



The Historicity of Individuals and the Five Hs in Selected Poems of Joe Ushie and Niyi Osundare

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ABSTRACT: *The idea that history mediates contemporary postcolonial discourses in African literature and criticism is a given; however, existing studies are dominated by the notion of periodisation in relation to social structures and the resultant conflicts generated in the texts. This paper corroborates Andrew Abbott's thesis that continuity in time does not only occur at the level of the larger social structures, but also, and most importantly, historical continuities are more dynamic with individuals. To exemplify how this idea works in literature, this paper selects to study, from the New Historicist perspectives, both the life story and the works of Joe Ushie and Niyi Osundare by critiquing their history, historicity, historicism, historification and historicity, which constitute the five Hs in their poems. The analysis reveals that Ushie and Osundare do not only share commonalities in personal life accounts and ideologies, their works also bear the marks of their common struggle against tyranny, injustices, oppression and impoverishment of the masses by the neo-imperialist forces within and outside their milieu, as the analysis of selected poems in such anthologies as *A Reign of Locusts*, *Hill Songs*, *The Eye of the Earth* and *Village Voices*, among others, is indicative. The paper concludes that postcolonial literary criticism can be very interesting and more rewarding when approached from the angle of individual historicity rather than from the perspective of social structures.*

Keywords: *History, Historicity, Historicity, Ushie, Osundare.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing ahistoricity of contemporary critical hermeneutics propelled by the quest to enliven the aesthetic texture of postcolonial literatures and criticisms, historicisation has remained normative to postcolonial criticism. For instance, while reporting on the nascent notion of transnational aesthetics and the literary possibilities inherent in exceeding the postcolonial, John McLeod maintains that 'the value of postcolonialism lies in its sensitivity to the historical, cultural, and social contexts which enable and limit consciousness and representation' (87). Also, the attempt by John Su to offer syncretised and synthesised views on how aesthetics should operate in postcolonial critiques is based on the understanding of the risks involved in jettisoning contents (history) in pursuit of beauty (language) in postcolonial discourses (65, 66). The importance of history in Africa's postcolonial discourse is particularly striking because history is the lifeblood without which the entire enterprise loses its vitality, vigour and vision, even as history remains the meta-subject matter of Africa's postcolonial studies in politics, culture, arts and literature, among other discourse.

However, the way history has been approached and utilised in existing discourses mostly aimed at explaining the workings of the social structures, which William Form and Nico Wilterdink define as 'the distinctive, stable arrangement of institutions where human beings in a society interact and live together' (1). Social structure, therefore, emphasises the macro indices that give rise to the patterned and predictable social relations among members of a given community. The implication of studying societal history from the angle of social structure is that individuals and their contributions to shifts and evolutionary processes tend to be ignored since it is assumed within the framework of social structures that individual human beings are not free, so to say, but are more or less controlled by social forces. Since social life is usually assumed to be structured along the dimensions of time and space, historical continuities (historicity) are not normally associated with individuals, but rather with institutions and other units of society. For instance, periodisation and generationalisation dominate the time dimension of postcolonial studies while the space dimension is occupied by the various institutions and groups largely organised around binary structures such as West/East, Europe/Africa, white/black, rich/poor, bourgeoisie/proletariat, among others. Individuals and individual heroes, including

villains of history, are subsumed in the binary structures so that their actions are only perceived as being motivated by the institutional forces which they belong, rather than proceeding from freewill and conscious choices.

The intent of this paper to study continuities in time through the ideological prism of individuals is motivated by the fact that some scholars like Ima Emmanuel and Romanus Aboh, among others, have, in recent times, called into question the logicity and workability of periodisation, contending that its messiness and rigidity problematises the classificatory issues in Nigerian literature in particular and in African literature in general (163, 164). It should be noted that periodisation problems in literary studies such as highlighted by Sarli Gholi (1) follow consequently from the problems of periodisation in history as submitted by A. Gangatharan (862). Periodisation presupposes that events in history are arranged in diachronic frames and that history is itself objective, finished and immutable. However, in the New Historicist creed, which provides a theoretical bearing for this paper, history is subjective and relative and is shaped by individuals who live out its experiences (Charles Bressler, 181, 183). The dynamism of history within the framework of New Historicism could be deduced in the words of Edward Sackey: ‘. . . history is the present, that is to say the present-present, and the past in the present, gathered into one single instant of consciousness, moving back and forth diachronically in time, or transporting itself from time present into time past’ (48). The relativity and the subtle complexity in which the time arrow is perceived in New Historicism is not as endearing to postcolonialist and postmodernist critics as the privileging of all items right of the binary structure. Thus, in the binary ‘social structure/individual’, New Historicist principle assumes that social structure is the dominant and oppressive discourse and so should be jettisoned to allow for the individual’s voice to be heard so as to make for a balanced and a more objective critique. In this, Ann Dobie states that ‘It is by hearing the repressed discourses as well as the dominant ones that the historian is able to discover complex relationships among ideologies that eventually provide an interpretation of what the stories of the past mean’ (178). This explains why this paper chooses to approach the issue of historical continuity from the perspective of individuals and not from the point of view of social structures, which dominates existing studies.

Andrew Abbott argues that historicality, which refers to continuity over time, is better studied among individuals than social structures because, for him, individuals are central to history and are the prime reservoir of historical connections from the past to the present (3). In fact, Abbott is convinced that individuals exert greater force on historical events over time than social structures do and that historicality of individuals tends to outlive periodisation of history (13). He maintains that individuals have continuity over time to a degree that social structures do not because, as it is evident in biomedical sciences, ‘bodies carry forward records of the past in quite literal ways. They retain disease organisms. They retain an implicit record of past nutrition. They retain the marks of past behaviour – of occupation, of exercise, of drug abuse, of unprotected sex. Their immune systems retain a record of past exposure and nonexposure to various pathogens’ (4). Abbott then goes on to draw a striking analogy between biomedical sciences’ assumptions about the human body with the social body, reiterating that the self is strewn all over the social landscape (5).

The task before this researcher is to import Abbott’s theorisation on individuals’ historicality to literature by examining the poetic creations of Ushie and Osundare in relation to their experiences as individuals existing in space and time. The analysis is anchored on what the researcher refers to as the ‘Five Hs’ in the poems of Ushie and Osundare which are history, historicity, historicism, historification and historicality. These terms deserve some explications at this point in the research for the purpose of clarification and later application.

History, Historicity, Historicism, Historification and Historicality Clarified

The idea of history as ‘an approach in the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the “rhythms” or the “patterns”, the “laws” or the “trends” that underlie the evolution of history’ (John Passmore, 33) persists in contemporary researches. However, within the purview of New Historicism, which is the theory that regulates the proceedings of this research, history assumes no such ideological pomposity; but rather it is the human story that has been textualised and relativised so that it can be implied and utilised in any kind of discourse. The import of such radical view of history is felt in nowhere else other than in literature, where literary texts are read as products of history, thus abolishing, perhaps, forever the New Critical method of excluding the extra-literary from the criticism of literary texts. History, therefore, ceases to be the story of the past (absence) which stands apart from other disciplines and is called forth when necessary; but rather, history is the story or the text (presence) which incorporates all of the known time arrows (present, past and future, among others) with all their complexities, and is studied alongside other discourses for optimum comprehension and realisation of facts about the human condition. Contemporary interrogation of history also reveals that it rejects the grand stories of the past in favour of the smaller narratives by the oppressed and suppressed voices in human societies. Perhaps, this explains Eghosa Osaghae’s assertion that in current postcolonial studies, ‘. . . identity politics and contestation have taken

the front seat, and the new heroes are the feminists and indigenous peoples' rights activists, and the ethnic underclass, who are able to force the state to recognise the plurality of identities and respect the politics of difference' (89).

Osaghae's submission justifies the earlier assertion made in this paper that postmodernist and postcolonial critiques favour all items right of the binary structure, which are the oppressed components. The weaknesses of the traditional view of history are outlined by Richard Kroner when he writes that,

History, in the scientific sense, does not record all events and deeds that actually happen, does not record all the feelings and thoughts actually present in the souls of people, does not register the whole human tragedy and comedy. History relates only a small section of actual life, only that section which is connected with public or institutional or cultural change (134).

History, in its traditional notion, is seen to be preoccupied with recording mostly the events that affect the larger social structures of societies so that the activities of private individuals and the inner destiny of persons not directly or indirectly generating the change do not belong to the sphere of history (Kroner, 134). However, motivated by the principles of New Historicism, this paper identifies individuals as strong social and historical forces which deserve to have their narratives preserved in history and the other human discourses, including literature.

Historicity is a critical tool for retrieving historical facts from fictional works. The historicity of a text, therefore, is the historical actuality of the events that are fictionalised in the text. Jana Nterdová defines historicity as 'historical background and historical information used in novels in order to give a fictional story a stamp of reality' (7). The concept of historicity is based on the assumption that history operates in literary works as no text is written *ex nihilo*. And since history lays claims to a certain level of scientificity, the fictional work tends to lose its essence and creative signified if a careless attempt is made to view it as reality, for as Naomi Segal puts it: 'A fiction is not a lie, but its truth claims are not testable' (5). Thus, historicity is used as a critical device for determining the historical actuality of fiction. Segal also believes that all cultural objects are artefacts and that all artefacts have extension in time. It is, therefore, possible to see how the individuality of an artist can be mapped unto his or her art work so that a critical scrutiny of the art could yield, in most cases, the definition of the man or the woman. Indeed, it is not difficult to tell the dancer from the dance.

Historicism can be understood mostly in terms of the historical determinism of all human discourses. The idea that all human knowledge can be approached or studied through the instrumentality of history is the basic assumption of historicism. The Centre for Humanities Research, University of Western Cape, acknowledges the fact that Humanistic studies in Africa are 'underwritten by a deep-seated historicism that might be traced through its attitude towards political processes of emancipation, the discourse of agency and the commitment to the theories of change' (3). That historically determined discourses tend to dominate African literary criticism is not unconnected with the hegemonic discourses advanced by the West during the expansionist and imperialist programmes of slavery and colonialism, which were first of all ideologically executed through a mindless theorisation on the absence of African history. Yet even in contemporary times, the project of de-historicising Africa is still on the rise. This paper is an attempt to emphasise the importance of history in African literary criticism. Though the methods of temporal orderings and codification may run counter to the non-teleological perception of history in the New Historicist creed, historicism is deployed in the relativist sense in this paper to infer the historical underpinning of literary productions and the localisation of time-defined meanings in works of art. In historicism, therefore, all literary works are historified masterpieces. This explains why the researcher proposes to read the poems of Ushie and Osundare as artefacts in time and space connected by the historicity of their creators.

Historification is a literary tool originally associated with Bertolt Brecht in his dramatic works and it is denoted by situating a work in a distant past but in such a way as to make the reader or the audience draw parallels with contemporary events. Historification arises out of the enduring aspects of human nature and the consequent repetitive and universalising qualities of the human story. In historification, attempt is made by the artist to alienate the audience from both the actors and their actions as a means of creating the much needed critical distance that will invite the audience to cognitively map the events in the play onto their current extra-literary social circumstances (EpicTheatreandBrecht, 9). The ultimate aim of historification is to cause the audience to take action in a bid to alter the status quo. This researcher is of the belief that some poems of Ushie and Osundare are crafted with the technique of historification, as the analysis subsequently will reveal. Since the notion of historicity has already been explained, the next section of the paper examines the biographical information on Ushie and Osundare as individuals who constitute historical continuities.

Points of Historical Continuities between Ushie and Osundare: Some Biographical Notes

Continuities denote those consistent and unbroken operations of existence over time. Words synonymous with continuity include interrelationship, interrelatedness, intertextuality, interconnectedness, among others. Historical Continuities, according to Michael Paine, refers to 'a way of looking at history that

allows us to examine any historical event in context, rather than treating it as a distant object. . .’ (Par3). Thus, in examining the historicality between Ushie and Osundare, I propose to review their life stories in order to showcase the many qualities and attributes shared by the two individuals. However, I also share the pessimism of Alexander Gerschenkron regarding the absolute rightness of the term Historical Continuity. He argues that continuity as a critical term in philosophy and the social sciences does not faithfully follow the mathematician’s conception of the term and that any meaningful definition of continuity in the Humanities must take into consideration such sub-concepts as constancy of direction, periodicity of events, endogenous change, length of causal regress and stability of the rate of change (200). It is, therefore, safe to take refuge in the shelter of relativity of thoughts regarding the conception of continuity in history in going about the task of exemplifying the historicality between Ushie and Osundare.

Both Ushie and Osundare were born in the 20th century and so it is apparent that they and their works bear the temporal marks of the times, though Ushie is known to be younger in age and in human experiences compared to Osundare. Both grew up in their ancestral homes, implying that they are well-versed in the folklore of their people, as the critique of their works will reveal subsequently. Ushie and Osundare have also drunk extensively from the fountain of human wisdom and knowledge. Osundare, for instance, is a Professor of English who was educated at the University of Ibadan, the University of Leeds and York University. Ushie is also a Professor of English, educated in Ibadan where he got his Masters and Doctorate degrees. It should also be stated that Ushie was a student of Osundare and it is obvious that he has chosen to walk in the footsteps of his teacher as these biographical accounts presently will reveal. Both Ushie and Osundare are also academics of international standing, having made their marks through quality teaching and publications that are highly regarded within and outside Nigeria. For instance, Osundare currently lectures at the University of New Orleans, Louisiana, United States, while Ushie lectures at the University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria, where he is currently the Vice-Dean of the Postgraduate School. Just like Osundare who sees the teaching profession as a partnership between teachers and students and as an opportunity for the teacher to challenge and inspire students, Ushie is well known among his students, the researcher being one of them, as a teacher of life who usually transforms the classroom into a theatre of motivation and inspiration aimed at boosting students’ confidence in order to prepare them to face the macro world. Both Ushie and Osundare are Fulbright Scholars; Osundare in the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1990 to 1991 and Ushie in 2002 in New York. Ushie and Osundare are world-class critics of literature and the sociopolitical anomalies in their milieu. Their scathing indictment of the predatory Establishment has had reverberating effects in society.

Both Ushie and Osundare have produced numerous academic offspring, Ushie himself having been taught by Osundare. This is an important point in the discourse of historicality between the two scholars. It is, indeed, indicative of the positive influence these two erudite scholars have exerted on their generation. The significance is that these academic offspring are torchbearers of all that Ushie and Osundare represent in morality and ideology.

Ushie and Osundare are poets – poets of global proportion, repute and magnitude. Among the many collections of Osundare’s poems include: *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), *Village Voices* (1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), *Moonsongs* (1988), *Songs of the Season* (1999), *Waiting Laughters* (1990), *Random Blues* (2011), among others. Among the poetry collection of Ushie are *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998), *Popular Stand and other Poems* (1992), *Lambs at the Shrine* (1995), *A Reign of Locusts* (2004), *Hill Songs* (2000) and *Yawns and Belches* (2018). Ushie and Osundare write socially-committed poems which lament the tragic scenario of the contemporary state of Africa and Nigeria. Their poetry has been very critical of the political class and the elites whose actions and inactions have subjected the continent of Africa and the country Nigeria to poverty and ignominy. Osundare believes that the writer is a righter and that to utter is to alter. Like Osundare, Ushie believes in the democratisation of poetry, that is, a kind of poetry that gives the people a voice, as well as poetry that is written for, and on behalf, of the masses. This explains the marked creative simplicity that stylistically separates Ushie and Osundare’s poetry from the semantically opaque poems of Soyinka, Okigbo and Clark.

Arising from the philosophical motivation of their creative impulses, Ushie and Osundare have come face-to-face with the subtle brutality of the Nigerian Establishment. It is reported by Stephen Arnold that on 10th January, 1987, Osundare was attacked by thugs and left for dead; an incident that motivated the writing of *Moonsongs* published in 1988 (Arnold, 437, 438). Wikipedia quotes Osundare as implying that at a point in his literary activism, he was placed under scrutiny by the political Establishment: ‘A couple of my students at the University of Ibadan had become informers; a few even came to my classes wired. And when I was studying abroad, someone trailed me from city to city. At home, my letters were frequently intercepted’ (4). Ushie’s activism also fetched him suspension from the University, an incident that brought untold hardship to his family and dependents. These personal discomforts notwithstanding, Ushie has continued to use his verse and intellectual resources to speak for the cause of the common man in his society. Noting this, Romanus Aboh writes that ‘Ushie is remarkable for his critical undertones on the socio-political conditions in Nigeria and

Africa' and that he is 'one Nigerian academic and poet who has been involved in championing the cause of the ordinary man' (Par2).

There are many commonalities between Ushie and Osundare as the foregoing paragraphs have attempted to point out, and there are many more that the researcher has left unsaid for want of space. In all, it is equally striking that both Ushie and Osundare can be seen as academics and literary gurus who overcame their scars to become stars. This makes their stories to serve as a source of inspiration for the youths of their communities and beyond. As succinctly observed in a statement by the University of Ibadan in illustrating the iconic status of the great poet, Osundare, and this in some ways also apply to Ushie, 'From the modest but cultured beginnings in Ikere-Ekiti, through his cosmopolitan academic and professional engagements with the humanities in Ibadan, Leeds, and York, and several other universities, . . . has bestrode the world of scholarship in Literature like a colossus' (Par2). It is already obvious that the historicality observed in the biographical notes of Ushie and Osundare also rubs off on their arts. Thus, the next sets of paragraphs are committed to exemplifying the points of continuities in the selected poems of Ushie and Osundare.

The Historicality of Individuals in the Selected Poems of Ushie and Osundare: A Critique of the Five Hs

The historicality in the creative works of Ushie and Osundare follows consequently from the historicality that exists in their biographical information, some of which have already been hinted at in the foregoing paragraphs. Both Ushie and Osundare are usually categorised among the third generation Nigerian poets, an act which, as earlier criticised, works in favour of larger structures and their scholarly principles. However, within the purview of historicality, the two poets are seen as acting as stations of temporal and ideological continuities, based on the connectedness of their works in terms of stylistic and thematic foci.

To begin with, Ushie and Osundare's views align along the lines of operational definitions for their arts. Because their poems are written with the ordinary Nigerians in mind, they have to be written in a language that the averagely educated person would understand. This is what this researcher refers to as 'creative simplicity' because the seeming simplicity of their poems do not detract from their inherent poetic qualities. In *Songs of the Marketplace*, his first poetry collection, Osundare defines poetry as '. . . no oracle's kernel/for a sole philosopher's stone' but rather that 'poetry is man meaning to man' (4). In *Hill Songs*, Ushie sees poetry as an art whose essence lies in purity and innocence and so cannot dwell in a world pervaded by evil but must 'seek refuge/in the highest skies' where it will be safe to continue in its onerous task of protesting societal ills such as 'man chewing man' (*Hill Songs*, 76). Ushie's commitment to the art of poetry as a tool for speaking against injustices in society is evident in the poem 'Verse, not Blood' in *Hill Songs*, when he writes: 'I'll spill, all ways/verse, not blood/when hunger haunts/when penury taunts/when health goes gaunts' (75). The poem creatively and subtly inverts the violent ideological posturing of many regimes in Nigeria known for spilling the blood of activists for protesting the mournful state of things in post-independence Nigeria. Thus, instead of spilling blood, the poet's persona chooses to fight back through literary militancy. After all, as the old saying goes, the poem is mightier than the sword. Osundare is equally concerned with fashioning ideological commitment to the art of writing poetry. He sees the poet as a privileged intellectual who sides with the masses against their oppressors, rather than joining the other 'book wizards' in oppressing the common people. Osundare appears to pose the question: of what use is your knowledge if it only adds to the suffering of your people? In the poem 'Listen, Book Wizards', Osundare frowns at the kind of writing that hides the truth from the people. It is apparent that the persona is addressing the learned section of society, especially the lawyers, the journalists, as well as other writers who lack the morality required for their profession. Thus, the persona accuses the book wizards for allowing their professional skills to be the source of the people's anguish: 'The laws of your books/bow a million heads. . ./your pens are spears/in the eye of this land. . .' (*Village Voices*, 58). Apart from the continuities noted in the operational definition of and ideological commitment to the art of poeticising human experiences, Ushie and Osundare also share commonalities in thematic focus. Perhaps, one of the most outstanding themes that run through the oeuvre of Ushie and Osundare is the theme of inequality in society – the gulf that divides the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed, the privileged and the less privileged, among others. In a poem entitled 'Mobile Caskets', Ushie dramatises the rich-poor dialectics in the Nigerian society. The title of the poem is very creative because 'mobile caskets' is a metaphor for vehicles with tinted glasses usually owned by the political class and the elites in Nigeria. The persona of the poem is the collective voice of the poor and the less privileged members of society, and throughout the poem, this voice is heard making comments on the mobile caskets as they pass by him on the road. The persona calls these vehicles 'Tyred caskets' to signal its mobile ability compared to the literal caskets that is often immobile. The idea of casket supposes that the occupants of these vehicles are dead, but then it is only a figurative death as the persona's evocation reveals: 'We are both dead, o brother:/You, shrouded executhefly/In your tyred casket;/Going. . . on this road;/And we, or our skeletons/Tyrelessly watching you/As we go clothed in the elements' (*A Reign of Locusts*, 31). In this

poem, Ushie imaginatively depicts a society that is sharply divided along the lines of class using the metaphor and the dialectics of the living versus dead, though the two groups are seen to be dead to one another.

Osundare's 'Unequal Fingers' captures the theme of inequality using the common idiom that not all fingers are equal. Originally, the expression is meant to philosophise on the fact that nature endows people differently and so everyone cannot possibly be blessed with the same abilities. However, in this poem, Osundare depicts the artificial creation of social and economic inequalities through the systematic deprivation of rights, unjust system of wealth distribution, corruption and oppression. Like in Ushie's 'Mobile Caskets', the persona in 'Unequal Fingers' is the collective voice of the less privileged members of society who lament the socioeconomic gulf that separates them from the upper class members of society. It is apparent from the poem that the persona has long been exposed to this 'unnatural famine' caused by scarcity of staple food items such as yam which the persona refers to as 'gold' and the lack of payments for their farm produced by the buyers. In the midst of this hardship, the persona reports that not far away, '... chicken legs dance/at the bottom of simmering pots/. . . senior service children/pamper corpulent cats/with corned beef/laughing at our yawning ribs' (60).

Not only are Ushie and Osundare committed to speaking for the voiceless peoples of Nigeria and Africa, they are also sympathetic towards the environment. These two poets are famous for using their poems to create awareness among the governors and the governed about the issue of environmental degradation in Nigeria and Africa. In this regard, William Slaymaker describes Osundare as 'the best example of a black African writer, critic, and academic whose creative energy is focused on environment and ecological issues' and that 'what interests critics of Osundare's nature poetry most is his critique of political corruption in Nigeria, his support of peasant farmers and others who live on and off the land. . .' (686). In the same vein, Ismail Garba in a critical review notes that Ushie has demonstrated that a concern with the degradation of the physical environment is inextricably linked with a concern with the degradation of the sociopolitical and sociocultural landscapes (Par 13).

It is interesting to note that though Ushie and Osundare's eco-poems are usually inspired by the present destruction of the environment, they often begin by recalling a past when the environment was healthy and beautiful, and could support the people. This is the case in Osundare's 'Forest Echoes', which, through remembrance of a time when man and the environment coexisted in peace and harmony, draws attention to the carnage and wastages that the forest of Ubo Abusoro has been exposed to in recent times, apparently due to man's greed. This is a form of historicification because the poet uses the past as a strategy for calling attention to contemporary realities. Ushie's 'Hill Songs' also adopts a similar strategy. The persona is shocked by the vast destruction of the landscape that nurtured his childhood and then launches into an evocation about a time in the past when the landscape was evergreen because there was harmony between man and nature.

According to the persona, the forest was once a place of refuge for him: 'Into your bosom, O hills/I often flew on the wings/Of the grouse's dawn song, to hide/A kernel wombed in the roaring/Silence of your groves when/The world's weight peaked in my heart' (Hill Songs, 10). But all that is history now as the persona in the following stanza bemoans the cause of the tragic state of the environment: 'But by axe and flame/You stand undressed, nude/Like an anthill at market place' (10). The personification of the environment by Ushie is a device also used by Osundare as can be seen in the following interrogations: 'Are they of this earth/who fritter the forest and harry the hills/Are they of this earth/ who live that the earth may die. . .?' (The Eye of the Earth, 45). Doki Jeff notes that Osundare's preoccupation goes beyond the realities in the environment to the connection between the individual and his environment (68). For instance, Osundare makes a poetic connection between the environment and the impoverished members of society who he calls 'earth'. These earth-dwellers include the beggars who suffer under the oppressive boots of the rich, the millions of labourers, men and women, who toil in precarious working conditions and who are rewarded with penury and untimely death (Eye of the Earth, 45). The same connection can also be established in Ushie's poetics. The nature poetry of Ushie and Osundare is indicative of the pastoral surroundings which the two poets grew up in; another important point in the historicality of the two individuals.

There is a deep-seated historicism that characterises the poetry of Ushie and Niyi Osundare. This implies that the works of the two poets are mostly historically determined. A good number of their poems are based on events in the history of their societies. Osundare sees the African history, his history, as 'a mountain drained by thirty oceans/my chronicle's coast is a delta of fractured fingers' (Waiting Laughters, 81). In these lines, Osundare laments the continuous attempts by the West to appropriate Africa's history through a systematic distortion of facts. In 'Eclipse in Rwanda', Ushie poetically reports on the 1994 Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi by the Hutu, which is estimated to have claimed not less than one millions lives (Donatien Nikuze, 1094). Ushie's poetic recreation of the genocide reveals the darkness in the soul of man. He uses striking imagery to invoke the elegiac mood in the reader and to portray the inhumanity in humanity. Towards the end of the first stanza, the persona, who is watching the Rwanda horror on TV, screams: '... see the innocent child urging the fallen/mother to rise and go, for it's nightfall/See that youth perforated by man-crafted death' (23).

The poem's historicity is realised through well-chosen lexical items such as 'Rwandan woes', 'Bahutu', 'Watutsi', among others, which help to remind the reader of the Rwandan genocide. Ushie does not only historicise on events of global scale like the Rwanda genocide, he also documents the micro history of the ordinary persons like Bose, a child who was shown on TV with a six-inch nail driven into her skull by an unknown individual. The persona wonders what crime the four-year old child could have committed to warrant such an inhuman treatment. He calls the child 'wordless lamb' since she cannot speak for herself but notes that the heinous deed speaks of the 'index of man's bestiality' ('To Bose', Eclipse, 18). The historicity of Osundare's 'Eating with all the Fingers' lies in the widely known and widely reported cases of mismanagement of resources by most Nigerian and African leaders driven by greed. The same thematic concern is depicted in his 'Eating Tomorrow's Yam' in which the persona frowns at the attitude of those who spend the resources of the people without thinking of the future, and in the process plunges society into political and economic crises. Osundare in *Waiting Laughters* reminisces the tragic event of 10th January 1987 in which he was attacked by thugs. The images are those of time, history and human actions. The persona notes that 'Time ambles in diverse paces' in response to human suffering and that he has 'seen fright, seen fire. . . seen the truth of the lie' (35).

In *Popular Stand* and other Poems, Ushie anticipates time and history in the poem 'By the Year 2000'. He poeticises on the anxiety and the hope the entire humanity built on the year which marked the turn of the century and a new millennium. As the poem progresses, the persona adopts a sarcastic tone as he mocks the utopia that people assume the year promises. For instance, the persona writes: 'By the year 2000/We will feed the world/By the year 2000/We will move the Sahara. . ./we will make snakes walk. . ./we will drain the Atlantic' (10). In the final stanza of the poem, the persona cautions with a pessimistic tone by drawing attention to the sordid realities in the world including the extreme poverty in Africa and the ravages of HIV/AIDS, thus making it doubtful that such problems could be surmounted in such a short time. It is left for the reader to judge if the poet's poetic pessimism was prophetic after all, given that the realities in the world eighteen years into the new century have largely remained the same. In the poem 'Aka Uke', Ushie records the nuisance posed by the motorcycle riders in the Uyo metropolis, which of course, is representative of all the cities in Nigeria, where these riders could be found. At the moment of this critique, these motorbikes had been banned so that Ushie's poem reads like history, albeit a recent history. The rider is one of the less privileged members of society who resorts to commercial bike riding, not out of professionalism defined by career path, but in order to make ends meet. This explains his ill manner of riding as evident in the neck-breaking speed and dangerous overtaking of other cars on the road. His lack of driving experience and his reckless riding soon result in an accident. This is captured by the persona thus: 'The rugged rider/experienced in fall, lands near a gutter/trousers perforated at knee' (*Popular Stand*, 23).

Perhaps in no other anthology is Osundare preoccupied with time and the passage of time as he is in *Days*. In this collection, Osundare is conscious of the seconds, minutes, hours and days of human existence. The poet displays a firm grasp of time diction as can be seen in the following lines: 'Minutes murmur into moments/while the wink plays second fiddle/in the orchestra of transient eternities' (*Days*, 18). What is most interesting, however, is how Osundare uses the days of the week to make major statements about human beings and human actions. For instance, the persona criticises the overzealous religious adherents whom he describes as 'gullible tribes' and 'praying mantis', who have become toothless from the jaw-breaking "hallelujah!" (20, 21). There is a level of lexical intertextuality that exists between this poem and Ushie's 'The Sot' which dramatises the effects of drunkenness on the frustrated persona who chooses to build his mansions in his stomach, while the leaders build real mansions in choice cities around the world. The persona escapes his frustrations through drinking, believing that 'There is truth in the bottle' (18). He is reported to be saying: '. . . I build mine here/in my holy tummy, my Temple, Hallelujah!' (*Popular Stand*, 18). Again, the word 'yawning' which recurs in Osundare's poems is reflected in the title of Ushie's newest anthology, *Yawns and Belches*.

Ushie's preoccupation with time and history is evident in his newest collection *Yawns and Belches*, especially in the poems 'Fridays and Sundays', 'New Year Day', and 'My Happiest Day'. The appropriation of Africa's history, culture and conception of time forms the subject matter of 'Fridays and Sundays'. The persona laments the legacies left by the colonial masters which he and other members of society continue to suffer. The persona writes: 'On their arrival, the westerners wasted no time in reconfiguring our thought/Into discarding our ways and gods that had nurtured us across the countless/Blissful seasons' (*Yawns and Belches*, 60). The happiest day in the poet's life happens to be not the day he received his promotion arrears, not the day he obtained the highest academic degree, not the day he got married, but rather the day he was found worthy of being stolen from, as he has always thought himself too poor for that honour (*Yawns and Belches*, 64). It is a deeply sarcastic poem that only Ushie can craft.

The state of Africa in contemporary times has not escaped the poetic canvas of Ushie and Osundare. In 'Africa Today', Ushie depicts Africa as a beggar who years after colonial rule still takes a beggarly posture, waiting for the alms thrown at her by the former colonial powers. The persona says of Africa: 'She is the blind bowl-bearing beggar/Sitting on a roadside mound of gold/Yawning all day' (25). Ushie then goes on to attack

the 'one-eyed [African] leader' who loots the neo-colonial aids and explains away the underdevelopment of Africa as owing to her inherent slothfulness. Another aspect of the experiences Africans are exposed to currently is captured by Osundare in *Waiting Laughters*. This is the way Africans are treated during visa applications; right from the process of processing documents to travel abroad through to the point of boarding the airplane. These experiences are explained by Osundare in terms of waiting, a virtue all Africans must acquire in hyperbolic doses in order to succeed. The persona states: 'Waiting/The anxious fumes of the visa awefice/thick with queries, thick with fear/. . . Waiting/in the visahouse is a chronicle of cold complaint/. . . The visaman, rightly, suited/. . . takes two furtive looks at the crowded hall/then shuts the window with a cold/imperial bliss' (*Waiting Laughters*, 11). Even at the airport, the persona and his luggage are subjected to embarrassing searches which the poet captures thus: 'Waiting/just waiting, the Custom's uniformed fingers/in the entrails of my puking box/turning, turning, churning it like a bad diet' (13).

In 'One with the Beasts', Ushie deploys alienation, a technique in historicification, to create semblance between human beings and animals. What motivates the poet's arts is a wild life TV programme that shows the social relations of animals in the jungle. Through the device of historicification, this jungle scene is brought closer home so that by the time the reader gets to the middle of the poem, it becomes apparent that what is being poeticised is no longer the world of the animals, but rather the world of humans. The imaginative and observant persona states: ' . . . I watch the soldiery tiger lowering into a/Yawning yell the ebullient buffalo like Nigeria and India/Floored by belching Britain' (*Yawns and Belches*, 20). The fight between the animals soon assumes global and epic proportions and is shown in their historical frames. The persona again reports: 'I watch, too, two tigers partitioning one meek antelope/Like European delegates to the Berlin Conference of 1884/. . . And I watch China's bellicose tiptoeing towards America with lethal claws' (20). In the end, the persona has to admit that he cannot see the 'boundary between man and beast' (20). Human history is, therefore, likened to the events in the animal kingdom where one devours the other who is seen to be weak. From slavery through colonialism to contemporary times, human beings have been known to prey on one another. Both Ushie and Osundare are known to demonstrate this in their poems.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to critique the notion of individuals' historicity in the life and works of Osundare and Ushie. Historicity denotes continuities in time and this is not only reflected in the lived experiences of Ushie and Osundare, it is also seen in their creative works. The research also attempted to discourse the Five Hs (history, historicity, historicism, historicification and historicality) in the poetry of Ushie and Osundare. The idea is to emphasise the importance of connections among individuals in time in an effort to look away from literary approaches based on the study of social structures. The analysis of the poems, which is based on the New Historicist approach, reveals that the poetry of Ushie and Osundare intertextualises on many points among which include their preoccupation with the relationship between man and the environment, the protestation of corruption and oppression in society and their obsession with human history. It would be interesting to see more researches being conducted around the area of individuals' historicity, as this particular exercise on Ushie and Osundare has been very exciting, insightful and rewarding.

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