

## Poetry as a Connector of Nigerian History: A Study of Selected Kola Eke's Poetry

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### Abstract

A survey of modern Nigerian poetry reveals the representation of historical realities as an underlying feature. This is validated in the fact that virtually all African literary works are reactions, reflections and responses to contemporary history. Extant critical studies in modern Nigerian poetry have focused on the poetry of older first, second and third generation poets, with little or no critical attention to the works of third and fourth generation poets who emerged in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century. Eke's poetry engages with Nigeria's history and socio-political issues and serves as a connector between its past and present. By adopting the postcolonial theory, the study has been able to adequately account for the cultural, physical and sociological changes in Nigeria since independence. The collections are: *October 1960 and Other Poems* (2018), *June 12 and Other Poems* (2018), *May 29 and Other Poems* (2019), *February 1976 and Other Poems* (2020), *May 27 and Other Poems* (2022). The poems selected were subjected to qualitative literary analysis. Some of these issues include, ethnic and religious crises, recurrent corrupt government, electoral violence, leadership failings, legislative turbulence which have been the bane of the Nigerian society. The analysis reveals that for several decades after independence, Nigeria has been in a regressive stage in its growth. Going through Eke's poems one finds how urgent the Nigerian state needs total and immediate changes and Eke has used his poems to expose these pitfalls and imminent solutions.

Key Words: Kola Eke, National History, Post-colonialism, past and present, Nigeria

### Introduction

The events leading up to Nigeria's independence on October 1, 1960, have continued to act as a major reference point to the present state of the Nigerian society. While it is a common knowledge that Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the political terrain of the newly independent state was primarily determined by the events that led to the declaration of independence. Nigeria as a nation came into being with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate in 1914, two regions in Sub-Saharan Africa under British control after the scramble for Africa in the 1884 Berlin conference. After decades of colonial rule by the British, the Pan-African movement, an intellectual and political movement led by W.E.B Dubois and Marcus Garvey played a vital role in the struggle for independence in Nigeria. These Pan-Africanists, through annual conferences held in England, France, the United States of America, and the West Indies, sought to work for the democratic and independent rights of blacks worldwide. In these conferences, the welfare and fundamental human rights of the black race were discussed, and ultimatums were given to the colonialists to exit every black colony by 1945. This declaration by the Pan-Africanist movement led to the rapid rate of attainment of independence in most African countries by 1960. As an intellectual and political movement, Pan-Africanism engendered the struggle for an independent Nigeria. The fruits of colonial rule began to manifest when the early intellectuals in Nigeria started to appear on the scene. This was mostly due to the establishment of the University College, Ibadan, then a satellite campus of the University of London. Also, a set of intellectuals questioned the colonial government and their leadership style, further raising the "independence question". Intellectuals, nationalists, and politicians like Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dennis Osadebay, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Anthony Enahoro, and Aminu Kano, who were the most enlightened Nigerians, began to interrogate the Europeans and portray colonialism in a negative light through published political propaganda, and poetry placed increasing pressure on the colonial government. Independence came with several shades of hope for a newly democratic state solely owned and run by the indigenous people of Nigeria. However, independence fell short of the desired positive expectations of political and economic

developments and peaceful inter-ethnic relationships among Nigerians. The first decade of Nigeria's independence was fraught with great political upheavals and instability. As a new nation, Nigeria faced a tedious journey towards self-actualisation. Nigeria has thus witnessed numerous historical incidents which have shaped the concerns of poets. In the early post-independence era, the first generation poets who dwelt on the pitfalls that came with colonialism shifted their focus to portraying Nigerian society and how it had adapted to the idea of self-governance. By the mid-1960s, postcolonial Nigeria was riddled with corruption and exploitation of the environment and the people Awhefeada, 2010; Awhefeada, 2006). Lindfors (2007, p. 25) describes this as “the pre-independence dream of a brave new world turned into a nasty postcolonial nightmare”.

Early Nigerian writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Clark and Okara acknowledged that writing about colonialism would wear out soon since most African nations had attained independence from the British, French, Belgian and Portuguese governments. They saw the need to shift their focus to the newly independent nations and portray new strides in the continent's development. Concerning the new thematic focus of the post-independent African writer, Soyinka advises that “the African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past if he has to fulfill his function as the record of mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time” (Soyinka, 1966, 138-9). Achebe (1967), shares the same idea as Soyinka as he reveals that the African writer's burden was to “express our thoughts and feeling, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we say will be taken as evidence against our race. The problem of post-independence Africa lies with us and not Europe” (p. 13). Hence, Soyinka and Achebe portray the newly independent Nigeria as imperfect. They are ready to show the lopsidedness in its growth and development as continuous discussions about colonialism and its harmful effects on the continent have become stale and outdated. Their suggestions call for the self-evaluation of Africa by itself and not from external forces.

Lindfors summarises the political atmosphere on the African continent in the following words:

By the mid-1960s, only a few years after independence had been achieved, the popular mood in West Africa had changed to such an extent that new political institutions began to spring up to supplant the parliamentary forms of democracy hastily bequeathed to Africa as Europe departed. First, it was the one-party state, then the military junta, that dominated the scene. Bullets replaced ballots as instruments of governance, and in at least one country (Nigeria), post-coup conflicts deteriorated into full-scale civil war. The pre-independence dream of a brave new world had turned into a nasty postcolonial nightmare. During this period, West African writers could not ignore what they saw around them. (Lindfors, 2007, pp. 25-26).

While many Africans heaved a sigh of relief at the transition from colonialism to independence and had high hopes for the continent, the first decade after independence (1960-1970) was marked by failure. The writers thematised failure of leadership and disillusionment arising from corruption, and the devastation by the Nigerian civil war between Nigerian and Biafran armies from July 6, 1967-January 15, 1970( Awhefeada, 2009). Writers who had expressed optimism before were disillusioned at the condition of the Nigerian State. Many Nigerian first, second, third and fourth generation poets like Christopher Okigbo, Michael J.C. Echeruo, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and J. P. Clark, Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Funso Aiyejina, Ossie Enekwe, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Nnimmo Bassey, Olu Oguibe, Remi Raji, Nduka Otiono, Ossie Enekwe, Ogaga Ifowodo, Charles Bodunde, Afam Akeh, Uche Nduka, Esiaba Irobi, Usman Shehu, Kola Eke, Vincent Obioma Nwosu, Anne Long John, Florence Orabueze, Daniel Mbajiorgu, Robert Egbe, Ken Anierobi, Unoma Azua, Pius Adesanmi, Seyi Adigun and Sophia Obi have used their poems to reflect Nigeria's problematic historical experiences in the last six decades. Poetry plays a critical role in reshuffling history and memory, serving as a bridge between past events, personal experiences and collective identities. Eke's

poetry, holds significant importance in this regard as a result of the portrayal of Nigeria's history and commentary on Nigeria's socio-political issues engaging in both preservation and reconstruction of memory. Much of the critical studies on modern Nigerian poetry have been on the works of older first, second and third generation poets like Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Olu Oguibe, Afam Akeh etc., as their works come to terms with the exigencies of our national history. A critical evaluation through the corpus of Nigerian poetic criticism will likely give an impression that much of the poetic engagement with our national experiences ended with the older Nigerian poets. However, this is not the reality. It only appears to be because much of what the critical enterprise offers focuses on the works of 'older poets'. From the last decade of the previous century till this moment, quite a number of poets who continue to articulate the Nigerian experiences in verse have emerged. This study therefore, critiques Eke's poetry which reflects on the Nigerian postcolonial historical perspective and how his poetry serves as a historical connection between the past and present. The study utilises five Eke's poetry collections. The texts are *October 1960 and Other Poems* (2018), *June 12 and Other Poems* (2018), *May 29 and Other Poems* (2019), *February 1976 and Other Poems* (2020), *May 27 and Other Poems* (2022).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored on the postcolonial theory hinged on the concept of the 'nation' to discuss the post-independent issues of the Nigerian state. In postcolonial theory, the concept of the 'nation' is often explored in relation to the colonial experience and its aftermath. A nation in this context is not just a simple geographical or political entity but a complex construct shaped by historical cultural and social factors, particularly in response to colonialism. It involves the negotiation of cultural identity, historical memory and political sovereignty. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1995, p. 11) explain that "the idea of postcolonial literary theory emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of postcolonial writing" For Ashcroft et al., Postcolonialism presents and explores the conditions of colonised states and engages concerned notions about them. It involves studying to understand and analyse works from former colonies of Europe. Postcolonialism involves the psychological, physical, and cultural effects of the contact between the colonisers and the colonised. It also highlights the recurrent and novel cultural issues faced in the newly formed independent colonised state. (Balogun 2014, Irobi 2008).

### **Connection between the Past and Present in Eke's Poetry**

Literature serves as an indicator of economic, political and socio-cultural events within a society (Awhefeada, 2013). Already established in this study is the pivotal role of history in literature. The connection between the past and present historical events in Nigerian poetry provides a canvas for the reflection of Nigeria's diverse struggles with the changes that occurred with the attainment of independence in the year 1960. Eke's poetry collections create a link between the past and present in order to ascertain the level of growth and regression experienced by the Nigerian state. One thing that is striking about Eke poetry is his ability to expose repeated socio-political, socio-economic issues and his refractionistic efforts and commitment towards proffering impactful solutions to these problems.

### **Ethnic and Religious Crises**

The poem, "October 1960", is fundamental in this study since it epitomises the beginning of the quandary in the post-independence era. Eke reveals how independence in Nigeria gave birth to regionalism, tribalism and nepotism. All these problems highlighted further led to the cancellation of the 1962 census, 1963 Census and finally the collapse of Nigeria's First Republic in 1966. Eke reflects on the 1963 Census in his poem "Census 1963" and the clear failure of Nigeria's pioneer government to conduct a credible and transparent census exercise. He reveals the failures thus:

The exercise  
Was to count human population  
Not animals

The exercise  
Was to count humans  
Not household utensils

Reported cases of  
Strangled  
Census materials

Reported cases of  
Swollen  
Census figures (*February*, p. 116)

These stanzas attest to the alarming rates of inflation in the number of persons that were counted during the 1963 Census exercise and this is stimulated by the poet's use of the expressions "...count humans / not household utensils" (p. 116) to reveal the extent of perceived unfathomable desperation to receive major regional monetary allocation and exert total control at the expense of other regions. These reportages about irregularities further reveal the problem of ethnicity and tribalism which were prevalent in the 1960s. However, these divides along religious and ethnic lines have trailed the Nigerian state till date. The failure and collapse of the First Republic as a result of the facts stated above can be seen as bedrock for ushering in of the numerous tales of failures that befell the Nigerian state several decades later. Despite efforts by subsequent military and civilian leaderships to unite Nigeria, it has been an impossible task.

In the poem, "Unity in Diversity", Eke presents the attempt by Yakubu Gowon to keep Nigeria united amidst its ethnic and religious differences. Gowon goes to the highest length to achieve his aim even if it meant going to war with any tribal group which threatened the unity of Nigeria. This is seen in the tragic loss of millions of lives and properties during the Nigerian-Biafran war from 1967-1970. Eke reveals Gowon's efforts to keep Nigeria in unity thus:

His mission to keep Green Republic  
As one family  
Decided to sow  
The seed of unity

His task was  
To keep Green Republic united  
Memories of the war  
Dismembered

He sowed some seeds  
Of unity on rocky ground  
The sun attacked and  
Scorched them. (*May 29*, p. 92)

The poetic lines above portray the seed of unity planted by Gowon in order to keep Nigeria in unity. These events led to the hazardous civil war which could have been avoided by dialogues and sacrifices. Eke sees Gowon's "seed of unity" as a creation of a less functional, non-viable and cohesive federal character. This seed of unity Eke refers to is the 3Rs which simply means

reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction, with the aim of guaranteeing peace, stability and progress amongst the various tribes in Nigeria after the Nigerian-Biafran Civil war. However, the 3Rs on the long run failed to keep Nigeria united. Eke reveals that Gowon “Presided over Green / Republic / Without any political / Mission and vision” (*May 29*, p. 92)

Another poem, “Federal Character”, further expresses the manifestation of disunity and its consequent effect on Nigeria. He laments:

Federal Character  
Without equal opportunities  
Federal character  
He bred inequality

She has ignited  
Fire of disunity  
Across Green  
Republic

Fuelled the vehicle of  
Ethnic crises  
Across the country (*February*, p. 25)

The above stanzas depict the clear cases of disunity, mediocrity in the appointments based on tribal affiliations, and the causes of ethnic and religious crises in Nigeria. All these problems hinder true nationalism and federalism which has been one of Nigeria’s struggles since independence.

The Second Republic leadership led by Shehu Shagari also made it a priority like the First Republic and other military regimes in the 1960s and 1970s for Nigeria to experience unity that is devoid of tribalism and hatred. In Eke’s poem, “Brother’s Keeper”, he showcases the level of ethnic clashes in Nigeria that characterised the Second Republic. He bemoans:

Let us be our  
brother’s keeper  
Shagarian song of  
Peace and unity

Let us be our  
Brother’s keeper  
Recruitment not based  
On merit

Let us be our  
Brother’s keeper  
Ethnic clashes on  
A daily basis (*February*, p. 23)

These textual illustrations reveal the motto acclaimed by the Shagari government for the promotion of peace and unity in Nigeria. However, Eke reveals the clear disparity between words of mouth and the actualisation of the unification of the tribes in Nigeria. The government fails to achieve this aim as a result of constant cases of tribalism in the areas that include biased and unmerited appointment of positions, unemployment, promotions based on one’s state and tribe of origin. Eke advocates for the Nigerian populace to be “...our / brother’s keeper” (p. 23).

From the abovementioned, all efforts by the governments in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to broker unity have failed. In the poem “Machine of Unity”, the poet exposes some realistic cases of notable ethnic clashes that have re-occurred from the pre-independence, independence and post-independence eras. Eke recounts thus:

Ethnic clashes today  
Ethnic clashes tomorrow  
Tiv-Jukun clashes  
Ife-Modakeke (*May 27*, p. 90)

The Tiv-Jukun clashes Eke refers to did not start today in Nigeria’s history. These fights have been periodic between the late 1960s to the early 2000s. These fights have been caused by complains about marginalisation, inequality and insecurity from the Jukun and Tiv tribes respectively, consequently leading to destruction of lives and properties. The Ife-Modakeke crisis is one of the oldest intra-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. The clashes recorded span between 1835 and 2000. Causes of these conflicts include struggle for cultural identity, land ownership, accusation of cheating and injustice. Eke concludes the poem by asserting that, “Unity in Diversity / A scam / Yet to be / Born (*May 27*, p.90).

The foregoing assertion about the state of unity in Nigeria reflects the present reality of Nigeria in the twenty-first century as there have been cases of inter-ethnic, intra ethnic and religious riots which have led to the killing of many persons in Nigeria. To depict the prolonged and continuous problem of unity in Nigeria, the poem, “Without Apologies” presents the perpetual cases of animosity that permeates in the relationship between the three main tribes in Nigeria; the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba tribes. Eke reveals:

Animosities somewhere  
Animosities anywhere  
Animosities any place  
Animosities anytime

Without apologies  
Yorubas call  
Igbos  
‘Kobokobo’

Without apologies  
Yoruba call  
Hausas  
‘Gambari’

Vestiges of ethnic war  
Hausas call  
Igbos  
‘Nyamiri’

Vestiges of ethnic war  
Hausas call  
Yorubas  
‘Bayerebi’

Ethnic rivalry  
Igbos call

Yorubas  
'Ngbati'

Ethnic rivalry  
Igbos call  
Hausas  
'Alakuba' (*February*, p. 82)

These lines attest to the lingering consciousness to the mistrust and dislike each major tribe has for the other. From the above, we can describe the animosity among the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba tribes as rooted in a complex interplay of historical, political, economic and cultural factors. Some of these factors include colonial legacy, power struggles, resource control and ethnic identity and pride. The poet vividly depicts the complex and sometimes unpalatable relationships between Nigeria's three main tribes—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba—by using expressions that highlight the characteristics associated with each group. The Yorubas, for instance, refer to the Igbos as 'kobo kobo', a term that conveys the image of people driven by the love of money and profitable business skills—traits often attributed by other tribes. Additionally, the Yorubas call the Hausas 'Gambari', a metaphorical expression that reflects the Hausas' association with petty trading in kiosks, a common occupation among them. On the other hand, the Igbos refer to Hausas as 'Alakuba', a term that captures the unique style of prayer among the Hausa Muslims, who prostrate while chanting 'Allah wa kubar' in mosques and prayer grounds. Also, the Igbos in the South-Eastern Nigeria often refer to the Yorubas as 'ngbati', a mimicry of the Yoruba expression 'ni gbati', which means 'when'. The Hausas in turn, use the term 'nyamiri' to refer to the Igbos. This expression translates to 'yem miri' meaning 'give me water', a term used by Igbos during long journeys to the Northern parts of Nigeria. These expressions reflect the deep-seated animosities and ethnic disparities that have historically existed among the three major tribes in Nigeria

In addition to ethnic crises, religious crises permeate in Nigeria. This has worsened the possibility of having a united Nigerian state. In the history of Nigeria, religious crises have been notably violent and have primarily involved conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities. Some notable religious crises include; Miatatsine Riots of the 1980s in Kano, Kafanchan crisis (1987), Zangon Kataf riots (1992), Sharia law riots (2000) in Kaduna. Also, the Jos Riots (2001, 2008, 2010) and Yelwa Shendam Massacre (2004) in Plateau state have been notable. Eke replicates the historical representation of the Kafanchan religious crisis of 1987 in his poem titled "Kafanchan". The brutal event was triggered by the religious sentiments between Christian and Muslim students in Kafanchan Advanced Teachers College. The crisis clearly exposes the dangers of religious fundamentalism to the survival of humans in Nigeria. What is shocking about the Kafanchan crisis is the level of religious intolerance that abounds in a higher institution of learning which should be an institution where tolerance and peace should be instilled. Eke paints vivid images of religious violence that erupts in Kafanchan. He describes:

Kafanchan  
Contaminated by  
Religious virus  
Devoured by ethnic earthquake (*May 27*, p. 79)

From the lines above, religion is presented by the poet as something negative as a deadly virus since it has wreaked havoc amongst different sects. The poet's use of seismic imagery in the stanza underscores the role of ethnic differences in religious issues and its cataclysmic effects. Attention is

also drawn by the poet through his use of arthropod morphological imagery to describe the escalating levels of the crisis under discussion. He explains:

At the egg  
 Stage  
 Laid by disagreement between  
 Muslim and Christian students

At the larvae  
 Stage  
 Crisis consumed ninety  
 Five vehicles

At the pupa  
 Stage  
 Crisis consumed two  
 Hundred churches and five mosques

At the imago  
 Stage  
 Crisis swallowed  
 Human lives (*May 27*, p. 79)

Through the four stages in the metamorphosis of a butterfly, namely; the egg, larvae, pupa and imago, the fatalities of the Kafanchan crisis are exposed. The egg stage is the emerging and build-up stage where quarrels and non-violent acts ensue. The larvae stage sees the destruction of physical properties like cars, while the pupa stage involves the burning of sacred places of worship and sanctity like mosques and churches. The imago stage is the most brutal stage where the sanctity of human life is abused and broken with brash and unjustifiable slaughter of human beings. Reacting to the devastation of the Kafanchan Crisis, Falola (1998) considers the Kafanchan Crisis as “the first most brutal confrontation between Christians and Muslims... and the sixth most serious case of religious violence in the 1980s” (*May 27*, p. 179).

The poem, “Zangon Kafat” is a historical depiction of the dangers of religious and ethnic intolerance in Nigeria. The Zangon Kafat riot of February and May in 1992, further reveals the deteriorating relationship between Christians and Muslims that occupy Kaduna state since the riot takes place five years after the Kafanchan Crisis. Logically, one would only think that after the devastating and brutal Kafanchan crisis, the religious sects will make attempts to avoid such religious confrontations. History has shown that several religious and ethnic riots and crisis in Nigeria have taken place in the twenty-first century. In the opening stanza, Eke reveals the almost insignificant issue that leads to the destructive riots between the Zangon and Kafat sects. To appreciate this poem, one must be abreast with the devastating events that led to the riots. Tensions increased over the proposal to move the market to a new site, away from the land transferred to the Hausas. The Hausas opposed for fear of the loss of trading privileges. This caused violence and led to the loss of many lives and properties. The Hausa youths retaliated by killing many Christians of all ethnic groups. Eke compares the escalation of the disagreements to relocate to the market place to “a grain of / Mustard seed” which “grew into a big tree” (*May 27*, p. 80). The mustard seed is known to be one of the tiniest seeds but when planted, produces one of the biggest trees. The poet uses the analogy of the mustard seed to show how fragile and sensitive matters which relate to religion and ethnicity are in Nigeria. The devastation caused by the riots is revealed as thus: “Ninety-five persons dead / Two hundred and fifty-two injured / One hundred and thirty-three houses / Destroyed” (*May 27*, p. 80). As a reaction to



this violent acts, Eke implores the Kataf and Hausa tribes to “Live like David and Jonathan” implying the need to adopt more simple and arbitrary methods to solve religious and ethnic intolerance and tensions in the future.

### Repeated Cases of corruption

The Shagari government, which introduced Nigeria’s Second Republic, was racked with accusations of being one of the most corrupt governments in Nigeria’s political history. Hence, the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, acting on this notion, quickly began a palace coup in 1983, which saw the end of the Second Republic. Shagari’s civilian government in Nigeria contributed to economic challenges, public discontent, and several allegations of financial mismanagement, embezzlement, and favouritism. One major issue was the mismanagement of oil revenue, drastically impacting the economy negatively. The economic downturn during the Shagari leadership, marked by the fall in oil prices and mismanagement of Nigeria’s funds, aggravated the impact of corruption on the nation’s growth (Britannica.com). The poem, “Shagarian Republic I” describes the corruption inherent in the Shagarian government. Eke reveals the corrupt practices by pointing out that “Party chieftains / Emergency millionaires” (*May 29*, p. 61) through import licences to suggest a connection between political figures and economic gains, potentially indicating corruption or favouritism in the allocation of licences. This further leads to a situation where specific individuals benefited excessively from importing items like food and fertilisers during the Shagari government. The poem emphasises the need for a change beyond importation, implying that the reliance on imports is disadvantageous to the country’s advancement and suggests a desire for more self-reliant and less corrupt governance that prioritises domestic production over importation.

Eke portrays the perceived level of political corruption inherent in the Buhari-Idiagbon military regime (1983-1985). In Nigerian political history, the next government after Shagari was the Buhari-Idiagbon military regime, which dubbed the Shagari civilian government as one of Nigeria's most corrupt regimes. It is ironic that the Buhari regime which claimed its primary goal was to free Nigeria from the massive corruption of previous governments, ended up replicating the same corruption. During the 1983 military regime, there were speculations about Buhari, the head of state, being a figurehead. Babatunde Idiagbon, his deputy military head of state, performed and carried out most executive duties and policies. For this reason, Eke adopts the title of the poem “Babatunde’s Regime” to depict his influence on the entire regime. Babatunde created the institution, War Against Indiscipline (WAI). His regime was referred to as a regime that fronted campaigns against indiscipline and corruption but was ironically one of the most corrupt regimes in Nigeria’s history. Eke employs satire as a device to depict the massive corruption allegations. His regime’s atrocities are labelled by the poet as follows:

His regime  
Cemented the  
Walls of illicit  
Drug trafficking

Lubricated the  
Engine  
Of illegal oil bunkering

Greased the  
Machine  
Of bribes and  
‘Settlement’

Built the  
Bricks  
Of advance  
Fee fraud

Lubricated the  
Tractor  
Of stealing  
Stealing became “no big deal”

His regime  
Grilled the meat  
Of over-invoicing  
And contract inflation (*February*, p. 49)

The excerpt above depicts the level of corruption the Babatunde regime engaged in. The poet’s revelation of “illicit drug trafficking and “illegal oil bunkering” indicates a corrupt network which extends to activities that are detrimental to the nation’s status and further implicating the Buhari-Idiagbon regime in these atrocities against the nation’s laws. From the foregoing, the poet’s deliberate choice of terms such as “lubricated, greased, erected, built, cemented” metaphorically describes how corruption infiltrates the different aspects of the regime. The regime was purely involved in these corrupt practices. Eke’s reference to “Greased the / Machine / Of bribes and settlements and advance / Fee fraud” (*February*, p. 49) underscores the deliberate nature of corruption that permeated the Babatunde regime. The image of stealing becoming no big deal seals the acceptance and adherence to corrupt practices under his regime, which in a government devoid of corruption should be frowned upon. This only describes the normalisation of corruption in the regime with impunity. To express further the impunity of the Idiagbon regime, the poet employs culinary metaphors like “grilled the meat”, sliced the onions” to describe the corrupt financial practices. Activities like contract inflation, “over-invoicing, kickbacks and kick fronts”, and “bribery by the settlement” (p. 49) were evident in the Babatunde regime. These metaphors carefully define the organised and calculated methods of indulging in political corruption, which can be likened to the preparation of meals which require several condiments and careful planning.

In “Abacha’s Loot”, Eke reflects on the corrupt regime of the former head of state, General Abacha, who was notorious for embezzling billions of Dollars which till today, are still being remitted to the Nigerian state from the numerous countries he had hidden them. This embezzlement claim correlates with Egwaikhide and Isumonah’s declaration that: “under the military, corruption became a major project to which the Abacha regime in particular was vigorously committed...Corruption occurred on a large scale under Abacha in different spheres of the public sector with regressive effects on the economy” (2001, p. 232). In the poem, Eke reflects on the reactions of the general public to the magnitude of Abacha’s embezzlement of government funds. These reactions produce a sense of shock and disbelief. He reveals:

Abacha’s Loot  
We sank down on the chair  
Hardly able to  
Comprehend human greed (*June*, p. 87)

The poet’s use of expressions like “breaking the walls / Of our minds”, “breaking the walls of our hearts” (*June*, p. 87) implies the broken trust and lack of morality resulting from political corruption. The poet expresses the disgust seen in the Nigerians’ faces and nostrils upon the arrival of news

surrounding each newly discovered loot. The poet evokes the emotion of the Nigerian nation with the image of “...hands flying to their cheeks / We could not contain our tears” (*June*, p. 87). In the concluding stanza, the poet proposes the death penalty on the looters to curb the level of loot.

### Reflections on the History of Leadership Failings in Eke’s Poetry

The idea of failed leadership in Nigeria is also prevalent in the past and present times. With the emergence of the First Republic in 1963, the expectations of citizens in Nigeria were relatively high owing to the fact that indigenous leadership had come to take over from the colonialists. Nigerians had the notion that indigenous leadership will foster the rapid growth of the newly independent Nigeria. The First Republic fell beyond these expectations with atrocious episodes of corrupt practices such as embezzlement of public funds, neglect of public duties. The poem, “October 1960” encapsulates the failure of the First Republic. Eke presents a stark link between leadership in the First Republic and the leadership of the second and third decade in the twenty-first century with the focus on the Muhammadu Buhari and Yemi Osibanjo civilian leadership. The poems “Change the Change” and “President Black” reveal the failure of the Buhari leadership to fulfil the promises of its political manifestoes. During his campaign in 2015, the slogan of the All People’s Congress party (APC) was “CHANGE”. This change involved a commitment to the total overhaul of the alleged corruption that the People Democratic Party (PDP) fostered at the beginning of the Fourth Republic. Eke reveals in “Change the Change”:

Election have  
Come and gone  
And the people voted for  
CHANGE

The leader has assured us  
Is changeable  
A change from  
Poverty to prosperity  
A changeover from  
Violence to peace  
A changeover from  
Darkness to light (*October*, p. 33)

The above underscores the hope for a future filled with bloom that is devoid of poverty, violence, darkness and insecurity. These will be juxtaposed with peace, prosperity, security and light. Shortly after being elected into office, the reverse becomes the case as the situation of Nigerians become deplorable. Their living conditions deteriorates “From poverty to penury / From poverty to pittance” (*October*, p. 33) revealing the disparities between perception and actual reality. Eke clearly reveals the present state of Nigerians thus:

Yet they are now more impoverished  
Yet they are now more disadvantaged  
Yet they are now more poverty-stricken  
Yet they are now more hard up  
Yet they are now dying penniless (*October*, p. 33)

The stanza above shows the deeper level of deterioration that permeates in the Nigerian state in the twenty-first century as a result of incompetent leadership. Nigeria has experienced the most severe devaluation of the Naira, increase in poverty level globally, dependence on foreign debt and worrisome international status and reputation during the Buhari leadership.

“President Black” is another poem that further exposes in a howling tone the disappointing leadership of Buhari and Osibanjo. He refers to Buhari as “President Black” to express the bleak experience Nigerians had during his time as the president of Nigeria. He bemoans:

In this democratic kingdom  
Black has plucked out  
Our gills  
We can no longer respire

In this democracy  
Black has pulled out  
Our fins  
Impeding movements (*October*, p. 54)

From the lines above, the poet presents Buhari as a democratically elected president who does not respect the ideals and principles of democracy and instead has chosen to oppress the citizens of Nigeria by making policies which are not favourable to them. This brings discomfort and hardship to the citizens. Buhari’s democratic leadership saw the deterioration of every aspect of Nigeria’s existence. Eke uses the importance of gills and fins to the fish as a metaphor for the survival of Nigerians during the Buhari leadership. The poet uses the metaphor of a fish to symbolise the plights of Nigerians under Buhari and Osibanjo. A fish breathes through its gill which allows it to extract oxygen from water and removing the gill would suffocate the fish making it unable to survive in its environment. The fins also enable the fish navigate through water. Eke suggests that just like the fish, democratic government during the Buhari’s leadership through bad policies restricted, suffocated the progress and growth of Nigerians. The poem reflects on the struggle to survive the hardship, hopelessness and helplessness that was prevalent at that time. In response to these suffocative and restrictive leadership styles, Eke reveals the intention of the masses as thus:

We are waiting for  
Another June Twelve  
To extinguish Black  
A new president  
To nurse our slimy scales  
To nurse our gills  
To nurse our fins  
To nurse our bladder (*October*, p. 55)

Eke’s reference to ‘June Twelve’ in the poetic lines above is seen as an attempt to rekindle the essence of democracy in the Nigerian state through the eponymous June 12 election which was dubbed as the most democratically conducted election with a display of true patriotism. It also symbolises a ray of hope in the face of darkness that abides in moments of unfulfilment. The parallel lines emphasise healing, restoration of hope, rehabilitation of the nation from the destructions of the previous military regimes and civilian leaderships in the past and present.

### **Electoral Fraud and Violence**

Electoral fraud and violence have been recurring problems in the annals of the Nigerian political scene. These have led to series of protests and violence during democratic elections. Fraudulent electoral activities such as rigging and violence did not begin in the twenty-first century; it has been in existence during the 1960s, and beyond. In the First Republic, a major incidence of electoral violence was seen in 1965, after Samuel Akintola re-emerged as prime minister of the Western Region. His re-election led to massive protest which claimed the lives and properties of citizens. The Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) party was accused of rigging the election in Akintola’s

favour. This idea of rigging in the First Republic is what Eke tags in his poem “October 1960” as “independence that laid eggs / of rigged elections” (*October*, p. 13). Elections in Nigeria generally have been referred to as non-transparent and rigged. Shagari’s democratic government has also been described as one of the most rigged elections in Nigeria’s contemporary history. In the last two decades electoral fraud has metamorphosed into advanced stages through smarter and more dubious methods.

In the Poem, “Power of Incumbency”, Eke through a political analyst and erudite scholar of politics counsels on the dangers of the power of incumbency. The poet describes the power of incumbency as the “Bane of our / Nascent democracy / Hydra-headed monster”. He continues that “Incumbent candidates / Blessed with power / Blessed with bags of money / Blessed with media muscles” (*May 29*, p. 86). The foregoing underscores the abuse of power, electoral malpractices, lack of accountability, political violence, patronage and nepotism, media manipulations and stagnancy in policies by incumbents. Eke, through the keynote speaker, provides a temporal solution to the problem of incumbency as “One term of / Four years / should be allowed / Keynote speaker concludes” (*May 29*, p. 86).

In another poem “Double Registration”, Eke reveals the extent to which elections are rigged in present day Nigeria also known as the Fourth Republic. He decries:

Double registration  
Pervasive political predicament  
Declares  
An electoral officer  
  
Yes it is the owner  
Of the building  
Who knows where  
The building leaks (*May 29*, p. 44)

The foregoing involves the allegation made by an electoral officer, reporting the incessant rates of double registration that goes on during elections in Nigeria. In Nigerian elections, there have been several instances of double registration. Historically, Eke specifically refers to a certain candidate who sponsors this rigging exercise in the lines below:

Allegations of  
Double registration  
Levelled against Yahaya  
A big politician. (*May 29*, p. 44)

From the foregoing lines, Yahaya Bello, the All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate in Kogi state in 2019, was accused of rigging elections to emerge as the governor but was later declared the winner and upheld at the Supreme Court in Abuja. He was also accused by the other opposition parties of intimidation and violence. This validates the unyielding power of an incumbent governor.

In another poem “Square Peg in Round Hole”, Eke further decries the effect of the power of incumbency and its usage as a weapon to rig and win elections in Nigeria. Eke exposes these means as follows:

Deplored thousands of  
Security agents  
For a state election  
Like using sledgehammer to crack a nut

This sledgehammer tactics  
Sent cold fears  
Down the spine  
Of opposition parties (*May 29*, p. 101)

The deploring of intimidating and armed security agents to a civic exercise depicts the lawlessness and disrespect for the electoral process. These security agents are tools employed by the incumbent leader used to frustrate and intimidate members of the opposition party. It further portrays the failure of the arms of government in the Nigerian state. The poet's comparison of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut displays the level of toxicity and violence that abounds in Nigeria's democracy.

### Reflections on Legislative Turbulence in the Poems

Another political history of Nigeria that is depicted in Eke's poetry is legislative upheavals and turbulence. A number of Eke's poems reflect the changes in the legislature and executive arms of government from the parliamentary system to the presidential system in 1979. Like in other countries, the role of the legislature is to make laws and connect the people to the government by providing a platform where citizens' aspirations are met for the proper growth of the entire nation. One of the problems of the Nigerian legislature in recent times is its inability to implement the national budgets which have led to infrastructural decay in most senatorial districts and federal constituencies. The legislature during the First Republic suffered from ethnic-based problems such as the uneven representation of regions in the parliament which indirectly meant that the largest region (North) could potentially govern Nigeria at the expense of other tribes and regions. In the First Republic, the legislators were concerned about being oppressed by other regions. The legislators in Nigeria's Fourth Republic are seen as ticks. In the poem, "Ticks", Eke attributes the corrupt nature of these legislators to the characteristics of "ticks" which attach themselves to the skin of our national Assembly. The poet describes further the harmful nature of these ticks as thus:

The chieftain's larvae pierced  
The skin of allocated  
Funds  
Inflated street light prospects

Another chieftain-tick  
Impeached  
His stomach filled with blood  
Sucked from a minister's skin

A soft-bodied tick  
Designed  
After sucking multiple funds  
For the renovation of her house (*February*, p. 129)

In another poem, "Kangaroos", Eke recalls some of the most demeaning and shameful experiences in Nigeria's history which takes place at the National Assembly. It brings to the fore the commonality and denigration of the position of the Senators and House of Representative members in the Nigerian state. These legislators do not only embezzle public funds but behave in an animalistic manner. 'Kangaroos' presents a vivid picture of the physical combats between members in the Senate chambers which in a case leads to the theft of the mace, the symbol of authority. These unhealthy acts show the level of denigration and disrespect of the legislative offices in Nigeria. He reveals:

Outbreaks of House  
Fighting to finish in

The House  
 Like kangaroos legislators  
 Paw at one another's head  
 Quest for the mace  
 Begins (*May 29*, p. 108)

The lines above, narrates the dramatic theft during the assembly session in April 2018 by hoodlums who stormed the Nigerian Senate and carted away with the mace. This further leads to the arrest of Senator Ovie Omo-Agege, who was accused of escorting the thieves into the senatorial building to commit the punishable offence. The action of the mace theft breeds a certain perception about the lawlessness displayed by legislators elected into office to make laws that will move Nigerian forward.

We can see  
 Forearms locking  
 They lock arms and  
 Wrestle all day

And they push  
 Each other  
 Balance on their tails  
 Kick each other in the abdomen (*May 29*, p. 108)

From the above, the legislators have become worse compared to the legislators of previous republics. The fight the poet refers to happened in June 22, 2010, when Nigerian House of Representative members engaged in a free-for all fist fight on the floor during its proceedings.

### Conclusion

The study has proven that Eke is a third generation Nigerian poet who has shown great interest in confronting Nigeria's socio-political and socio-economic struggles through history. His poetry plunges into the misconduct of political leadership and its resultant effect since Nigeria's independence. By deliberately naming each collection after specific historical dates and events in Nigeria's political history, Eke re-visits Nigeria's political past as it relates to the present. The study also bring to the fore repeated worrisome and deteriorating states of the Nigerian society with regards to religious and ethnic intolerance, poor legislative and executive leaderships which have been the bane of Nigeria's existence. Eke through his reformatory stance in his poems, provides solutions which can curb these vices in the society if adhered to.

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