

## LIFE/LINES OF A NIGERIAN WANDERER-POET: A STUDY OF SEGUN AKINLOLU'S *THE KING'S MESSENGER*

Folasade O. Hunsu

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria.

Email: [fohunsu@oauife.edu.ng](mailto:fohunsu@oauife.edu.ng) or

[oyinhunsu@yahoo.com](mailto:oyinhunsu@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

This paper examines the poetry of a fourth generation Nigerian poet, Segun Akinlolu, from a biographical perspective. It discusses how his adoption of two traditional Yoruba personages, the king's messenger and wandering poet in *The King's Messenger* connect with his personal experiences as a young man brought up in a traditional Yoruba setting. Oscillating between the roles of both personages, Akinlolu explores universal, national and personal concerns that are targeted at sensitizing both the ruled and the ruler to their roles as agents of change in society. It shows how his work traverses different generations of Nigerian poets to address some commonalities in all human systems which include social inequality, poverty, and human suffering. As a highly mobile full time poet-performer and musician whose audiences vary, songs are an intricate part of his deliveries and they lend his poetry to performance and entertainment. It concludes that in *The King's Messenger*, Akinlolu demonstrates that both the wisdom and lives of the ancestors can be relevant in the modern world and as much as the collective experience of the nation is important, the personal in the creative possibilities of Nigerian poetry cannot be minimised.

### Keywords

Nigerian poetry, Segun Akinlolu, Beautiful Nubia, biographical, Yoruba, oral tradition, messenger, wandering poet, songs, performance, Sule E Egya

## Introduction

There are not many genres in Nigerian literature that have attracted more attention than poetry. From the period of nationalist struggles of the nineteen fifties to the height of struggles towards the democratization of Nigerian polity in the nineteen nineties, poetry has been an available and malleable platform for writers to participate in the country's socio-political life. A survey covering a period of twenty years, between 1988 and 2008 shows that an estimated figure of over one thousand poets have been published in eight anthologies besides individual publications<sup>1</sup>. Critical inquiries into this tradition have also shown that much of the original and innovative creations of these poets across periods are dynamic engagements with the turbulent socio-political history of the country<sup>2</sup>. Even when culture and tradition form the backdrop of some of their productions, the seriousness and palpability of the gross neglect and sufferings of the 'marginalised majority' take the centre space in their poetic canvasses<sup>3</sup>. It is therefore not surprising to find that the 'national' seems to have towered above the 'personal' in this tradition, so that individual poet's artistry is mainly relevant as long as it projects the collective experiences of the Nigerian nation. By the 'personal', I mean those aspects of the life and lived experiences of the poet which have direct influence on their work and are also exploited as part of their thematic concerns. Apart from this, Nigerian poetry, for reasons outside the scope of this study, more than before, shows the trappings of canonisation, where young and emergent voices risk the possibility of permanent obscurity because they do not fit into existing critical modes. This paper examines the poetry of an unsung fourth generation Nigerian poet, Segun Akinlolu from a biographical perspective and explores his creative impulse in *The King's Messenger*<sup>4</sup> to show how his poetry traverses different generations and demonstrates the importance of the personal in Nigerian poetry in English.

It is in recognition of the need for a proper contextualisation of his poetry that I have referred to him as a fourth generation Nigerian poet because it is within this practice that his art stands out as an uncommon personalised response to national experience. In addition, a biographical approach becomes helpful in view of the

role his life and experiences play in the overall reading of his work. However, this does not imply that biographical sources are infallible; neither are they the only tools needful for unpacking his text, but they point at its uniqueness and his literary achievement. This point is further explained by Jonathan Kramnick as he comments on the relevance of biographical study in literary criticism:

Plays and novels express the self as an author of forms. The mistake is to think one could ever escape biography. The dramatic or novelistic forms one attends to when viewing a play or reading a novel simply are the expressions of the authorial self, even or especially when these expressions are indirect, mediated, put into the intricacies of literary language, dramatic convention and so on<sup>5</sup>.

He writes in favour of Emily Hodgson Anderson's approach to the study of eighteenth century novels and drama because she is able to demonstrate that the 'experience and feelings' of the author in addition to 'culture or history or ideology' underlie the shape of the literary production. Indeed it is exactly the writer's experiences and emotions as revealed in the work that account for the bulk of the signatory elements that the critic lauds as creativity. Sidelining Akinlolu's feelings and experiences while interpreting his poetry may result in critical omissions because he claims that:

[m]y compositions are spontaneous; they come to me as I process my environment and my experiences, I write and sing about what comes to me, whatever I like. I write to express myself, not necessarily to impress or win awards<sup>6</sup>.

### **Contextualizing Segun Akinlolu's Poetry**

The tradition in which he expresses himself is one that has been provided generational identities by its critics. Sule E. Egya's essay, referred to at the beginning of this paper, is appropriate and useful in identifying features of generations of Nigerian poetry which Akinlolu's *The King's Messenger* traverses. In his analysis, the first generation is made up of writers, including poets, who responded to the biting grips of colonialism and the socio-cultural baggage of the era. He describes them as cultural ambassadors who spoke on

behalf of the nation and were later to become critics of indigenous administrations as the nascent nation struggled to be established. These writers who devoted their writings to projecting the beauty and workability of traditional Nigerian cultures and structures include 'Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, T. M. Aluko, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, and many others'<sup>7</sup>. His discussion of the second generation focuses on their techniques and ideologies as delineating features of their works:

The second era of Nigerian writing was a deviation from the first, not so much in thematic issues, as in stylistic considerations. The publication of Ochia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* marked the beginning of the vibrant literature produced in this age. Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi, Kole Omotoso, Bode Sowande, Tess Onwueme, and many others came on the scene with the intent of turning writing into an act, and a people-centered one. Consciously, and in order to deviate from the path of their predecessors, these poets/writers evolved a poetics that was a combination of semantically simple expressions and a more engaged dependence on orature<sup>8</sup>.

The third generation, being the major interest of his essay, receives more attention than the previous two as he dwells on their backgrounds as poets and the socio-political conditions that gave rise to their poetic temperament. He highlights the role of poetry clubs in their growth as poets and the effect of the precarious and stifling political atmosphere in the militarised Nigeria on their literary productions. The highpoint of his description of this generation is the recognition of the anger and pain that propelled them into writing and the subsequent style they adopted in their work. As he succinctly puts it, they

were hurt into writing poetry... Having thus been hurt into poetry, their artistic bearing takes its roots in the already existing tradition of radical arts typified in the poetry of Ochia Ofeimun and Niyi Osundare and theoretically expounded by the Ife-Ibadan Marxists such as Omafume F. Onoge and Biodun Jeyifo. It is thus to the poetry of the Alter-Native tradition that the new poetry is inextricably linked...<sup>9</sup>

Understandably, he presents a long list of poets which includes notable poets such as 'Remi Raji, Toyin Adewale, Afam Akeh, Chiedu Ezeanah, Promise Okekwe, Angela Agali, Sesan Ajayi, and Lola Shoneyin', as evidence of the unparalleled output of poetry volumes in this period.<sup>10</sup>

There are two points to note in Egya's well-informed categories. The second generation, to which Niyi Osundare belongs, made a deliberate attempt to depart from the creative tempo of the first while they were followed by those that found their methods relevant, thereby creating a kind of continuum between the second and third generations. The second point is that Egya's criteria include details such as their ages, educational background, spatial and ideological locations without excluding specific national socio-historical experiences of Nigeria in relation to the period of their writing. This categorisation acknowledges the importance of biographical information in the reading or interpretation of Nigerian poetry and its significance in appreciating the richness and diversity of this tradition. His analysis of the works of selected poets shows that the 'megatheme'<sup>11</sup>, which is the successive absence of credible leadership in the country, is a thread that connects different generations of Nigerian writers. Although Egya's essay is very recent, the 'new' poets he refers to have since become old with many younger voices emerging in the scene as testified to by Toyin Adewale's collection<sup>12</sup> and others that were published after hers. Adewale describes her anthology as featuring,

representative voices chosen to capture the melody and the vast energies of young poets writing in Nigeria today... The poets here embrace the realities of the socio-political Nigerian experience and their poems are like a relay race, one shared reality, different runners passing the baton to each other.<sup>13</sup>

Akinlolu made the list but had then only published his first volume, *Waiting for the Bones*<sup>14</sup>, which he dedicated to the memory of Ken Saro Wiwa, an activist, poet, playwright and actor who was gruesomely executed by the late Nigerian head of state, General Sani Abacha. Others like Ogaga Ifowodo, Uduma Kalu, Kabura Zakama, and Kunle Adebajo are included in Adewale's anthology, which might be regarded as a publication of fourth generation

Nigerian poets. Segun Akinlolu has since published two volumes of poetry *Thinking Big* and *The King's Messenger* in addition to a novel titled *Citadel Blues*<sup>15</sup>. His penchant for performance poetry has borne three CDs namely: *On a Cold Evening* (2000), *Where Rivers Sing a Song* (2004), and *Like a Tale at Night* (2006). It is interesting to note that while he is relatively unknown in the literary scene, Akinlolu, known as 'Beautiful Nubia' is a fairly well-known musician with nine discographies to his credit: *Sun No Dey Sleep* (2011), *Irinajo* (2009), *Kilokilo* (2007), *Fere* (2006), *Awilele* (2004), *Jangbalajugbu* (2002), *Fire on the Roof* (2001), *Voice from Heaven* (1999), and *Seven Lives* (1997). Just like his poetry, his music is a mixture of personal and national experiences. However, despite his literary creativity his works have not been subjects of any known critical inquiry, a void that this essay intends to fill.

#### **A Brief Biographical Sketch**<sup>16</sup>

Segun Akinlolu was born in Ibadan in 1968, the third child of the family. While he was growing up in the Oke-Bola area of Ibadan, one of the commercial nerve centres of the city, Akinlolu witnessed different varieties of oral tradition. He saw many itinerant performers and folklorists who were always coming by to entertain the community. Apart from this, the defunct Oyo state-owned radio station, Radio O-Y-O, was also featuring rich varieties of traditional music, tales, and other performances. He lived in Oke-Bola with his mother and grandmother until he was admitted to the University of Ibadan to study Veterinary Medicine. According to him, this was not his desired field of study but because he was a bright student, his parents felt the medical sciences would be a better field for him to realise his potentials. He agreed reluctantly, graduated in 1991 and practised for about eight years before deciding to follow his heart and become a poet, song writer and performer. He, like many others, sought for greener pastures as he emigrated to Canada in 2001, from where he travels to Nigeria, most often more than twice a year. He has performed his poetry before small groups of about thirty and sometimes large groups numbering thousands in and outside university campuses in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and Canada. In 2004, when he was thirty-six years old, Mike Parker, a

Canadian journalist featured Akinlolu in the *Here Magazine* where he mentioned some of Akinlolu's appearances outside Nigeria:

he was a headliner poet at the Austin International Poetry festival. Two years ago, he was invited to perform at the Farrago Poetry Series in London, England, and the Bristol International Poetry Slam, where he won first prize. Recently, his poem *On a Cold Evening* won an honorable mention in the John Newlove Poetry Award organized by the University of Ottawa's Department of English<sup>17</sup>.

One remarkable aspect of Akinlolu's life is that as a full-time poet-performer and singer, he is self-taught. He did not study poetry at any point in his life, neither was he exposed to any of the poetry clubs mentioned by Egya but some of his poems have been published by leading newspapers in Nigeria, including *The Daily Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Post Express*.

#### **A Reading of Akinlolu's Poetry**

*The King's Messenger* is divided into four sections of eight poems each. They are not strictly thematically arranged as they address disparate personal, national, continental and possibly global issues. For the reason that they were written over a period of ten years, these poems cover different settings. He explains in the 'Foreword'<sup>18</sup> that the poems 'are the impressions made on me by the people I have met in my travels and the places I have been'. Titles such as 'January One', 'The Travelling Man', 'Chillin' in T.O.', and 'Live from My Peep Street Studio' among others are scattered in the volume as tributaries to the people and places he encountered in his travels. In spite of the seeming disconnection among the poems, a closer examination reveals that the first group of poems is tied together by the exploration of the power of the spoken or written word while the second section centres on issues concerning Nigeria and life generally. The third is a collection that deals with issues of the poet-persona's mind as he journeys through life and is in a sense more meditative than the previous sections. The final section contains poems about romantic love, the poet-persona's relationships, his aspirations and dreams.

Visible in *The King's Messenger* are two personages, drawn from Yoruba culture, whose attributes constitute the platform from where the poet-persona launches his literary devices; the king's messenger and the wandering poet. In traditional Yoruba setting, the king's messenger is the media officer attached to the palace who gets the community duly informed about social, cultural and religious events and also disseminates important information that could preserve and promote communal peace. He also reminds the traditional ruler of his appointments and sometimes, commitments to members of the community. He announces wars, curfews, prohibitions and the like and as the need arises, goes to surrounding communities to deliver the king's message. Therefore, it behoves him to deliver his message with accuracy, boldness and confidence so that the required effects of his mission are felt. It is in line with this traditional public relations personality that the poet-persona makes his call in the first poem titled 'Words' (9). He seems to be addressing a community of people that need a collective awakening from slumber. Each of the six stanzas is opened with 'Let our words...' and he desires that the words speak against 'Hungry leaders stealing from the poor/ And their stealthy agents who live amongst us' (10). This poem, written during military rule in Nigeria, and as is characteristic of third generation poetry, is filled with 'intense emotion' as the tone becomes angry and urgent in the third stanza:

Let our words explode  
From binding visions and motionless dreams  
Freed victims of untruth and marching upon injustice  
Like many before us, bootless, limbless  
Sacred sacrifices too many to recall  
We fight on till thirsting spirits slump in fatigue  
Words, like the warm spurting of passion throes  
We spread the seeds of change  
Things will not be the same again. Positively.

The persona evokes images of the repression and wanton killings that marked the era of the military with phrases such as 'poison of martyr's blood', 'freed victims', 'sacred sacrifices', when the people are 'the hopeless', 'the depraved', 'the tired' and 'the hurting'.



However, Akinlolu's vision for social change and a better society is manifest in this poem as it is throughout the volume. He believes that 'words are the life force of change, words are the building blocks of creation...' (7). The messages he delivers are therefore targeted at engendering a process of transformation both among the ruled and the ruler, which is why he hopes in the last lines of four out of the six stanzas that 'Things will not be the same here again. Positively'. The entire collection is prefaced and closed by a rhetorical refrain which underlines the potency of the messenger's words:

Of what use are words employed in jest?  
Perhaps they help heal the broken heart?  
My words are not written  
For empty laughter.

Though he can be identified with the third generation of Nigerian poets who are 'hurt into writing poetry'<sup>19</sup>, Akinlolu's art is more optimistic and positive. He envisions a future that can be better if the entire citizenry play their part. One of the divergent points in his poetry is shift from the rulers to the ruled. In his perception and from his experience in places he has been to, Akinlolu believes that the buck should not just be left on the table of leaders but also the led, a principle of cooperativeness and communality which he epitomizes in his art. 'If...' (40), a poem crafted in the shape of a cross, is replete with messages to the led:

If this land  
Must be changed  
From the home of pain and hurt...  
Each one of us must till the land, Fill its womb, And pray for  
rain...  
Each if us must grow a heart  
Pump out its blood  
Rejuvenate these lives.  
If this land must be great...  
A rebirth must commence  
In you, in me  
For we are the system  
Rotten today, valueless

We are the future  
The ones who must die  
On this cross.

Calling for the death of the people is antagonistic to the extinction or demise of 'oppressive regimes' about whom poets of his generation write. Clearly, his personal vision for a nation that is redeemable has informed the optimism and shift in focus which this poem shows as we see the poet-persona acting as an objective messenger of the king. The poem, 'The King's Messenger' (12), typifies the confidence and respect accorded this personality:

<i>Arewa eye oba</i>	Beautiful king's bird
<i>Owo aye kan o le te o</i>	You can't be harmed by the powers that be
<i>Arewa eye oba</i>	Beautiful, king's bird
<i>Owo ota kan o le ba o o</i>	You can't be harmed by any foe
<i>Ko'rin ayo faye gbo</i>	Sing for the world to hear
<i>Ko'rin ibukun, ko'rin ogo</i>	Sing songs of blessings, sing songs of glory
<i>Ko'rin idunu, ko'rin ayo</i>	Sing songs of gladness, sing songs of joy
<i>Ko'rin isiti, ko'rin eye</i>	Sing songs of counsel, sing songs of honour
<i>Ko'rin isiri, ko'rin ogo</i>	Sing songs of motivation, sing songs of glory
<i>Arewa eye oba</i>	Beautiful king's bird
<i>Owo ota kan ko le ba o</i>	You can't be harmed by any foe (translation mine).

The office of the king backs up the messenger and is therefore protected against attacks by the opposition. The bird is a metaphor of the freedom that the king's messenger has, he could sing about any subject, without leaving out the didactic aspect of his message, such that his songs are for entertainment as well as for 'motivation' and 'counsel'. This aspect supports further, the poet's position in the first poem, on the usefulness of words as agents of change.

Moreover, by virtue of his position as The King's Messenger, he is a kind of repository of communal history and wisdom. He has on his finger tips, the life stories of past leaders and warriors and he

draws on this memory as is needful, to pass across relevant messages to the people. 'Of Reasons and Seasons' (23) is an exposition on the value of people-centred leaders. This poem alludes to the story of Kurunmi, a 'Yoruba leader of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century'<sup>20</sup>, in order to underscore the need for selfless and fearless leaders. He contrasts Kurunmi's bravery to that of 'Today's generals' who 'lead from behind'. He states in the third stanza:

Kurunmi, our father,  
Sent his people out to war  
Sent his five sons too  
All were killed in one day.  
Today's rulers never fight in their wars,  
They hide in the tube  
And send other people,  
(Their children safe at college  
Or suddenly disabled)...

The poet-persona proffers an alternative to the endless wars that these leaders send other people's children to fight: 'The truly great one is he/Who has conquered hatred./The war of hate is won/ With love'. Again, the messenger does not just criticize, he also counsels.

The counsel and information that the messenger gives is not limited to indigene-subjects but also to members of the audience who are either passersby or non-indigenes who have come to the community to conduct one business or another. The variableness in audience allows for him to show his versatility as the mouthpiece of the king and the traditions of his people. In 'Where Rivers Sing a Song', the poet persona invites the 'friendly stranger' to have a glimpse of the rich religious traditions that his people possess (26). He takes his guest to a prominent tourist centre in South West Nigeria, Olumo rock, a place reputed to have been a shield and aid for the Egba people in times of war. He introduces selected members of the Yoruba pantheon before the stranger; Orunmila, Ogun, Sango, Esu, Oya, Osun, Yemoja, and Olokun. Among the poems in *The King's Messenger*, 'Where Rivers Sing a Song' stands out as a representative piece of Akinlolu's indebtedness to the Yoruba oral tradition. As the poet-persona takes the stranger to each of these gods, he performs songs in their praise, highlighting

their qualities and their location in the Yoruba systems of worship. There is no doubt that in Nigerian poetry, as attested by Okunoye and Niyi Osundare he is a foremost patron of traditional Yoruba aesthetics but his adaptation and adoption of traditional poetics does not assume ritualistic dimensions<sup>21</sup>. In this poem, the atmosphere of reverence and worship is palpable, the speaker declares:

<i>Chant:</i> Eni s'aju s'emu	(He who makes the eyes and the nose)
Orisa ni ma sin	(It is the divinity I will serve)
A da ni b'otiri	(He who creates as he wishes)
Orisa ni ma sin	(It is the divinity I will serve)
Eni to ran mi wa	(He who sent me here)
Orisa ni ma sin	(It is the divinity I will serve)
	(translation author's).

He does not only sing, but goes ahead to offer sacrifices and prayer requests to the gods. He asks that 'Orunmila, great physician,/Heal our infirmities/Teach us the tenets of hygiene,/And show us the road to fulfillment-/To seek the joy of others/ And be happy with our lot'. At each of the groves, he concludes his visit by asking that the gods intervene in human affairs and cause changes that will benefit all. In this way, he universalizes the need for health, peace, truth, honesty, prosperity, and joy that they might bring.

The second personage in his poetry that is a metaphor for Akinlolu's life and experience is the wandering poet. He explains his connection with this itinerant traditional performer:

There is nothing original in what I do. It has been done before by thousands of itinerant African poets who wandered between villages or planted their feet in marketplaces and shared eternal truths with people... I wouldn't say I am on a quest to revive the wandering poet tradition. I just wanted a chance to relive it, to see myself as a new form of that institution. I am always on the road, going from place to place with no guarantee of income. I live on the edge and constantly have to reinvent myself to stay fresh. I am still on that road. 'Everywhere is home to the beloved poet', I wrote that line in 2011 in response to the question of what home means to me. Wherever I find love,

wherever they spread a warm mat of welcome and receive me and my offerings with joy, that's my home. But I am not the kind of child who stays permanently. I am here for a season then I'll be gone to, maybe, return some other day.<sup>22</sup>

Wandering poets are not strangers to traditional Yoruba communities as he has rightly pointed out but it is important to state that Akinlolu's contact with this kind of performers in his growing up years in Oke-Bola, Ibadan has made a remarkable impact on his poetry. There are three main characteristics of the wandering poet which are present in his life and lines. Movement or mobility is cardinal to this personality who commutes from one village to another, from one marketplace to another, and from one occasion to another. Without a 'guarantee of income', the wandering poet performs for survival because any attempt on his part to refrain from performance will have serious consequences on his finance which is mainly from the tokens he receives from the impressed audience. Therefore the need to entertain and appeal to his audience cannot be compromised. The last is the wealth of experience gained during and through his many travels which he incorporates into his skillful renditions. The following paragraphs examine the thematic concerns and devices of *The King's Messenger* in the light of these characteristics.

The titles of some of the poems are indicative of the locations of the poet-persona at different times and to a certain extent, personal accounts of his experience as he travels around the world. He is 'Somewhere Called Earth', 'On the Road', a 'Travellin' Man', finds himself in 'Abuja Park', and makes supplications for a safe trip in 'Time for Prayers' (From Falgore to Kano) and is at another time 'Chillin' in T.O'. A highly mobile person is unlikely to write about the same theme all of the time because his concerns are tied to his state, physically and emotionally during the periods of travel. Therefore, Akinlolu's mobility probably informs the universality of some of the issues he raises in his poems. Beginning from 'Somewhere Called Earth' (41), he speaks of the commonalities in all human systems: social inequality, poverty, and human suffering. The poet's experience in the global North is depicted in this poem where he says, 'The West labours/strained by its own

immorality/There is poverty here too, I see/And pain, and injustice...' (41). From here, he moves to the second stanza to the global South, specifically Nigeria where he observes a similar phenomenon: 'The little woman with a rusty tray of sweets/On the roadside, licking her wounds/...The young boys, homeless, running with the light/Will clean your car, will eat...or not...'. The closeness of both places in successive stanzas underscores the sufferings in 'Somewhere Called Earth' and could as well symbolise his frequent travelling from Canada to Nigeria and his relationship with both nations. In the remaining stanzas, he extols the qualities of a 'true friend' whom he says is 'hard to find here', that is wherever he finds himself. 'Here' represents the earth, the ever changing space which he covers in his poetry. As he does throughout this collection, he concludes with a lesson he has learnt from his lived experience, 'Liberation comes from within/Not from some place/Across the seas or beyond the sky.

The marketplace is one of the major places where the wandering poet performs and is also a site mostly occupied by women; he cannot afford to ignore them. More than most male Nigerian poets, Akinlolu recognizes the importance of women in any society. Okunoye's concluding submission on *Songs of the Season* reveals the marginality of women in Osundare's poetry and is typical of the male dominated tradition:

Surprisingly, the world of Osundare's marginalized majority in *Songs of the Season* is essentially the world of men in which women are almost invisible. While this is not replicated in such other collections as *The Eye of the Earth* and *A Nib in the Pond*, it hints at the complex nature of the politics of representation, for the poet ends up even if unconsciously, excluding a significant category<sup>23</sup>.

Despite the claim of an 'unconscious' elision of women in a poem that treats the sufferings of the Nigerian masses, this attitude in a way is a continuum of the 'maligned image of women' in the work of the first two generations of Nigerian writers<sup>24</sup>. In addition to the awareness that Akinlolu has about the population and importance of women in his audience, the fact that he was brought up by his mother and grandmother is influential. He states that:

I have always been closer to the women – my grandmother, my mother, female teachers, and female workmates. But I don't think that has informed the way I write about the sexes. I was brought up to look at issues without favoritism; I was exposed to the limpness of bigotry early in life. In my daily life I strive to rise above these scheming or oppressive tendencies. In my work I like to reflect life as it truly is or as I think it should be if we embraced true fairness and equity<sup>25</sup>.

In *The King's Messenger*, women are considered part of the vulnerable groups of society for whom and about whom the poet 'sings'. The persona is conscious of the conditions of women in a society where depravity is commonplace. Therefore he identifies with them: 'I sing for the women, / The mothers with their secret sorrows/ Our wives with their silent worries/ Our daughters in hipsters, body-hugs and micro-minis/ If only we could love them more... (12). He seeks to balance the depiction of male and female experiences as the experience of the people unlike what obtains in most male-authored works where men's experience is 'the experience'. Women, in the poet-persona's vision, are part of the oppressed and like their male counterparts, agents of change in society to the extent that he upturns unfavourable representation of women as witches into a positive one. Therefore he asks in 'The Warrior and the Chest Thumper':

Whence will emerge the new women  
Witches whose wands weave smiles  
With herbs to heal all infirmities  
Mothers whose huge breasts never stop milking?  
How do we raise from this rabble  
A new legion of the strong and faithful  
The likes of the great men of old? (15)

In the last section of the collection, where the poet-persona introduces the reader to his romantic life and his life aspirations, the warmth and comfort that he enjoys in the arms of his woman-lover is contrasted to the 'nights of cold', 'a world of discord and greed', and the climax of their lovemaking is described as 'painless combustion'. He recognizes the place where the woman-lover is a 'Home, where I belong/ With you'. Akinlolu's respect and love for

the female resonates in the fourth stanza of 'The Vigrant's Stand' (78) where he wishes for a daughter first before a son, an uncommon wish in a culture where the male-child is the 'all important' one.

Other features of *The King's Messenger* achievements of Akinlolu as a wandering poet are the musicality and the attendant lyricism of his work. Songs, either in the form of openings or chorus, are an intricate part of deliveries. They show how he lends his poetry to performance because for him, 'performance takes poetry back to the people. It breathes life into the words and creates a bond between the audience and the poet'<sup>26</sup>. Members of the audience join in the singing or dance to the melody.

### Conclusion

A major contradiction in Akinlolu's life, professed philosophy and his artistic creations is that though he has insisted that he is not 'an ambassador of Yoruba culture', yet he is obviously a promoter of this same culture. The Canadian journalist, Parker, quoted earlier, rightly describes him as a poet-performer who 'offers a rare glimpse into the culture and traditions of his homeland' in the way he blends 'traditional folksongs, original poems and storytelling'. This contradiction can be better resolved by situating his creativity within the environment in which he grew up. As stated in the brief biographical sketch, the world that he grew up to know in Oke-Bola Ibadan was a world dominated by Yoruba oral traditions and if he has maintained that his poetry is an expression of his experiences, it is only to be expected that he writes about these things. The fact that he earns his living from poetry performance and music is also important. If like the wandering poet he needs the approval of his patrons, it is only reasonable to vary the issues he writes about.

Significantly, Akinlolu can be regarded as a literary bridge in Nigerian poetry. In *The King's Messenger*, he demonstrates that both the wisdom and lives of the ancestors can be relevant in a modern world. His poetry also shows that as much as the



collective experience of the nation is important, the personal in the creative possibilities of Nigerian poetry cannot be minimised.

#### NOTES

1. Sule E. Egya, 'Art and Outrage: A Critical Survey of Recent Nigerian Poetry in English', *Research in African Literatures*, 42, 1 (2011), 49-67.
2. Oyeniyi Okunoye, 'Niyi Osundare and the Marginalised Majority in *Songs of the Season*', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 29, 2 (2007), 75-85.
3. *ibid.*, p.76.
4. Segun Akinlolu, *The King's Messenger*, Ikeja, Lagos: EniObanke Books, 2004. All references are to this edition.
5. See Jonathan Kramnick, 'Recent Studies in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 50:3 2010 p.683. Subsequent references to this essay are from this page.
6. Personal interview with Segun Akinlolu at his Ibadan residence on 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2010. Excerpts from this interview are quoted as the poet's statements about his life and art in this essay.
7. Egya, *op.cit.*, p.51.
8. *ibid.*, p.52.
9. *ibid.*, p.53.
10. *ibid.*, p.52.
11. *ibid.*, p.54.
12. See Toyin Adewale, 'Introduction', *25 New Nigerian Poets*, Berkeley: Ishmael Reed, 2000.
13. *ibid.* p. iii.
14. Segun Akinlolu, *Waiting for the Bones*, Ikeja, Lagos: EniObanke, 1997.
15. Segun Akinlolu, *Thinking Big*, Ikeja, Lagos: EniObanke, 2000, *Citadel Blues*, Ikeja, Lagos: EniObanke Books, 2004.
16. Personal interview.
17. Mike Parker, 'Overseas Letters', *Here Magazine*, [www.herenb.com](http://www.herenb.com). Accessed 27 August 2007.



18. 'Foreword', p.6.
19. Egey, *op.cit.* p.53
20. See 'Footnote' p.25.
21. Okunoye, *op.cit.* p.77.
22. Personal Interview.
23. Okunoye, *op.cit.* p.84.
24. *ibid.* p.83.
25. Personal Interview.
26. Personal Interview.