

Odia Ofeimun at 70: The Poet Ages

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To you whose name rattles
the tongues of looters and
whose verses wrench their
hearts, I bring a song of the
season. Odia, who among
us does not know that before
the arrival of thunder there is
rain? You are the flood of poetry
that erodes their madness and
wipes their lies. To you whose
verses glow beyond the darkness
in the sky of this country, I bring
a gift of the season.

Odia Ofeimun: internationally acclaimed poet, polemicist, administrator, factory worker, editor, and essayist. The opportunity to write this tribute for this extraordinary man is undoubtedly a privilege and an exciting one for me as a writer and scholar. I don't have the gift of Odia's language, but does that matter? Words are limitless, but the alphabets are not. Listen, you cannot say because you are wealthy that you will consume more salt than the poor. My language is just enough to express the justness of justice, and the justice of righteousness. How many words do we need to attribute inestimable honor to dear Odia, a *caviar* among the dearest of poets?

Odia has occupied various positions in his seven decades of life. He worked as an administrative officer, a teacher, and a secretary to the great Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Did I say seven decades? Yes, the poet has aged like wine matured in the vineyard of the gods.

“I never finish,” is a creolized phrase that Fela turned into a chorus to add more *wàhàlà* to an elongated list of *iyà*, the kin of *iyanu*.

So, there is still more.

Odia has contributed greatly to the space of poetry in Nigeria as part of the “third wave” of Nigerian poets, those whose language is regarded as that of the market-place—the poets who took poetry to the streets, pepper soup joints, and night clubs. Those poets are alive and still thriving, as I found in my search for them at Gogobiri and Freedom Park in Lagos where my late-night wander challenged kidnappers and armed robbers to deal with me. Odia is also a human rights activist who is internationally recognized as such.

Let me now go to the warehouse in Lagos where Odia once worked, now converted to a church, to do a street poem:

Odia,
the kolanut of old age becomes
your daily meal. Today and beyond
today I bring to you a parcel of joy,
a box of letters full of indelible
memories. You whose life
brightens our lives, whose
songs lift our feet, whose
arms wrap us the way a mother
wraps her child. Today I echo
your name beyond the seven
hills of Ibadan, beyond the river
of Mother Idoto. You whose
laughter stirs the sea and ruffles
the trees. As your feet continue
to walk the earth, may you never
lose the magic of poetry.

Odia’s pioneer collection of poetry, *The Poet Lied* (1980), showed the world a new voice had landed in the crowded poetic Nigerian space. I was not there with them. I was never to be a part of that crowd. The language of the collection illustrates an infinite show and charades of policies and responsibilities of labor and pain. Was there fatigue in describing African leaders and their politics? This striking diversion is what makes the collection noteworthy, creating a new poetics of a different kind of anguish. Over time, Odia’s countenance began to mirror his lines, as he could be affixed to a spot and still look meditative.

His use of language, personal and muscular, conveys clear meanings and direct messages. His crusade was, and still is, very clear. He is a leader in the fight against injustice. His vision has always been to generate a sociopolitical force bent on creating a worthy humanistic Africa, one based on social justice and equality.

Odia never wrote in a vacuum, even if he has created a vacuum over the years. Hopefully, his celebration in March will come with an army of vacuum cleaners. His works can be viewed through the lens of his evolution as a man who has experienced multiple expectations as well as the traumas of social, cultural and political conditions in his country which have not only “cooked” him well but also continues to nurture him with the ideologies of activism and humanism.

It is the mission of Odia and his abiding vision that conquered us all and opened our eyes to the realities of our decadent and hopeless society. His mission made him worthy of our recognition. His vision turned him into a champion of the marginalized. His composition created the portrait of a humanist. His language is cosmopolitan—openminded, accommodating, and caring. At this point, let me take my adulation to Dugbe market in Ibadan where I am with the admirers of Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the one and only Daddy GO who has taken over all the warehouses where Odia lives:

May you
never lose the flavor of songs.
May you never be buried prematurely.

Odia, come and pay your tithe!

“I never finish!”

Through Odia’s essays, conversations, anecdotes, and poems, one thing stands out: the fight for the common man is his priority. Having seen his consistency over the years in this goal, I can argue that his “tribe” is the marginalized Nigerians. He bears this “tribalism” quite well. When he speaks on the divisiveness of ethnicity in Nigeria, or, when just last month in Abuja, he accused the present government of “tribalism”, he is looking beyond ethnic divides to champion the cause of the disenfranchised. After Abuja, he proceeded to Ikenne, the home of Papa Awolowo. There, he also made strident critiques of the nation state leaving no one in doubt that he inherited the genes of the older members of the distinguished lineage to speak to politics, education, management, administration, institutional leadership, and community organizing. His watchword is hard work, reporting truths, showing empathy and compassion for you and me, and forgetting himself in the process.

Not that he did not labor for his worth, but unlike you and I, he forgot to collect his rewards. He is a Mr.; he never became a Dr. His vast repertoire of knowledge too never took the title of a Professor. He is the socialist who has refused to be swayed by materialism to turn into a socialite. His stomach refuses to grow into a patriotic front. The foundation of his life and career was laid many decades ago. As a young man who registered for a PhD degree and a recipient of the Commonwealth Fellowship at Oxford University, he combined excellence in education with distinction in journalism. But neither a professor nor a media mogul did he become! Odia remains Odia, never becoming *odi*, *òdẹ̀* or odious.

He became our Prophets Samuel and Job. Odia's style shares many things in common with the truth sayers and visionaries in the mold of Prophet Moses. He is a straight-shooter and chronicler of words, a nexus of simple with deep diction, similar to those of Usman Dan Fodio. Quick to the point, dramatic in his actions and choice of words, combative in presentations, and very witty, Odia is effective in getting to the bottom of issues and reaching conclusions based on facts and good judgment. Let me return to the University of Ibadan to use the language of his cohort:

In the songs of the masquerades
we learn the rituals of dance and
magic. In the songs of the birds
we learn the vastness of the sky.

Odia, seasons multiply like
fallen leaves in the parade of the
wind. But you, carrier of our
country's light, know too well
the path that leads to the promised
land. You said the poet lied.
But your verses didn't lie.

"I never finish!"

It is also important to note his giant strides and immense contributions to one of the most iconic periods in the history of Nigeria, the 1993 elections and Abiola's ordeal. He scribbled sweet and delicious verses for that moment. That was how some of his richest polemic essays, *June Twelver's Dilemma* and *Taking Nigeria Seriously* were born. They are a historical resource for all ages and through the ages.

We have enjoyed the language of the poets of the precolonial era. We have also relished the poetry of the colonial era. Now we are now enjoying the

poetry of Odia in the post-colonial time, verses that have created a new wave of poets who imbibe and write in Odia's style to present new poetics and politics.

The language of the marketplace and the common man celebrated by Odia lives on. And we are also privileged to witness the logical and critical political arguments with which he has advocated for Nigeria's progress and continuity. Odia, a visionary who once sent me a manifesto on his ambition to become a governor. He had the dreams to build a rail line from Benin to Abuja, give jobs to millions of jobless youths, and unite the country. He deserves to be celebrated in songs. Join me in dancing to a song for him:

Your
verses are the hurricane that rages,
that splits the wall of corruption.
In the song of the season,
yours is a verse of light that
guides our feet across the
field to the future. They say
the earth does not end. They
say a bird does not die in its
nest. They say the sea does not
thirst for water, and the hive
does not lack bees.
Bàbá, may your life never
know the sorrow of the world.
Because every day the sky
opens its page of light,
and every day the birds
voyage across the world.
Now that your poetry gathers
us for a dance of the season,
may your feet never stumble.

Happy Birthday, Odia.

The last time I visited him in his little house in a small street corner in vibrant Lagos, I left a bottle of brandy with him. He does not drink, but he could at least take it to the University of Lagos where he will be hosted, toasted, and roasted with the camaraderie spirits that flow out of the bottle.

I don't talk tire!