

3 | Narrating the green gods: the (auto) biographies of Nigerian military rulers

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In the tyrant's praise

Let cannons of fake biographies be burnt

(Remi Raji, *Webs of Remembrance*, 2001)

Background

Since the inauguration of military rule through the first coup of Saturday, 15 January 1966, there has been no aspect of Nigerian life that has not experienced, whether positively or negatively, the reformative 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 had an immense impact 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., in *The Impact of Military Rule on Nigeria's Administration* (1987), examine the influences of the military on various aspects of public administration in post-independence Nigeria (1966–79 and 1984–87). The contributors in Ninalowo's *The Quest for Democratization: Military Governance and Trade Unionism* (1996), 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* (1996) re-narrates Nigeria's socio-political crisis exacerbated by the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election and the ascendancy of tyranny under General Sani Abacha.

The realm of fiction also bears the imprints of decades of military rule. A military coup provides the *deus ex machina* that resolves the political débâcle in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), although later, in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988) – as discussed elsewhere in this volume – he reviews 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 such as *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *Jero's Metamorphosis: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope* (1988), *Madmen and Specialists* (1988) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995). Festus Iyayi in *Heroes* (1986) celebrates the ordinary people and the underprivileged soldiers on the Nigerian and Biafran sides as the true 'heroes' of the civil war. Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (1989) and Frank Uche Mowah's *Eating by the Flesh* (1995) are also a part of Nigerian literature that engages with soldiers as subjects.

The impact becomes more evident, however, when one considers the 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 received a good deal of exploration by military officers in this regard is that of life narrative, referred to in this chapter as (auto) biography.¹ Considering themselves to be 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. The works are political writings yet they claim some literary merit, however slender. They often celebrate rising from a humble background to a high pedestal of power and influence. Though lawyers, politicians, artists, bureaucrats and other professionals have explored the genre of (auto) biography in contemporary Nigeria, this chapter primarily focuses on the narratives of military officers who have contributed to the recent expansion of 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 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' (Geesey 1997: 1). Among different cultures in pre-colonial traditional societies, it is channelled through oral poetic modes such as epic, ballad, saga, legend, myth and song. Judging from its oral antecedents, one can assert that (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 devices such as exaggeration and symbolism in the representations so 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 next in spite of the oral mode of transmission. According to Skinner (1980), they are rendered in a manner that lays claim to truth.

With the advent of missionary education in the nineteenth century and the concomitant focus on the written word, another mode of articulating personal narratives of a distinguished existence developed. Some of the earliest attempts at prose narratives 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. *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 *Awo* (1960) and *My Early Life* (1968), Nnamdi Azikiwe's *My Odyssey: An Autobiography* (1994), John Paden's *Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto: Values and Leadership in Nigeria* (1986), Trevor Clark's *A Right Honourable Gentleman: The Life and Times of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa* (1990), Tai Solarin's *To Mother with Love: An Experiment in Autobiography* (1987) and Wole Soyinka's trilogy of *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981), *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* (1988) and *Ibadan: The Penkeleles Years* (1994).

Nadel identifies two primary objectives of biography. While it narrates the subject's life, it also 'corrects, restates or re-interprets false and distorted accounts' of the subject (1984: 176). (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 Starobinski describes as 'self-interpretation' (1971: 286). According to the transparency theory of the genre, (auto) biography strives after a truthful recollection or transmission of life events. Miller examines this theory and submits that it is basically a 'transparent recounting or reproduction of actual life events' (1997: 5). Apart from re-presenting the essence and presence of its subject,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 *Let My People Go* (1962), Donald Woods's *Biko* (1978) and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995), for instance, stand to enrich the investigation of the mechanisms of discrimination, social injustice and racial prejudice directed at the black man in apartheid South Africa. Azikiwe articulates the social utility of life story narrative:

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. (Azikiwe 1994: xi-xii)

Theoretically, the genre promises a truthful representation in a way that fictional literature does not. It must be granted, however, that the realization 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 events. The practice of selectivity inherently problematizes 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 problems indicated above make it more imperative for scholars to devote critical attention to ex-soldiers' life narratives 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' narratives

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 intervention in politics. These 'green gods'³ 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, Sani 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.⁴ However, the seed of this development had been sown earlier with the publication of Olusegun Obasanjo's *My Command* (1980), a narration of the author's involvement in the Nigerian civil war, and *Nzeogwu* (1987), 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.⁵ In spite of the controversies generated by these books, they pointed to a direction that would later attract many fellow professionals, in or out of uniform. Many Nigerian officers have wanted to share with the reading public their experiences of the first military coup of 1966, the civil war and post-civil war military governance. These events are obviously major challenges in the intriguing history of the Nigerian Army. The urge to be part of a reconstruction of national history from the perspective of the military ruling class shared by Obasanjo stimulated subsequent (auto) biographies of military personnel.

A critical reading of these works allows us to identify 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 temperaments. Examples include David Ejoor's *Reminiscences* (1989), Olu Bajowa's *Spring of a Life: An Autobiography* (1992), Samuel Ogbemudia's *Years of Challenge* (1991), David Jemibewon's *A Combatant in Government* (1990), Abdul-Karim Adisa's *Loyal Command: An Autobiography of Major-General Abdul-Karim Alabi Adisa* (1999), and James Oluleye's *Architecturing a Destiny: An Autobiography* (2000).

In a second category are 'authorized' biographies written by others. These include Isawa Elaigwu's *Gowon: The Biography of a Soldier-Statesman* (1986), Lindsay Barret's *Danjuma: The Making of a General* (1979),

Funmi Omosofunmi and Foluso Akinlonu's *30 Days in Power, 4 Years in Command: The Story of Vice-Admiral Akin Aduwo* (1997), Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo's *Olusegun Obasanjo in the Eyes of Time: A Biography of the African Statesman* (1999) and Oluranti Afowowe's *Onward Soldier Marches On: A Biography of Major-General Robert Adeyinka Adebayo* (1998).

Some texts, and they belong to the third category, instal 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 personalities of the narratives. Here, one can cite Chidi Amuta's *The Prince of the Niger: The Babangida Years* (1992), Uche Ezechukwu's *Abacha: The Myth, the Man* (1997) and Chris Alli's *The Federal Republic of Nigerian Army: The Siege of a Nation* (2001).

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 realization. One finds hazy or missing the objective distance that ought to exist between the biographer and the subject. The biographer who is well supported by the subject or his close associates essentially narrates the life from the viewpoint of the subject, defending his opinions and sometimes sharing his prejudices, biases and sentiments as, for instance, Omosofunmi and Akinlonu demonstrate. Thus, the biography becomes only slightly different from the autobiography.

What accounts for the increasing fascination of military officers for the genre? What are the factors that motivated them to explore life 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 subculture of patronage and distribution through public launching often attracts. Apart from this, 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 the future to serve through a career in politics. (Auto) biography is therefore sometimes used as a prefatory step into this new arena. It

offers a ready means of painting a good record of performance while the commission lasted in order to secure a positive public evaluation for the subject and place him in 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 office during the period, are generally self-recommending subjects for (auto) biography. This is more so in a country where, in the words of Omosofunmi and Akinlonu, 'leaders tended to play god' (1997: 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. As an 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 – financially supported the publication of Amuta's *The Prince of the Niger: The Babangida Years* (1992).

In a way, the boost in the production of life narratives by soldiers is a product of the economic expansion of the oil boom era of the 1970s. It also owes a measure of debt to the austerity and liberalization associated with the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced by the Babangida administration in 1986. The expansion in commerce in the 1970s had an impact on the book industry. Several indigenous publishing outfits developed alongside the dominant names of Oxford University Press, Macmillan, Heinemann and Longman. The new ones had to compete for survival with the international publishers who also struggled to remain in business in the face of economic recession in the 1980s and 1990s. With acute poverty and low literacy rate as a result of economic hardship, the publishing and patronage of fiction suffered a setback. One way of meeting the challenges of the market was to make publishing facilities available to those who could afford them. This class of people included wealthy military officers who would not mind investing in the venture of putting a perceived unpleasant record 'permanently straight' through (auto)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 the 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' (Fawole 2001: 61). Thus, conscious of the unfavourable representation of their actions in other published accounts and the negative responses that their public policies while in government might have generated, the military rulers find an appropriate medium in (auto) biography to counter 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' (Ejoor 1989: vii).

Consequently, from the perspective of the officers, the genre 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 reconstruction. 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. (Adisa 1999: 69)

Some officers who took exception to the way they were represented in Obasanjo's *My Command*, and who disagreed with his interpretation

of historical events, also adopted the genre for rebuttal. Some perceived gaps in the stories of the civil war in the life narratives of other writers that they felt obliged to fill. Naturally, this became a pattern: one (auto) biography begets another, aiming at correcting perceived misrepresentations. 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' (Ejoor 1989: vii–viii). He explains the difficult circumstances in which he found himself as the Governor of Mid-western State when Biafran soldiers invaded. He was forced to flee the State House and find his way to Lagos through a bush path on a 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* (1980: 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' (1989: 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 towards the issue of reorganization of the post-civil war Nigerian Army (1986: 130). In *Years of Challenge*, Samuel Ogbemudia (1991) responds to Ejoor's insinuation 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* (Omosefunmi and Akinlonu 1997) also deplore the portrait of of their subject in Obasanjo's *My Command*. They highlight the undercurrents that informed his unfavourable disposition towards 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' towards Aduwo, rather than the latter's incompetence.

One tendency that is noticeable from the foregoing is that one account emerges as a counter-discourse to or as a renegotiation of another. In this sense, one can speak of the genre as a dialogic space through which military rulers trade facts and interpretations of national history.

As for the 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 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 family origins, which in the manner of rendering is almost synonymous with his place of birth and/or ethnic affiliation. For example, Oluleye (2000) prefaces his narration in the first chapter (titled 'Birth in a Natural Fortress') of *Architecturing a Destiny* with an account of his roots in Efon Alaaye, a town in the present Ekiti State. Similarly, 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, documents his birth and upbringing as a Prince of Ikale in Ondo State. *Spring of a Life: An Autobiography* is his first in a proposed trilogy of life narrative (Bajowa 1992). The 151-page book also narrates his education and experience of life in Lagos as well as his enlistment and successful career in the Nigerian Army, from which he retired with the rank of major-general in 1980.

Another common focus of the soldiers' narratives is the subjects' struggles with the forces of fate and the harsh realities of life. These struggles are attended by varying degrees of failure and triumph. But one picture that is common to these accounts is that of a man who, as Ken Saro-Wiwa puts it, 'literally lifted himself by his boot straps'

(1989: 251). The subject usually 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 who enjoys a pleasant reversal of the Aristotelian 'reversal of fortune'. Unlike the hero in classical Greek tragedy, the subject rises from rags to riches, from an inconsequential beginning to a lofty croft of power with attendant influence and wealth. Aduwo, for instance, is presented as a 'gallant Naval Officer, elevated from the drudgery of life as an inconsequential part of the rural 'humanity of Ode-Aye' (Saro-Wiwa 1989: 20) to become 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 supplement his mother's effort with proceeds from handicrafts. He was appointed Military Governor of Midwestern State and Chief of Staff, Nigerian Army, before his retirement.

The genre 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.⁶

In view of the interested motive of the genre and the involvement of the subject in the process of production, objectivity is inherently problematic. 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 (1992) 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' (Amuta 1992: 40). What Amuta produces is an apologia for a leader who was already having it rough in power. With the economic hardship that attended the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) as well as with the intrigues, uncertainties, corruption and equivocation that characterized Babangida's

programme for 'Transition to Civil Rule', Amuta's claim is suspect and many analysts would be wary of endorsing it.⁷

The point can be corroborated by another illustration. The military (auto) biographies usually present stories of material success attained through hard work. Even when evidence from the public sphere points to mismanagement or nepotism by the individual while holding public office, there is usually a dignified 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 of 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, including structures that were clearly beyond a range of 100 metres, using bulldozers from the Ministry of Works.⁸

In another instance, since his demise on 8 June 1998, there have been substantiated allegations of gross abuse of office and corrupt enrichment against General Sani Abacha during his tenure as head of state between 1993 and 1998.⁹ Ihonvbere (2001: 18) underscores these allegations when he describes Abacha as belonging to the class of 'bloodthirsty despots and world renowned looters of their respective national treasures'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the portrait of Abacha painted by Adisa (1999: 102) 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)

It can be argued that the assumption of office by Abacha as an unelected head of state on 17 November 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'.

Readers in search of truth and objectivity have to look beyond soldiers' self-writing. Critics should not just engage the text, but also the world outside which the text seeks 'transparently' to recount. They have

to look for information from other sources such as books on politics and history, newspapers and magazines, popular songs, cartoons, films, fiction, drama and theatre. One reading should be mediated by the 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 means of life documentation.

Conclusion

At the moment, the list of (auto) biographical discourses of military men who have participated in governance since the first coup of 1966 is growing. Many have been written and many more are likely to be produced in order to meet what the officers and their mouthpieces perceive as 'gaps' in Nigeria's extant narratives. Such self-representations will be helpful if one is to probe the contours of state collapse and authoritarianism among other indices of the military years in governance. As such, they deserve more than passing attention or premature dismissal by scholars. This chapter has observed that these life-narratives, being an essential part of national historiography, need to be understood as a medium for renegotiating Nigerian history and politics. They provide insights into the complexity of power relations in Nigerian society and the way they involve the military profession. The information provided by this genre may contribute to an informed evaluation by critics. They allow the critics to confront the personalities who have shaped and distorted the nation's history. The texts are, of course, replete with gaps, absences, silences and omissions. As Belsey (1980: 136) has rightly noted, 'the task of criticism, then, is to establish the unspoken in the text, to decentre it in order to produce a real knowledge of history'. Since the genre manifests inter-textuality and counter-narration through which truth is configured and reconfigured, 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 a generic boundary and with which it is in a dialogic relationship. Writers and critics whose allegiance is to the public and posterity should carefully examine this class of (auto) biography. They should not only study it, but also contribute by adding their own understanding and interpretations. Their contributions will go a long way in ensuring a proper representation of an era that has been hitherto portrayed with

a bewildering admixture of facts and fabrication. There is a need to be aware not only of the 'identity productions' of the 'green gods' but also of their substantive role in Nigeria's post-independence political history, which they have dominated.

Notes

- 1 '(Auto) biography' in this chapter refers to both biography and auto-biography.
- 2 'Subject' refers to the central personality in the life narrative.
- 3 'Green gods' is metaphorically used in this chapter 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 greenhorns in the sphere of politics and governance, hence their inability properly to nurture democratic development after about three decades in power. Meanwhile, their domination of power space, their *deus-ex-machina*-like manner of intervention in political crises, 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 the 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* (1990: 49).
- 4 Such ceremonies were usually attended by 'eminent' personalities from different segments of the polity, from corporate organizations 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* (1990). This work also generated a great deal of controversy. For instance, it provoked an instant response from Ebenezer Babatope in *Not His Will* (1991). Here, Babatope, a politician, tries to defend Chief Obafemi Awolowo against perceived denigration by Obasanjo.
- 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 politicization 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 regard 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]. (Adisa 1999: 97)

7 Compare this view with an assessment of Babangida's regime in Ihonvbere's essay 'A Radical View of Nigeria's Political Development' (Ihonvbere 1996: 108-34).

8 See S. Fulani, 'By Force', *News Magazine*, 10 June 1996, pp. 18-19; J. Oyewole, 'The Coming of Adisa's Bulldozers', *P.M. News*, 4 June 1996, pp. 2-3; C. Iwuoha, 'Aksion on the Bridge', *This Day*, 26 May 1996, p. 11.

9. Abacha was alleged to have looted 9 billion dollars with the aid of foreign banks and multinational companies. See *The Anchor*, 22 August 2001.

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. They are portrayed in a play by Soyinka as discussed in Adekoya's chapter in this book.

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