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Digging up Maroko's Bones

BY CHUX OKEI OHAI

My friend, Maroko is the great Nigerian novel writing itself" says Prinzi, a principal character in Mail? Nwosu's award-winning novel, Invisible Chapters.

But, the book focuses not so much on the redefinition of the so-called great Nigerian novel, nor the writing of it (as the author would want to make the reader believe), as it does on the unearthing of a particularly significant past event.

There are two Marobos in the novel: the old and new. Beyond these, there is an historical Maroko, now a mere speck in the sands of time, which Nwosu has appropriated as paradigm for his reconstruction of the Nigerian social-political experience. Evidently, the story of the two active Marobos is a rehash and extension of the original one.

Once upon a time, Maroko was a bustling settlement of the poor and less privileged, a shantytown on the fringe of the Lagos lagoon. In spite of attendant vices and squalor, it was home to thousands of Nigeria's down-trodden who had drifted there in search of succor from a system that was increasingly riddled with vast inequalities and life-threatening contradictions.

Nonetheless, wrapped in the warmth of their exciting but lonely world, the residents of Maroko were oblivious of the anguish their existence caused their rich and influential neighbors living in nearby highbrow Ikoyi. Ironically, they provided the work force that the fount of a cultural renaissance, and first laboratory for many of the principal artists working across the many genres of contemporary art. Demas Nwoko, J.P Clarr, Mabel Segun, Wale Ogundeyi, Tunji Oyelana, Chimma Achebe, Imoukhuede Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka etc.

The more enduring image however is the fifth type, metaphorically referenced from J.P Clarr - BebedeMero's almost legendary poem on Ibadan and its contrapuntal use of the imaginaries of rust and gold. value and dissonance: "Ibadan/running splash of rust/ and gold - flung and scattered/among seven hills like broken/china in the sun."

This particular poem, the poet, and the city of Ibadan seem locked in eternal embrace as evidence of the romance between the city and the imagination. Rust, Gold, broken china in the sun: Ibadan itself is paradox.

Ibadan Mesiogo is a rather intriguing title. It forces a dialogue between the insider who knows some of its references, and the outsider who is compelled to insist on a roadmap. For all its eloquence, it is essentially a book by university wits, a story from the Ivory Tower, and as such covers only one angle to the story. The bigger story involves the many, unrecognized folk artists for whom Ibadan is also home and creative spring: the drummers, masqueraders, plastic and visual artists, the raconteurs whose art is shut out from expression in this forum due to its special meaning. The Ibadan story is in that sense long and varied. The politician, Lamidi Adedibu has written an instructive book titled What I Saw in the Politics of Ibadan:and: there also used to be a journal known as Ibadan Mesiogo also used to be a journal known as Ibadan Voices: and: scores of Fuji musicians, notably Abarabe Abarabe Obosere, the Fonky Fuji exponent - these are people excluded from this celebration, whose voices are neither heard nor represented, since they fall outside the umbrella of the university system.

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served the needs of the latter. They were at once the craftsmen, factory-hands, laborers, cooks, who the affluent exploited to keep their progress unhindered. Yet, looking down upon Maroko from the balconies of their enchanting mansions, with telltale frowns and wrinkled nostrils, these high and mighty couldn't help but wish Maroko's instant disappearance from the face of the earth. Their wish was soon granted through a military fiat.

One morning, the residents of Maroko woke up to find impatient government bulldozers growling at their doors. A detachment of soldiers had been assigned with the express task of enforcing the quit order previously issued the residents by the Governor of Lagos State. His Excellency's excuse, shallow and controversial as it seemed, appeared hinged on the fact that Maroko was dangerously sinking below sea level and as a result, could no longer be regarded as habitable. But no sooner had the bulldozers reduced the shantytown to rubble than the apportioning of choice parcels of the same land to the rich began in earnest. The dispossessed were thus left to their own devices, at the mercy of chance.

The foregoing analogy applies to Maik Nwosu's fictive Maroko. Here, hope is temporarily rekindled in the dispossessed with the promise of resettlement in a better and healthier environment. Subsequently, the government hurriedly sets up a Resettlement Board to oversee the fulfillment of this promise. But when the masses eventually arrive New Maroko, they discover, to their consternation, a wasteland of sorts spotting a huge incinerator belching toxic fumes, as the dominant feature of the landscape.

Maroko's story is in a very significant way, the story of Nigeria. The people involved in the tale are stereotypes drawn from real life. The wretched, dispossessed residents are representative of the wretched and misruled masses of Nigeria. The under-currents of lies, intrigues and conspiracies that act to annul Maroko's existence are similar to the factors which threaten the corporate existence of the country.

In this novel, the masses are pitted in a vicious and continuous struggle for survival, while the ruling class, through its fawning agencies, employs myth making as a tool to plough through to the heart of new Maroko. When this fails, it quickly resorts to victimization and repression of their (the masses') will.

Invisible Chapters, no doubt, is a novel which seeks in part to trace out the psychological trauma suffered by resilient masses in their quests for a better deal from the ruling class. The plot unfolds in four segments or books. The first book concentrates on a significant event in the life of New Maroko serving as link between the past and the present. The second book, in typical flashback tradition, affords the reader a glimpse into the immediate circumstances preceding the eviction and resultant exodus of people from old Maroko. The third and middle part of the story begins where the first part ends and progresses on to the fourth and conclusive segment.

The story is told in a compelling manner, with appropriate symbols and signs which vary as the plot progresses. The author's preoccupation with symbols is evident from the
on-set of the narrative. The Rastafarian record shop owner in New Marobo, Haffe’s unusual switch from playing protest music to the music of ‘pure white Christmas’ signifies an invocation of the neo-colonialist spirit at a period when residents are still reminded of the sad events of their immediate past. Also, Prinzi’s pre-occupation with the theory of opposites (Ps - 8) sets the tone for the progress of events in New Marobo by hinting at the complementary nature of good and evil, with good enhancing evil and destruction existing possibly for the sake of reconstruction. The story of Eto, Ka and Minitimma, which underlines the relationship between materialism and discord, is also a fable that describes a progressive condition of being. The sudden deaths of Ignatius, Madam Bonus and Goomsu evoke a mystique that ultimately results, first, in the March to old Marobo and, second, an all-night vigil on the eve of Christmas, which are both held in commemoration of the destruction and reconstruction of the settlement to appease “whatever spirits remain to be appeased” Kaabiyesi, the faceless patriarch of Crocodile Island and apostle of “authority stealing”, symbolically prefigures the enthronement of a ruling hegemony, while the Resettlement Board also symbolizes ineptitude in high places. The communion of the long Tide and Kaita’s bazaar, signify a battle for the soul of the masses between art, morality and materialism. Even, the Prinzi-led Marobo letting-finding expression in dances and rituals which are symbols depicting prevailing moods, and also acknowledging the transitory periods in the life of the settlement.

Thematically, Invisible Chapters is in more ways than one an indictment of the military and military governments. Thus, the military is cast in the image of a monster, an accomplice in the grand plot to keep masses of people perpetually subjugated. Soldiers thrive both on corrupt practices and outright intimidation of the defenseless masses they are supported to protect. Military training, it seems, vests the average soldier with the license to unleash violence at will, with or without provocation. In as much as freedom becomes an impossible song under the military, open dialogue is constantly discouraged among the people and dissenting voices are brided with brutal force. Governor Raji Omo-ale’s visit to Marobo in the days before the destruction of the settlement reveals the penchant of Nigerian military rulers for double-speak and insincerity in the discharge of their duties. Omo-ale does not only tell blatant lies and make false promises, he goes on to polish the same through the government-owned media.