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L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century
A África e os desafios do Século XXI
إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

**Power, Artistic Agency, and Poetic Discourse:
Poetry as Cultural Critique in Twenty-first Century Africa**

Sule E. Egya
University of Abuja

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It is a given, especially, within the literati that literature – here conceived as imaginative writing – played a vital, if not fundamental, role in the struggles leading to the wave of independence in the 1960s in Africa. Poetry was one of the agencies for this artistic intervention. Those often regarded as the first generation of African poets in European languages (Senghor, Okigbo, Soyinka, Diop, p'Bitek etc) approached imaginative writing in the 1950s and 1960s with a strong sense of instrumentalism, the social moorings of their works tending towards a counter-narrative. That is to say, their works mainly constituted a narrative that sought, and perhaps succeeded, in challenging western epistemological system that undermined the very humanity of Africans. Since then, African poetry, in whatever language, has continued to concern itself with historical events in Africa, mostly critiquing socio-political and cultural problematic, articulating the travails and triumphs of the common people under oppressive regimes put in place by military and civilian elite across the continent. This is evident in the works of Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Jack Mapanje, Kofi Anyidoho, among others, who emerged in the 1980s. The central argument of this paper is that while new poetic voices continue to emerge on the African literary scene, it does seem that poetry in Africa, even in the twenty-first century, continues to historicise and critique cultural, social and political challenges which have persistently troubled the continent since independence. In a materialist reading of selected poems published in this century, the paper contends that emerging African poets, like other writers and artists, like progressive intellectuals and activists, are concerned about the seemingly bleak fate of the continent and are participating, through their engaged poetry, in the construction of an alternative vision for the continent.