

shabbily.

However, certain images run through the entire book: the first set is that of Ibadan as an ancient, mythical city which though beginning as a war camp, has since acquired a cosmopolitan edge without losing touch with its ritual roots, traditions, masquerades, taboos and superstitions. The second set of images depict a university town, specifically in terms of how the presence of the University of Ibadan has imbued the city with a distinctiveness in the peculiar mix of the intellectual and artistic, the rustic and popular. The third image group is that of a city of many historic places: the topography of hills and valleys, Cocoa House, Mapo Hall, Dugbe, Gbagi, Bodija – each with its own significance. The fourth set of images signifies

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. Clark, Mabel Segun, Wale Ogunyemi, Tunji Oyelana, Chinua Achebe, Imoukhuede, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka etc.

The more enduring image however is the fifth type, metaphorically referenced from J.P. Clark – Bekederemo's almost legendary poem on *Ibadan* and its contrapuntal use of the imageries 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 primary orality. Beyond this, it is worth noting that Ibadan has also served as home and creative source-point for the raconteur and dramatist, Adebayo Faleti; the fabulist, Amos Tutuola; the folk poet Olanrewaju Adepoju; scores of Fuji musicians, notably Akande Abass Obesere, the Funky 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.

What creative writers have attempted in *Ibadan Mesiogo* can also be essayed by historians, scientists, politicians and civil servants for whom Ibadan has always held a 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 Ibadanland*; there also used to be a journal known as *IBADAN*; Tekena Tamuno has edited a book called *Ibadan Voices*; film-makers, and other artists have also paid tribute to this city of many possibilities. The harvest then is rich and it promises to be richer. In *Ibadan Mesiogo*, both the editors and contributors lift the veil on a significance aspect of that harvest. In writing about the city, they write about themselves, ourselves, our lives, our fears, and the politics of our land. In as much as their effort is worth the trouble, the product is worthy of attention. GBS

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Digging up Maroko's Bones

BY CHUX OKEI OHAI

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Y friend, Maroko is the great Nigerian novel writing itself" says Prinzi, a principal character in Maik 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 Marokos 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 Marokos is a rehash and extension of the original one.

Once upon a time, Maroko was a bristling 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 lowly 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

Maik Nwosu,
INVISIBLE
CHAPTERS, House of
Malaika and Tivolick,
Lagos, Nigeria, 1999,
322 pp.



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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 pre-occupation with symbols is evident from the

on-set of the narrative. The Rastafarian record shop owner in New Maroko, Haile'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 (P5 - 8) sets the tone for the progress of events in New Maroko 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 Elo, 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 Maroko 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." Kaabiyisi, 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 Maroko left-wing find 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 bridled with brutal force. Governor Raji Omo-ale's visit to Maroko 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.

Perhaps one of the engaging features of this novel is the endless discourse it spawns on the future of the Nigerian novel and its enduring place in literary culture. Aside his concern for justice and fairness regarding Maroko, Prinzi appears to be absorbed in the task of charting a course for his art from a seeming void. In the process of brainstorming with Ashikodi and Razaki, issues are raised and discarded while questions are asked. The "latitude to be" becomes a fundamental principle upon which all art and, of course, the great Nigerian novel must be anchored; it is the kernel of all human activity, the spiritual responsibility of everyman to the next person, irrespective of class, tribe or creed. Thus, when this principle upturns or is disregarded, society loses its essence, life its value, and art its substance.

In the resurrection of Maroko, from the ruins of the old to the new, lies a glimmer of hope. But this is hope soon transformed, in the light of fresh and incisive manipulations, into gloom. It is a recurrent and vicious cycle of gloom in which every misfortune becomes an opportunity to be amply exploited (even the name of God is exploited for gain). And, as soon as this happens, those affected are forced to recoil into their shells, stunned and full of questions.

One thing that might render *Invisible Chapters* beyond the pleasure and understanding of the average reader is the preponderance of high-flying expressions. The author, it seems, had a specific audience in mind when he set out on writing this novel. But the concern ought to have been on how much of the work would be read, and across what boundaries, other than on who reads it. Apart from this, and a few other failings, *Invisible Chapters* has a mission to fulfill, which is to open readers up to some hard truths about the conditions of human life on the African side of the globe. It is illustrative of the 'insignificance' of life against the backdrop of constant devious schemes and man's inhumanity to fellow man. Coming therefore in the nick of time, as the cliché goes, Maik Nwosu could not have chosen a more auspicious moment than the present to impress a bold statement upon the cultural/political landscape of Nigeria. History cannot be merely obliterated, hence Maroko will forever remain an epochal landmark in the convoluting history of Nigeria. There cannot be a better explanation for Nwosu's commitment to his tale. **GBS**