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Modernization of the African Culture: The Town Crier and Gender in Patrick Naagbanton's Writings

ABSTRACT. African oral tradition and literature has been relegated to the background and termed inferior because it is erroneously misconceived by the West whose written culture and civilization is presumably superior. African writers have to mobilize their intellectual energy to disprove the West by enriching their writings, culture and heritage. Again, the modern African nation especially the Nigerian nations' state is fraught with violence and injustice and therefore remains a dangerous place for creative writers, activists and investigative journalists who fictionalize realities and engage in human rights campaigns. The town crier is a character in a traditional stage that disseminates information by going around with a beaten gong. Can we assign the role of this town crier to contemporary writers, activists and journalists? This paper made enquiry into this question by following a qualitative research approach and by studying Naagbanton's writings, using Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarisation technique as well as Susan Andt's reformist feminism. In the end, it discovered that the author has revived the African town crier culture and given it a modern outlook and the primordial town crier now has reincarnated in ace creative writers, activists and journalists who are the current advocates of information, equity and justice and who, for attesting to the truth, run great risks in the hand of state apparatus and machinery of violence like the police, the army and the State Security Services (SSS). The paper further discovered that the town crier motif in African culture now finds a new voice at the global setting in Naagbanton's works, taking both male and female gender; and that most exponents of justice, truth and equity are masked town criers. It recommends that aspects of African ancient culture should be rehabilitated to meet new trends and modern universal standards.

KEYWORDS: African culture, modernization, Town Crier, gender

Introduction

Africa has been touted as the cradle of humanity by intellectuals of many schools of thought especially those leaning on the ideologies of historians, evolutionists and anthropologists. This situation arises most probably from the manner Western narratives propounded by anti-African ideologues such as G.W.F. Hegel made unimpressive remarks

about Africa in matters of history, culture and civilization. In view of this, Ugiomoh (2012, p. 13) states: "Two hazy interpretations are explicit in the Hegelian supposition. In the first instance is the accidental nature of events and occurrences in the continent, which renders them unhistorical. The second is an identity disputes that rejects the cartographic boundary of the continent". The efforts of African scholars ever since the advent of these unpleasant theories have remained concerted in order to counter the wanton attacks of especially European intellectuals and their allies and these have consummated in many parallel doctrines aimed at defending the African culture and history. In line with this, Okorafor (2003, p. 72) enunciates:

It is an accepted fact among scholars that Africa is the birth place of mankind. Africa may as well be seen as the centre of the world. Other early developments on earth such as the emergence of culture and later civilization occurred first in Africa which led the way contrary to what is observed today.

What the above hypothesis presupposes is that life sprang from the tropics which have a quantum of energy in the form of sunshine before migrating to the colder spheres of the planet known as the temperate zones and this accords Africa, located in the tropics, a special pride of place, according to the critic. A UNESCO report (Iyalla-Amadi 2022, p. 2) corroborates this assertion when it posits that there is abundance of energy sources in Africa:

The energy resource base in Africa largely remains unexplored. The availability data indicate that potential energy sources are more diversified than is often assumed. These resources include traditional sources covering fuelwood, agricultural residues, animal residues, crop-processing by-products, and non-traditional sources such as hydropower, oil, gas, solid fuel, and uranium.

However, on culture and civilization on the African continent, one aspect of it that is as old as man's existence on the earth is communication, man being a social being that needs to interact with others to keep abreast of events happening around him. Various means of communication had been invented by the early man in the history of human evolution beginning with physical gestures and symbolic signs in addition to language. In the African primordial society, culture, habits and norms were known as means of communication. Owete (2003, p. 223) lends credence to this fact

when he affirms that “Communities in Nigeria in particular use masquerade display as a cultural means of communication”. Masquerade as channel of communication is not only restricted to the peoples of Nigeria because Africans in general, especially the sub-Saharan peoples are unique in the way masquerades, signs and symbols, drums and songs serve till today as medium of communication in our cultural settings. The talking drum also remains outstanding whenever the question of traditional means of communication in Africa is raised. Timothy-Asobele (2016, p. 87) underscores the relevance of this instrument:

Ainsi nous pouvons voir, par exemple, le double rôle du tam-tam dans la société précoloniale comme moyen par excellence de communication. Il servait à transmettre les nouvelles de morts; c’est le joueur de tam-tam qui proclamait les louanges, les exploits guerriers d’un grand personnage. Le tam-tam est ainsi un élément culturel très important, parce que son roulement est une forme d’écriture (Un talking Drum).

Thus, we can see, for instance, the dual role of the drum in the pre-colonial society as a means of communication par excellence. It was used to announce deaths; the drummer sings the praises and the war exploits of a great person. The drum is therefore a very important cultural symbol because its sound is a form of writing (The talking Drum). (Our translation).

Nevertheless, another means of communication and transmitting information to the local folks in the ancient African society of that time which still subsists to an extent today is the use of the gong beater or the herald of the gong better known as the town crier who would go from one end of a community to the other to disseminate vital information to its members. Bakare et al (2019, p. 98) corroborate this information by declaring that “in rural areas, the town crier would walk around beating a gong and announcing important messages for all to hear”. A little shift from the drum, the role of the town crier as a medium of communication is very crucial to the well-being and dynamic function of his society. This is as a result of the fact that while the drum beater is static, since in most cases the drum has a specific place where it is fixed in the public arena or in the house of the beater, the town crier is mobile and more effective in his job as every receiver of his message sees the messenger live and this could not happen in the case of the drummer. In other words, the message of the town crier would come across with visuals studded with actions, gestures and speeches to support it and entertain the public or

community members. The notion of the town crier appeared in African literature as far back as the fifties and sixties. According to Maduka (2016, p. 2–3), the late poet:

Christopher Okigbo forcefully calls himself a “town crier” in his celebrated “Hurrah for Thunder” which uses the rhythmic cadences of oral poetry to denounce the irresponsible wielding of power by the Nigerian civilian political leaders overthrown by the Military in 1966 and to warn the soldiers of nemesis if they fail to govern the people justly.

The town crier has been a male culture since the African society remains a patriarchal one. But with the wave of feminist awareness sweeping across the African society of late, writers have begun to tilt toward the recreation of female characters in their fictions. Sequel to this, Patrick Naagbanton seems to have dropped the single gender domination of the role of the town crier in his works in order to integrate female characters into it. This paper, however, sets out to examine the various critical perspectives from which the author approaches the notion of the town crier in his literary and activism writings and which have transformed the town crier from his initial role as the primordial male character of a local dramatic scene to informed male and female social crusaders and bearers of social conscience, and again moving his art from the oral to the written context. We will also see how this transformation has given the town crier far more clout than it is seen in Okigbo’s poetry or in Elechi Amadi’s works as presented by Maduka. This will be achieved through the critique of Naagbanton’s works which promote the image and personality of the town crier uniquely sculptured in his poetry, activism and social commentaries and which step is highly needed in order to create a voice through art for the down-trodden in Nigeria, especially the oppressed people of the Niger Delta. Little wonder that in the course of his activism and campaigns for the less privileged, Naagbanton, when he was alive, travelled mainly on invitation to many countries. In these places, he presented insightful papers on the state of things in the region including human rights abuses and the spate of militancy in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta region, due to years of exploitation, caused by exploration without significant development, by the Multinational oil companies and their accomplices in the Nigerian government. Looking at Naagbanton’s writings and activism, Orike (2021, p. 7) affirms thus:

Growing up ideologically, Patrick was seen to have encountered three practical dimensions of the struggle. The first was the struggle of the Ogoni ethnic nationality for self-determination. The second was the struggle to free the mass of Nigerians from retrogressive forces. The third was the struggle to liberate the global working class from the grips of capitalism. Somehow, the different strands of the struggle were interconnected. For Patrick, thinking globally encouraged him to act locally.

The ideological trilogy enumerated above by Orike no doubt forms the bedrock of the author's passion and commitment to social responsibility; all which are present in both his works under review, his philosophy and thematic preoccupation of this present paper. We hope that at the end of this work a new image of the town crier will have emerged, especially that which will be in consonance with the new roles designed for him in response to the current social and political challenges facing the contemporary African society and the happenings around the globe.

Defamiliarisation and Reformist Feminism

Viktor Shklovsky, the famous formalist critic used the Russian word *ostranenie*—making strange—to underscore the concept of defamiliarisation (Selden 1985, p. 10). In "Art as Technique", he postulated that the human consciousness is meant to retain the freshness of the mind's perception of objects. It happens through the process of 'automation' which is originally a poetic term developed by William Wordsworth in which the innocent nature retains 'the glory and freshness of dream' (Selden 1985, p. 9). According to Shklovsky, defamiliarisation deploys the narrative tools of slowing down or interrupting actions and descriptions:

In his monograph on Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Shklovsky draws attention to the ways in which familiar actions are defamiliarised by being slowed down, drawn out or interrupted. This technique of delaying and protracting actions makes us attend to them, so that familiar sights and movements cease to be perceived automatically and are thus 'defamiliarised' (Selden 1985, p. 10).

This process called defamiliarisation, Shklovsky insists, cannot be achieved by the normal state of human consciousness except through art and the purpose of art is to impart sensation on our consciousness. Hence,

this informs the title of Shklovsky's article. In other words, art is a technique and a kind of programming and reconfiguration of ideas quite alien to any average reader and naïve critic and which changes the perception of things. Selden (1985, p. 10) writes again:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object, the object is not important. (Shklovsky's emphasis)

Feminism has gained ground in African literary criticism over the years and African feminist critics are of the view that if Africa is perturbed by the experience of colonization, it should stop the colonization of women. These critics have therefore advocated the liberation of African women from patriarchal shackles so that their ego will rebound giving them the opportunity to contribute to the socio-economic and political growth of the continent. The clamour involves the inclusion of women in sensitive and formally gender-based roles for them to realize their full potentials and contribute to the socio-political and economic growth of the African continent. Feminist criticisms as a result decry the poor image of women presented in early male-authored works especially those of Achebe for which Udumukwu wrote about the "thingfication" of women (Asana 2021, p. 108) and which led to female writers' assumption of the duty of changing the narrative through writing. However, in my articles: "Achebe's Receding Male Chauvinism: A Study of the *Anthills of the Savannah*" *JGP* 6 (2), 2016 and "African Women in Search of Global Identity: An Exploration of Afropolitanism in Chimamanda Adichie's Works", *JGP* 13 (1), the principles of African feminism and Afropolitanism were profoundly discussed. But for the purpose of this article, the aspect of African feminism I would like to reiterate is Susan Andt's reformist perspective. She explains that a gamut of African feminist works is reformist in their plots; which means that there is room for African patriarchal society to amend its dynamics and accommodate women and this involves negotiations in order to obtain new enhanced roles. This form of African feminism scripted in fiction advocates the refusal of a bandwagon image of men, but an individualistic description of characters and it is reconciliatory in nature:

In the texts of reformist African feminism, individuals, patriarchally-moulded individuals, norms and conventions, both century-old and modern, which discriminate against women and hinder their self-realisation are censured. Consequently, the criticism is only partial and it is usually brought forward in a differentiated way. Reformist African-feminist writers want to negotiate with the patriarchal society to gain new scope for women, but accept the fundamental patriarchal orientation of their society as a given fact. It is assumed that the society is capable of reform; in keeping with this logic, the texts usually have a conciliatory 'happy end' (Andt 2002, p. 33)

Andt added that men characters in such works are broad-minded and amenable to reforms especially when it has to do with reproachable attitudes against their women and therefore they are portrayed as characters with positive sides and they are contrasted with traditional 'pedants' who embody limited prospects toward reforms.

Naagbantón in his writings tries to rehabilitate the role of the town crier by renewing the interest of his readers in this traditional artist in order to appreciate his personality and character that has almost been forgotten. He also tries to extend the frontiers of the roles of characters involved in town crying, so that it is not only the primordial characters we knew, but embraces the modern characters who, through various ways, inform society of events taking place around it, issue alert on dangers, injustices and heinous crimes against humanity. By this virtuous and patriotic act, the reader knows the town crier not only in the man who carries gong, but now in various personalities who fight for justice and welfare of the public such as activists, writers and human right campaigners etc. The role of the town crier is an ancient practice which needed to be transformed into faster and more competent media to find a place for itself in the modern jet age. Onyenemezu and Boro (2021, p. 209) seem to agree with this belief and subsequently declare as follows:

The fact remains that people previously relied on traditional media channels such as gong, bell, town criers and others for dissemination of development information in rural communities. These traditional media channels are limited in speed and coverage and therefore cannot catch up with current trend of information dissemination to speed up development in rural communities.

Nevertheless, through Naagbantón's new perspective, we see the town crier and his local media in multiple regalia today even though in most communities, especially in towns and cities, no one talks about a town cri-

er again these days while he is everywhere in disguise. The town crier has been transformed through Naagbanton's artistic vision and craftsmanship to the extent that his formally primordial art has been modernized. The current status he enjoys offers the town crier who is an artist in transition a role to play not only in the traditional African setting but also in the modern global arena. Naagbanton's approach suggests defamiliarisation in all its ramifications, sustained by the need to elevate our oral tradition to the height of an elite culture by assigning new roles to it. Again the modernization has a feminist flavour in the sense that the town crier's role which was exclusively reserved for men in Naagbanton's works is now played by both men and women thereby altering the gender structure. This theory therefore serves as framework to this essay. Some of the women have collective identity with men in the form crowd solidarity such as the **Umuchem** protesters and **Unillorin** 49 while one, Ibiba Don Pedro has an individual identity as a writer and journalist. What this implies is that both defamiliarisation technique and reformist feminism will guide this research.

The Concept of Town Crier in Naagbanton's Writings

If there is a vision, prior to verging toward a wider social phenomenon with all the trappings and flamboyant outlook of the modern age, which is capable of assuming the status of a universal philosophical persuasion which owes its origin to the tradition of local folks, it is no other than Patrick B. Naagbanton's notion of the town crier. Indeed, it is a motif that pervades the entire length and breadth of the writings of a literary poet, an investigative journalist and freelancer, a militant of the pen, a social crusader, a son of the oppressed people of Ogoniland and a fallen hero. Through a kind of transformation and metamorphosis different from the superannuated perception of it by the traditional African society, Naagbanton in effect has risen to give the town crier a new definition and dimension. Maduka (2019, p. 3) in his work on Elechi Amadi conceives and elucidates this concept:

"Minstrel" and "town crier" are terms from oral literature. "Minstrel" denotes the multitalented artist of the traditional society who incarnates the spirit of his people's social, economic, political and cultural life. He is at once a singer, a musician, a poet, a dramatist, a novelist, a dancer, a social critic and even, as it is popularly affirmed, his community's library.

The statement above buttresses our understanding of the town crier as an artist who has acquired multi-dimensional nature and roles in our own time. This kind of distinction is the best description that can enrich our discourse on this concept as it gives us a clear picture of our subject matter and the social and traditional importance attached to the town crier. He is richly gifted as it could easily be seen in the illustration above. Maduka (2019, p. 3) further states that "The town crier constitutes the energy of the communication sector of the people's civilization, hence he uses well-developed gongs, to disseminate vital information of the community".

No doubt, Patrick Naagbanton is highly excited by this concept that is unequivocally encapsulated into a kind of social and traditional symbolism. His passion for the town crier makes him fall into the category of writers who have combined writing and activism in their artistic productions or who have finally abandoned writing for activism. His picture vividly depicts the group Egya (2020, p. 121) describes in the terms below:

Because of the pressures to speak out on behalf of the downtrodden, to confront institutional powers, they have had the need to have writer-activists who are alert to cases of injustice and direct their imaginative skills towards tackling oppression. They are sensitive individuals, intellectually alert, who either combine their profession with activism or abdicate their profession for activism out of deep convictions.

However, such decision by a writer to abandon writing for the sake of activism, in the African case, arises mostly from the kind of environment we find ourselves. The human nature is such that we scarcely forget historical and experiential beacons and this accounts for why peculiar and striking personal experiences that have etched in one's memory are hard to forget. This fact accounts for Naagbanton's lingering sense of nostalgia for his adored character and hero, Nkpoo Sibara, whose memory is gorgeously recorded in *FOOTPRINTS*, both a title and weird graphic grooving image of human footprints serving as hood upon the book's cover. It is also a symbol of self-exhortation of the author and that of his audience, never to be subjects of forgetfulness in the face of all important historical landmarks that predetermine the collective consciousness of our human existence. In tracing the path of fame of the town crier, Naagbanton launches into the bustling past to re-enact that which tickled his infancy and presents himself both as a historian and an artist to bring back to focus the person-

ality of a traditional gong beater and a rural primordial people's herald who now assumes the status of information and media personality, with enormous potentials that largely helped the dynamics of his society. His legacy could only be appreciated by discerning social commentator and creative artisan of social structures, such as Naagbantón, whose boundless creative energy helps us to imaginatively live with him in the dynamic and nostalgic time of Nkpoo Sibara. Nkpoo Sibara remains in Naagbantón's view an architect of early pristine, communal and social engineering imbued with competent and professional ethics present in well-tailored ineffable touches found in here and there of his life and which effusively helped to coordinate and weld a dream Bodo community where information flowed to every nook and cranny and social awareness and progress thrived for purposeful living, thanks to no other than the skillful character, the community conscience bearing man. Naagbantón recaps his emotional thought of him in his opening narrative:

Many years ago in my birthplace, Bodo, located on [in the] south-eastern axis of Rivers State, about 60 kilometres away from Port Harcourt, its capital, I was opportune to have met a man I greatly admire. Though I met him when I was a minor, but I can still remember clearly this man. I think highly of him, because of his sense of wit, epigram and comedy. He was extremely dark like charcoal and had a standard stature. He was dark everywhere except his teeth and eyes. The man was called Nkpoo Sibara. I can't guess how old he was then. He was the town crier of Bodo then. His job was to inform, educate and enlighten my town's people on the daily affairs [of the town] (*FOOTPRINTS* 1).

The creative genius in the infant Patrick Naagbantón was pushing him to be a witness to the activities of the then hidden hero of the people and so he recorded the data that lay latent in his memory waiting for the time the ripe pod would burst leading to the revelation of his experiences and which task he accomplished in his adult age. This incident is again captured by the author in the following statement:

Any time, I saw him out in the public places, in the town with his lone carved wooden instrument (gong); as he struck it with a squat smoothen stick, to produce some musical and sweet-toned sound, to attract the attention of the people while spreading his news, I would follow him. Then I would escape from my house—kept my poor mother (her only child who survived, 3 died in their infancy) in suspense over my whereabouts and would follow, Nkpoo Sibara, the town crier, sometimes throughout the whole day (*FOOTPRINTS* 1).

The coast is clear where Naagbanton is heading to as he takes along his audience in the understanding of the heroic archetypal character whose concept it is the preoccupation of this paper. That is Nkpoo Sibara, a silhouette covered by his own mantle of deep dark complexion and only recognizable through the snow-white flash of his teeth and eyes, from three out of the nine mystic openings a male human being possesses—the two eye sockets and the mouth. This character is imbued with awesome qualities and the role of keeping the local expectant community folks of his time on edge and abreast of events taking place in their domain and which responsibility made him a vanguard and crusader who illuminated the ignorant and which patriotic duty he carried out with sheer voluntarism and quintessential artistic performing displays that delighted his people, especially this author.

However, the concept of the town crier of which Nkpoo Sibara is a role model is hewed into two dimensions by Naagbanton. The first is the story of a man whose patriotism in service once upon a time endeared him to his society and through the socio-historical and artistic review he was eventually not denied a place of honour in the annals of history. Secondly, our dear author stops at a point in the linearity of this great historical account to take up the intellectual reengineering of the role of a town crier to put it to effective use in the contemporary time. The town crier assumes a very high phenomenal pedestal in the philosophy of the writer who presents him as a platform for all social crusaders, campaigners, freedom fighters, investigative journalists, human and environmental rights activists and protesters of sorts; and, according to Naagbanton, Nkpoo Sibara's footsteps are worthy of emulation. This, no doubt, gives rise to the title of the book and informs the author's ideological vision and moreover puts him in a stead where he could be addressed as a philosopher: first for being a witness of his time because according to Ibanga (2016, p. 109), "Every philosopher is time-bound and culture-specific, tailored to address the ills of that particular society in the first instance and that of the global community in extension". And secondly for using a local object of consciousness to amplify a higher level of universal consciousness, Naagbanton confirms his philosopher status. This is what Udoidem means when he writes:

Who is a philosopher? In its ordinariness, a philosopher is one who searches for knowledge by taking note of, and paying attention to the little things around his universe of existence, thinks about them, speculates about them, uses them as the stepping stone for interpreting and understanding and the more profound distant objects of consciousness (*indigenizing philosophy* 7)

Thinking like existentialists, it seems as if metaphysical circumstances of our human existence have blindly cast us on this planet as unfortunate beings to face our sentences as pronounced by predominant and uncanny absurdities. Leaning on this philosophical point of view, it seems moreover that if one resigns to such imbecilities, one is spared. At any point the person is alienated by refusing to compromise, he or she pays a price. People who continue to live and wedge a war against the absurd are lucky. This is perfectly true of Naagbanton, who is in the grave today probably because of activism. This is Naagbanton, who takes Sibara's place in the role and risky adventure of modern town crier, and whose unflinching spirit of devotion to his avowed cause when he was alive had to encounter the forces in an oppressive society like ours that utterly rejects defiance. It is this desire not to derail and obtrusive opposition to social ills that turned Naagbanton to another town crier, an investigative journalist and an activist, doing these in a modern way and with rudiments of formal education that pockets his responsibility as light of the new generation of the oppressed people and victims of authoritarian and despotic regimes that are the lot of our nation, race and continent. Out of patriotism, Naagbanton takes up this risky role in the course of which a lover once offers him refuge while he is in distress, but he refuses to be lured away from his avowed struggle as seen in one of his poems:

I am a dissident on the run/ I am a refugee in hiding/Hiding from the termites
rage/It is a time of turmoil/And your warm bosom is safer than their unkind
prison/Like a benevolent bloody cockle/You opened your shell to hide me
from them/Your love threatened my undertaking /But I am a dissident on the
run/Not a lover (*FOOTPRINTS 20*).

However, the town crier concept from all indications is an integrated one that accommodates the principle of artistic re-engineering. This is a wholesome and systematic practice involving creative powers that reveal a character's virtues. It is therefore an act of re-awakening of hidden potentials that recreate one from being a flat character in life's drama to a hero or heroine through a kind of defamiliarisation. Against this background, Naagbanton directs his artistic searchlight to individuals and personalities with sturdy profiles and who have shaken the Nigerian social and political landscape with writings and activism.

Modern Town Criers Succeeding Sibara

Cheta Ibama Ibegwura. In one of his works, *The Last Militant*, Naagbanton celebrates the life of a social crusader well known for his struggle for justice in society and our nation as well as the well-being of his people. He is 'Che' Cheta Ibama Ibegwura, who has a history of struggle and militancy for common good and so paid his price for all that through the normal route of detentions and imprisonments in the hand of autocratic military and civilian authorities. Nnimmo Bassey steps out in his forward to state as follows:

This is a story of courage, love, commitment and passion. It is a story that shows the triumph of the human spirit even in the most hazardous situation. It is a story of a survivor. He (Comrade Che) indeed survived many detentions, false imprisonments and assassination attempts. He admired his late friend, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the Ogoni people for 'being true to the struggle in the naked face of mass arrests, killings, government and crude oil-induced bribes (*The Last Militant*, xii).

Some of the crosses "Che" had to bear early in life were trekking long distances from his native Erema community in Ogba to Ahoada in search of light symbolized by education. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he was one of the early persons who discovered the importance of education and did not yield to the impediments underlying his aspiration. Naagbanton writes about this character's resilience:

In early January, 1948, Wati left the SDNCG School to attend the Government school located in Ahoada, some 114 kilometres away. Wati would trek about 114 kilometres from his Erema village through almost impenetrable bush paths to Ahoada and returned to Erema every school day. The vehicles and motorcycles were not common like we have today. Nobody in Erema, not even his parents, had any of them. But some persons had bicycles then. So bicycles were a major means of transportation and its operators were charging one shilling from Erema to Ahoada. This was a big sum then and his parents could not afford that on daily basis (*The Last Militant*, p. 16).

It is worthy to note that Cheta Ibama (addressed as Wati) assumed the title of "Che" while living in Port Harcourt in the fifties. He became driven toward the Marxist orientation as a result of police brutality and extortion of innocent citizens and poor people. This is the early signal Naagbanton

gives in his book to the later life of Cheta Ibama which is embodied in trade unionism and one instance of which was his anti-colonial activities that was partly the fall-out of the shooting of coal workers in Iva Valley Enugu in eastern Nigeria on the fateful day of 18 November, 1949. His activism therefore was greatly influenced by movements like the Zikism, the Nkumamaism and NCNC of that time as well as personalities in politics and the industry like Chief Ajuluchukwu, Mokwugo Okoye, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Gani Fawehinmi and Obi Wali, to mention but a few. He was engrossed in his PZ job and attended so many Unionist and political meetings. Naagbanton writes about one of the incidents that led to his arrest by the police in his Diobu apartment in Port Harcourt:

Che took his wife (Kaizar), from hospital with the new born baby without any fanfare. He has to remain underground, to avoid possible arrest following his role as a union leader in the Ebocha demonstration. He had made arrangements to sneak to Lagos to meet with Comrade Wahab Goodluck and others. He left Port Harcourt and bade farewell to his wife and new baby. The woman was already used to his itinerary lifestyle and struggles and she was always ready to give all the support. By late March, 1975 Che was all over the media houses in Lagos granting interviews to journalists about the Ebocha incident. The media reported the matter extensively. His mission accomplished, Che sneaked back into Rivers state (*The Last Militant*, p. 121).

Naagbanton eulogizes Cheta Ibama, who lives and stands today as an epitome of struggle for a better society which has eluded his country and the world till the contemporary times. And one wonders what he would be imagining looking back to his antecedents, especially now that the vigour to continue such struggles is no longer there.

Ibiba Don Pedro. The African patriarchal society does not recognize women or assign certain roles to them and one of these roles in question is that of the town crier. However, the modernization of this culture in Naagbanton's writings has changed the narrative as he removes the gender limitation that characterizes it by designating such traditional title to a woman. She is Ibiba Don Pedro, a celebrated woman of valiance in the realms of activism in the Nigerian nations' state, who has carried her campaigns for justice and self-determination of the minor ethnic groups of the country across borders. The confiscation of her book, *Oil in The Water—Crude Power and Militancy in The Niger Delta* became the flash-point of her

allegedly seditious activities, for which, plus other worthy, patriotic and genuine struggles for the down-trodden, Naagbantón picks her out of the crowd and designates to her the status of a town crier. What is she crying for? The author writes:

Ibaba Don-Pedro has been consciously calling attention to the untold hardship, sufferings and injustices militating against the Niger Delta territory and its peoples. The book is, indeed, a delight and promotion of the cause of the Nigeria's Delta peoples which is the cause of the oppressed peoples all over the world (*Footprints...* vol. 2, p. 125).

Ibiba Don-Pedro is moreover a town crier for the numerous awards including the CNN African journalist of the year (*Footprints...* vol. 2, p. 59) and for later turning to a freelancer writing for 'several international media' via which media she laid bare the uncanny situation facing the Niger Delta people and the less privileged in general.

Unillorin 49. Naagbantón conceives of another set of town criers in the Unillorin 49, a group of academics made up of men and women and who suffered for the dearth of truth, justice, equity and commitment in the educational sector in Nigerian; who resisted one of the lethal oppressive regimes in Nigeria while leaning on the loyalty of their trade Union in the 2001 **ASUU** industrial action. These scholars refused to sign a register kept for the chicken-hearted fawns among the flock which was designed to force them return to work. Eventually, along the line of the gargantuan struggle few among the heroes had to pay the ultimate price. Such noble hearts were J.E. Adegbija of the Department of Modern European Languages and A.E. Annor of Geology Department. Given this heroic resistance, history will not forget them as town criers not only for tertiary institutions in the Nigerian Machiavellian state, but for the oppressed peoples of the world and the entire humanity. They are now in the pantheon where the likes of late Comrades Festus Iyaye and Eskor Toyo, town criers of ever-green memory, lie.

Gani Fawehinmi. The *Senior Advocate of the Masses*, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, also wears, in the author's works, the garb of a town crier with all its paraphernalia and he is accordingly exalted. The audience could understand why the persona in the poem 'Fawehinmism' asks:

Like an old unresolved burden.
 Who will defy them?
 Who speak in our defence?
 Who will defy them?
 Who will speak in our defence?
 Who will defy them?
 Who will distribute the leaflets of freedom? (*Fury of the Fisher Woman*,
 p. 18)

People of Umuechem. Naagbanton dedicates another town crier status to the people of Umuechem in Etche, Rivers state. The people of Umuechem carried out a peaceful protest with olive branches against the environmental hazards arising from the exploration activities of Shell Petroleum on November 1, 1990 and their village was attacked by soldiers who killed and maimed as many as they could. The words of Egya (2020, p. 124) cannot be ignored at this point when he declared that “The human index in Nigerian eco-activism could be, for some ecocritics, the result of underdevelopments that leaves humans struggling to survive, to rescue themselves, before they can even think of rescuing the non-humans”. Gomba (2014, p. 174) in “REMEMBER UMUECHEM”, a memorial for the victims of the barbaric act, strengthens Egya’s position as he composes this elegiac lullaby for the victims:

Remember Umuechem/ Umuechem with floating bodies on the river/
 Umuechem reduced to rubble./ A thousand and one children in the woods/
 A thousand and one women naked in the woods/ A thousand and one corpses
 under rubble./ Hills pile over bloated bodies/ Hills pile over hills with bod-
 ies under/ Death reposes in the womb of our earth./ Who probes the womb
 of our earth/ Dares the putrid region of forced silence/ Dares the harvest of
 bones./ The living are remnants of the vampires’ feast/ The vampires in their
 coats of arm.../ Drilling crude and drinking blood.

Ken Saro-Wiwa. Ken Saro-Wiwa remains an irreproachable town crier and the father and progenitor of environmental activism in Nigeria in the view of Naagbanton. He was hanged on November 10, 1995 by the Nigerian government for his fight against environmental degradation. Naagbanton (2016, p. 212–213) affirms:

The Umuechem tragedy is not different from that of the Ogoni; the only difference is that of dimensions and scale. The late Ken Saro-Wiwa, the hanged writer, columnist and activist visited Umuechem and saw the ruins, the wanton

destructions and deaths. Indeed, the Umuechem calamity affected Saro-Wiwa greatly. Around the 1990s too, saddened by the vast damage of the beautiful environment of the people and other mindless actions of the Royal Dutch Shell and the Nigerian state against the Ogoni people, Ken Saro-Wiwa led a struggle for environmental protection, justice and self-determination. The tragedy that befell the Umuechem people also befell his Ogoni people.

Udoidem (2012, p. 94–95) in one of his famous commentaries on writers, activists and literary critics recalls the essence of the life and times of Ken Saro-Wiwa as an activist par excellence and what he stood for and defended that led to his sacrifice. In it he encapsulates the noble virtues of this pioneer town crier which ideals should have constituted the quintessential values of his society, but unfortunately ended in illusion. He captures these in the following words:

Indeed a careful reading of his *Detention Diary*, reveals the mind and conscience of a citizen acutely concerned with justice and the welfare of his nation than his own safety. There were overtures made to him which if he had accepted would have enriched him (for he was not a poor man) and saved his life. He rejected all these but consistently demanded for justice rather than compromise.

Olisa Agbakoba. Furthermore, Naagbantón draws attention toward another personality who merits the town crier elevation. He is Olisa Agbakoba, a radical human right lawyer, who needs no introduction in the Nigerian activism domain. He has fought his battle through Civil Liberties Organization, an NGO founded for crying wherever it happens. He achieved this feat thorough legal investigation of abuses, reports, campaigns and seeking of redresses in courts that became his routine label. The author comments:

Olisa Agbakoba later left the position of the president of CLO when his tenure expired. We served on the CLO board together. We fought together as activists on CLO and other platforms such as the United Action for Democracy (UAD) and others (Naagbantón 2016:208).

Other Personalities. Naagbantón finally confers the title of town crier on many more personalities, intellectuals and activists such as comrades **Claude Ake, Chima Ubani**, comrade **Festus Iyayi, Dele Giwa, Kofi Awo-**

nor, the poet who died in the hand of Al-Shaabab criminals and extremists in Kenya, comrade **Ike Okonta**, slain journalist, **Martin Adler**, and a host of others. In all these cases, he accuses the machinery of state violence such as the Police, the Army and the DSS which have shown uncanny love for bloodletting of heinous crimes.

Conclusion

This essay has endeavoured to explore one of the grey areas that most critics who have been plying the way of literary criticism perhaps are unfamiliar with. It is all about the town crier phenomenon in the literary and activism domains. This notion could sound as an obscure subject matter because first it commenced with the oral tradition which has been overtaken by written scripts in order to meet contemporary challenges as seen in Naagbanton. Secondly, it has shown that the author whose works are under review is located half-way in the literary creation because his weight is more on journalism and activism. So it took a lot of effort to draw a parallel line between his writings and literary fiction and bringing him to this focus is what appears to be one of the major achievements of the essay. In other words, Naagbanton's works are more of historical and social commentaries with the exception of his poetry which acquires full characteristics of a literary text. Generally, his works explore the exploits of the town criers and their struggles against the powers that be which keep them in check with both moderate and extreme violence. The author portrays them as worthy martyrs of the masses despite these huddles and persecutions they had to face in their struggle against injustice and inhumanity of man against the other. This article has sufficiently shown how the motif of the town crier permeates the length and breadth of Naagbanton's literary and ideological universe. This being the myth that is subsumed under the author's vision, it happens that all his heroes and heroines must pass through this litmus test before being adjudged patriotic individuals and revolutionary icons capable of confronting the tides of oppression in order to change the fortune of the oppressed and less privileged. Again, the town crier motif or concept is not new but our author has given it a new image of the technological age by overcoming the gender limit to which it was initially restricted in the ancient patriarchal African society. Apart the attributing the title to Ibiba Don Pedro, making it a group heritage as in seen the Umuchem and Ilorin 49 shows that the town crier has stopped being

a single male individual ritual thanks to the creative innovation of our author. Hence, the town crier ceases to be the old order sculptured only in the old tradition, rather a concept cast in a new modern frame and fashioned for universal appreciation and valorization by a gender-sensitive world. The town crier is no longer wears only the features of Nkpoo Sibara's time, but has been given a collective sense since unity is needed to fight the evils of our age. The author's message therefore is simply that of solidarity in the face of the mammoth challenges that confront the struggle of the town crier in today's society and world. On the other hand, for a world that is in need of gender equality and cultural relativism for the construction of a silo of universal values through global cultural exchange, Naagbanton's rehabilitation of the traditional town crier rites becomes very meaningful, very relevant and could conveniently serves as one of Africa's best contributions to the international cultural heritage. I would like to inspire my readers with great nostalgia found in the following quote from the spring of it all, "Ode to Nkpoo Sibara", one poem that appears in *The Fury of the Fisher Woman*:

Nkpoo Sibara, the great husband of the gong/ Many years have passed /Since your gong ceased to sound./The gong you played with honour and humour,/ The long, old gong which you educated us with,/I escaped from my infant cell to join you./Your gong produced the sweet-bitter tunes/which soothe my soul like the/purifying water from your clay pot...*Dumkere!* Since you left us there is no/one to tell us the tales of life/ Which you did with your devotion (Naagbanton 2015, p. 43).

It is obvious that the author decides to fill the gap created by the departure to the great beyond of his hero. This becomes the metaphor for renaissance of the great character, Nkpoo Sibara, who reincarnates in Naagbanton and other characters both men and women. But in this second coming, he has to opt for modern ways of performing these social duties by adopting the writing tradition of the Western world, organizing and participation in conferences, travelling and conveying his messages through press media outfits. The fact is that whether it was Nkpoo Sibara, Christopher Okigbo, Dele Giwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ibiba Don Pedro, Gani, Fawehinmi, Adegbiya and Annor or Patrick Naagbanton, the renaissance myth of the town crier is that of the mystic going and coming of geniuses and legendary characters. Lastly, it is the opinion of this paper that African values and culture of the old should be revisited for proper

re-engineering in order to bring out the modern essence in them. And what Naagbanton has done is particularly patriotic and worthy especially in this age of globalization.

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