NARRATING THE GREEN GODS: NIGERIAN MILITARY RULERS AND THE GENRE OF (AUTO) BIOGRAPHY.

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Abstract

The paper is a study of autobiographies and biographies of military personnel who have dominated the sphere of governance in post-independence Nigeria. These personnel –‘green gods’- and their sometimes-induced admirers appropriate the medium of life narrative to mediate their paradoxical mortality and inscribe themselves into the historicising consciousness of subsequent generations.

The paper observes that many of these works are exercises in self-re-writing. The documentation of military rule is done in a way that is somewhat more pleasant than it is in reality. The common picture one gets is that of a man who rises from a modest background and arrives at remarkable success through hard work, even if evidence from performance while in power belies this. The list includes David Ejoor’s Reminiscences, Chidi Amuta’s The Prince of the Niger: The Babangida Years, Abdul-Kareem Adisa’s Loyal Command and Akin Aduwo’s 30 Days in Power, 4 Years in Command among others.

These non-fiction texts deserve more critical and scholarly attention than they are earning at the moment. This is because they provide a significant site for the interrogation of the travails of democracy in Nigeria and also an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of dictatorship fostered by prolonged military rule. In studying them, the paper submits that it is important to pay attention to gaps, omissions, silences and absences perceivable in the narratives. A text, rather than being treated in hermetic isolation or as a complete whole, should be considered along with other texts with which it shares generic boundary and with which it is a priori in a dialogic relationship.

In the tyrant’s praise
Let cannons of fake biographies be burnt.

Remi Raji, *Webs of Remembrance.*

**Background**

Since the inauguration of military rule through the first coup of Saturday 15th January, 1966, there is no aspect of Nigerian life that has not experienced, whether positively or negatively, the reformatory ardour of successive military regimes. As a result of the long span of military rule and the domination of political power by soldiers while military governance lasted, soldiers have immensely impacted on politics, education, sports, internal and international relations, economy, law, penology, resource allocation and so on. This observation has been made in diverse studies. For instance, Sanda et. al’s *The Impact of Military Rule on Nigeria’s Administration* examines the influences of the military on various aspects of public administration in post independence Nigeria (1966-1979 and 1984-1987). The contributors in Ninalowo’s *The Quest for Democratization: Military Governance and Trade Unionism*, through a multi-disciplinary approach, engage the interconnections between trade unionism and military rule on the one hand and the dangers posed by military dictatorship to the development of an enduring democratic culture on the other. Soyinka’s *Open Sore of a Continent* re-narrates Nigeria’s socio-political crisis exacerbated by the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election and the ascendancy of tyranny under General Sanni Abacha.

The realm of fictional literature also boldly bears the imprints of decades of military rule. A military coup provides the deus-ex-machina that resolves the political debacle in Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, although the author later in *Anthills of the Savannah* re-views the messianic conception of soldiers especially in their intervention in civil administration. Soldiers and the military institution provide the butt of Soyinka’s ridicule in plays like Kongi’s *Harvest*, Jero’s *Metamorphosis*, *Madmen and Specialists*, *A play of Giants*, *Beatification of Area Boy* and the most recent, *King Baabu*. Festus Iyayi in *Heroes* celebrates the ordinary people and the under privileged soldiers on Nigerian and Biafran sides as the true ‘heroes’ of the civil war. Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn*, Odia Ofemun’s *The Poet Lied*, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Soza Boy* and Frank Uche Mowah’s *Eating By the Flesh* are also part of Nigerian letters that engage soldiers as subjects.
The impact however, becomes more evident when one considers public policies and actions of military regimes that influenced literary productions as well as the contributions of Nigerian soldiers as writers and subjects of writing. One literary genre that has recorded a good deal of exploration by military officers in this regard is life narrative, which is referred to in this paper as (auto) biography.

Considering themselves as statesmen and intellectuals of some sort, soldiers who hold political or top army posts use the genre as a discursive space to articulate, inter alia, their stewardship. Essentially, the works are political writings with some literary merit, however slender. They often celebrate the rise from a humble background to a high pedestal of power and influence. Though lawyers, politicians, artistes, bureaucrats and other professionals have explored the genre of (auto) biography in contemporary Nigeria, this paper primarily focuses on the narratives of military officers who have contributed to the recent expansion in the canon.

**Self-(re)-writing and the Public Sphere.**

The genre of life narrative has an enduring history and it occupies a significant space in modern Nigerian Literature. As Patricia Geesey rightly remarks: ‘Even to the casual observer looking at the development of contemporary African writing, autobiography would certainly seem to stand out as a major component in the vast array of cultural productions from that continent’ (p.1). Among different cultures in pre-colonial traditional societies, it is channeled through oral poetic modes like epic, ballad, saga, legend, myth and song. One can assert that judging from its oral antecedents, (auto) biography has a long tradition of existence in Nigerian literary culture. Indeed, praise chants or heroic poetry generally bear fragments of self-representation. Even though they adopt literary resources like exaggeration and symbolism in the representations as to make them fictive, references to actual people and places establish their (auto) biographical motive. For example, among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, poetic chants like *rara* (ballad); *Iwi Egungun* (poetic chants associated with the ancestral cult) and *Ijala* (hunters’ chants) feature the life struggles of distinguished personalities as well as their contributions to the shaping of their societies’ destiny. The long narratives of Hausa men called *Labaru* contain historical and autobiographical stories of the narrator. These are handed down from one generation to the other in spite of the oral mode of transmission. According to Neil Skinner in *An Anthology of Hausa Literature*, they are rendered in a manner that lays claim to truth.

With the advent of missionary education in the 19th century and the concomitant centering of the written word, another mode of articulating personal narratives of distinguished existence developed. Some of the earliest attempts at prose narrative in Nigerian literary history were actually in the form of autobiography. One of them is the
autobiography of the slave boy – Gustavus Vasa, otherwise known as Olaudah Equiano. \textit{Equiano’s Travels} published in 1787 captures an important period in history of human (un) civilization, that is, the slave trade era. It narrates the genealogy, the growth, capture, transportation, service and freedom of Equiano as a slave from Africa. It is against the same backdrop of documenting an important life for the sake of posterity that one can speak of the works of Nigerian nationalists and statesmen like Awolowo’s \textit{My Early Life} and \textit{Awo}, Nnamdi Azikiwe’s \textit{My Odyssey: an Autobiography}, John Oadbn’s \textit{Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto: Values and Leadership in Nigeria}, Trevor Clark’s \textit{A Right Honourable Gentleman: the Life and Times of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa}, Tai Solarin’s \textit{To Mother with Love: an Experiment in Autobiography} and Wole Soyinka’s trilogy of \textit{Ake: the Years of Childhood, Isara: a Voyage Around Essay} and \textit{Ibadan: the Penkelemes years}.

\textit{(Auto) biography} is a vital source of knowledge of a people’s history, culture and public sphere, though it is primarily concerned with the narration of a life or what Jean Starobinski describes as a ‘self-interpretation’ (p. 286). According to the transparency theory of the genre, (auto) biography strives after a truthful recollection or transmission of life events. Mary-Kay F. Miller, who has engaged this theory in her essay ‘My mothers/My Selves: (Re) Reading a tradition of West African Women’s Autobiography’, submits that it is basically a ‘transparent recounting or reproduction of actual life events…’(p.5). Apart from re-presenting the essence and presence of its subject\textsuperscript{2}, it also rewards the reader with a vista of interaction between this subject and the society. Consequently, with the benefits of (auto) biography, a people can avoid the pitfalls of the past, and chart a new historical course away from the errors of the present. That is why Albert Luthuli’s \textit{Let My People Go}, Donald Woods’ \textit{Biko} and Nelson Mandela’s \textit{Long Walk to Freedom} for instance, stand to enrich the investigation of the mechanism of discrimination, social injustice and racial prejudice directed at the black man in apartheid South Africa. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria’s former Head of State, articulates the social utility of life story narrative in \textit{My Odyssey: an Autobiography}:

\begin{quote}
Man comes into the world, and while he lives he embarks upon a series of activities; absorbing experience which enables him to formulate a philosophy of life, and to chart his courses of action; but then he dies. Nevertheless, his biography remains as a guide to those living who may need guidance, either as a warning on the vanity of human wishes, or as an encouragement, or both (pp.xi-xii).
\end{quote}

Theoretically, the genre promises a truthful representation in a way that fictional literature does not. It must be granted however, that the realisation of this goal is hindered by three factors. First, the (auto)
biographer, like the fiction writer has to select his materials from a vast array of experiential data. The practice of selectivity inherently problematises accuracy or truthful representation. Second, psychologically, the self invariably pursues that which is pleasurable and always seeks to avert what is unpleasant. It follows that the narrator of the self may be tempted to leave out that which is unpleasant or unwholesome to the self in the course of selection. Third, the fallibility of human memory in terms of accurate recollection of people, events and situations, is also a factor that undermines transparency and accuracy.

The problematic indicated above makes it more imperative for scholars to devote critical attention to ex-soldiers’ life narrative not only in the study of contemporary Nigerian writing, but also in efforts to apprehend the dialogic interaction of literature and the public sphere.

**Military Officers’ Narrative**

The second coming of military rule in 1984 produced another set of military officers, who would later find life narrative an appropriate medium for celebrating their re-intervention in politics. These ‘new gods’ have since then been exploring the genre either as writers or as subjects. The genre actually received a boost in the 1980s and 1990s during the regimes of Generals Ibrahim Babangida, Sanni Abacha and Abdul-Salaam Abubakar, when it became modish for soldiers who held military posts or public offices to have their (auto) biography produced and launched with fanfare at elaborate ceremonies.

However, the seed of this development had been sown earlier with the publication of Olusegun Obasanjo’s *My Command* (a narration of the author’s involvement in the Nigerian civil war) and *Nzeogwu* (a biographical portrait of Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu who led the 1966 coup but died during the civil war while fighting on the side of Biafra). In spite of controversies generated by these books, they have shot in a direction that would later attract many other fellow professionals, in or out of uniform.

Many a Nigerian officer would want to share with the reading public, experiences of the first military coup of 1966, the civil war and post-civil war military governance. These events are obviously the major challenges in the intriguing history of the Nigerian Army. The urge to be part of a re-construction of national history from the perspectives of the military ruling class shared by Obasanjo stimulated subsequent (auto) biographies of military personnel.

A critical reading of these works shows that there are three major categories. Some of them are autobiographies written by officers themselves usually after leaving the force. Post service years afford a break from the regimented existence of the barracks and the crowded schedule of public office. There is ample time for ‘looking back’ with varying

In the second category are “authorised” biographies written by people who are deeply fascinated by their subjects. These include Isawa Elaigwu’s *Gowon: The Biography of a Soldier-Statesman*, Barret Lindsay’s *Danjuma: The Making of a General*, Funmi Omosefunmi and Foluso Akinlonu’s *30 Days in Power, 4 Years in Command: The Story Of Vice-Admiral Akin Aduwo*, Femi Ahmed’s *Domkat*, a biography of Lieutenant General Bali, a former Defence Minister and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Onukaba Adinoyi Ojo’s *In the Eyes of Time: A Biography of Olusegun Obasanjo* and Oluranti Afowowe’s *Onward Soldier Marches On: A Biography of Major-General Robert Adeyinka Adebayo*.

Some texts, and they belong to the third category, install themselves in the spaces between (auto) biography and political discourse. They feature analyses of historical and political events, as well as military governance along with materials drawn from the private lives of the authors or the central figures in the works. Here, one can cite Dayo Duyile’s *Babangida: His Vision, His Mission, His Courage*, Olusegun Adeleye’s *IBB: A Soldier and a Democrat*, Chidi Amuta’s *The Prince of the Niger: The Babangida Years*, Uche Ezechukwu’s *Abacha: The Myth, The Man* and Chris Alli’s *The Federal Republic of Nigerian Army: The Siege of a Nation*.

Curiously, there seems not to be much difference between the military officers’ biographies and the autobiographies especially in the mode of production and method of realisation. One finds hazy or missing, the objective distance that ought to exist between the biographer and the subject in the biographies. The biographer who is well supported by the subject or his close associates essentially narrate the life from the viewpoint of the subject, defending his opinions and sometimes sharing his prejudices, biases and sentiments, as Omosefunmi and Akinlonu demonstrate. Thus, the biography becomes only a few removes from autobiography.

Perhaps, one may ask at this juncture, what accounts for the increasing fascination of military officers for the genre or what are the factors that motivated them to write their personal narratives?

Arguably, some of the texts are goaded by the quest for acclaim and ‘immortality’ which successful writing confers on its producer. However, some are stimulated by mercantilist calculations, considering the financial success that the sub-culture of patronage and distribution through public launching often attracts.
Apart from the foregoing, military officers in Nigeria, whether by design or accident of circumstance, often leave the force when they could still put in more active years in public service. The manner of exit ranges from outright dismissal to voluntary or compelled retirement. Those who consider themselves too ‘young’ to fade away from the public sphere look forward to another opportunity in future to serve through a career in politics. (Auto) biography is sometimes used as a prefatory step into the arena of politics. It offers a ready means of paiting a good record of performance while the commission lasted in order to secure positive public valuation for the subject and place him in a good stead for political competition in a democratic dispensation.

The pre-eminence of the military in Nigeria’s post-independence governance, and the success-after-misery stories of many Officers who held public offices during the period are generally self-recom mending subjects for (auto) biography. This is more so in a country where, in the words of Omosebi and Akinlonu, ‘leaders tended to play god’ (p.63). By virtue of their wealth, these officers could afford to bear the cost of production of their life narrative, through the increasingly popular tradition of self-publishing in contemporary Nigeria. In the alternative, they or their friends/admirers can finance the production of biographical works. For instance, as the author acknowledges, a ‘friend’ of Babangida - Chief M.K.O. Abiola - strongly supported with finance, the publication of Amuta’s *The Prince of the Niger: The Babangida Years*.

In a way, the boost in the production of life narratives by soldiers is a product of the economic expansion and liberalisation of the oil boom era of the 70s. It also owes a measure of debt to the austerity and liberalisation associated with the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced by the Babangida administration in 1986.

The expansion in commerce in the 1970s impacted on the book industry. There developed several indigenous publishing outfits in addition to the dominant names like Oxford University Press, Macmillan, Heinemann and Longman. The new ones had to compete for survival along with the international publishers who also needed to struggle to remain in business in the face of economic recession of the 80s and 90s. With acute poverty and low literacy level as a result of economic hardship, the publishing and patronage of fictive literature suffered a setback. One way of meeting the challenges of the market was to make publishing facilities available to those who could afford the cost. This class of people includes wealthy military officers who would not mind investing in the venture of putting a perceived unpleasant record ‘permanently straight’ through biographical publications.

There is no doubt that successive military regimes in Nigeria accentuated political exclusion and economic hardship. Their arbitrary actions and policies, wanton abuse of human rights, inability to stem
corruption, among other failings, are strong indices of performance of military rulers. As Fawole has aptly observed, the Nigerian military from its colonial inception has remained an instrument of coercion in the hands of a state that is essentially ‘a predatory mechanism for plunder’. He submits that ‘in the course of performing their duties of pacification on behalf of the rulers of the state, Nigerian soldiers are generally contemptuous of people’s rights and freedoms, and consequently have elevated sheer lawlessness and banditry to a norm’ (p.61). Thus, conscious of the unfavourable representation of their actions in other published accounts and negative responses that their public policies while in government might have generated; the military rulers find an appropriate medium in (auto) biography to mediate this negativity. In the words of David Ejoor in Reminiscences:

...This volume affords me the opportunity of stating my own side of the story of events during a crucial era of our nation’s history (p.vii).

Consequently, the genre somewhat provides an opportunity to remedy the untoward perception/evaluation of the quality of leadership offered by soldiers during the era of military rule. To this end, there is an ostensible pursuit of collective redemption through individual testament of propriety. It is not surprising therefore, that the image of ‘failed administrators’ with which the officers are associated by many analysts and critics are quite tempered in the (auto) biographical works, even when there is an admission of collective guilt.

In Loyal Command, Adisa, a former Governor of Oyo State and Minister of Works and Housing dismisses his association in public perception with meanness, severity and sternness. Chapter 10 of the book titled ‘Not a Bull-dozer’ reinforces the author’s preoccupation with self or identity re-construction. In his words:

I am a favourite subject of cartoonists desirous of making a caricature of public officials. I have been portrayed ensconced behind the driving wheel of a bull-dozer exuberantly ready to charge at structures… Indeed the cartoons will provide a minefield (sic) of information in a study of what I am supposed to be but which thankfully I am not (p.69).

Some officers who take exception to the ways they are re-presented and who disagree with Obasanjo’s interpretation of historical events adopt the genre for rebuttal. Some do perceive gaps in the stories of the civil war in life narratives of other writers apart from Obasanjo, more so, when their own accounts are yet to be provided. Naturally, it becomes a pattern that one (auto) biography begets another, aiming at bridging perceived hiatus. Justifying the publication of Reminiscences, Ejoor declares:

...Telling my own story gives me a chance to answer some of those who, in an endeavour to exaggerate their own contribution to
the nation’s survival in those difficult years of 1966-1975, have sought not only to play down my own role, but to malign and deliberately misrepresent me (pp.vii-viii).

Ejoor in the book explains the difficult circumstances in which he found himself as the Governor of Mid-western State when Biafran soldiers invaded the state. He was forced to flee the State House and find his way to Lagos through a bush path on bicycle. Though the event painted him as a cowardly and disloyal officer who collaborated with Biafran soldiers against the Federal Government, he emphatically submits that he was ‘really no more than a victim of circumstances’ (p.126). He writes a rejoinder to Obasanjo who derides him on account of this event as ‘a helpless spectator and a ‘bicycle-riding fugitive’ in My Command (p.37). According to Ejoor, ‘circumstances may have catapulted Obasanjo to being Head of State…some of us who will no doubt die unsung did far more to “keep Nigeria one” in those critical months of 1966 and 1967 than Obasanjo was in a position to know, given his rank at that time’ (p.127).

In another respect, the author dismisses as ‘a gross misconstruction and ignorance’ Isawa Elaigwu’s conclusion in Gowon that Ejoor had a ‘lax attitude’ as the Chief of Army Staff toward the issue of re-organisation of the post-civil war Nigerian Army (p.130).

In Years Of Challenge, Samuel Ogbemudia responds to Ejoor’s insinuation (in Reminiscences) of collaboration between Ogbemudia and the Biafran soldiers in the invasion of Midwest. Both writers were military governors of the old Mid-western State from where they hail.

The biographers of Akin Aduwo in 30 Days in Power, 4 Years in Command also deplore the portrayal of their subject in My Command. They highlight the undercurrents that informed Obasanjo’s unfavourable disposition to Aduwo while both were in office as Chief of Army Staff and Military governor of Western State respectively. Obasanjo in his book claims that Aduwo was relieved of his appointment as the governor in order to rescue him from the problem of the West ‘which had overwhelmed him’. In defence of Aduwo, Omosefunmi and Akinlonu reveal the political intrigues that saw their subject out of power in a month. They ascribe the development to Obasanjo’s intolerance, ‘pre-meditated double standard, undisguised prejudice and hostile attitude’ toward Aduwo, rather than the latter’s incompetence.

One tendency that is palpable from the foregoing is that one subject emerges as a counter-discourse to or as a re-negotiation of another, usually preceding it. In this sense, one can speak of the genre as a dialogic space through which military rulers trade facts and interpretations of national history.

For subject-matter, the works commonly present the central figure in association with people and places, showing the influence of the family
and the environment on the formation of his personality. They provide information about the family genealogy, early childhood, educational profile, entry into the military and attainment of high professional status, which the works are essentially out to applaud. Besides, they articulate the views of the central personality on historical events, his ‘philosophy of life’ and experience in public office. The perceived largeness of the subject sometimes informs the attempt to dig into the family origin, which in the manner of rendering is almost synonymous with the origin of his place of birth and/or ethnic affiliation. For example, Oluleye prefaces his narration in the first chapter (titled ‘Birth in a Natural Fortress’) of *Architecturing a Destiny* with his roots in Efon Alaaye, a town in the present Ekiti State.

Olu Bajowa, the Acting Administrator of the South Eastern State and one time Director General of the Ministry of Defence under the regime of General Babangida retired from the Nigerian Army as a Major-General in 1980. *Spring of A Life: An Autobiography* is his first in a proposed trilogy of life narrative. The 151-page book documents his birth and upbringing as a Prince of Ikale in Ondo State. It also narrates his education and experience of life in Lagos as well as his enlistment and successful career in the Nigerian Army.

Another common focus of the Soldiers’ narratives is the subjects’ struggles with forces of fate and harsh realities of life. The struggles are attended by varying degrees of failure and triumph. But one picture that is common to these self-writings is that of a man who, as Ken Saro-Wiwa puts it, ‘literally lifted himself by his boot straps’ (p.251). The subject familiarly rises from a modest background and attains remarkable success through ‘hard work’ and ‘divine intervention’ as expressed in the turn of destiny. Here, the reader encounters a seemingly Olympian figure that enjoys a pleasant reversal of the Aristotelian ‘reversal of fortune’. Unlike the hero in classical Greek tragedy, the subject rises from rag to riches, from an inconsequential beginning to a lofty croft of power with attendant influence and wealth.

To substantiate this point, Aduwo is presented as a ‘gallant Naval Officer, elevated from the drudgery of life as an inconsequential part of the rural humanity of Ode-Aye’ (p.20) who later became the Chief of Naval Staff. Similarly, Ejoor describes himself as the son of a poor Urhobo farmer/trader who could not pay his school fees as a child. His mother, a trader, financed the education of David the boy and that of his sisters. He had to complement his mother’s effort with proceeds from handicrafts. He was appointed as the military Governor of Midwestern State and Chief of Staff, Nigerian Army before his retirement.

The genre also provides a platform for exposition and evaluation from within, of the military in national politics. As such, the reader comes to a clearer awareness of factors that ensure the domination of politics by military culture (even up to the present) as well as the ethos around which
success and failure in the military profession are structured and facilitated. One of these is ethno-geographical affiliation.

In view of the interested motive of the genre and the involvement of the subject in the process of production, objectivity is inherently problematised. The task of telling the truth ‘as it is’ becomes arduous. One finds traits of adulation, hero-worshipping and self-deification. In *Prince of the Niger*, a 354-page exposition on Babangida, his regime and legacy, Amuta sets out to distance his work from those of ‘court biographers, sycophants and fifth columnists’. But his success in this regard is quite doubtful if one considers the following assertion among others in the book:

The acts of good that were performed under his administration (Babangida’s) to the greater number of Nigerians completely overwhelm the isolated instances when evil may have been enacted by the state (p.40).

This assertion is like an apologia written to defend a leader who was already having it rough in power. With economic hardship that attended the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), the intrigues, uncertainties, corruption and equivocation that characterised Babangida regime’s Transition to Civil rule programme, Amuta’s claim is suspect and many analysts would be wary of endorsing it.

The point can be stretched further with another illustration. The military (auto) biographies usually present stories of material success attained through hard work. Even when evidence from public sphere point to mismanagement or nepotism by the individual while holding public office, there is usually a dignifying silence on such unpleasant details. Acts of arbitrariness and violation of human rights among other excesses are conveniently omitted or appropriately tempered in the narratives. For instance, Adisa in *Loyal Command* defends the policy of demolishing ‘illegal structures’ under flyovers and within 30 metres from Federal highways in Lagos while he was the Minister of Works and Housing. However, the autobiography refrains from explaining that in carrying out the demolition, men of the Special Task Force under the Soldier-Minister’s command destroyed structures that were not under any bridge. Structures that were clearly beyond the range of 100 metres were also demolished, using bulldozers from the Ministry of Works.

In another instance, since his demise on June 8, 1998, there have been substantiated allegations of gross abuse of office and corrupt enrichment against General Sanni Abacha during his tenure as Head of State between 1993 and 1998. Julius Ihonvbere underscores these allegations when he describes Abacha as belonging to the class of ‘Bloodthirsty despots and world renowned looters of their respective national treasuries’ (*State Reconstruction in Africa*, p.18). Nonetheless,
the portrait of Abacha painted by Adisa in *Loyal Command* is strikingly more redeeming:

Abacha remains in my modest estimation, the quintessence of fair-mindedness and firmness; a true but an underestimated soldier not given to lies. No pretence. He taught and I imbibed that *it is soldierly to tell and stand by the truth, to put all cards on the table as a matter of honour and never to bend the rules for vested interests* (emphasis added) (p.102).

It can be argued that the assumption of office by Abacha as an unelected Head of State on November 17, 1993, the acts of repression experienced under his regime and the failed transition programme that he superintended all point to ‘bending the rules for vested interests’.

What this implies is that a reader in search of truth and objectivity may have to look beyond soldiers’ self-writing. Besides, the critic should engage the text as well as the world outside the text, which the text seeks to ‘transparently’ recount. This can be done by seeking more information from other sources like books on politics and history, newspapers and magazines, popular songs, cartoons, films, fiction, drama and theatre. One reading should be mediated by an experience of other text(s). The submissions in each of the texts need to be weighed against similar texts in the genre as well as other socio-cultural means of life documentation.

**Conclusion**

At the moment, the list of (auto) biographical discourse of military men who participate in governance since the first coup of 1966 is increasing. Many have been written and many more are expected to be written to fill one perceived gap or the other in Nigeria’s extant narratives. Such self-representations will be necessary if one is to probe the contours of state collapse and authoritarianism among other indices of military years in governance. As such, they deserve more than passing attention or outright dismissal from scholars.

The paper has observed that these life-narratives, being essential supplement to national historiography, serve as a useful medium for re-negotiating Nigerian history and politics. They provide insights into the complexity of power relation in the Nigerian society, which impacts upon the military profession. The information and data being put across through the genre will facilitate an informed evaluation by critics. They will also aid a re-encounter with personalities who shape or distort the nation’s history. Such encounter is necessary in attempts to meet the challenges of national re-birth against the backdrop of nascent democratisation.

In approaching the texts however, it is important that the critic should be mindful of gaps, absences, silences and omissions in the narrations with a view to harvesting greater understanding. As Catherine
Belsey has rightly noted in *Critical Practice*, ‘the task of criticism, then, is to establish the unspoken in the text, to centre it in order to produce a real knowledge of history’ (p.136). Since the genre ostensibly manifests inter-textuality and counter-narration through which truth is configured and re-configured, a text can supply the missing strand in another narrative. A text should therefore, not be treated in hermetic isolation or as a complete whole. Rather, it should be considered along with other texts with which it shares generic boundary and with which it is *a priori* in a dialogic relationship.

Apart from this, writers and critics whose allegiance is to the public and posterity should show more interest in this class of (auto) biography. They should not only study extant works, but also contribute to the burgeoning genre. Their contributions will go a long way in ensuring a proper re-presentation of an era that has been captured hitherto with a bewildering admixture of facts and fabrication in many (auto) biographical texts. Through such interventions, the reader will come to a greater awareness of the identity productions of ‘Green gods’ who dominate Nigeria’s post-independence political history and who are recurring figures in contemporary life narratives.

**NOTES**

1. ‘(Auto) biography’ in this paper simultaneously refers to both biography and autobiography.
2. ‘Subject’ here refers to the central personality in the life-narrative.
3. ‘Green gods’ is metaphorically used in the essay to refer to Nigerian army officers. The designation is derived from a pun on the colour of the Army uniform, which is green. However, ‘green’ also connotes inexperience. This implies that soldiers are green horns in the sphere of politics and governance, hence, their inability to properly nurture democratic development after about three decades of adventure in power. Meanwhile, their domination of power space, their deus-ex-machina-like manner of intervention in political crisis, their imperious disposition and their association with a certain measure of omnipotence by citizens when they take over power mark them out as ‘gods’. While in power, some of these officers too carried on as if they were omniscient and omnipresent. They gave the impression that they had solutions to all socio-political problems facing the nation, hence, their intervention in every aspect of the polity. ‘Green gods’ therefore, captures the paradox or ambivalence of military governance. Niyi Osundare has earlier employed this metaphor in *Waiting Laughters* (p.49).
4. Such ceremonies were usually attended by ‘eminent’ personalities from different segments of the polity, from corporate organisations...
to private enterprises, government departments and parastatals. The invited guests would be expected to purchase copies at prices well above the bookshelf prices, or simply make financial donations with a view to offsetting the production cost and leaving behind some margin of profit.

5. Obasanjo thereafter published another autobiographical piece titled *Not My Will*. This work has equally generated a great deal of controversy. For instance it has provoked an instant response from Ebenezer Babatope in *Not His Will*. Here, Babatope, a politician tries to defend Chief Obafemi Awolowo against perceived denigration by Obasanjo in *Not My Will*. See Olusegun Obasanjo *Not My Will* Lagos: Heinemann, 1990 and Ebenezer Babatope *Not His Will*. Lagos: Jodah Pub, 1991.

6. Though the works, admittedly, often paint records of remarkable achievements, there exists some soul-searching lamentation and a nostalgic yearning for the restoration of professionalism and integrity obviously compromised in the course of the politicisation of the military. For instance, Adisa in *Loyal Command* writes:

   However, I think it will be dishonest to say that military involvement in government has done the nation any good. Undoubtedly, professionalism has been affected. In the name of security, a lot of wrong appointments have been made: there is no regard for seniority, no regards for experience, no regard for competence. Rather, it is politics, intrigues, god-fatherism. Trust has been eroded and very little premium is placed on loyalty. It has been difficult even to organize exercise of training: there is always the suspicion that you might be planning a coup…(sic) (p.97).


9. Abacha was alleged to have looted 9 billion dollars with the aid of foreign banks and multi-national companies. See *The Anchor*, Wednesday 22 August, 2001, p.1.

10. Other despots mentioned in this category include: Idi Amin of Uganda, Jean Bedel Bokassa of Central African Empire and Marcias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea (p.18).
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