

Not My Business

by Niyi Osundare

They picked Akanni up one morning
Beat him soft like clay
And stuffed him down the belly
Of a waiting jeep.

What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?

They came one night
Booted the whole house awake
And dragged Danladi out,
Then off to a lengthy absence.

What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?

Chinwe went to work one day
Only to find her job was gone:
No query, no warning, no probe -
Just one neat sack for a stainless record.

What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?

And then one evening
As I sat down to eat my yam
A knock on the door froze my hungry hand.
The jeep was waiting on my bewildered lawn
Waiting, waiting in its usual silence.

First Impressions

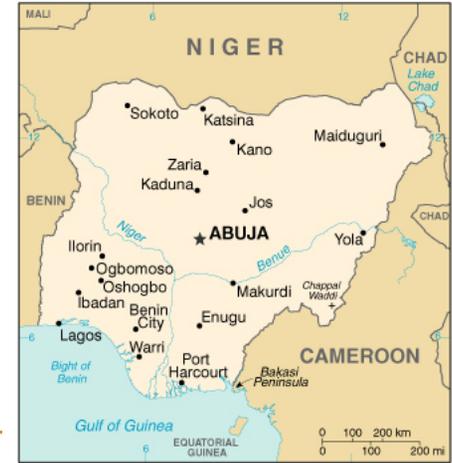
- Read the poem through
- What country or type of country do you think the poem is set in?
- Who do you think 'they' are?
- What sort of people do 'they' appear to be?
- What words give you this impression?
- What sort of people are Akanni, Danladi and Chinwe?
What do you think happened to them?

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Context

The poem is most likely set in Nigeria. The poet, **Niyi Osundare**, used his poetry to object to the cruel dictatorship that ruled his country.

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He said, **‘African poets have no choice but to be political in their work :**

‘You cannot keep quiet about the situation in the kind of countries we find ourselves in.’

BBC News June 1998 : Abacha dies at 54

Nigeria's military strongman, General Sani Abacha, has died at the age of 54 after *reportedly* suffering a heart attack.

Nigeria under Abacha

- The general seized power in 1993 after cancelling presidential elections.
- He steadily consolidated his grip on power, with purges of the army and restrictions on political activity.
- After the execution in 1995 of nine opposition activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, and with the presumed winner of the 1993 elections, Chief Moshood Abiola, still in jail, Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth and became diplomatically isolated.

Go to <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/109265.stm> for full report

What is a **Dictatorship**?

- A **dictatorship** is when a state is ruled by someone (often a usurper) with unrestricted authority. Dictators very often use the military to impose their regime.
- People who do try to express their ideas either in speech, writing or actions are arrested, imprisoned, punished and possibly killed to silence them. They may be called a dissident.

What is the **opposite** of a dictatorship?

- A **democracy** is where people in the country have a chance to vote for representatives who make laws and changes on their behalf.

Can you think of examples of famous dictators in history?

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Context

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**Slobodan
Milosevic**



Serbia

**Adolf
Hitler**



Germany

**Saddam
Hussein**



Iraq

**Augusto
Pinochet**



Chile

Which country did each of the Dictators above rule?

‘Uttering a word is like breaking an egg – you can’t put the pieces back together again’

- It is a sentiment the Nigerian government under the dictatorship of **General Abacha** wholeheartedly agreed with.
- In the **Abacha** years, writing poetry was considered a dangerous activity, as Osundare found out himself. ‘With the kind of poetry I write, I can never be the dictator’s friend. So I got a knock on the door at two in the morning a couple of times.’

How does this information relate to any lines of the poem?

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Context

Osundare has written on the execution, in 1995, of the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the unlawful imprisonment of journalists. Subsequently he was visited by security agents and asked to elucidate (explain) his phrases.

‘By that time I realized that the Nigerian security apparatus had become quite ‘sophisticated’, quite ‘literate’ indeed!

A couple of my students at the university of Ibadan had become informers; a few even came to my class wired. And when I was reading abroad, someone trailed me from city to city. At home, my letters were frequently being intercepted.

Now, according to Osundare, the situation is better: ‘We have a democracy, but it is still an infant democracy. Our new democracy is taking a long time to grow. But we have to nurture it. There is no alternative to freedom.’

- 1. Why would a dictator be worried about journalists and writers?*
- 2. Write a few sentences about how the ability to read and write makes people a threat to powerful governments.*
- 3. What is the difference between our political system and a dictatorship?*
- 4. What is a ‘free press’?*

There is also no choice for the African poet or writer but to be political, Osundare emphasizes.

‘You cannot keep quiet about the situation in the kind of countries we find ourselves in, in Africa. When you wake up and there is no running water, when you have a massive power outage for days and nights, no food on the table, no hospital for the sick, no peace of mind; when the image of the ruler you see everywhere is that of a dictator with a gun in his hand; and, on the international level, when you live in a world in which your continent is consigned to the margin, a world in which the colour of your skin is a constant disadvantage, everywhere you go – then there is no other way than to write about this, in an attempt to change the situation for the better.’

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Reading the poem

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They picked Akanni up one morning
Beat him soft like clay
And stuffed him down the belly
Of a waiting jeep.

What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?

1. *Who do you think 'they' were?*
2. *How is the violence of Akanni's arrest shown in the poem? (__)*
3. *Comment on the description of the jeep. What poetic device is used? ()*



The poet uses **personification**. He describes the jeep as having a 'belly' like a person or animal. This makes the image more powerful as it sounds as if Akanni has been eaten by the jeep.

This also connects with the last lines where the narrator is eating.

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Reading the poem

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They came one night
Booted the whole house awake
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What business of mine is it
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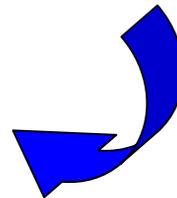
1. *How is Danladi's arrest made to sound violent and sinister? Underline the words which show aggression and cruelty. (_)*
2. *'a lengthy absence' could be described as a **euphemism**. What do you think the phrase means? ()*

Euphemism- where something serious is lightened by a milder choice of words.

e.g 'passed away' = died.

'a lengthy absence' could be a long term of imprisonment or death. By using these words the poet makes Danladi's fate unclear.

Why might this uncertainty be more frightening?



Not My Business

Reading the poem

by Niyi Osundare

Chinwe went to work one day
Only to find her job was gone:
No query, no warning, no probe -
Just one neat sack for a stainless record¹

*What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?*

4. *Do you think the poet agrees with this attitude? Why?*

1. *What happens to Chinwe?*
2. *How does the poet make this seem unjust?*
3. *The same lines are repeated at the end of the first three stanzas. What is being suggested about the narrator?*

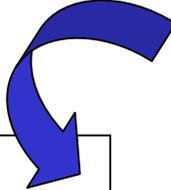
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1. *What happens to Chinwe?*
2. *How does the poet make this seem unjust? (_)*
3. *The same lines are repeated at the end of the first three stanzas. What is being suggested about the narrator?*
4. *Do you think the poet agrees with this attitude? Why?*



The **repetition** of the lines emphasises that arrests and injustice were a regular occurrence under this government.

In each case, the narrator seems to be ignoring what is happening as long as it does not directly affect him by not having enough to eat. His '**savouring mouth**' shows that he enjoys his food and wants to go on enjoying it, ignoring what is happening to his neighbours.

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Reading the poem

And then one evening
As I sat down to eat my yam
A knock on the door froze my hungry
hand
The jeep was waiting on-my
bewildered lawn
Waiting, waiting in its usual silence.

3. *How is repetition used effectively?*
()

Repetition emphasises the fact that this event has happened before to other people. The narrator has been waiting for it to happen to him but done nothing to prevent it as long as he had enough to eat.

It also contrasts with previous verses. How?

1. *What word suggest the narrator's fear and shock? (__)*

2. *How is personification used in this stanza? (...)*

The lawn is made to sound like a person because it is 'bewildered' (puzzled and frightened) like the narrator.

4. *Why is only the jeep mentioned in these lines and not 'they'?*

A jeep is a machine, it has no feelings so it emphasises the unemotional arrest of the narrator. It sounds sinister and automatic like a robot.

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What is the poem about?

- We live in a country which is a democracy. We have laws, and if we break them, we are punished.
- Those laws are made by a democratic process. Most people over 18 can vote for a member of parliament to represent them.
- We have a free press. The newspapers are not controlled by the government and they can print different points of view and criticism without fear of arrest.

Can you think of ways people show their objections to government decisions?

- We may not always change things by what we say or write, but our way of life defends our right to say it.
- **'Not My Business'** criticises people who allow injustices to go on within a country as long as it does not affect them. The poet is suggesting that if no one stands against injustice and dictatorship, it will, eventually, affect their lives.

Extension Work

Produce a piece of original writing called ‘The Arrest’

- a. You could base it on the narrator or other characters in ‘Not My Business’.

or

- b. You could brainstorm reasons for any type of arrest and base your story on this.
- Decide what the ‘crime’ is.
 - From whose point of view are you going to write the story?
 - Is it going to be a first or third person account?
 - Remember to describe feelings, as well as events.