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Sombre Tropes as Social Commentary in FRCN's Pendants of Rhythm: A Selection of Radio Nigeria Network News Commentaries

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Abstract

News commentaries are some of the major means of communicating ideas to the public through both the print and electronic media. By a dexterous use of language, writers of news commentaries freely select subject matters whose topicality is relevant to the events, ideas and lifestyles of the moment. In this article, the medium of news commentary is conceptualized as a sub-genre of literature, and in this light, various thematic pre-occupations that border on societal malaise and negative practices encapsulated by this medium shall be highlighted with a view to correcting them. By selecting data from a pool of commentaries with varied topics and themes, this article underscores the functionality of news commentaries as potent instruments for arousing the consciousness of the citizenry about abnormalities in their society. More so, relating themes in these news commentaries with those in fiction (creative works) is expected to be the point of intersection between literature and the news media in this study. Sociological approach to literary criticism is adopted as the theoretical framework since news commentaries as sub-genre of literature function in a society inhabited and affected by the actions of human beings.

Keywords: News, Commentaries, Poverty, Corruption, Migration

Introduction

News commentaries are components of daily news bulletins, especially in the newspapers and radio network news. It has become an inseparable part of news bulletins that it is unimaginable to have complete news broadcast any day without an accompanying news commentary. Commentaries are vital and important appendages to news stories as they are, in most cases, compendia of researches on burning issues or current affairs. W. Wang defines news commentaries as “opinion articles with the important communicative function of contributing to the formulation of certain ‘preferred’ viewpoints about the world,” adding that “the function of news commentaries within the larger context of newspaper or radio

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coverage is to offer newspaper readers and radio listeners a distinctive and sometimes authoritative voice that speaks to the public directly about matters of public importance” (170). Commentaries sometimes appear twice or even more in a news bulletin. These are both because of space and commercial reasons. To break even, some media outfits expertly infuse more than one news commentary in a day’s bulletin, but with deliberately-crafted nomenclatures, depending on the media outfit’s in-house arrangements. But whereas one or more are often sandwiched in the middle and are variously captioned “spotlights”, “focus” or “viewpoints”, the main one is placed near the end of the news bulletin, immediately after sports stories in the Nigerian case, and shortly before weather forecasts and recapitulations of news headlines. Spotlights, viewpoints or focus are characteristically sponsored or paid for by their owners, but general news commentaries are not paid for, as the editors usually pick out from their gallery topical issues and well-written commentaries for the day. Also, commentaries written in advertorial vein, like spotlights by governments, companies, and other organizations are paid for; otherwise, the norm is to select and air only the best commentary available. Commentaries are usually analytical in style as the issues which are usually broad and current are incisively discussed. The language is usually precise, with minimal embellishment, because of what Niyi Osundare calls “the feeling of the tyranny of space” (Preface, 15). In other words, whether in print or electronic media, spaces for news commentaries are usually circumscribed, thereby giving little or no room for elaborate discussions.

There is a misleading perception in some circles that “news” is over once the presenter concludes the item on sports. To them, news commentaries are not significant enough to be listened through. They feel it is a bourgeois indulgence meant for the educated audience; hence, they either switch off their radios before commentaries are aired or walk away from their radios to face other activities which they consider worthier of their time. This happens, especially when the subject matters deal with issues to which they are not attracted. This perception conforms with Wang’s view that commentaries are “usually written by academics, journalists and other experienced linguistic experts or language handlers”, (Wang, 2007:3). But, the fact that T. A. Dijk Van posits that news

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commentaries “...exert an important influence on political opinion formulation, both on everyday reader or listener on the institutional and/or elite members of the society”, underscores the need for people to exercise patience and read or listen to them. News commentaries are important. Their functions range from the instructive, hortatory, to the entertaining. Being an aspect of journalism, news commentaries provide what Osundare again refers to as “open page[s] inhabited by metaphors and moments, vistas and visions, a rallying point and wrestling ground, a forum where some of the burning issues of our world could be articulated in a definite and yet elastic idiom” (xvi). They analyse, evaluate issues and persuade listeners or readers or viewers. They are even less perishable than news stories in that, unlike the latter, commentaries do not dwell only on the latest information in the society, but are the products of deliberate and diligent researches. The import of commentaries for the well-being of society, therefore, can be sustained for a longer period of time – perhaps than news.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the thematic features observed in the selected news commentaries as contained in the compilation, *Pendants of Rhythm: A Selection of Radio Nigeria Network News Commentaries*, to determine the degree of their information and enlightenment value to readers/listeners. It aims at advancing knowledge in this area by focusing on news commentary as a sub-genre of literary enterprise. Since writers of news commentaries often strive to be dispassionate in their analysis, their works are usually objective. In this regard, themes and actions in news commentaries are directly communicated to the audience unlike say, in literary genres such as novels, drama, or poetry where the same messages are conveyed through fictive characters and protagonists, which enhance the vividness of the ideas portrayed. “Theme” in the context of this essay is used in the sense in which X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia define the theme of a story as “whatever general idea or insight the entire story reveals” (180). The primary source *Pendants of Rhythm: A Selection of Radio Nigeria Network News Commentaries* is a collection of news commentaries already aired in the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) during a period which spanned 1991-2009. In this regard, the themes of the commentaries in the

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compilation vary from one commentary to another, as would be demonstrated in selected ones to be analysed here. By regarding the themes of the selected stories in the texts as sombre, we imply that the issues of decadence and general corruption which characterize these commentaries are obviously unacceptable about the Nigerian society. The ultimate aim of this study is to draw attention to this anomalous condition of our society which these commentaries encapsulate, and through intense and rigorous analysis of their unsavoury import on our polity, engage the minds of all and sundry, including the powers that be towards their eradication in the society. The news commentaries under study are “Rural/Urban Drift” by Ayodele Aliyu; “Tackling the Problem of Corruption in the Country’s Urban Centers” by Shamsi Tiamiyu; “On Destitution” by Isma’la Shehu; “The Problem of Unemployment” by Danladi Buba Gombe; “Fighting Corruption” by Itoro Udoh; and an unsigned news commentary entitled “Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in the Country.”

Theoretical Framework

News commentaries are written by individuals who believe that writing as a vocation can be used to draw attention to the condition of people in the society. Seen here as a sub-genre of literature, news commentaries play one of the functions of art, which is to unveil the ills in the society and to advocate the correction of those ills. Speaking about sociological approach to literary criticism, Wilbur Scott states that “sociological criticism starts with a conviction that art’s relations to society are vitally important, and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one’s aesthetic response to a work of art” (123). In other words, Scott subscribes to art as a mirror of the society. As he contends further:

Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of persons, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important articulate part. The sociological critic, therefore, is interested in understanding the social milieu and *the extent to which and manner in which the artist responds to it.* (123) (my italics)

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The italicized part of the quotation above is very important since it is the exact intention of this study to reveal the manner and extent to which the authors of the news commentaries under study have drawn attention to some unacceptable practices in our society.

Sombre Themes as Social Commentary

In the compilation, a news commentary by Ayodele Aliyu which was aired on Wednesday 6th January, 1992 and entitled “Rural/Urban Drift”, takes up one of the issues that plague the Nigerian nation – the negative consequence of rural-urban migration. The discovery of crude oil in Nigeria in the 1950s led to improvement in the lives of people as all sectors of the economy witnessed positive growth and development. Unfortunately, the social amenities were concentrated in urban areas while the rural areas were left unattended to. There were no such facilities in the rural areas as pipe-borne water, electricity and good network of roads. People in the rural areas lived side by side with dirt and squalor. Since social amenities were lacking in the villages, the result was that people began to migrate to towns and cities where they could have better access to such facilities. Incidentally, as the number of immigrants in the towns and cities multiplied, the facilities themselves turned out to be inadequate coupled with rank unemployment facing young school leavers in search of salaried jobs in the cities. The result was that the few available amenities were overstretched and the teeming army of the unemployed, idle and redundant.

The aftermath of this trying situation was dire for the people, as besides the pangs of unemployment, hunger and starvation, many otherwise good citizens were resorting to criminal and immoral acts for survival. While able bodied men took to armed robbery, “women of cheap virtues”, in Aliyu’s word, “could be found everywhere.” (4)

The story surrounding rural-urban migration is ironical. According to Aliyu, “Agriculture which had been the mainstay of the economy for several years was neglected. Even then, nobody was complaining because Nigeria could use her booty from oil to purchase all she needed from other countries” (4). Aliyu’s lamentation and condemnation of this sorry condition can be seen in his choice and use of the word “booty” which

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gives the impression of wealth or something acquired in a hurried and mindless manner, and which is expended without due resort to prudence. Because of the uncoordinated nature of practices in the oil industries, the wealth it generates is often frittered away on white elephant projects. Worse still, he regrets that no new investments are made. At most, the government sets up agencies such as Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), National Directorate for Employment (NDE), Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW) or rolls out numerous policies to give the impression of its commitment to the welfare of the rural people. Regrettably, such agencies and policies become unproductive because of what Aliyu terms “poor implementation and inadequate funding” (4). When people listen to stories about towns and cities, they feel that such places are paved literally with gold. Sometimes people, who are already self-employed in the villages, abandon their jobs for the cities where the possibilities of white collar jobs seem to abound. They arrive in these cities to discover to their dismay that the realities of life differ from the tales they had been told about the city. Some who are lucky to secure jobs, sometimes out of lack of self-control and discipline lead reckless lives to the detriment of their families in the villages.

The destructive effects of rural-urban migration and the vulnerability of living or life in the city are regular themes in fiction. Way back in the English Romantic Period, William Wordsworth in his poem “Michael” recreates the sordid story of an adolescent, Luke, who, though the only son of his aged and poverty stricken parents, is sent to the city to live with an uncle in the hope that Luke would make good his stay in the city and help to elevate his parents from their unflattering economic condition. Unfortunately, the city consumes Luke, as he turns wild, and gives himself over to inebriation and philandering:

Meantime Luke began
To slacken in his duties; and at length,
He in the dissolute city gave himself
To evil courses: ignominy and shame
Fell on him, so that he was driven at last
To seek a hiding place beyond the seas. (71)

Sadly, the craze to travel to towns and cities has not abated; rather, it has exacerbated with dire consequences. The vogue today is to travel to the

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United Kingdom or United States of America. People move in droves, seeking greener pastures, as it were, a pointer to man's insatiable hunger for adventure and discovery. But the cities present surprises to them. The fact that these drifts to towns and cities in many cases end in fiasco is a potent reason for governments to extend social amenities to rural areas in order to stem the tide of rural/urban migration, while migrants themselves should re-examine their reasons for the constant urge to travel. Gauging Aliyu's disposition toward his subject, it is obvious that he is not impressed by the scenario playing out before him. In his angst-filled mind, he seems to suggest an alternative to the problem. For him, if the villagers who are local farmers and petty traders are given subventions by the government, and social amenities are extended to them, they will stay and ply their trades at home and in this way help to make the villages more habitable to the rural dwellers. This, in the main, is the substance of Aliyu's write-up.

Closely related to Aliyu's theme above is the one treated by Shamsi Tiamiyu in the news commentary entitled "Tackling the Problem of Street Hawking in the Country's Urban Centers." In the commentary, Tiamiyu agonizes over the practice and preference by some traders to carry their wares on the head while roaming and marketing same from street to street. He despises the practice for being one of those "...which lead to overcrowding of streets and heavy traffic" (7). His anger hinges not only on the dangers to which the practice disposes the lives of the hawkers themselves and to other road users, especially motorists, but because "street hawking also contributes to sanitation problem in the metropolis and worsens the chaotic traffic situation" (7). Apparently, Tiamiyu argues that from whichever angle one prefers to view it, street hawking is a dangerous and unlawful practice. Though Tiamiyu admits that it is a global phenomenon, it worries him sorely for two reasons: first is that the governments are not doing much to erect markets large enough to meet the increasing demands of the traders; the second is that in a few places where efforts have been made to establish such structures, the traders themselves are largely unwilling to move to the new markets, hence the reluctance on the side of government to build more. It is ironical, Tiamiyu seems to be saying that, "most of them...hibernate around the old markets only to make themselves prey to local government officials who carry out constant raids on such

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business hideouts”. It baffles him that most of these hawkers who should be expected to benefit from the magnanimity of the government where these facilities exist prefer to defy the law and subject themselves to exploitation by local government officials who collect illegal fees and release the wares to the hawkers “after temporary seizures”, in this case the laws become subjected to abuse by the government officials.

Another criticism against street hawking is that it is not uncommon to see and hear the hawkers advertising their wares in a crude manner, thereby constituting noise nuisance to the inhabitants of the area. In spite of legislations against street hawking, like the Anti-Street Hawking Edicts, banning this abnormal culture in some cities and towns in the country, the practice continues to exist, and reports often reveal that majority of those who indulge in it usually come to hurt.

This is not good enough, at least in Tihamiyu’s opinion. A society that accommodates street hawking stands the danger of always experiencing traffic gridlocks, as hawkers commonly operate long major highways and obstruct vehicular movements. Nonetheless, it is apposite to observe that street hawking, in a general sense, is an indictment of the government in failing to provide dividends of democracy to the people. That governments erect few shops here and there is unacceptable, especially considering the huge amounts of money usually voted for such projects which end up being embezzled by some dishonest public office holders. The failure of the governments to act well pushes the low income earners who cannot afford to rent shops in the highbrow commercial areas to devise their own survival strategies. It is also an indictment of the government’s irresponsibility towards the citizenry by its failure in providing social amenities and job opportunities to the masses. Majority of these hawkers are youths. Some of them are school drop-outs while some are those who have not even seen the four walls of any educational institutions because of poverty. A responsive government should ensure that such individuals are assisted by finding a way of keeping them in schools instead of allowing them roam the streets and road sides in the name of trading.

Nevertheless, hawking as a practice is not only indulged in by the youths; even adults who cannot secure legitimate alternative mercantile endeavours engage in it. In some cases, female adults do it with babies

strapped to their backs. Other times they do it lugging their innocent children along while chasing after prospective customers in speeding buses. Kiosks are erected on the shoulders of the roads and from there, sellers dash out to sell their goods, not minding that the children who are already exposed to unfavourable weather conditions can also stray into harm's way. A gory picture similar to this probability has been painted in fiction by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in her novel *House of Symbols*, where Soronje's mother loses her baby to a speeding vehicle, as the "vehicle crashes into the little figure, knocking it clear of the road. The impact of the front wheel against his skull leaves a dull echo hanging in the air" (433). Following Tiamiyu's objective assessment of these tendencies, one readily agrees that there could still be several other disadvantages of street hawking, but no other could be worse than the ones involving loss of lives. In more horrible cases, vehicles ram into a crowd of hawkers and kill them instantly. Tiamiyu's position, therefore, is a clarion call on the governments and well-spirited individuals for a critical attention to be paid to this risky trade to forestall the carnage it wreaks in the society.

While Shamsi Tiamiyu's skeptical disposition towards street hawking is not in doubt, Isma'ila Shehu's strident voice against street begging is even more vocal, vitriolic and critical. In his article captioned "On Destitution", Shehu deplores the practice in which strong and healthy people take to begging as a means of eking out a living, attributing it to colonial intrusion in Africa which left many homes economically exploited. He sees the tradition of begging as dehumanizing since it diminishes one's honour and prestige.

In Shehu's own words, "Beside the plunder of our natural and human resources, colonialism succeeded in the abuse of our indigenous cultural value and norms." He adds that invariably, "our political, economic and social systems have been relegated to the background, dislocating a lot of the indigenous and effective ways of doing things" (137). Begging for alms is a culture that is not restricted to Africa. It is an undignified practice that cuts across races and religions. The Holy Scripture records situations where Jesus Christ extended alms to the society's most vulnerable – the blind, the lame, the deaf, the demon-possessed, and the pregnant mothers with toddlers. These people begged for a living. Some of them were

reduced to their states by physical disabilities. Blind Bartimeous is a good example. As soon as Jesus restores his sight and makes him whole, he ceases to beg. But the case of begging by minors in the Northern part of Nigeria is a rampant one, and the ways they go about it, apparently supported at times by parents, leaves one wondering whether begging in this manner is endorsed and sanctioned by the Islamic Religion, even if tacitly. The truth of the matter here is that almsgiving, otherwise known as Zakat, is one of the five pillars of Islam and this makes begging a way of life in a predominantly Islamic society and those who give alms see it merely as part of their religious obligations. Perhaps this is an exceptional case. However, this practice seems to have partly offered a ready alibi to many who ordinarily are physically healthy and should have engaged themselves in more engaging and lofty ventures. For instance, in the southern part of Nigeria, especially in Igbo land, begging was unknown until the civil war ended and people's popularity depended largely on their solid personal achievements. But the war left many negative impacts on its wake, and many people can be seen now begging, to survive.

Obviously, begging in itself is a symptom of poverty, even if there are some exceptions. Shehu observes that "the dangerous trend of economic hardship explains the general social disregard to the poor and needy – an attitude which ironically legitimizes the spate of social vices such as armed robbery, begging..." (137). One comes across healthy persons who beg around, some of them inventing bizarre stories that really portray their conditions as truly pitiable. This class of beggars goes to the extent of faking disability with photograph pictures and documents from hospitals. Their act, Shehu berates openly, is condemnable. It bespeaks moral deficiency among such crop of individuals. In contrast, however, the examples of the physically challenged members of the society and the minors popularly known in Hausa parlance as the *Almajiris*, are among the ones whose conditions are apparently caused by deprivations and want, and Shehu, no doubt, sympathizes with their condition and definitely holds some members of the upper class guilty for being partly responsible, through their precipitous acts of connivance to the beggars' plights.

In this news commentary, Shehu dispassionately adopts the method of social criticism common among creative writers who lampoon certain

personages or individuals in society when their actions are perceived to help foster or compound the plight of the downtrodden. To this effect, Shehu explores the kind of theme and social criticism similar to what one gets from Jonathan Swift's biting satire in his treatise, "*A Modest Proposal*" where the author ridicules the government of Ireland for its insensitivity towards the plights of the beggars on the streets, but at the same time sympathises with the beggars since they are victims of prohibitive house rents by shylock landlords, and casualties of government's negligence. In the Nigerian society, the insensitivity of government to the miserable condition of mendicants, as Wole Soyinka brands them in his play, *Madmen and Specialists*, manifests in the actions of some politicians who are always paying lip service to the affairs of these destitute in particular, and of the entire poor masses in general. In worst cases, they are evacuated from the strategic points in the towns and cities where they normally converge to beg for alms, thereby recalling an appalling scenario in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* where, ironically, Mour Ndiaye receives Order of Merit Award for the role he plays in clearing the beggars from the streets. It is interesting to note that, in some cases, this street-cleansing is carried out for reasons of tourism, especially given the fact that beggars are said to constitute "sight pollution" within the surroundings where they operate. A preponderance evidence of this culture of sending beggars away unceremoniously from the streets abounds in Nigeria. For instance, the rancour and controversy which followed the policy of the former governor of Lagos State, Babatunde Fashola, when he ordered the evacuation of beggars from the streets of Lagos, and the transportation of the same beggars down to the south-eastern part of Nigeria, are still fresh in people's memory. Instead of relocating and resettling such invalids in comfortable homes, they are regarded as vermin which are not fit to live side by side with the wealthy in exclusive environments. Beggars live daily in trepidations and shrink from the intimidations posed by the rich in the society. Shehu submits that this kind of condition should be redressed.

The evacuation of beggars or mendicants from the streets can become acceptable to people only when it is done without an intention to hurt the pride of any section of the society. In such an exercise, a resettlement programme aimed at bringing greater comfort to the destitute should be in

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place. Since no concrete action is taken by either the government or the influential members of the society to bring succour to the beggars, the latter therefore take to criminal activities and start menacing society as a way of getting back at the powers that be. And a society that continues to neglect the welfare of the masses will certainly continue to experience reactions from the people by way of criminal activities.

In “The Problem of Unemployment,” Danladi Buba Gombe takes up yet another theme that is of immense significance in our contemporary society. This is because unemployment constitutes the bulk of socio-economic problems in Nigeria. The rate of unemployment in the Nigerian nation is alarming. Many families find it difficult to make ends meet, let alone contributing to the economic growth of the nation. Gombe asserts that “unemployment is an endemic social and economic problem that exists in every society,” adding that “its consequences are grievous, tedious and cumbersome to all stratification of people in the African continent today” (186).

Over the years, Nigerian universities have continued to release to the labour market graduates who have acquired degrees in various sectors of the national life. Some of these graduates come out of the universities with good grades and technical expertise that need to be put immediately to use in the service of the nation. But they find out that there are no vacancies for them in the public sector, and that the leaders are not bothered much about how to absorb them in the civil service system as to enable them utilize their acquired talents in that direction, nor does the private sector hold out better opportunities for them since industrialization is still at an insupportable level in the country. Consequently, these graduates become idle and their talents are wasted. Gombe argues that “the Nigerian quest for industrialization has suffered a lot of setbacks which was besieged by unemployment with its attendant consequences of poverty and crime that had further aggravated, compounded and undermined the development of the country” (186).

Allied to the above is the problem of underemployment. This is a condition in which those who succeed in getting jobs are poorly remunerated and their talents or knowledge are under-utilized in view of the fact that the positions and job schedules they get are a far cry from what

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they merit and hoped for. Underemployment may be better than not having any job at all. But most of the time, both lead to the same destinations - anger and frustration in the individuals involved, and an inevitable economic retardation to the nation. Furthermore, Gombe seems to align his opinion to the popular sentiment that “an idle brain is the devil’s workshop”. According to him, “unemployment [is] the major cause of social vices and abject poverty among Nigerians going by the tremendous increase in crises and contradictions within the country as well as other African countries” (186).

Gombe’s stance on the consequences of either a total lack of employment, or abject prevalence of underemployment, is in consonance with Esiaba Irobi’s feeling which he expresses through his characters in his plays, *Hangmen also Die* and *Nwokedi*. In the former, going into armed robbery and militancy becomes available option open to the youths while in the latter, the unemployed form “The Unemployed Youths Association” and take their complaints and grievances to their rather bumbling and indifferent leaders, first peacefully through a series of letters, and later violently when their complaints are not addressed. Speaking about Irobi’s achievements in *Nwokedi*, Rowland C. Amaefula concludes that in the play, “it is revealed that unemployment in Nigeria is a generational problem that has been created by leaders whose main interests are wealth and power” (91).

Proceeding from the point above, it is clear that unemployment frustrates people. Those who are unemployed watch helplessly as some projects and programmes that catch their interest elude them owing largely to a lack of fund. Even such projects and programmes invariably suffer abject neglect because those who should implement them are financially hamstrung and will of a truth begin to feign lack of interest. Institutions suffer because only few hands are engaged and sometimes even in the wrong places, while those who are most qualified for the jobs roam the streets aimlessly or engage in odd and menial vocations. The society is worse off under this kind of condition for as Gombe rightly observes, “one other area militating against the advancement of the Nigerian society was in the area of professionalism where the value of specialization is hardly upheld by employers of labour” (187). In this wise, Gombe in this

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commentary seems to suggest that frantic efforts are needed from the government as well as from concerned citizens to help solve the problem of unemployment and by extension eradicate crime in the society.

Though unemployment (or underemployment) is counter-productive in a society anxious to join the league of industrialized nations, yet there is another malaise that is just as evil, endemic and monstrous as it, or even worse. This plague is corruption. Ito Udoh explores this theme in the commentary captioned "Fighting Corruption". Udoh's definition of this evil is very apt and encapsulates in its terseness all that is negative, execrable and despicable about corruption. In his view, "corruption refers to the use of the advantage of one's office to illegally enrich oneself either through plunder, fraud or receipt of gratification for the performance of what should have been one's normal assignment" (200). Corruption, as can be gleaned from Udo's explanation, is the bane of Nigerian public and private life. He insists that one of the downsides of corruption is that it takes away benefits from the legitimate persons and organizations and gives them to the unmerited individuals. Corruption, no doubts, is not the culture of only the rich and the powerful. Every stratum of our national life manifests one form of corrupt practice or another, leading to the undoing of the society at large. But the effects are more disastrous when the privileged class is involved, because they have access to the nation's real plum and substance; they plunder and coral advantages unto themselves without scruples and at the detriment of the weak and unenlightened. In his view on the nature of corruption in African countries, Emmanuel N. Obiechina opines that the common people are usually "first duped by their would-be redeemers and then betrayed through the cupidity and selfishness of the political class and bureaucratic elite, the dice are loaded against the common people when their interests and those of the elite clash, because the elite are in control" (147).

The most disconcerting aspect of corruption is that it burrows into areas and institutions that should serve as fortresses against it. As Udoh observes, "In the public service, corruption is perpetrated through contracts and granting of favours to unqualified persons" (200). In Nigeria, it spreads to the judiciary as lawyers accept bribes and pervert justice. It also spreads to security agencies as the police, the military and staff of the

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Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), all accept gratifications and turn a blind eye to the scourge of corruption. Today, soldiers mount road blocks as the Nigerian Police are accustomed to do, and extort money from motorists. Again in the Nigerian situation, officers of the anti-graft agencies like the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Offences Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) are sometimes implicated in cases of corrupt practices. Yet, these are people reposed with public trust. Whereas poverty may be one of the reasons for people's entanglement in acts of corruption, greed is obviously the major propeller. Lack of self-control and the primitive acquisition of wealth, with the drive towards piling up money for the descendants of one's family up to the third and fourth generation underscore this hideous propensity. Besides, Udoh adds that "hero worshiping which is one of the retrogressive aspects of our culture and the desire to live ostentatious life are other reasons" (200). In whatever guise this vice appears, and no matter whatever reason for which it is committed, corrupt practices are bad. A society that welcomes, instead of chastising people whose sources of income are questionable, is a society that encourages corruption. This is because when people watch corrupt persons, say politicians, display ill-gotten money without public criticism, some of these onlookers may start scheming to do the same so as to equally command respect in their community. In this situation, one would be right to say that corruption is contagious, and people should possess the attributes of honesty and self-discipline to escape this evil affliction. By so doing, most of our people would be unlike the characters in Achebe's *A Man of the People* or Amah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*, who, though profess hatred for corruption with all their souls, end up becoming drawn into the cesspool of the same evil. In addition, the anti-corruption laws in the country should always be enforced without bias so that, in the words of Udo, "the spirit of reconstruction and rebirth" would be engendered.

In "Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in the Country," the focus of the commentary is on the dangers of ethno-religious wars. Though an unsigned commentary taken from this compilation, the write-up probes and critically analyses some causes of conflicts, and their side effects on the

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psyche of the citizenry. Ethnic or religious conflicts are usually unacceptable developments no matter in whatever form they occur. This is because war by its very nature and goal is negative and destructive. Whether a war is intra or inter-ethnic; intra or inter-religious in orientation (even when war is within individuals), the effects are usually devastating.

In a country like Nigeria with multi-ethnic groups, wars ensue from time to time. According to our anonymous writer, “experience has shown that the more pluralistic a society is, the more likely the possibility of frictions and crises...Ethnic and religious clashes cannot be instantly ruled out. They cannot be abolished or wished away” (276). When crisis is not over a parcel of land, it could be a disputation over the location of social amenities like cultural centers, maternity homes, water projects, hospitals, and, sometimes, educational facilities. Whatever is the cause of any war, the aftermaths are always the same - despoliation of these facilities and a waste of human lives. The cause of a war can also be religious where, for instance, the systems of worship differ, as those between the Islamic religion and Christianity in Nigeria. Among denominations of a given religion like Christianity, conflicts can result from diverse opinions on certain issues. So, doctrinal issues can result in intra-religious crisis with devastating consequences. No wonder the writer affirms that “conflict has been described as a fact of life in any human environment,” thus:

History is replete [of] times and circumstances of crises and friction of different proportions and consequences, emanating from political, cultural, economic, religious and social relations among different groups in the society. (276)

However, in spite of the inevitability of war as a fact of human life, one seems to detest the phenomenon based on the point that more often than not most wars are instigated by politicians for selfish motives. For instance, it is not uncommon to see distraught politicians create problems or misunderstanding among people or group of people where none hitherto existed, or they play one group against another just to be able to achieve their personal, self-serving ends. All these could result in avoidable crises or war that will eventually claim the lives of many innocent members of the community. As the commentator observes, “cultural and ethnic differences do not, on their own, provoke crisis. It is the manipulation of these differences by the elite in the society, for political and economic

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advantages, that usually spark off ethnic and religious clashes” (276). The above situation plays out in Isidore Okpewho’s war novel *The Last Duty*. In the novel, Urukpe community and her erstwhile friendly neighbouring community had intermarried and related peacefully. But at the onset of a communal clash following misunderstandings presaged by the actions of the egotistical elite, the groups become enemies and went their separate ways. Even more, they are ready to go to intolerable length to crush each other just to protect and preserve individual ethnic groups.

Indeed, the consequences of ethnic or communal conflicts can be monumental and the end of such conflicts when once sparked off can be unpredictable. In this commentary the writer evinces strong aversion to any form of conflict, be it ethnic, religious or otherwise. He goes ahead to proffer solutions out of such wars when they eventually ensue. Hence, his suggestions that:

They can only be managed by understanding the historical, political and cultural influences contributing to the crises. Other structural measures for addressing the question of ethnic clashes should include provision of jobs for the teeming youths who are ready instruments of manipulation by ethnic warlords. (277)

Conclusion

This study employed incisive analysis of themes of social decadence in some news commentaries contained in *Pendants of Rhythm: A Selection of Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria News Commentaries*, as a way of drawing attention to the prevalent anomalies in our nation, and then arguing for a need to redress them. Disproving the perception in some quarters that news commentaries are an elite pastime, the paper reveals that they rather embody themes that are of great relevance to both the high and the low in the Nigerian society. The leadership cadre in the country hijacks the facilities meant for the citizenry and either appropriate them for their personal use or concentrate the facilities in the towns and cities, giving rise to rural/urban migration and its dismal consequences. The work condemns street hawking and destitution as practices that result from the highhandedness of the leaders and argues that equitable sharing of the national resources will reduce the trend. Again, corruption and war are

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identified as counter-productive and bode ill for the growth and unity of the country, as only a few individuals profit from proceeds got from corrupt practices while beneficiaries of war loot are the politicians and highly placed in the society who ironically instigate such wars for their ulterior motives without participating in the actual fighting and loss of lives. While the leaders appear culpable in all the maladies identified, the masses themselves should not be seen as innocent, as their silence and complacency are oftentimes interpreted as acquiescence. However, the political and educated elite are more blameworthy because of their privileged positions, which they mostly misuse.

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