

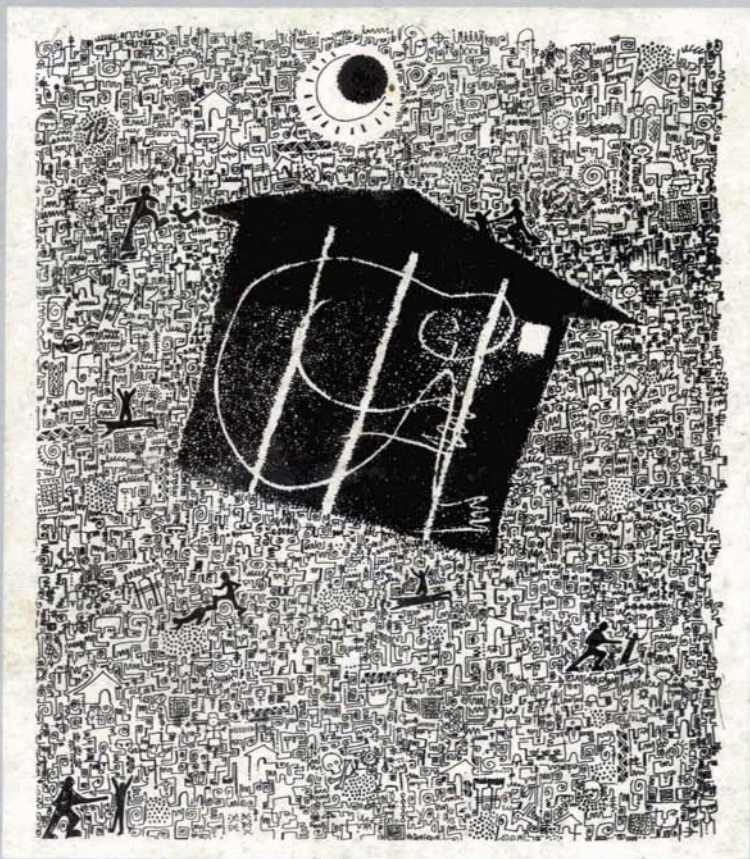


OKIke

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING

SILVER JUBILEE ISSUE

THEME: NIGERIAN LITERATURE IN THE LAST DECADE: 1986-1996



OKIKE

An African Journal of New Writing

NUMBER 34, OCTOBER 1996

Patrons

Prof. Ulli Beier, Chief F.J. Ellah, Dr. Alex I. Ekwueme,
Chief (Dr.) Arthur A. Nwankwo, Alhaji Abdulaziz C. Ude.

Founding Editor
Chinua Achebe

Editor
Onuora Ossie Enekwe

Managing Editor
Obiora Udechukwu

Assistant Editor
Amechi Akwanya

Editorial Assistants
Nathan Nkala, Chika Nwankwo
Sam Onuigbo

Art Editor
Tayo Adenaiké

Business Editor
Nnaemeka Ikpeze

Secretarial/Administrative Staff
Philomena Ngene
Esther Ogadi

Contributing Editors
Joe Bruchac, Chinweizu, Ernest Emenyeonu, C.L. Innes, Onwuchekwa Jemie,
Micere Githae Mugo, Emmanuel Obiechina, Joe Skerrett,
Michael Thelwell, Ada Ugah.

*Manuscripts should be in duplicate, typewritten, double-spaced with ample margins.
A brief autobiographical note should accompany each submission.
Unused manuscripts shall not be returned, unless accompanied by
self-addressed, stamped envelopes.*

ISSN 0331-0566

Copyright 1996 OKIKE MAGAZINE, P.O. Box 53, Nsukka, Nigeria.

Acknowledgement:

This publication has been made possible by a grant from the
Heinrich Boell Foundation of Cologne, Germany.

OKIKE

An African Journal of New Writing

NUMBER 34

October 1996

Contents

Note from the Editor		v
Onuora Ossie Enekwe	Interview with Niyi Osundare	1
	Interview with Dan Izevbaye	12
Poetry		
Toyin Adewale-Nduka	Streams	18
	Friday Night Live	19
Amiri Baraka	So the King Sold the Farmer (Angels & Demons at Play) Sun Ra	38
Diiyi Will-West	Phases and Passages	50
Alex Muoka	Nationhood	51
	Night Rain	51
Maik Nwosu	Sonia	52
J.O. Abolade	Argungu Fishing Festival	54
Babatunde Ajayi	Black Beauty	62
Boye Adefila	Sunk	63
	Mongrels at Sea	63
Jimi Soetan	Meditation	64
Ladipo Soetan	I Wear my Africanness Light	75
Tunde Olu-Ojomo	Runaway	94
	Prisoner	94
Pius Adesanmi	Defeat	96
	Chess Game	97
Ademola O. Dasylva	Plant a Tree	99
Onuora Ossie Enekwe	Homeless in the City	117
Stories		
Wale Okediran	Holy Michael	21
Boye Adefila	Confessions of a Broken Bottle	41
Toyin Adewale-Nduka	Crystal Woman	57

Essays

Tony E. Afejuku	Towards A Nigerian Standard Pidgin Literature	65
Charles Bodunde	Poetry in the Newspaper: The Younger Poets in Nigeria and the Search for Artistic Medium	76
Toni Duruaku	The Limits of Artistic Freedom: Esiaba Irobi's <i>Nwokedi</i>	87
Emmanuel Babatunde Omobowale	Urbanizing the Rural Woman, the Farce and the Facts: A Perspective on Tess Onwueme's <i>Tell It to Women</i>	100

Book Reviews

Wumi Raji	A Poet for the City: <i>Fingermarks</i>	118
Amechi Nicholas Akwanya	<i>Nkala's Drums and the Voice of Death</i> and the Power of Events	121
Chika Nwankwo	<i>For Ken, For Nigeria: Poems in Memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa</i>	130
	Beyond the Limits of Experimentation - A Review of Ada Ugah's <i>The Ballads of the Unknown Soldier</i>	140
Notes on the Contributors		150

Art

Victor Ekpuk	vi, 11, 139
Ubong Etuk	95
Marcia Kure	17, 56, 74
Chijioke Onuora	37, 64, 129
Ada Udechukwu	61, 93, 113

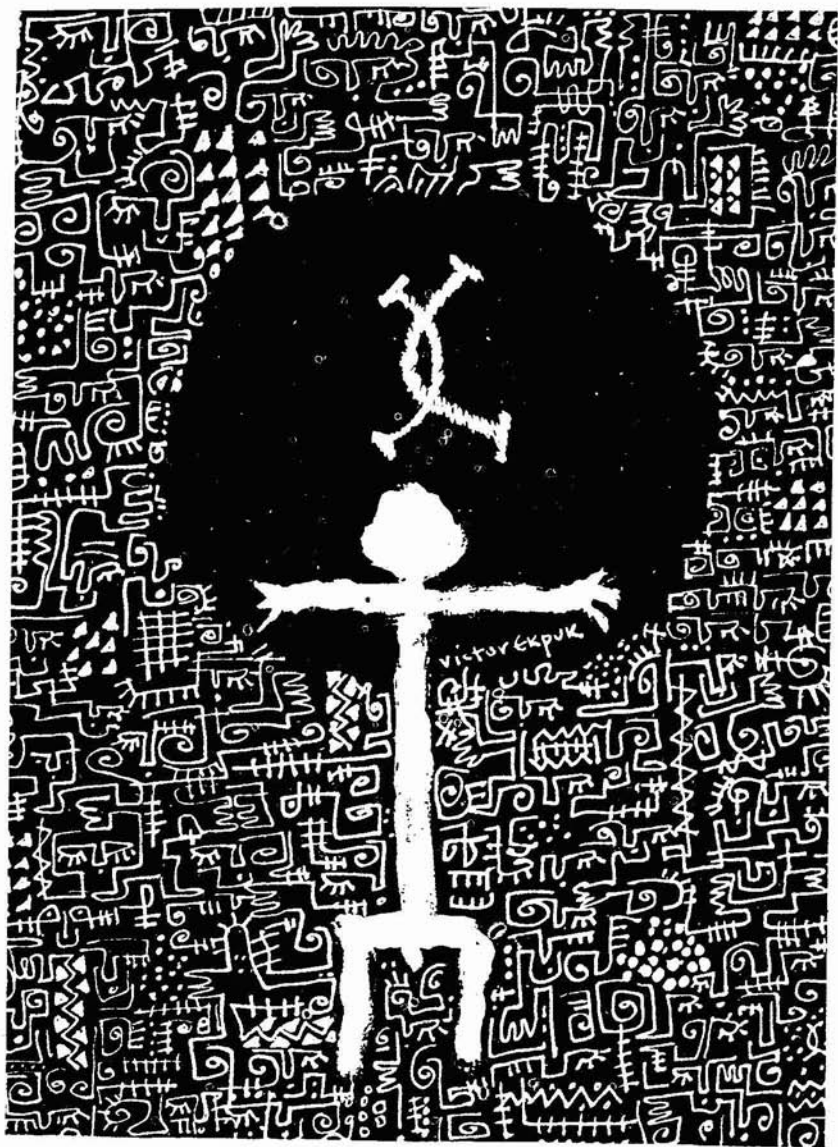
Cover: *Prisoner of Conscience* by Victor Ekpuk

Note from the Editor

As earlier indicated, this issue commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Okike*, perhaps the oldest African literary journal.

The interviews constitute the "Introduction" to this issue of *Okike*. These and the articles on Nigerian literature, with the reviews of works by young Nigerian authors, make this issue a very rich source material for all teachers and students of African literature.

This collection is certainly a befitting memento for the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Okike*.



*ONUORA OSSIE ENEKWE***Interview with Niyi Osundare***

Enekwe: Professor Osundare, you know about the theme of the next issue of *Okike*. It is "Nigerian Literature in the Last Decade, from 1986 to 1996". What are the features of this literature?

Osundare: The past decade is that of paradox. On the one hand, this literature has been faced with obstacles - political, economic, social and cultural - that modern Nigerian literature had not experienced since its beginning. On the positive side, 1986 was auspicious, for that was the year that Wole Soyinka was awarded the NOBEL prize for literature. That was also the year in which one or two other Nigerians won international prizes, a great boost to our literature.

The eighties have to be separated from the nineties. Although there were signs of political and economic degeneration in the eighties, they were a little better. There were still echoes of the prosperity of the seventies. The 80s were particularly good for poetry. This was the time when Obiora Udechukwu, Ossie Enekwe, Tanure Ojaide, Funso Aiyejina, Harry Garuba, and, to a very large extent, Odia Ofeimun, came into prominence. *Broken Pots* came out in the nineteen seventies, but was reissued in the nineteen eighties. So, there was a lot of poetry going on. That was also the period when Nigerian poetry moved decisively from the classroom to the podium, from the closet to the market place. This also coincided with the beginning and blossoming of creative

* This interview took place in Niyi Osundare's office at the University of Ibadan, on 10 October 1996

2

writing courses in our universities and colleges. At the University of Ibadan, Professor Isidore Okpewho and I started a creative writing programme. While he handled prose, I was handling poetry. So many of the poets who emerged in early nineteen nineties were products of these creative writing classes in many of the universities. This was, in fact, a salutary development.

Our own generation never knew any creative writing effort within the classroom in this country. The programmes were mostly academic. So, audience consciousness, a strong communicative impulse, became the hallmark of the literature of this period. Also, this literature coincided with the coming of the second generation of Nigerian writers - Osofisan, Enekwe, Odi Ofeimum, Ojaide, Udechukwu, Femi Fatoba, Harry Garuba; on the prose side - Festus Iyayi, Kole Omotoso; on the drama side - Osofisan, Bode Sowande, and so many others. This was the period when all these genres blossomed.

Also, it was in the eighties that the Association of Nigerian Authors came into being. I remember our inaugural meeting at Nsukka in 1981, and, later on, in 1982 - when Chinua Achebe was still around. In 1983, the ANA prize began at the convention in the University of Benin. These events have had a salutary effect on Nigerian literature.

I think our literature started getting bolder, getting more responsive, more answerable. Moreover, it was a literature that had something to react to, or against. Soon Achebe towered for prose, Soyinka for drama, and inimitable Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark and Gabriel Okara, for poetry. So, there were people that the second generation of Nigerian

writers could react to or against. I remember, for example, that those of our generation whose output really became phenomenal in the eighties came straight on board with tremendous audience consciousness that we were going to discuss public issues, political issues, that we were going to put art in the service of humanity. Thus, echoes of the Nigeria civil war came in *Broken Pots*, *What the Madman Said*, *Come Thunder*, and even in a recent novel, *Heroes*. So, it is a very responsive literature indeed.

By the nineteen-nineties (1990-1991), the problems of anxiety were beginning to set in. The economic experimentation of the Babangida era was beginning to collapse. The naira began to weaken. With it, the national spirit, and, of course, publishing, started taking a nose dive. So many manuscripts that were produced in the last six or seven years have not been published. And those that are coming out have been in the coolers. So, there is a lot of anxiety.

Younger writers are becoming more and more impatient. So many of them that should have been in print are not at the moment.

In a way, it is possible to divide this decade into two. The first five years were ebullient. The last five years have not been so good. The last five years also coincided with the exodus of Nigerian brains from this country. Most of our younger writers are now in exile, and this is a very sad happening for Nigerian literature, because the kind of communality we used to have in the past is no longer there. I would never forget that I met Ngugi wa Thiong'o for the first time in Nsukka 1981 when he and my good friend Dacheche Warioge came all the way from East

Africa as friends of Nigerian literature. It was a great thing indeed.

In the early eighties, many people actually started writing upon seeing Achebe around, upon seeing people around. Where is Achebe today? Where is Soyinka? Where is Obiechina? Where is Abiola Irele? Where is Nkem Nwankwo, one of the most successful writers of comic prose in Nigeria? I read *Danda* in my undergraduate days. I was already a teacher at the University when I read *My Mercedes is Bigger Than Yours*. Where are these people? Our national spirit is suffering. It is like a talk I did last year, when Soyinka's sixtieth birthday was being marked with a book exhibition by the British Council. To begin with, those present at that exhibition were so few, because the British Council was afraid of publicizing the event, in case security people would come and disrupt it. So, there was only a handful of us there. But it went on all the same, and I remembered my talk was titled "Behold the Feast, but Where are the Guests?" because the person we were celebrating was far away. Perhaps, he didn't even know we were celebrating him. This is not the Nigerian literature that I used to know. The Nigerian literature I used to see was the one that would take us to Nsukka, the East, take us to the old Bendel - Benin, take us to the North, take us everywhere. Now, so many of our brains are abroad, singing their songs in wildernesses where there are no ears for their kind of problems. And taking away the aura and inspiration that they should be exuding here in Nigeria and wasting them in foreign lands. For these are very unhappy times in Nigeria. But we are still managing to create all the same. And even

when what we are creating is not being published. I keep telling people: "Where the spirit moves you write". People are writing, people are painting, people are drawing, people are carving all the same, because that is one thing about art. It is internality. You cannot kill it. You drop it within a room; if the door is not open, it will start creating a chink in the wall and escape and fly like an eagle to the sky. There is a way in which you cannot keep down the word, and I think there is a way in which nobody can keep down the spirit of Nigerian literature.

Even in this dictatorial time, even in this fascist time, our work is managing to break through walls and speak to so many. I believe very much that the literature of the country belongs to the future. So, basically, the last decade has been full of ups and downs. This is how I feel.

Enekwe: What do you consider to be the features of the writings within this decade?

Osundare: I started with this earlier on. Relatively, the greater level of audience consciousness. I remembered that very beautiful "Foreword" to *Broken Pots* written by this woman that we were sad to have missed (Mrs Ihekweazu). The very first line I will never forget is: "Ossie Enekwe is singing poems to his guitar". The poet is you. It is good watching you and your guitar together.

The point I am making there is that the poetry of this period has accessibility. There is a way we have taken the poetry from the closet, I may say, to the marketplace. This is part of the audience consciousness I am talking about.

In many of our books, you see that the poems are not just there. There are also indications of musical accompaniment. So, creating drama out of poetry is one of the stylistic peculiarities of this period, and also creating poetry out of drama - for example, the most recent work by Ezenwa Ohaeto, *Voice of the Night Masquerade*. I like this poetry which comes in the form of chant. I believe very much in this kind of poetry too. The turbulent confidence in oral tradition, and also appropriation of the element of orality. The way of literature is looking back at the great resources of our orality, our oral lore, and making use of all these things.

So I see a lot of fidelity to orality in the writing of the past decade and the engagement with the political problems of our time. The generation of the period we are talking about literally had no choice. Our generation - second generation is the angry generation... It was during our time, remember, that Marxism came to the fore in Nigeria letters for the first time. People were talking about Bertolt Brecht, Althusser, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre, and Jameson. These were names that nobody remembered in the early seventies, not to talk of the sixties when they were regarded as indigenous writers. So the second generation also comprises academics who had had second and third degrees, and, therefore, could propound theories. They propound theories about writing before settling down to write. It is also an angry generation because this is the generation which was born before the Nigerian Independence who saw the ebullience of Independence and suffered the calamities of post independence trauma. So there was no way they

could hide away and write about the Danbodes and so on. This also is the generation that had gone through the civil war, a war that should not have taken place. Before the war, there were the political crises. First at the Federal level, next in the Western part of Nigeria, they rigged elections, and then problems in the West, and the first coup, second coup, the pogrom in the North, and the civil war. There is no way we can talk about the literature without engaging the history of contemporary Nigeria. Each time I read *Omabe* or when I read your *Broken Pots* or when I read *What the Madman Said*, and of course, Okigbo, I remember the Nigerian Civil War. So there was a way in which the situation of our period forced us to engage our art in terms of social responsibility.

The Achebes, the Soyinkas, the Elechi Amadis, the Okaras were a little luckier. I think they came at the right time. At least, they enjoyed the serenity of the pre-independence period and immediate independence period. Between 1958 and 1965, there was some kind of serenity in this country and the Soyinkas and Achebes were able to enjoy that. We are the generation of civil war, the generation of crisis. I think this is why this has to reflect stylistically in the kind of work we produce, whether it is drama of Osofisan and Sowande or the prose of Iyayi and Ifeoma Okoye or Kole Omotoso or poetry of so many. This is what I call the oral ethics of work.

I think the work created by the second generation in the eighties led the way in building confidence in the oral tradition. They did not invent it. Of course, after Okigbo nobody could have said that. But there

was a way in which the audience was brought in as an essence in literature. Before theory started talking about readerly competence or readerly authority or whatever, Nigerian literature had discovered, that it could not succeed without the audience because of the essentially oral nature of its work. Because of different things we had read and because of different places in the world we have visited, I think the second generation was very much unafraid in coping with social issues and in discussing the class thesis of Nigeria's problems. It is no wonder that that generation produced Iyayi's *Violence* which remains one of the most eloquent novels in that regard, Ifeoma Okoye's *Men Without Ears* or in fact, *Behind the Clouds* or when talking about the war, *Come Thunder* by Ossie Enekwe, in terms of prose. So, the common man and the common woman that had always been neglected in Nigerian literature came to the fore. When you read the *Interpreters* written by Soyinka, I have asked myself several times, these interpreters are like Samurai, middle class, and aggressively so. Where are the farmers who produced their food. What about the tailors who sewed their clothes? What about those house girls, and so on, who cleaned their houses. You have never heard their voices there. What our generation did was to bring these people right to the front which I think in terms of social answerability is a very important mark of the generation.

The generation after us is impatient and aggressive in a certain kind of way. If the second generation is the angry generation, I think the third generation is a despondent generation. I think they have their reasons for being so despondent, and also, being the

anxious generation. These are people born after independence, may be a year or two before the Nigerian civil war. They experienced the civil war as babies and as people growing. They went through the oil boom as young people.

The Soyinkas and Achebes were lucky because they started operating at the time they did. The second generation was a little lucky because they still had the echoes of the serenity that the first generation experienced. The third generation, which is the new generation, have nothing to go back to. I think what had been handed over to them is like a wilderness, an essentially beaten up country, beaten up mentality, deracinated. These are the CNN generation. They look abroad most of the time. When they look out, what they read is what is happening in New York, what is happening in Paris, happening in Japan, and so on and so forth.

So in a way many of them are impatient with the politicality of our works. Which is ironic. I have had occasion to tell one or two members of the new generation that if any generation should be political at all, it should be their generation. You leave the university, four years later you still haven't got a job, and you say, "Yea, I am a poet, I don't want to write about politics". Then, you are not a poet, you are a slave because you cannot even express what is happening to you.

Art helps us to bring out what is right in there, to project it to the outside, bring out a manifestation, and the truth of reality as we see it or reality as we conceive it. I think that is what the first generation did to a very large extent, but what the second generation did to a very great extent. The third is the

generation that cannot be quoted in just one hole. They are many and there are so many tendencies in their works. The poetry of Olu Oguibe is different from the poetry of Esiaba Irobi, although they are friends. The poetry of Uche Nduka is different from the poetry of Ademola Babajide. In Uche Nduka, there is striving towards a certain kind of purity; a certain distancing from political reality. But as I have said on a number of occasions, the more the poet tends to run away from politics, the more political his poetry becomes.

Ademola Babajide is lyrical and really well engaged. I do not think he has anything out or published yet, but I have read two of his manuscripts. This is a poet who is very very rooted and he seems to me a poet who really knows where his voice is coming from.

I see many influences in the new writing. The craving for Latin American influences and the flight from the essence of the African spirit. This makes me very uncomfortable. At times I see a lot of pretence too. A young man rising to say, "Yea, your generation was a political generation, I tell you, our generation is of pure poetry". I think they are finding to their chagrin that there is nothing called pure art, to say nothing of pure poetry. The fact that many of them are now on forced exile abroad shows that there is something wrong with us and so we have to use our art, everything in us to right the wrongs that political dictators and political jobbers have forced on this potentially great, but unfortunately mismanaged country. So there is a lot happening in Nigerian literature and I believe that the kind of contradictions we are having is okay. For

we can't all sleep with our necks to the same place. I think it is good for us to have points of argument this way.

we: Thank you very much.



Interview with Dan Izevbaye*

Enekwe: Professor Izevbaye, I am very very delighted that you have allowed me to interview you at very short notice.

I will just ask a few questions which will help clarify a decade of Nigerian literature (1986-1996)

As one of the giants of African literary criticism, this is very crucial for us in **Okike**. What do you consider very important in the development of Nigerian literature in the last ten years?

Izevbaye: Well, I suppose what is important is the ways that writers have responded to the changing social scene. Everybody knows that there has been a lot of brain-drain movement out of the country by the so-called older generation. Most of the giants of yesteryears have left - Achebe, Soyinka and others. We have one or two still in the country. J. P. Clark is still around though he is not as active as he used to be. He is probably still writing, but not publishing. So those coming after them have become the main figures. They are almost all in the country. Osundare and Osofisan, former ANA President, the present ANA President. They are still around and still writing. They, at least, keep a sense of tradition and continuity, and they have given ANA, which is a key institution in the continuity and development of Nigerian literature, the paternal grooming and a sense of direction, since they are as committed

* This interview took place in Izevbaye's office in the University of Ibadan on 10 C 1996.

ANA as other figures have been. And under their encouragement and leadership, ANA has continued to sponsor its creative writing competitions. We are lucky that a lot of writing is being done. Unfortunately, we don't have the publishing resources that these writers can take advantage of. So the first two things which have helped the development of literature in this decade are:

1. The continued presence of this so called second generation of authors, and
2. The activity of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA).

The third factor is the emergence of new publishing ventures. We have about three or four of them owned by indigenous sponsors, and locally based. Unfortunately, they don't have the capital base as old publishing houses which used to sponsor African literature had - Heinemann, for example, Longman. Because these new companies don't have the capital base, too much is being expected of the young writers. They are a bit reluctant to put their money in new publications, partly because they don't expect that these publications will make the same kind of impact that sustained, say, the Africa Writers Series. But, at least, publishing initiative is passing from the hands of the old foreign publishing houses to the new indigenous publishing houses and presses. I think these are the main factors.

I am not sure that we have major literary events ; yet. Of course, we have prize winning publications coming out from people like Osofisan and Osundare. The Nairobi based NOMA Award and the British Council and ANA have done a lot to promote new writers.

I think we have not come to a stage where we will consolidate the gains made so far. We may not have the kind of spectacular productions that marked the late fifties and sixties, but some good writing is being done. Some of the younger writers are, of course, a bit impatient. This has been said often and often again at ANA meetings, especially the creative writing competition. A lot of impatience and people don't yet fully accept that creative writing is not just a matter of feeling and inspiration. It is also a matter of sweat. This is what had made both the first and second generation. But I think since so much writing is being done it gives us a matter of hope.

Finally, we must note some kind of negative element in the development of literature: the present political and economic condition of the country which puts a lot of pressure on literature since literature has to respond to its environment.

Enekwe: Thank you very much. Now that you have started talking about the features of the new writing, please can you say a few words about them?

Izevbaye: Well, since we have to begin with tradition and continuity, I think it is important to stress what has been done with the features of the oral tradition, whether people have managed to integrate it with their writing. I am not sure that much has been done in this direction, though I know that people continue to make use of this. But I think that under the radical impact of the seventies, there is less interest in the material of the past, the oral tradition - this is just a general impression - than on the urgency of contemporary life, on city life, on urban conditions, and in particular, on the experience and the condition of women. In fact, a lot of very good

writing has been produced by women, putting across problems of gender in society, and on the experiences of women in recent times. Also, some kind of shift. Although we have had a couple of fairly good novels, it does not seem as if at present the novel has managed to remain the major form. Again this is an impression. There seems to have been a shift towards poetry and short fiction. And when I referred to the contribution of women earlier on, I think of their work in terms of short fiction mainly. So, it does not seem as if we have the long breath required to sustain long fiction. I know we have a few important novels, quite a few. I can mention one of them: Adebayo William's, for example, which is an impressive novel. I don't want to misquote the title. It is more in short stories, and more in the stories and poems about urban living.

Enekwe: Thank you. Prof, I will now leave it to you to make whatever remarks you want about the new Nigerian literature.

Izevbaye: Okay, the situation has not been an auspicious one. I think that would be our starting point. I think we would not be fair if we don't mention some of the tragic experiences that our literary culture has experienced. We refer to the passing away, to put it mildly, of the former president of ANA - Saro Wiwa - and the fact that some of our major authors are now living abroad - Soyinka and Achebe. We cannot turn our back and pretend that these issues are not there. And, inevitably, these unfortunate and tragic events have left some kind of mark on the literary scene. We can call it trauma if we will. That is the first thing. I just mention the level of the individual tragedy that has left an inevitable mark

on the consciousness, on the development of the literary community in the country.

Secondly, at the level of organization, not much progress has been made materially in the literature. I am thinking of ANA, for example. Now ANA ought to have a secretariat, ought to have an archive, ought to be able to sponsor regular creative writing workshops. In spite of the considerable difficulties and setbacks, ANA has had some kind of commendable achievements. It brings out its newspapers. But that paper comes out only for ANA conventions. By now, really, there ought to be more regular production of that newspaper or at least newsletter. I know there are local workshops, but I don't know how much of this is being done. I know ANA, Oyo State, is trying to revive the old Mbari idea, a meeting place for writers and artists. It is a bit late in coming, and I think it is due to the generosity of a man like Demas Nwoko. We ought to have many more of such things all over the country. Not just this once a year meeting and the very occasional creative writing thing.

Now the depletion of the ranks of creative writers as academics means that the very good start made with creative writing courses in our universities has also suffered somewhat. So, these points ought to be made. We do have, of course, the shift towards the media or towards freelancing. We can think of people like Odia Ofeimun whom I referred to earlier on as present president, those who can at least attempt to get things moving, but communication is not so easy in the present conditions. And I thought I would draw attention to this. So, the one hope is that the question of workshops is now an accepted

ANA idea. May be ANA could add to this some kind of consultancy. Consultancy is not really an accurate word; it implies payment, but some kind of information bureau to give advice to young writers, seeking information on workshops and publishing facilities and the reading public.

Enekwe: Thank you.



*TOYIN ADEWALE-NDUKA***Streams****Streams I**

Where dragon flies feed
Where clouds query the sun
Streams splash in your eyes
in the unravelling lines
of convoluted buses
O river brimming with whys
searching the venom of police guns
The yawning graves of our pathways
May corn salute your teeth.

Streams II

The earth is mud under your stilettos
You would release a torrent of jasmine
and pray for open heavens
Your ache is a circumcised penis
ebony streaks of charcoal
champion wrestler of big boys
Your lips are yet dawn
do not suck on blood
Be my gold earrings
let me brush you in warm soap
let me rinse you in spring water.

Streams III

For those who love
even the hibiscus sprouts thorns
in battles older than fire
You carve new tables
coaxing the wayfarers to rice and true dreams
breast the narrow path in male pants
And at the hour when laurels are won
toast your womanhood with tears
in a shower of black soap
Give the wind a wild grip on your hair.

Friday Night Live

Our dreams are hindsights
travelling to the people under the earth
journeying down the cities
filling the centuries with sons
so fat they can't pass the needle's eye

Only the ointment keeps faith
in the hands of a daughter
preparing you for burial
the unleavened bread
calls forth mourners

And prostitutes eating bread
with hallowed hands.
Henna mingles with hungers
at the eleventh hour when
rejected pebbles fall like death
sentences on brown earth

This wine sets my eyes on edge
to stilled waters on barren hillsides
this wine red in the cup
the scarlet thread
the broken donkey
Linen breeches dyed in crimson.

The air is rich in prophecies and revolutions
within the olive tree
a copulation is a flame
burning the bush full of grass windows
the light shimmers upon the waters

Light is a quiver of arrows
Light is an earthquake
Light is a stormy wind
Light is a great cry
electric on bones and skulls

The bones are diving for flesh
The shrouds are dying in the stars
There is light in our loins.

Holy Michael

The hysterical voice shouted; "I must see the doctor immediately. I must see him now". Despite admonitions from the nurses to the effect that the doctor would soon attend to him, the visitor continued shouting in a high-pitched voice. "Tell the doctor it is I, Holy Michael, the anointed one of God. Tell him that they want to kill me, but God is greater than them."

As I was still attending to another patient, I left the nurses to handle the matter as they knew how to. However, the peace of the hospital was suddenly interrupted by a commotion which soon erupted in the waiting room. Before I knew it, the door to the consulting room crashed open and I was face to face with a stocky light-complexioned man in a dirty-brown cassock with an equally dirty and high mitre on his head. Boldly emblazoned on the front of the cassock in red were the drawings of two angry looking lions standing by the side of a cross. Around the man's wide middle was a large yellow sash at the end of which was a small bell. Each time the man made any movement, the little bell jingled.

The man was sweating and rocking his head from side to side as if in a trance. His eyes glinted under the fluorescent light, while a trickle of saliva flowed from the corner of his mouth. The muscles of his neck stood out so much that, for a moment, I thought he was going to burst from the strain. Behind him, looking pensive in their equally dirty cassocks were a crowd of women probably members of the Prophet's flock.

Gripping the Prophet tightly on both arms were two tall men who were the only ones in the Prophet's entourage not wearing cassocks. The Prophet spat a stream of saliva through

the window, cleared his throat, and said, "Doctor, you have to help me. They tried to kill me. They didn't succeed. Now, they say I'm mad. Please, help me. I'm not mad".

"He's talking rubbish doctor. Don't listen to him", one of the guards said.

I asked the Prophet to enter the consulting room, but he remained on the same spot, and, so, I asked the men restraining him to set him free.

"No doctor, we can't let him go. He's very dangerous", one of the guards said.

"Don't listen to him, Doctor Samuel, I'm not dangerous. They are the ones who are wicked. They want to kill me, but I am Holy Michael, the anointed one and nothing can harm me", the Prophet replied.

I didn't know how the fellow knew my name since he didn't look familiar to me. As a psychiatrist, I could see that he was a very sick man who could be very violent. Still, I wanted him left alone for proper assessment. "Let him go", I said once again to the guards.

"No, Doctor Samuel, you don't understand", one of the guards insisted, pointing a finger to his own head and making a circular sign with the finger. He seemed to be telling me that the Prophet was mad. Still I insisted on his being let go, since that was the only way I could conduct a proper medical examination.

Once free, the Prophet now turned to his flock and started praying in a high-pitched voice. Amazingly, the women in the dirty brown cassocks all went down on their knees, supplicating and saying 'amen' to his utterances. I was still thinking of how to handle the situation when the Prophet now turned to one of his guards and demanded why the fellow was not saying 'amen' to his prayers. And then in two quick movements, he slapped the man so hard that the impression of his palm suddenly appeared vividly on the man's face, line for line. Before the

second guard could respond, the Prophet gave him a vicious headbutt which sent the burly fellow sprawling on his back.

Realizing that I had a very sick man on my hand, I decided to try a soft approach. "Now, now, my dear man, you shouldn't ..." I started as I approached the man but was cut short by the Prophet who suddenly cleared his throat and with all his might spat straight into my face. As I groped blindly about for the washbasin, he added, "And if you try to give me an injection, I will cut your throat". He was brandishing a pair of scissors he had just taken from my table. By then, the whole hospital was in disarray as nurses and patients ran for safety. It was only the women from the Prophet's flock that remained on their knees, their lips moving obviously in silent prayer.

Knowing full well that I now had to act fast to prevent the situation from getting worse, I quickly sent for reinforcement from the group of artisans who practised their trade near the clinic. Between the hurriedly assembled crowd of bricklayers, vulcanizers and mechanics who had hearkened to my distress call, we wrestled the cranky and now fearsome Prophet to the floor. There, with my free hand, I injected him with a large dose of a sedative through his shirt sleeve.

Thirty minutes later when a series of snores were bouncing from his direction, I called one of his 'guards' to inquire of the genesis of the Prophet's problem.

Zachaeus, as the guard was called, gave me a gist of the events. As he spoke in low tones by the Prophet's bedside, the 25-year old man cast occasional furtive glances at the sleeping figure as if he expected the Prophet suddenly to wake up and re-enact the vicious headbutt that had only minutes ago, sent him sprawling.

"We are from the same village in Cross-River State. It was actually the Prophet who brought me to Ibadan about two years ago to assist him in his transport business. Since then, we have been living together as brothers".

“You mean that chap was actually a taxi driver?” I asked in surprise.

“Yes he was. It was when he couldn’t raise the 20,000 naira required to overhaul the car that he decided to go into the church business”.

“Church business? What church business?”

“I mean, the business of starting a church and asking people to come for prayers and deliverance from their different problems.”

“How do you make money from that?”

“Ha, doctor”, Zachaeus chuckled as he gleefully rubbed his hands together, “there is a lot of money in the business. For example, during the first week of starting the church, we organised a week-long revival programme during which sermons and prayers were offered daily and...”

At that point, the sleeping figure stirred, and Zachaeus jumped with fright. A plaintive murmur now rose from the man, a murmur saddening and startling as if another human voice different from that of the Prophet was emanating from the sedated figure. Sounds hesitating and vague now flooded the room. From a whimper, the sounds ascended to the level of a growl, before scrapping themselves slowly into words that flowed out gently from the Prophet’s feverish lips in a murmuring stream of soft and monotonous sentences. “Where can one lay the the ... heaviness... of one’s trouble... but in a friend’s heart...?”

The Prophet sighed, paused for a while and then his words flowed on: “I trusted my friends and my brother, but there’s no worse enemy and no better friend than a brother ...” Another sigh, short and faint followed; then a stir, and he was soon snoring.

“Doctor,” Zachaeus asked moments later, “Will he die?”

“I don’t think so. How long has he been sick?”

“A week maybe. I haven’t slept for the past five days since he became very restless and aggressive but...”

The Prophet stirred again and once more, Zachaeus jumped out of fright.

"Are you sure the injection is enough? As I told you before, he can be very dangerous", he added.

"He's Okay; he only turned round. He should be sleeping for the next couple of hours", I said, as Zachaeus continued his story.

"Apart from the money from the collection which normally goes into the Prophet's pocket, more money comes from special prayers, the purchase of holy water, holy candles, holy handkerchiefs, holy rings and so on."

"You mean all the money goes into the Prophet's pocket?"

"Not really. We the assistants also get our salary. In addition, anyone who introduces a business to the church will take a commission".

"How much is the commission?"

"Could be from ten to twenty per cent on the job, depending..."

"How do you get all this holy stuff?" I asked.

"Anything the Prophet blesses becomes holy".

"Even water?"

"Yes doctor, even water. In fact, holy water is the fastest selling item we have, followed by special prayers".

"People have to pay for that too?"

"Yes. You know, there are too many people with problems in Nigeria: from people who are looking for jobs, husbands, wives, children and money to those who want promotion in their places of work or who want to be made ministers and commissioners. Business men and women also come here especially when going for business trips".

"Going for business trips, what kind of business?"

"Em em em, any business..." Zachaeus said hesitantly as he avoided my eyes.

"Any business? Even assassinations, armed robberies and smuggling?"

“Ha doctor, it is difficult to know what business everybody does”.

“You mean if someone, for example, wants to traffick in hard drugs such as cocaine, you will still go ahead and pray for that kind of fellow?”

“Ha doctor, like I said, business is business. We are not the ones smuggling, stealing or carrying cocaine. All we do is pray for them”.

“And of course you will be paid for the prayers?”

“Yes. Business is business”.

“Has it not occurred to you that the money you’re paid is from the proceeds of so called business?”

“What is that to us? Even you as a doctor, do you know the source of the money your patients use to settle their bills?” he asked, a triumphant smirk playing on his lips.

“Em, em, em... I’m saving lives. That is different from actually assisting these criminals as you’re doing”, I replied, my voice rising from anger at the man’s impudence in comparing his business with mine.

“Tell me Zachaeus,” I asked still in anger, “don’t you know that there is a portion in the Bible that prescribes a heavy punishment for those who use God’s name fraudulently?”

Before Zachaeus could answer, we were once again interrupted by the sedated Prophet. Not only did he stir, this time around, he actually got up from the bed. Instantly, Zachaeus fled the room. Michael tried to stand, but the sedation made him unsteady and he swayed dangerously on his feet. I sprang forward but not in time to stop the sick man from falling. Being such a thickset man, he crashed heavily on the floor. Luckily, the infusion drip was still in place. As I slowly injected another dose of sedative into the rubber tubing, I watched as the burly man slowly drifted into sleep again. It was difficult getting him up. However, with the assistance of the nurses, I managed to put him back into bed.

“Where is Zachaeus?” I asked one of the nurses when I couldn’t find the fellow who had been assisting me with the history.

“I don’t know doctor”, the nurse replied. “I’ve searched everywhere for him”, she added.

“But he must be somewhere. He couldn’t have just disappeared into thin air... what about those women who came with him”, I asked.

“They are still there doctor”.

“Have you asked them for Zachaeus’ whereabouts?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, none of them knows where he’s gone to.”

“In that case, call me one of them.”

A fat, forlorn-looking woman in the dirty cassock soon entered the room where Michael was. At the sight of her Prophet on the bed, she knelt by the bedside, made a sign of the cross and said, “Holy Michael, pray for me”. Then, she kissed the man on both cheeks before chanting a sort of canticle quietly.

I allowed her to finish her supplication before asking her name, age and occupation.

“My name is Stella Oyoyo. I don’t know my age but my eldest child is eighteen. I sell children’s clothes at Dugbe market”.

“Where is Zachaeus? He was assisting me here a few minutes ago.”

“Brother Zachaeus has gone. He said it doesn’t seem as if your method is going to help”, she said surprisingly in good English. “Really? Even if he does not approve of my method, couldn’t he tell me before running away and abandoning this fellow”? I asked in a very bitter tone.

“He has not abandoned Holy Michael. None of us in his flock can abandon the holy one. He is our god. Without him we are nothing. He is the source from which the river of our life flows”. As she said this, her eyes glinted and I could see a far

away look in her face as one usually sees in people under the power of hypnotism. Before I could react to what she had just said, she fell on her knees once again and started chanting. Initially it was in low tones. Then it gradually rose into loud sobs and songs as she wrung her hands in supplication while a copious flow of tears soon flooded her face. The sudden commotion brought the nurses running into the room. Still Oyoyo went on singing. She sang of the greatness of Holy Michael and his powers. Her song in the same tune of the Christian song *Amazing Grace* was sad and tugged at the heartstrings.

Holy Michael, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now am safe,
was blind but now I see.

As she sang, she genuflected, wept and rolled on the floor. It was another ten minutes before she finally quietened down. I told the nurses to excuse us. I then asked the question I had wanted to ask since. "When did Michael start behaving abnormally?"

Instead of answering my question, the woman again burst into tears.

"It's all my fault. I caused the whole problem... May the good Lord forgive me..."

"How did you cause the problem?" I asked as calmly as possible.

"I was the one who brought the business that caused the problem."

"What business?"

"A friend of mine had a relative who was said to be possessed by the evil spirit. I took her to the holy one who agreed to exorcise the demon. It was while he was removing the evil spirit that the demon jumped on him."

"How do you know it jumped on him?"

“Ha ha, that’s very easy to know. The possessed man became well while the holy one started behaving just like the sick man was before he was healed.”

“And what do you think caused that?” I asked.

“The devil of course. He’s trying to test our faith but by God’s grace, he won’t succeed”.

“How much did your friend pay for the job?” I asked.

“Twenty-five thousand naira.”

“Twenty-five thousand? thats a lot of money.” I exclaimed. “That’s more than the twenty thousand I understand the Prophet needed for the repair of his taxi cab.” As I said this, the woman suddenly looked startled.

“Who told you that?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about that... what was your own commission out of the money?”

“Em... em... commission? what commission?”

“Oh come on Madam Oyoyo, the Prophet certainly pays commissions for such jobs.”

The woman was now more startled than before.

“Who has been telling you all these things? What else did they tell you?” she asked fearfully.

An idea suddenly came to my mind, an idea which I felt would unravel the mystery behind the whole drama. For it suddenly seemed to me that the genesis of the whole problem had nothing to do with psychiatry. It was a strong gut feeling which something in the manner of the woman told me could never be wrong. She must have felt the same because in that short instance when I tried to sort out my thoughts, she got more rattled. In desperation, she went on her knees and faced me.

“Please doctor, let me know what else you know about the holy one. As I said before, he is my saviour. Without him I’m nothing and only to think that despite what he did for me I am the cause of his problems...” she said as she again broke into loud sobs.

"Who poisoned him?" I suddenly asked.

A shriek, vibrating and shrilling suddenly came from the woman, and pierced like a sharp dart the quietness of the hospital room. The noise was so loud that it stirred the prophet from his sleep. He mumbled.

"Take away your poison. Don't kill me".

"Poison?" the now bewildered woman again shrieked.

"What are you talking about doctor... how can you ever think of such a terrible thing?"

Quickly I repeated the question; "Who poisoned the prophet?"

"They all did ... all of them ..." came the reply not from Oyoyo but from the drowsy figure on the bed.

The woman was by now looking ghastly and darted fearful looks from the Prophet to the doctor and back again. "No doctor... don't listen to him. It's ... it's ... not true. Nobody tried to poison him."

"It is true!" came the assertive reply from the prophet. "The poison was put in my food... by... by... the woman..."

Madam Oyoyo now jumped up. There was a wild and murderous look on her face as she stared at the figure on the bed.

"He's talking nonsense. He's out of his mind... How could he talk such rubbish?"

Instead of replying, the prophet coughed twice. He then spat a copious stream of saliva on the floor. Then slowly and steadily, he got up into a sitting position.

"Doctor, I want to say something very important. Could this woman excuse us before I talk?"

"No, I'm not going anywhere. You better say all you want to say right here in my presence", Oyoyo said.

"If I may say, madam, that's a rather rude way of talking to someone you described as your saviour"

“He’s my saviour quite all right, but he’s presently not in control of himself, and I don’t want him to say things that may mislead people”.

The Prophet now yawned and scratched his head.

“Please woman excuse us. What I’m about to say is the truth and I am fully in control of myself”.

“No I will not go. You must talk in my presence” the woman added.

That was when I lost my cool. “You have to go, madam. I not only demand it, I hereby order that you leave this room this very minute so I can talk to my patient in peace”.

Still she did not move.

“Madam, I guess you want me to use force on you”.

“Depart Oyoyo. Do as the doctor says. Trouble loses its teeth when people follow the ways of wisdom. The doctor is already angry with you. Do not travel the same path with him”, the Prophet said.

It was only then that the woman hesitantly left the room. The Prophet once again yawned as his eyes remained dreary, obviously from the effect of the sedation, which, surprisingly, could not put the man to sleep, even at such a massive dose.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sleep? I could always come back to listen to your story,” I said.

“I don’t feel like sleeping. In fact, I have been awake a long time. I was only waiting to regain my strength, but when I heard how that ungrateful woman was lying, I decided to speak.” He coughed again, but this time, he didn’t spit on the floor. He did it inside a nearby trash can. “As I told you earlier on doctor, there is no worse enemy and no better friend than a relative. It is in the perfect knowledge that usually exists between relatives that comes the strength for good or evil. I am suffering today because I trusted my relatives and friends.. but where else could one lay the heaviness of one’s troubles but in a friend’s heart?” As he said this, a breeze came into the room in fitful puffs that blew the flowery curtains into a bellow of

sail. The breeze also lifted up the dirty cassock that the Prophet wore revealing parts of his emaciated body.

The Prophet was quiet for some time as he collected his thoughts together before speaking, "When I decided to leave my village for Ibadan, I brought along that ungrateful boy, Zachaeus. And when I went into the church business, I also took him along. I taught him all the tricks of the business and he later became my right-hand man". As he spoke, he was very calm, even too calm for someone who only a few hours ago appeared very agitated. "When the money started coming in, Zachaeus and that Oyoyo woman... in fact, that Oyoyo woman is even worse than Zachaeus ... This is the woman who had been so ill that the verdict at five different hospitals was that she couldn't survive. I was the one who saved her life. For over two months, none of her relatives showed up and I had to feed and clothe her. It was during her sickness that her husband abandoned her. The moment she recovered, she and Zachaeus started shacking up together. Initially, I thought it was just pure Christian love but when it became too embarrassing for the church, I had to warn them. That was when they promised to get married, but they never did. All the same, they were still in charge of the church accounts. Unknown to me, they had been stealing a lot of money. Each time I challenged them, they would deny it until one day that Oyoyo woman brought in somebody for deliverance. Since the money involved was huge..."

"How much was it?" I asked.

"Twenty-five thousand Naira"

"How much was the lady's commission?" I asked.

"Commission? I will come to that doctor. You seem to know a lot already and I will tell you everything", the Prophet said as he once again spat into the little dustbin next to his bed. "Now where was I...?"

"You were going to tell me what you did with the money from the deliverance," I reminded him.

“Yes... instead of paying the money into the church account, I only gave the woman her commission and I kept the remaining money in a secret place in my room. Unknown to me, the two of them had plans for the money. From the rumours that came to me, they had wanted to use the money to pay for a parcel of land where they planned to start their own church. So they kept asking me for the money, saying they needed to buy new furniture for the church, but I refused to release the money. I told them that I wanted to pray over the money for at least two months before it could be dropped in the bank. A week later, I had a vision where I was warned to be careful of being poisoned. Since Oyoyo was the one who normally prepared my food, I called her and told her about the vision and...”

“What about your wife?”

“She died five years ago and I don’t intend to get married again... Please doctor let me finish what I’m saying before you interrupt me. I always find it difficult remembering where I was. Yes where was I? Okay yes, I warned Oyoyo against being used by the devil and she denied the allegation. The very next day, after a meal of fufu which she prepared for me, I started feeling funny in the head. The next thing I knew was that Zachaeus called in one nurse whom I suspected was part of the plot to get the money from me. The nurse gave me an injection and my condition got worse. Before I knew it I had been dragged here with a very wicked allegation that I’m crazy. Doctor, you have to help me. I am not crazy; no demon jumped on me from anywhere. This is not my first time of removing demons from the possessed. What is happening is a clear case of attempted murder. Zachaeus and that Oyoyo girl want to steal the church money by first getting rid of me. You’ve got to help me doctor. My trouble is higher than my stomach; fear covers me like a blanket and I do not know what to do. Even the...”

The conversation was suddenly interrupted as Zachaeus and Oyoyo entered the room in the company of one elderly man and another lady in the same garment as the others. At their sight, the prophet's face suddenly changed and I saw a strange face, an unknown face grimacing with fury and despair.

'No... no... no don't kill me. Just go away. Leave me alone...', the Prophet muttered as his lips moved rapidly and hollow moaning sounds filled the room like a far-off murmur of a rising wind. On an impulse, I wanted to send out these people. However, when I saw the effect of their arrival on the prophet, I changed my mind.

'That's all right prophet. No one can harm you here.' In spite of my admonitions, the man continued to shake his head, and to roll his eyes which appeared very terrified, as though he had been looking at some unspeakable horrors. Suddenly, with an incredibly strong and heartbreaking voice, he sobbed out; "These are the ones who tried to kill me. They've come back to finish the job and..." The remaining words dried up as if something had choked him and couldn't allow him to finish.

That was when Zachaeus spoke. "Doctor, we have come to take him home and..."

"No. I am not going anywhere", the Prophet replied, gripping the railings of his bed so tightly that the veins of his hands stood up very vividly. Doctor, please save me. Don't let them take me away. They've succeeded in destroying everything in me, but, please, don't let them take my life", he said in a husky voice and tears, soft and copious flowed down his face. He must have strained himself to say all he did for he was now panting like a dog after a run in the sun.

"Doctor, don't you believe anything he says. He's out of his mind", the elderly man said.

"Yes doctor," Zachaeus added, "he's obviously crazy. How can he say we want to kill him?"

"It is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard in my life." Oyoyo added.

"After all, he's not the only one I cook for, neither is he the only Prophet who does deliverance..."

As the exchange continued, I slipped a note to my secretary to phone my friend, Inspector Danladi, the Divisional Crime Officer in charge of our locality. Meanwhile, Michael was trying to say something as his moustache and beard stirred. His words, incomprehensible, but ominous, came out in short spasmodic efforts as he mumbled behind his tangled bushy beard. I now saw before me, a strange face, a grimacing mask of despair and fury. His lips kept moving rapidly but no meaningful sound could be heard. What came out were moaning whistling sounds, vague sounds of menace, complaints and threats. Suddenly, the prophet shook his head and rolled his eyes. His head and limbs now started uncoordinated, jerky movements while the whole body suddenly went into convulsive turns. So severe was the seizure that the whole bed shook violently.

At this, Oyoyo gave a short, raucous cry as she raised her two hands upwards and danced round the room shouting "He's in a trance; he's in a trance, alleluya; he's in a trance". Then she made to kneel down but was quickly yanked up by the elderly man.

"How dare you?" he screamed. "You don't even have any shame. Somebody just accused you of trying to kill him; you yourself agreed that he is out of his mind and the next thing you do is to put down your head for his so called blessings?"

"But... but... he is my... my... saviour... my Lord... and redeemer... from whom all... my... my... blessings come," Oyoyo said as she continued dancing round the room and drooling at the sight of the now gibberish and convulsing Prophet.

"Is he the only one who can go into trance?" Zachaeus said looking at Oyoyo with disdain. "The problem with you is your lack of faith. You are utterly too lazy to think for yourself".

"Let me be lazy. Michael is my redeemer. All these days you have been boasting that you can see into the future, yet you have seen nothing. The only visions you see are your so called adoring young girls whom you keep seeing in your dreams. Not one deliverance, not one trance. Even the church you promised to start has not materialised all these days, yet you dare call me lazy. Those who are lazy know themselves!"

"Trance! my God, what is an ordinary trance?" Zachaeus shouted. "I go into trance everyday only I don't advertise it like some cheap prophets".

"Trance my foot!" Oyoyo said as she burst into laughter. "When did going into trance become ten for one kobo?"

So enraged was Zachaeus by the woman's utterance that he quickly called the elderly man. "Look, baba, get on your knees and let's pray. I want to show this ungrateful woman that I too have some powers." And so Zachaeus and the elderly man both went on their knees and before long, the room became a bedlam of babble and gibberish sounds as Michael's feverish convulsive mutterings competed with the shrill voice of Zachaeus' incantational prayers. While Michael shook and muttered incoherently on the bed, Zachaeus and the elderly man who had been introduced as the *Baba Ijo* of the church could be seen wriggling on the floor. Zachaeus, in addition, was snapping his fingers at imaginary enemies, and at the same time, shouting on them to leave the room: "... in the name of Jah, get out of this place... get out of this place... get out... now... now..." While Zachaeus' voice continued to rise in volume, Michael gradually calmed down. Minutes later, the only sounds in the room were coming from Zachaeus and the old man. And as Michael, Oyoyo and I watched, Zachaeus started trembling all over. He rolled his eyes while his head and limbs now went into uncoordinated jerky movements.

"He's in a trance - Hallelujah, he is in a trance", Oyoyo suddenly said, as she let out a loud cry. She quickly knelt down and genuflected. "Glory be to God ... after all these years,

Zachaeus has finally gone into a trance!" she added. She was still talking when the nurse came to announce the arrival of the police.

"Let them in," I said.

As Inspector Danladi and his team entered the room, he took a look at Zachaeus and Oyoyo and he grimaced. "Ha ha, it is Cosmas and his wife again"

"You know them" I asked.

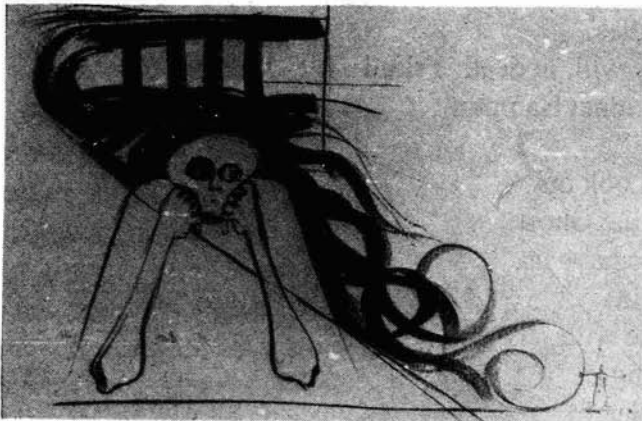
"Oh yes, I do. They are our regular customers".

As Zachaeus heard the Inspector's voice, he quickly got up from his kneeling position, rubbed his face and gaped at the policemen. Oyoyo also got up looking startled.

"But I thought you were in a trance?" I asked Zachaeus.

"What kind of trance?" the Inspector asked. "He wasn't in any trance. It's all a trick. Both of them have been arrested several times in the past for different crimes, ranging from extortion to impersonation. The last time, they were in for attempted murder by poisoning. Luckily for them, the evidence was not strong enough to nail them," Danladi said.

And as Oyoyo and Zachaeus continued to stare at the policemen, Inspector Danladi turned to his colleagues. "Please get them into the car, they surely have some explanation to make".



So the King Sold the Farmer
(Angels & Demons At Play)
Sun Ra

The Ghost

Ghost

Watch out

for the Ghost

Ghost get you

Ghost

Watch out

for the Ghost

In bitter darkness screams : arpness as smells
 & Seas black voice
 Wails
 in the death filled
 darkness

Their bodies disease beneath intoxicated floors
 A seas shudder afraid its turned to Blood

The bodies

they will, in death's skull

to Lionel Hampton

Ghost Look out
 for the Ghost

Ghost is have us

chains

is be with

dying

is caught

Sea mad, maniac
drunken
Killing sea

Ghooooooooost
Ghooooooooost

The chains
& dark
dark &
dark, if there was "light"
it meant
Ghooost

Rotting family we
ghost ate
three

A people flattened chained
bathed & degraded
in their own hysterical waste

below
beneath
under neath
deep down
up under
grave cave pit
lower & deeper
weeping miles below
skyscraper gutters

Blue blood hole into which blueness
is the terror, massacre, torture
& original western
holocaust

Slavery
We were Slaves
Slaves
Slaves

Slaves

-

Slaves

-

Slaves

-

We were
Slaves

-

Slaves

-

They threw
our lives
a way

Beneath the voilent philosophy
of primitive
cannibals

Primitive
Violent
Steam driven
Cannibals.

Confessions of a Broken Bottle

It was shivering cold in the open air morgue. Marble and mud structures occupied the mysterious silence of the graveyard; a subtle parody of the much bandied dictum that death was the ultimate denominator of all men, noble and common.

The rain had just stopped.

But its elemental relative continued to chill the atmosphere, making Lydia and the other mourners shiver through-out the long litany of the Bishop. Lydia clutched her frail torso on both sides with her arms, her jaws in a rhythmic battle with a bubble gum. Her unkempt hair fell carelessly over two looped shoulder bones, the latter trapped in the fragile embrace of shoulder pads. Her toes stood in the groove of her pointed shoes, stuck in the graveyard mud.

In all, about two hundred people had defied the rain - that is after the initial torrential downpour - to grace this august departure of his grace. As the elderly bishop continued to eulogise the departed soul, Lydia glanced at her watch, then at the slowly drifting clouds. Urgent thoughts crowded the screen of her mind, like impatient beggars at the mouth of a Friday mosque. She viewed each supplication patiently and concluded that there was so much to do. But first she had to take her medication.

From the corner of her eyes, she saw a figure of a man amongst the wind chilled crowd pointing towards her direction.

Uneasily, she kept her calm. But when the man on her right shifted a few inches away from her, and yet another behind her suddenly traded his seemingly comfy position for a muddy spot some distance away from her, she knew the elderly bishop would have to conclude his citations and eulogies without her presence. Excusing her way past the gathering of bodies

dutifully shrouded in a gloomy apparel to highlight the mood of the occasion, Lydia soon stepped into the world of the living, and then into a smoky, junkety bus en-route her home, not too far from the Atan Cemetery.

Just as she boarded the bus, the clouds began to puke relentlessly, pouring their airborne entrails onto everyman's roof; no doubt another divine leveller of the meek and mighty. As the bus launched wildy unto the main road, away from the bus-stop towards the Yaba-Jibowu round-about, Lydia looked forward to the cosy comfort of her one-room apartment. She couldn't wait to get home. She'd thought the graveyard service would be short, from where she'd planned to go for at least one shot of her medication before her planned visit to the sanitorium.

Her mind wandered.

The rain whipped the bare back of the yellow Molue-bus mercilessly. Her co-occupants seemed to be either sleeping or simply benumbed by the strenuous demands of city life. Only the torso-naked conductor and the hell-bent driver appeared to have any life in them.

She was hungry. Hungry for her medication.

Her mind wandered still.

Her eyes viewed the heads that sat in a seeming conspiracy of solitude, on the necks in the commercial bus. For a brief moment, the sea of heads took the shape of large hairy question marks before her vision, each question mark clearly etched from their foreheads to the crook of their skulls, above the nape of their necks. Indeed, she reflected, the whole of man's life from alpha to omega resembled one huge question mark, a continuous search for solutions to the ever puzzling riddle of man-the-beast and of man-the-god; of birth, death and salvation. It was this search for answers that had led Lydia's friend - Ruth, to desperation and drugs, then to the Church, and back again to drugs and despair, and so on the cycle went until...

More out of human curiosity than friendly loyalty, Lydia once followed her friend Ruth to the Church. It was...

"Owo mi da?" The voice of the half-naked conductor shook Lydia back to reality. Without thinking, she dipped her right hand into her bossom bank and withdrew a ten naira note. The conductor, wet all over from standing at the doorless entrance of the Molue-bus, suddenly took a second look at her, scrutinising the pale, shivering, weather-beaten creature before him. He glanced pitifully at the black needle spots on her arms and in a show of rare empathy, passed on to his next victim without taking her money.

It was a bright Sunday morning, as the saying goes, and the sun of God shone on all things and beings that thrived and strove beneath its ubiquitous rays. But more especially, as if by some special arrangement, the sun poured its luminous energy on the pinnacle of a certain Church tower in the heart of Lagos, apparently ridding the holy structure of any stray ray of darkness. Inside this ecumenical edifice, a young, human beacon of hope had not so long ago also striven to throw light on seemingly hopeless situations.

Reverend Father Thomas.

Although quite young for his noble duties, Reverend Father Thomas was not exactly a stranger to the confessional. Since he left theological school four years ago, he had worked at several parishes before the Bishop in charge of his diocese transferred him to head this particular parish. The thinking of his superior was that in this age of rapidly changing values, attitudes and norms, the likes of Father Thomas could better cope with certain crop of devotees and converts.

Father Thomas had since his posting a year ago lived up to the Bishop's expectations ministering to the diverse crop of young men and women that formed the majority in his parish. He listened to hundreds of people throw-up their darkest deeds, but somehow he'd always managed to distance himself from the sinner. He had long learnt the art of detachment. But since

this strange, lonely lady walked into the Church a few months ago, he doubted if he had ever counselled such a self-destructive and pitiable case. Ruth would sit across the confessional table behind the thin veil of cloth that separated her from this divine intercessor, and Father Thomas would doubt his ability to empathise from a detached distance. He deeply felt the lacerations that lined the plot of the young woman's life...

Ruth was once a twenty-three year old graduate of music from the Obafemi Awolowo University. Before then she was a teenage orphan who had grown up under the heavy yoke of an unkind auntie. During her N.Y.S.C. year at the Imo State Broadcasting Corporation she'd met a dramatist with whom she'd struck up a blissful affair. Having no one in particular to return to after her N.Y.S.C. sentence she eagerly accepted the dashing dramatist's proposal of marriage. With her background in music, and his theatrical expertise they composed harmonious visions of a blissful future. But an ugly cacophony tuned in, when, without due notice, the Eternal Director recalled her fiance backstage, on the eve of their registry marriage.

Since then her life had become a drift in the wind. She returned with dashed hopes to the hostile weather of Lagos life.

Then she took up another life. Rather than seek gainful employment, she decided to invest her degree quietly, far from the unkind hands of fate. As such, Ruth buried her talent in the caves of remote cafes and nite-clubs. Before long she had cultivated other talents in order to pay her dues to the goddess of the flesh.

She hawked her body by day and sold her voice by night. She made good money. She made good friends. Some even proposed to her, strange as it might sound. But she had grown to cherish the drifting life, cork-sure nothing, not anyone could rekindle the faggots of fire she'd burnt out in her last affair.

And so Ruth sang from Club to Club, living a night at a time, picking one habit after another, till she met a certain special friend, a friend who, all of a sudden, promised instant bliss and succour from her torturing lifestyle. Their lovelife was even more fulfilling and, yes, very versatile. She could have him anytime of the day, occasionally she would even romance her dear friend right on stage, just like the revered fetish of Afro-beat. She could have him straight and dry or laced with other delightful but less potent company. Her friend became her all and all, and at a point he even became a god to her. And whenever she was down and sad, she would quickly wrap up a point to puff his ethereal presence or just to sniff a whiff of his salvation.

Then one day, all of a sudden, she lost her voice. At first she'd thought it was a mere sore throat; not anything a few antibiotics and vitamin-C could not solve. But she discovered otherwise. Her god had seized her heaven-brought talent.

She panicked.

Her voice was her only real survival kit. She was now thirty-two. She severed all communication lines with her family, or better put, the latter had cut her from their family line. Since she came to Lagos, after the disappointment in Imo State, she had taken her tough life into her determined hands, making her youthful buxom beauty and beautiful voice her unique selling points. Now both points seemed to score only in the past tense.

And so it was, that after two months of regular confession and counselling sessions, Reverend Father Thomas had pieced together the scenarios of Ruth's fragmented life. Primarily, Ruth felt guilty about losing her voice. She believed it was God's punitive censure against her for abandoning the Church years ago, after her parents' departure from the great stage. This was not strange. But after Father Thomas discovered the truth of her devotion to the lesser gods of the flesh and of the blue

heavens, he prescribed a legion of penances. For Ruth, spiritual penance was welcome, and she served all faithfully, except one.

She refused to stop worshipping one of the lesser gods. It was as if a spell had been cast indelibly on the canvas of her soul. As if once snuffed, forever smitten. But she tried. She tried hard. But the harder she tried to divorce her new friend, the more she desired him. She would come out of the peaceful sanctuary of the Church and amorous fangs of desire would be waiting for her. Her mind would go weak at the knees and straight to the needle she would go.

And on and on she went in circles, trying and failing.

"Father, it's me your daughter."

"Peace be unto you."

"I live in sin father. Save me."

"It is human to sin my daughter. Pray earnestly, ceaselessly that the saints guide thy feet from the door of sin."

"Father I couldn't do it. I took a little again today... and it felt so goo..."

"Hold your peace! May God forgive you. You must try harder. Turn from these evil ways. Complete your penance. Sacrifice your evil desires for the blessings of the holy mother."

That had been the last time she'd come to confession. For weeks she'd not even come to Church. Father Thomas had been duly worried by her absence. He hoped she hadn't done anything drastic. He'd heard cases, way back in the seminary, of confused penitents taking their lives. He prayed that his parish would not witness a sudden death of a member.

Meanwhile, Ruth had resumed her regular uninterrupted worship of her lesser gods; little atomised grains of passion, white demons that temporarily snuffed her sorrows into the nostrils of forgetfulness. In the single room she shared with her friend and professional colleague, Lydia, on the Ayilara end of Ojuelegba, the two friends would compare the infinitesimal but lofty salvation of the white powder with the apparently intangible promisory heaven of the Christian faith. Each time

Ruth seemed to be making a headway at warding off her periodic dosage, temptation would appear in the embodied form of Lydia, wielding a blazing joy-stick lavishly laced with the real thing.

And so the two heavens had pitched their tents in Ruth's perplexed mind. All night, she would earn her living at some hotel or another, tactfully suppressing the strong urge to sing again. All day, she would torment herself with the harsh words of Father Thomas. Throughout the weeks of her absence from the Church, the two winds within her would blow her hither and thither. She was caught in the teeth of jagged waves, each determined to sweep her to the bank of painful discovery.

Soon she began to host sleeplessness. Then followed waking nightmares in which she envisioned herself as the goddess of retribution, dishing out lake-fire punishment to speechless penitents.

"You there. You have wasted three decades of your life. I gave you a voice like velvet. But you cast your rhythmic spell in dark places... go to the left. Quick, a million years of acidious fire... Next!"

At times she saw herself as a forest deity, felling trees of handsome young priests in the wild of life. But each time she apprehended this particular tree, a voice would chant from the lips of heaven:

"That, is my chosen one... spare him, for he knows not what to answer."

The nightmares got worse as the days passed. Lydia, in a bid to get her friend back to her former self, had suggested that Ruth should pay a visit to her Father Confessor. Lydia on her part, found no conflict in bowing to the wishes of the two heavens, but she was eager to help her friend to untangle the roots of her dilemma. A few months earlier when Ruth had muted the idea of going to Church, Lydia had agreed, but had objected to one in which she had to confess to the heavenly Father through an earthly priest. Thus she occasionally attended

a new wave pentecostal Church very far from their Ojuelegba residence. When salvation from the Church was found wanting, she would intensify her visits to the hard-drug dispensary.

Having worried endlessly about the fate of this particular supplicant, Ruth, Father Thomas had turned over the matter to his Father in heaven, and he was not surprised that throughout the confessional period after today's Sunday afternoon mass (which he instituted contrary to regular practice), he did not hear the familiar voice of Ruth. As he strolled out onto the open space beyond the west door of the Church, blessing the departing worshippers and exchanging pleasantries with Church officials, one familiar sight greeted his vision. The heavenly authorities had played back the ball of destiny into his court! Ruth and her friend, dressed somewhat in very casual clothes were walking towards his direction. Although lots of people crowded around him, his attention flowed compassionately towards Ruth in the distance. It was as if months of mind-to-mind intercessions and weeks of absence had established an invisible cord that now struck a rhythm of attraction.

"Father, bless our child." A couple interrupted his thoughts, as they thrust their bundle of joy in his hands. Father Thomas, like his ancient predecessor was not one to turn away little angels, and so he took the little baby in his strong, priestly arms, bestowing a wide, sincere smile onto the new soul. He knew the couple. The woman had delivered a month earlier. The little stranger smiled back at the Reverend Father, kicking his tiny little feet mischievously, as if to say "By the time I'm old enough to confess, you'll be grey and gone".

It was then that it happened.

Right there in the forefront of the cathedral, Father Thomas suddenly felt a sharp object collide with his left temple, as fragments of glass shattered his eyes. He fell to the ground, his hands holding tight to the baby in his hands, in a fatherly

instinct. Commotion took the air. Voices, running feet, grappling hands, orders, yells.

Amidst the stars that contended for his fast receding attention, he caught a glimpse of his attacker pinned to the ground by four men, thrashing violently, and wielding a broken bottle with a jagged, bloodied end. Before oblivion finally overtook his vision, he thought he saw tears in his assailant's eyes. Ruth!

Father Thomas had watched the entire burial ceremony with inhuman glee. From his etheric watchtower, he amused himself with the solemn theatrics by one Bishop from his late diocese. Father Thomas himself had presided over such ceremonies in the past and recited the same predictable sermon. If only they knew the true colour of heaven, he pondered, they wouldn't mourn for him so much. He felt so free and happy; so joyous and ecstatic. He had watched as strong arms lowered his coffin into the mysterious earth. Then he had seen a man, one of the Church officials, pointing at a certain lady; then the lady had begun to slither out of the gathering. At once he recognised her and wondered where her friend, his ironic assailant was. Ruth's action still puzzled him, and he made a mental note to ask the invisible helpers who waited patiently, a few clouds above him, in a golden-yellow chariot of fire. Perhaps they could throw more light on the puzzles below. He wondered what heaven really looked like.

He looked forward to the great journey. He looked forward to the end of his burial ceremony.

Lydia filled the forms at the main hall of the sick home, stating her relationship to the patient. Everybody in the hospital looked unwell, including the nurses and junior workers.

An hour and a soaked handkerchief later, Lydia stepped out into the world of the sane, wondering aloud as she asked no one in particular, "What is the colour of heaven?"

*DIYI WILL-WEST***Phases and Passages**

Sometimes
I'm not sure
I don't know
What to make of this
Don't know
What life's passages
Will bring me to.

I'm excited
About all of this
But the pains
Of yesterday
Though now
Flung through the window
I sometimes remember
Then,
I'm not sure
Then,
I don't know
What to make of this...
I fervently hope
That life's phases and passages
Will bring me pure gold.

Nationhood

Born out of oppression
and frustration
weaned on depression
and destitution
nurtured in tyranny
and anarchy

I
came to manhood
in strife
and civil unrest
peaked in war and
mutiny
and went to rest
in
revolution

Night Rain

There's a quiet dignity
that cloaks the night rain
as it falls gently
in silver shimmers
the soft whisper
like wind thrashed palms
caressing my soul
willed to deep slumber
Till - I'm drawn in
by the mesmeric rumble
of distant tunder

*MAIK NWOSU***Sonia**

in the heavens of your supersonic jet
ecstasies peaked on fluttering wings
and the flight hostesses
became cherubims of second platters
but finally
twenty thousand streets under the sky
I could read on the walls
of your fabled catenas
the graffiti of your decadence
- the shivering dead in painted doorways
chain-gangs of dinner jackets
stalking antiseptic shadows
noise-pointers to meridians of flesh

*"welcome to london
the centre of the world"*

between soho and the west end
I am a collarless african
about to be fleeced
enticed both with neoning moans
and whispers of frankincense
into the ramp
of english dukes and french princesses
and heisted for pounds sterling
- the currency of futures-traders
only fifteen cowries sums up your heaven

*"why you want to go to soho, brother?"
soho is baaad"*

yet what did we not caress, sonia
before and beyond the policing spirits

of the internet?
hat god is an african jew
ynched daily in the streets of lagos
like a chicken-thief
out yet and ever to resurrect
hat love is in the groins
sex in voodoo mantras
and what then would the roman mass be
without its grecian communion?
or those who will haggle at peep-dens
with the queen of nights
and the king of yokes
anticipations in satin panties
condolences in heaving motorcades
resurrections in phantom cocoons
omens both to peaking tides
and reef-builders
lamed by a hundred hungry species
of ecstasy.

J. O. ABOLADE

Argungu Fishing Festival

In Argungu only the initiated
and the trained dare wade
in the hallowed stream
during the annual fishing cheer.

Simple gear adroitly steered
By men who match
ingenuity with ancient skills:
bodies gliding in the tranquil river,
perforated calabashes with hinged lips bobbing
and instinctively dipped in studied spots.

Every catch is a tribute to ardour,
agility and art.
But above all, the prize catch
which electrifies the spectators' stands,
infuses with joy and common pride
chiefs, guests, commoners and all,
is a salute to a re-enactment
of the display of collective pluck.

The festival over,
the fish will not know
of any row from poaching hands
for another year.
Not so in the nation proper -
our only native sphere -
where many are racked by
a fevered round of scrawny existence;
Yet some, without any demur,

and expecting neither a whine nor whimper,
have diverted our common need
to water their cavernous greed.
And from the little that's left
they fish and fish in and out of season,
observing neither taboo nor rule
until the river's become a brook
and we've had to change from drawing nets
to hooks, and from hooks to catching
toads with calloused hands.

Cyclic Growth

Few joys equal those I draw
from taking down from my childhood shelf
an unspoilt dainty album and feeding on
pictures; then savouring
recollection as it wafts along my garden and bower.
And no memory flaps with greater thrill
than that of me receiving help from Mother
with the scrubbing of recessed back
as I bathed out of doors.
The confidences shared turned every soap bubble,
every sponge stroke into the practised finish
of a potter's art,
a hot balm into every cold skin pore.

Then there were the nail-cutting moments
when every touch of Mother's razor blade
was a rare musical note etched on a platinum score sheet
and silences became as instructive as
the diamond words deposited in my mental chest.

Mother has long since gone and dunes
stand over the footmarks we together made.
And as I watch my own towelled kids romp
in and out of terrazoed bathrooms,
I never tire to wonder
whether they can enter
under the skin of the shoeless child
in a dense village served by a single stream.
I muse on the cyclic growth
of hairs and nails,
of the wisdom of females in nurturing
and honouring the plenitude of both
and the dimness of men in persistently
clipping the replenishment that adorns
and anchors us all to eternal roots.



Crystal Woman

What else would describe that thundering silence? Like the still of an industrial generator quietening without warning...

"I don't believe in Chemistry," she replied. Her voice was the tinkling brooks of harmattan streams. The debate had livened up. The boy was investing brain and brawn, telling the crowd why fathers were more important than mothers at the top speed of an Orient express...

"Ladies and Gentlemen, when my brother broke his leg, my father took him to the hospital. My mother was just crying all over the house. My father pays my school fees...."

Scattered applause greeted his efforts. I disagreed intensely with him, even though I had coached him on those points. As a youth corper, serving the nation at Oreckpe, an inland town on Nigeria's Delta, I had the chore of teaching year one students of Edosa Community Secondary School, the English language and what a cranky lady teacher of mine at the University had called preserve with a French twang.

The school had been invited to participate in a debate, and I was one of the teachers leading the Edosa delegation to the event. My boys weren't doing badly, and I was beginning to lose interest in the proceedings. As I stood at the edge of the crowd, I saw her. We could have been caterpillars from the same cocoon. She had the same pose as I, complete with a bottle of Limca. Something deep inside me surged joyously and I felt very afraid.

I started gliding towards her, but she took to her heels, smiling and clocking her heels through the crowd. I felt the electricity of her flight. Flares after flares after flares, a NEPA transmitter blowing its brains up. I ran, cracking all my rules with each step. I who always scoffed at Chemistry had been

caught by my shirt cuffs! I caught up with her at the car-park. I drew her by the hand and smiled.

“Why are you running away?”

“Life does not wait. I’ve got to keep up with it.”

“Please don’t go. There’s a NEPA transmitter blowing up in me. You’ve made me electric.”

“I don’t believe in chemistry,” she replied, “but I bear buckets of cold water.”

“You want to kill me? Water and electricity breed fatal shocks.”

“Don’t you think the earth is already over-populated?”

I had met my match. My arsenal of words had sorely let me down. I followed her quietly. “...I, I don’t know your name, but you’re as familiar to me as my sister’s voice. Crystal woman, I am entrapped in your eyes.”

She replied, “When I call, can you come? Can you spice my seasons with truth?”

I said, “I can only confess that I’m on fire and want to sing hosanna”.

She hissed and marched on ... I ran ahead of her, did a triple somersault in the dust, landing in front of her face. She burst into laughter. I noticed that her dimples were uncommonly deep.

“See, I have rolled in the dust at your feet. Won’t you have mercy and talk a little with me?”

“All right! Mr. Electric...”

We plopped down a bench under a nearby tree. Time flowed on like mountain dust blown to the four winds, uncatchable. We talked in ebbs and flows galloping with our words, wallowing in our histories. She was also a Youth Corper, a medical doctor doing her Youth Service two towns away from mine. How come I hadn’t noticed her at the National Orientation camp?

“Oh, we don’t move in the same circles, I’m sure.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you look like you fraternize with the party crowd.”

“Sure, I like to party a little. Anyway, where were you on mp”.

“Guess, where would a crystal woman dwell?”

“With the Orange people; there her light will shine.”

“You’re off the mark. I don’t like Orange, I don’t drink orange, I don’t wear orange. Last and final guess...”

“Em, em...”

“I pitch my tent with the Pentecostals, you dunce.”

Inside me, the fire cools a little. I fell for a preacher?

She got up to go... “I’ll be on call in an hour. I’ve got to go w.”

I did not want to leave her. “Please, let me come with you.”

“What about the students you came with”.

“The Head Teacher will take them back”.

“In that case, do let the Head Teacher know you’re coming th me”.

“No, he’ll cook up an excuse to detain me.”

“But be sure to do a note and let him know where you are.”

As I scribble a quick note, I notice one of my students ing to sneak past. “You, come here! Why are you hiding?”

“Sir, I was hungry So I just hurried out to get some ad.”

“All right, make sure you give this note to Mr. Laskana. I’m ing somewhere. I’ll see you guys in school. Let’s go.”

A bus came along, we stopped it and entered. As we roached my town, I was arrested by a message as gripping a straitjacket. All my being beeped one message in clear sonants... “Do not GO”. I tried to shake it off with a flick of head, but my body became immobile. Panic crashed in. She iced my discomfiture and smiled...

“Having second thoughts?”

"No, but something is telling me to drop right here at my town."

"In that case, I advise you to obey."

I wished I could shake her out of her calm composure.

She turned to the conductor and asked him to stop the driver.

The bus stopped, and I jumped down. She shook my hand, passing something into it. I opened my hands and looked at it. It was a Christian tract.

"Won't you come with me?" I urged.

"Have you forgotten that I'm going on call in a few minutes?"

"I'll come and see you tomorrow then."

"Suit yourself."

She smiled and waved to me as the bus zoomed off in a cloud of dust.

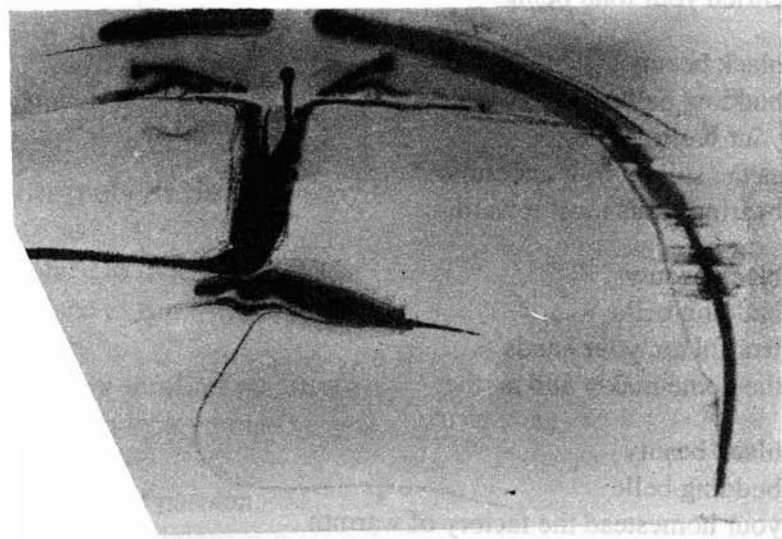
...Somewhere in the centre of dreamland, I was irritated by the sound of wailing. It rose louder and louder. I battled to be free of it, but it dragged me into wakefulness. My eyes fluttered open. The wailing rose in tempo just outside my room. I came out, wearing my white night-shirt, barefoot in my hurry. As I dashed out, I saw Jude, my flat mate weeping on the pavement. I ran towards him. He took one look at me, screamed and ran off. I ran after him shouting, "Stop! Stop, Jude!"

I caught up with him at the principal's lodge where a crowd had already gathered. Above the din, one word kept repeating itself: "No, No, No, No". Some people were pinching me, while others threw sand. I was frantic, gasping for air, and trying to keep the sand out of my eyes. "Stop pinching me, you're blinding me. What have I done?"

Because I remained whole, they became convinced that I was no phantom. Then, they explained. "You sent a note to Mr. Laskana, saying you were travelling to Kaseh with a lady you met at the debate." Because it was all so sudden, the boy decided to jot down the plate number of the bus he saw you

... About four hours ago, some boys coming into town mentioned a gory accident on the outskirts of Kaseh. The bus had run into a van, leaving no survivors. Mr. Laskana asked if anyone could remember the plate number of the bus. They could, it was the same bus ...”

The ground swayed to meet me. The planets gave way. I came a parachute jumping into Pluto, the moon ablaze with fire and bare dreams... I felt rivers of cold water flooding my mind. They were rude awakenings, red pepper in my raw wounds. O, I would have listened to a thousand sermons just to hear her voice again. Another torrent poured on me. I opened my eyes, wanting the storm to stop, and my eyes beheld the Crystal Woman. She was smiling. She was unruffled. She had water in her hands.



the black world is proud of you
mother, wife, sister and friend,
budding belle
black beauty
and the birds awake the ribs
where moonlight cuddle sweet songs

*BABATUNDE AJAYI***Black Beauty**

black beauty
budding belle
your heritage is royal
from the palace where shuffled feet
respond to the embrace of gbedu and sekere

black beauty
budding belle
your skin shone
with the flash of the sun
the egg in your eyes
enrich your total being

black beauty
budding belle
your brain fertile
as the soil of your ancestors
bearing fruits most rewarding

black beauty
budding belle
fruitful are your hands
the home maker and mother

black beauty
budding belle
your homestead the factory of warmth
where moonlight cuddle sweet songs
and the bards awake the ribs
black beauty
budding belle
the black world is proud of you
mother, wife, sister and friend.

*BOYE ADEFILA***Sunk**

Put some grime on their road
a dash of slime
to twist the ankle of time
So, as one
We'll clock the beast
into our past
Or,
shall hour after hour
tick us rudderless
towards the last half
Of two-thousand AiDs?

Mongrels at Sea

No place to hide
No place to run

Is solace a scroll of peninsula
mortgaged by a young General

in the heat of passion
for a bite of Biafra?

JIMI SOETAN

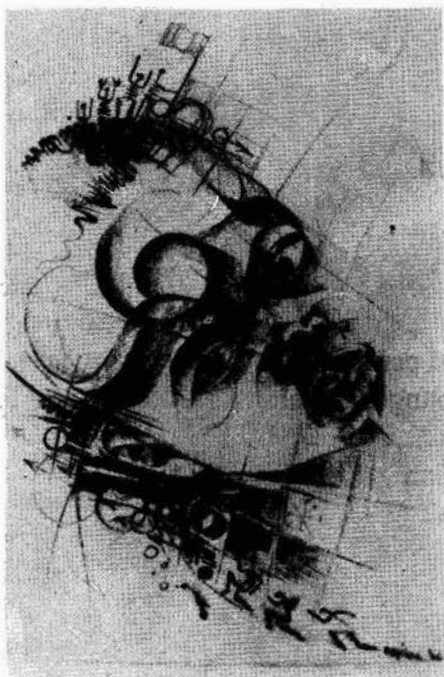
Meditation

Silence

In solitude I stall
surrounded
By the four corners
of my walls.

Silence

The disconnection
with the physical
A connection with myself
The golden link
To the luminous heights.



Towards A Nigerian Standard Pidgin Literature

It has been my belief since the 1980s when our new generation of writers began writing seriously in Pidgin that it is up to the critics, writers and intellectuals of this country to consider seriously any question that pertains to the development and future status of our literature (and education generally) and to enlighten public opinion as best as they could. The remarks I am going to offer here in respect of the current and future status of Nigerian Pidgin Writing are offered with this view in mind.

Aig-Imoukhuede, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Tunde Fatunde and several others are familiar enough names which come readily to mind in any discussion involving Nigerian Pidgin Literature. In an interview Fatunde granted *Weekend Concord* (Saturday, October 13, 1990, p.7), he spoke thus:

Pidgin is still an oral language. Every language grows as an oral phenomenon before it becomes written and standardized. There is no standard Pidgin. What I'm doing and what many Pidgin poets and dramatists are doing is just to standardize Pidgin ... Myself, Aig-Imoukhuede, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Ezenwa-Ohaeto and a group of others are still in the embryonic stage of the evolution of Pidgin as a written language. As an oral language there are so many varieties. For example, in Bendel State, there are so many versions. You have the Sapele version, you have the Warri version, you have the Delta version, you have the Rivers version which is normal.

Fatunde is right to say that there are many "versions" of Pidgin in Nigeria. But when he says, "You have Sapele version, you have Warri version, you have the Delta version", he overstates the case. The variety spoken in Sapele and Warri is the same. This variety is also generally regarded as the Delta variety. In fact, Sapele-Warri Pidgin is the standard variety, and we should seriously query Fatunde for saying there is no standard form of Pidgin. As I have stated in an interview:

If you want to write Pidgin, it's well and good. But there's the problem of what is standard Pidgin. We have to understand that Pidgin in Bendel is different from Pidgin anywhere else. So the question of standard should be there. Even in Bendel, the Pidgin in the Delta is quite different. There is what we call Pidgin within Pidgin. The Pidgin in Sapele is different. Or the Pidgin of the Bay-side or the Quay-side boys, you won't understand it. There's another kind of Pidgin called canary Pidgin. [In any case] the standard [Pidgin] should be that spoken in the Delta (*The Guardian*, February 10, 1990, p.14).

It is clear that what can pass as Pidgin from any of the Yoruba or Hausa parts of this country would be rejected outright as Pidgin by an observer from Bendel State where indisputably the best Pidgin is spoken. Furthermore, even in "Bendel", speakers in and from the Delta area regard speakers from elsewhere as not good enough speakers of the language. Because Pidgin has its origin in the coastal towns of Sapele and Warri in the Delta, indigenes of these areas naturally see themselves as the "owners" and speakers of the standard language in the same way the English pride themselves as the owners and standard bearers of "Queen's English" which is the "purest" English spoken or written anywhere in the World. Indeed, as "Queen's English" holds sway in any discussion in English Studies, so also should Delta, that is, Warri and Sapele Pidgin, hold sway in any discussion of Nigerian Pidgin Writing and Studies generally.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that there is need for us who are in one way or another connected with the business of writing, and who are wont to create and recreate our thoughts in standard Pidgin to do a re-appraisal, not only of the language, but also of our respective positions - if we are really concerned with improving the creative or literary qualities of our works, and also if we are really committed to elevating the status of Pidgin as a literary language.

One way to achieve the desirable result is for us to master standard Pidgin, that is, Warri-Sapele Pidgin, in its spoken

form, because, as it is said, "You write the way you speak". Once this is achieved, we will then move to the next stage, which has to do with morphology and orthography of the language. How should Pidgin standard constitute its vocabulary? What words should easily pass as Pidgin and what words should not.

I will attempt to answer the first question, for example, by saying that the grammar, the sentences or constructions and word formation of Pidgin are akin to those of the normal standard English save for a few instances where a sentence like "Yu dey go" (in a singular sense) is not the same as "You are going" (in a singular or plural sense). The pronoun "yu" and verb "dey" in the Pidgin sentence are obviously singular, while the pronoun "you" and verb "are" in the second, standard English sentence can be either singular or plural, depending on the context in which the sentence is uttered. Moreover, while the second sentence is the progressive aspect present, the first, the Pidgin sentence, is the present tense, except, of course, when the sentence is turned into a question "yu dey go?" When it becomes a question, it will take the same grammatical form as the standard English equivalent: "Are you going?" But even then, while the pronoun "you" and the verb "are" in the standard English sentence change positions, the pronoun "yu" and verb "dey" of the pidgin sentence retain their positions.

From the above, it is clear that in Pidgin the present tense and present progressive forms are the same, whereas in standard English the present form differs from that of the present progressive.

The problem of what constitutes standard Pidgin vocabulary, or of how certain Pidgin words should be spelt, is even more complex. I doubt if there can be any agreement in respect of what words should enter or not enter a standard Pidgin dictionary. I also doubt if there can be any agreement in respect of how such words should be spelt. However, any Pidgin lexicographer who tries hard enough, concentrating on

the Warri-Sapele variety for reasons already stated, should be able to come out with a useful result. It is instructive to mention here that Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, a book he styles "a novel in rotten English", has a glossary of some Pidgin words, but I find it hard to accept the spellings as they appear there. In standard Pidgin English, words like "Ugbarugba" (problem), "taprita" (interpreter) "nor dey" (not available), "ashawo" (prostitute), etc, are wrongly spelt as "ugbalugba", "terpita", "no dey", "ashewo" respectively. But these "misspellings" arise from the way in which Rivers, specifically Saro-Wiwa's Kana-speaking people, normally pronounce them.

The example I have given and treated above may appear too simple, or rather too simplistic, and even mark me out as too rigid and too negative a prescriber, but I think they help to prove adequately the point I want to establish in respect of how to think and write properly and creatively in standard Pidgin. Readers of this essay should be aware by now that to write, and more importantly, to read (if not to speak) Pidgin demands some bit of literacy, something which our Pidgin writers seem not to be aware of, or not to have taken seriously enough. Since the 1980s, our Pidgin writers have set themselves the task of radicalizing and popularizing our literature and of making it more relevant through a medium of mass appeal. How can they achieve this objective when the masses themselves are not even literate in Pidgin?

Agreed, if a Pidgin play, for instance, is seen on stage by the masses, they will be able to understand and appreciate its message, but it is doubtful if they can read and appreciate the same play in print. Thus, as oral playwrights, our Pidgin playwrights will make their mark, but as literary, textual playwrights they may not.

What all this will amount to, in effect, is that our writers, our Pidgin poets, playwrights and novelists who have been writing since the 1980s, are not at all writing for the masses after all - at least for now: they are writing for the select few,

for the select literate, for the few among them who are both literate in Pidgin and in standard English. Thus, no matter the thoughts they conceive about writing for the masses, no matter the thoughts and sentiments they conceive and have for the masses, their business really is to write elegant Pidgin in order to elevate the status of the language and to enhance the interest of the readers in their works as works of beauty and of art. Any of the Pidgin writers who is not prepared to do this has no business writing at all. For literature is not merely about content, but also about how this content is expressed. Therein lies its beauty; there also lies its art. Of course, many a writer who does not want to try hard enough can take cover in radicalism, Marxism, Socialism, and simplistic notions of populist literature, and write works of little or no literary merit, works in which *content rom method*, or *content rom manner* are not married properly or not at all. But it is our business as readers and critics to say "No: this is not the literature we want". After all, there are many Marxist writers in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere who have written great literature. At this point, I should like briefly to examine and comment on the works of some of our Pidgin writers in furtherance of my thesis.

Although Aig-Imoukhuede can rightly be said to have popularised the use of Pidgin as a medium of literary expression in Nigeria with the publication of his highly successful Pidgin poem "One Wife for One Man" in the University of Ibadan Department of English magazine, *The Horn*, in the fifties¹, Tunde Fatunde is today easily its most publicised practitioner. Furthermore, of the writers writing in Pidgin since the 80s, he seems to be the most enthusiastic defender of the medium. His defence of Pidgin writing and literature in general is very tenacious. But unfortunately, Fatunde's Pidgin is flat, almost bizarre, because he is, among other things, more concerned with the content of his works than with the method and manner with which this content is

expressed. There is no explicit wish in Fatunde's Pidgin poems or plays to recreate as well as excite his readers. In his poems and plays, for example, *No Food, no country*,² *Oga na Tief Man*,³ *No More Oil Boom*,⁴ *Water no get Enemy*,⁵ his themes and arguments are factual, but these are often weakened by his wearisome manner. His style, generally, is hurried and lacks rigour, while his ("Pidgin") sentences rattle on, as it were, without elegance or form. If Fatunde wants to be the accomplished and acclaimed standard Pidgin writer of our generation which, I think he strives to be, he must endeavour in his future works to engage in close and ceaseless correspondence with passions in style. He may wish to continue to retrench abundance or elegance of phrase or any trick of metaphors or "volubility of tongue" from his future writings, but he should strive to excite and interest us with finesse of language.

The excitement that we miss in Fatunde's work is to be found in Aig-Imoukhuede's poetry. He writes lyrically and aims at literary distinction. His "One Wife for One Man", for instance, clearly attests to the fact that literature, which can be defined as a mode or method of expression, can be written in any language. The way in which the poet writes about his displeasure for the un-African culture of "One Wife for One Man" clearly elevates the status of Pidgin as a distinct language which we should not feel ashamed to speak or develop. If the poem can be regarded as a model Pidgin poem, it is not necessarily because of the theme or subject matter it treats, but because of the writer's creative use of it to show his displeasure for the new European culture that extols the virtue, so to say, of "One Wife for One Man". But in spite of the above, it must be pointed out that Aig-Imoukhuede's Pidgin is in the main 'anglicized' Pidgin like Fatunde's; it lacks the 'pureness' and distinctness of the 'native' speakers and 'owners' of the language. A detailed examination of "One Wife for One Man" and of Aig-Imoukhuede's collection *Pidgin Stew and*

Sufferhead will clearly reveal that the poet not only fashions his poetry after the Europeans whose culture of "One Wife for One Man" he disapproves of, but also that he surprisingly uses standard English words where he could have easily used their Pidgin equivalent. In fact, his Pidgin poems would have been far more exciting, far more remarkable, if he had used Pidgin spellings rather than standard English ones, in places where they occur in the poems. It is shocking to discover that the titles of his Pidgin poems are all rendered in, standard English. These are serious enough lapses in the work of an acclaimed Pidgin writer and popularizer! Was he really thinking of the masses when he was writing *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead*?

It is sad that other Pidgin writers have followed his example in this direction. Tunde Fatunde, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and even Ken Saro-Wiwa, the miracle of the new generation of Nigerian writers (at least on account of his prodigious energy, prolific pen and gifted imagination) have all, in one way or another, been influenced and 'infected' by Aig-Imoukhuede's art of anglicization. However, Ken Saro-Wiwa in *Sozaboy*⁶ can be said to use Pidgin somewhat differently. In that novel, he richly bastardizes Pidgin for the desired literary effect. Although he also anglicizes, he clearly tells us that his is a "novel in rotten English" where everything is acceptable - provincialism, bastardization, anglicism. All these make his "rotten English" novel unique and "a garden of delights". But in his plays, where anglicization of Pidgin predominates, he hardly achieves the same effect.⁷

As to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, his Pidgin poems are rich in imagery, but he is like Aig-Imoukhuede as far as anglicization goes. His often-quoted Pidgin poem "Song of a Labourer" which has the subtitle "If to say I bi soja"⁸ clearly attests to this:

If to say I bi soja
 I no go dey go marching
 Dey make left-right, attention, at ease,
 If them say make I retire

Na inside one big Farm I go dey
Where machine go they work.

In this poem as well as others he has written, he, like the other writers, fails to reduce to the barest minimum the use of standard English words and turn of phrase.

Now, it should be pointed out that our earlier and firmly established writers - Soyinka, Achebe, Ekwensi - also use Pidgin in their works. However, their intention, unlike our new writers of the eighties, is never to highlight its literary possibilities or to elevate it, so to speak, to the status of a literary language. They all, without exception, use it merely to depict the low characters and the semi-literate ones in the same way Shakespeare uses prose to portray characters that lack qualities of grandeur in his plays.

What the foregoing remarks amount to is that there is need for all of us who are interested in elevating the status of Pidgin as a standard language for the growth and improvement of our literature to meet, discuss and, among other things, set up a Committee for Pidgin Education, Literature and Research. The body will promote ideas and objectives that will help the growth and general acceptance of Pidgin as a viable language in all its ramifications. Issues such as writing an acceptable standard Pidgin dictionary and a glossary of standard Pidgin literary terms and others pertaining to an acceptable orthography (which I discussed much earlier) will also be part of the task of the proposed Committee. Furthermore, it will not be asking too much if the said Committee is mandated to think seriously of translating literary works in standard English or any other language into standard Pidgin. These are not little and easy tasks and objectives in our politically explosive field of education. However, given the fact that the majority of our pupils and children in schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities in the South tend to grasp more easily an idea expressed in Pidgin than in standard English, it behoves us who are interested in promoting Pidgin to use all the resources at our

disposal to carry our case to the authorities responsible for handling such matters. This must be so, because any talk of improving the status of Pidgin, of transforming it into an acceptable medium of expression in our schools will be mere hocus-pocus unless it receives official backing. English, the "Queen's English", that we speak and write today was once-upon-a-time even lower in status than the Pidgin that we are writing about now. Long before the time of Chaucer up to the eighteenth century, English was a local or vernacular language that was derided. Latin or Greek, at that time, was the language of the academy; French was the language of gentlemen and culture. It was also the language of business and government. But with time all this changed, English evolved and superseded the erstwhile languages of academia, business and parliament. This was possible because of the official backing the erstwhile "local" and "vernacular" language got from government, after the Norman period, and especially during the Renaissance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this period, English rose in status and became the language, even though writers like Alexander Pope still copiously quoted from Latin and Greek.

Another reason why Pidgin should receive official backing is that it is more likely to unite us as a country than Igbo or Yoruba or Hausa or any of the mother tongues which have been generating debates in several circles, official and unofficial. And the role a novel or play or poem written in Pidgin will play in this and other aspects of our national life can be likened to that which English Language Literature has played in promoting science and its achievements in other areas of learning and human endeavour in that blessed tiny island.

Notes

1. See Martin Banham, ed. *Nigerian Student Verse* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1960), p.29.
2. Tunde Fatunde, *No Food, no Country* (Benin-City: Adena Publishers, 1985).
3. Tunde Fatunde, *Oga na Tief Man* (Benin-City: Adena Publishers, 1986).
4. Tunde Fatunde, *No More Oil Boom and Blood and Sweat* (Benin-City: Adena Publishers, 1986).
5. Tunde Fatunde, *Water no Get Enemy* (Benin-City: Adena Publishers, 1989).
6. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (Port-Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1985).
7. See, for example, Saro-Wiwa's *Four Farcical Plays* (Port-Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1989).
8. This poem is contained in Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *Songs of a Traveller (Poems)* (Awka: Towncrier Publications, 1986). pp.30-31.



*LADIPO SOETAN***I Wear my Africanness Light**

I, offspring of antelope and gazelle
Wanderer in glades and in the Sahel
Washed and fed on sugarcane stew
Wear my skin, my Africanness light.

When our history was new like dew
Careless hands the sweeping sallies
of warrior-kings into dusty crypts swept
And dark was our view and our plight.

Those elder griots, my compatriots
Upon whom these warrior spirits leapt
Upon whom these spirits ate and slept
Sought to smite what was then a blight,
Crept with feline feet into crusty crypts,
Repainted the faded glories of exploits
Past in an incandescent yellow hue.

I offer now thanks and proffer regards
My inheritance lives and is mine again
And now I can because of those upright guards
I can in the noontime heat of our story
I can when all our money is borrowed
I can when all our brows are furrowed
I can when backs are bent from worry
I can wear my Africanness light.

CHARLES BODUNDE

Poetry in the Newspaper: The Younger Poets in Nigeria and the Search for Artistic Medium

For an art producer who aims at social relevance and a wider audience, the choice of an appropriate medium is as important as the production of art itself. In her book on Antonio Gramsci, Christine Buci-Glucksmann argues that a literary tradition which espouses the idea of the sociality of art and its forcefulness in class struggle must necessarily 'intervene in literature and the means of its production.'¹ Terry Eagleton's amplification of Walter Benjamin's idea on the task of the art producer reveals the artistic values derived from innovative artistic medium:

For Benjamin, the revolutionary artist should not uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production but should develop and revolutionize those forces. In doing so, he creates new social relations between artist and audience, he overcomes the contradictions which limit artistic forces potentially available to everyone to the private property of a few. The revolutionary artist's task is to develop these new media as well as to transform the older modes of artistic production. It is not just a question of pushing a revolutionary message through existing media, it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves.²

Eagleton's summary of the essence of Benjamin's position touches specifically on the newspaper as a medium of artistic creation. He emphasizes that the newspaper medium, if used properly 'melts down the conventional separation between literary genres, between scholar and popularizer and between author and reader.'³ Also writing on the need to search for an innovative artistic medium, Omafume Onoge concludes that the very sociality of art demands that the business of criticism must go beyond the actual literary text to investigate the mode of its production and transmission.⁴ He contends that studies in this direction should encourage the revolutionary use of the media

so as to create alternative art production mode which should turn the masses into creators rather than mere consumers of art.⁵ In Nigeria, the need to create alternative means of artistic production and circulation is pressing particularly at a time when the dominant outlet for the poet (the book publishing industry) has crumbled.

Origin, Nature and Potentials of Newspaper Poetry in Nigeria

The attempt to create and sustain poetry in Nigerian newspapers is an encouraging literary development. This attempt is made with the recognition of the nature of the newspaper medium itself. The medium easily accommodates materials which are political, social or literary. In this regard, significant insight can be drawn from Karl Miller's explanation of the origin of his interest in the field of literary journalism. For him, 'politically active newspapers which are preoccupied with the struggle to co-ordinate attention to politics and literature are effective in exposing and shaping the behaviour of rulers.'⁶ He argues that the newspapers advance the course of literature since they provide an outlet to new writers who often come out with fresh literary materials.⁷

Newspaper poetry in Nigeria results mainly from the efforts of the younger branch of the literary tradition. The members of this literary group have employed their experiences in media practice as the means of struggle for themselves and other poets. Femi Osofisan has explained the processes of the struggles which led to the emergence of literary pages in *The Guardian* as follows:

After *Opon Ifa* died and *Okike* became spasmodic and *Nigeria Magazine* wasn't appearing again, I just thought that since I was going to the newspaper, then it should be the next available outlet for art. And I'm telling you, I had to fight in order to maintain the literary pages... Luckily, I had sympathetic minds there, particularly Stanley Macebuh.... Once it got on, other pages got the

idea too. At the *Daily Times*, I gave substantial space to literary materials and then our own students after graduation came to take over these pages.⁸

Odia Ofeimun has also spoken about his contribution to newspaper poetry:

I helped to establish the tradition in one sense. As a culture page editor in *The Guardian*, I started the business of publishing poetry on a regular basis. Niyi Osundare advanced it beyond anything we could have attempted. He was doing it almost on a weekly basis, every Sunday.⁹

Niyi Osundare is one of the writers who have struggled to create a space for poetry in the newspapers. He has also continued to write through this medium under the title, "Songs of the Season" in *Nigerian Tribune*. At an international conference, Osundare described one of the events which determined his choice of the newspaper as a medium for poetry:

The 'psychological' origin of *Songs of the Season* dates back to 1983. The blatant way the general elections of that year were rigged, and the widespread civil strife which ensued left many Nigerians perplexed and despondent. I felt the occasion called for satire and poetry of indictment and I wrote a few songs which the *Tribune* published on a full page in one of its daily issues.¹⁰

Literary journals and chap books appear to be the closest to newspaper poetry in terms of function. In describing the forces of literary media in South Africa, Andries Oliphant contends that:

Literary journals are important sites of cultural production. They perform a variety of roles which include providing a forum for new developments in literature by publishing emergent voices. They help mediate and shape the direction in which a national literature develops by means of critical essays, reviews and debates. In most societies, journals are often the barometers of the general literary life.¹¹

For the art producer, the newspaper medium is even more reliable and less financially involving than journals and literary magazines. Poetry in the newspaper enjoys the advantage of regular production since it exists within a medium that

possesses a fairly stable means of production and circulation. Osundare alludes to this while explaining the circumstances which often lead artists to search for alternative media:

I discovered early enough that learned journals and poetry magazines lack the ease of expression, immediacy of purpose and general accessibility needed to carry the weight of my social vision. To make matters worse, these publications are an endangered (if not yet extinct) species in Nigeria. Of all the creative writing journals of the sixties and seventies, only *Okike* has managed to break the 'Ogbanje' syndrome. Even *Black Orpheus*, that once robust outlet of creative tempests, now hangs on to life by intermitent gasps.¹²

The newspaper, as Osundare argues, is a viable forum. This is because it is cheap and more widely distributed locally than literary journals, magazines and chapbooks. Some of the merits of the newspaper as medium for poetry are the immediacy of purpose and response that it guarantees. Poets circumvent the frustration and delay in book publishing by turning to the newspaper medium. Obviously, this is a more convenient forum for the poets to intervene in the problems of their society. In Nigeria, the use of the newspaper as artistic medium is not limited to private papers. In spite of the often political nature of most of the poems, government controlled newspapers like the *Daily Times* have a fairly long tradition of newspaper poetry. *The Guardian*, like the *Daily Times*, has literary pages devoted to poetry. In both papers, contributions come mostly from younger poets. Both papers also have attractive titles indicating a commitment to the literary enterprise. For instance, *The Guardian* has 'Poet of the Week' while *Daily Times* has 'Poets Corner' and 'Guest Poet.'

Social and Literary Phenomena in Sample Poems

Sample poems are chosen from *The Guardian* and *Daily Times* because both papers present poems from a wide range of authors. This allows an estimate of the impact, and to determine the proportion of contributions from Nigerian poets. The poems

selected for discussion here are those published between 1986 and 1994, among which can be distinguished three categories: poems on social issues, on political subjects, and those concerned with the nature of poetry itself.

George Asinaba's newspaper poem, "Maroko River"¹³ presents social contradictions in the images of two contrasting settings. One is a stale ghetto deprived of 'all earthly consolations.' The other radiates with luxury and wealth. The river between the two worlds symbolizes the classic division that normally occurs in class societies. The closeness of the two worlds however signals potential conflict. The poet says they are "like veiled twin-beans/in a pod." They exist as:

Contrast of two
Startling cities
Banished in rustic rivalry
And standing contemptuously
At close ends
Of the same world.

In what appears like a dismantling of this symbolic reminder of class contradiction, four years after the publication of this poem, the Lagos State Government evacuated the Maroko Community turning the people into refugees at the fringes of the Lagos lagoon.

The same Maroko syndrome is examined in Ogaga Ifowodo's "Maroko's Blood."¹⁴ In this poem, Maroko becomes the symbol of the ugliness of inequality and class oppression. Ifowodo's choice of the images of suffering and decay emphasize the existing debased humanity:

And here where cobwebs are the silky blinds
here where spiders make long gowns
to dress the festering sores
of a compost heap
Your pain pales before your children's
children whose birthcries become
war cries
who go on living defying death
through the emptiness of feeding vessels

who are weaned on the practice
of fasting...

Acting within the aesthetic tradition of the new poets, Ifowodo investigates the origin of the social contradiction which the Maroko world portrays. He traces the problems to contorted social form in which tyrants and killers masquerade as political messiahs:

For those who would replenish a desert had
fertilised the earth with gun powder.
Those who would reclaim lost farms had guns
for hoes and sickles those who would regrow
abandoned Orchards had sown grenades as
seed crops they would cure the thirst of
crusted earth with canals of your flowing
blood.

The regularity and wide circulation of newspaper poetry make it effective as a censor of political form. Even in a political formation where the apparatuses of state are garnered against dissenting voices, newspaper poetry still makes a major impact in the critique of politics. Commenting on the efficacy of newspaper poetry in agitating the minds of the members of the ruling class, Osundare recalled his newspaper poem on the execution of three cocaine pushers during the Buhari-Idiagbon regime:

I couldn't believe it because my hand was shaking even as I was writing the poem. Those close to the Security Agents said that the poem didn't go down well at all with the ruling class. In fact, they wanted to pick me up. Somehow, this is where the indirectness of poetry protects. No name was mentioned but then they knew what I was saying.¹⁵

The fact is that the ruling class recognises the effect which political poems can have on the people especially when they are widely circulated and are written to expose political corruption and misrule.

In 'Thought on October 1990'¹⁶, David Nwamadi directs his anger against 'an army of changelings' which manipulates

stolen power to impose on the people the fate of the lizard which 'perpetually falls off the Iroko of stability.' He lashes out at collaborators of the tyrannical regime, describing them as whores who dedicate their thighs 'to universal connections' so as to 'foster the tradition of generosity.' He warns that the people's hammer blow awaits those who rationalize a cruel regime. Still on the issue of despotism, Afam Akeh's 'An African Broadcast'¹⁷ condemns the African military class for employing coup d'etats as a means of attaining political power. He chides this class for perpetrating violence and destruction throughout a continent where urgent social and political reconstruction is needed. Also in 'The Whirlwind,'¹⁸ Tanure Ojaide traces the origin of despotism to the delusion of Power snatchers who convert the apparatuses of state to create an exploitative class that is alienated from the ordinary people. The poet says:

Once there... they always
 forgot what would make us
 wear endless smiles
 They ordered the helpless to prop
 their iron roofs;
 they made state armchairs of sacred
 trees - they saw themselves
 as a different tribe and displayed
 their decorated weapons
 everywhere.

In 'The Lagoon',¹⁹ Esiaba Irobi sees the sudden emergence of water hyacinths on the Nigerian shoreline as a threat to social life. In a brilliant metaphoric manoeuvre, the poet connects the water hyacinth phenomenon with the more universal problem of the threat which leaders of powerful nations pose to weaker ones, moving from the ordinary sphere of ecology to the more turbulent arena of international politics, with the world's terror clique identified as the devil's hyacinth faces. Ogaga Ifowodo's 'Atop the Rubble of Berlin Wall'²⁰ extends the global political subject raised in Irobi's 'The

Lagoon.' Here, Ifowodo uses the occasion of the reunification of East and West Germany to reflect on the contrasting states of war and peace in world affairs. The merger of Germany's two parts symbolized by the demolition of the Berlin Wall represents UNO's programme of peace and unity. However, reconciliation and unification only come as brief interludes in an unending global crisis. Ifowodo notes in particular that events in Kuwait, Iraq, Nicaragua, Libya, and so on show the contradictions in the use of war or violence in combating crises:

The peace of a flaming world lies
in pentagoned palms
as Saddam's little devils
precede him to hell,
their tails burning
with the fire of saints.

The newspaper medium establishes a new relationship between poetry and the ordinary reader outside the intellectual environment of the university for instance. The need for a mass based poetry which addresses the ordinary reader has been stressed by the poets themselves. For instance, Ofeimun argued in the interview already cited that people often approached poetry with feelings of awe, and would not want to relate with it, and that they need a species of poetry they could relate with on a daily basis. The newspaper is an appropriate forum for the poet to educate the readership on the nature of poetry and purge it of the mystification which the purist aesthetic tradition has imposed on it. Thus, a poem like Balami Shaffa's 'some poets are the reason'²¹ is published in the newspaper to disseminate new ideas on the nature of poetry. In this poem, Shaffa condemns the neo-modernist poets, those he calls 'the algebraic poets' for producing inaccessible poetry that discouraged the ordinary reader. The poet rejects the poetry of obscurantism in favour of one of clarity of meaning and vision. For Shaffa, the obscure poet is caught up in his own word maze. He encounters 'constipation with his own diet of rock verse,' insisting that:

Poetry is not the gnarled shape
 Of its very vehicle, so murdered meaning
 Is left spread-eagled and irrelevant
 In the crucible of the mind...
 Poetry is not the argot of a cabal
 That plot and scheme in lingual puzzle
 Poetry is not the forest of deadroots
 Stalked by the practised steps of medicine men
 Unfollowed by apprentices seeking
 the trade's powers...

Poetry is rather a 'guide to the footpath of delight,' and therefore requires a 'crystal glitter' clearness, a 'see-through liquid that sings to man,' without turning the readers into 'tooth-gnashing victims of cold.'

Newspaper poetry also accommodates poetic dialogues among poets; and most of the exchanges focus on the responsibility of the artist, the dignity of the creative enterprise and the need to preserve these qualities to retain the true voice of the poet. The last movement of Esiaba Irobi's 'The Lagoon' is a dialogue with Niyi Osundare, an accomplished Nigerian poet of the new generation. In this poem, Irobi expresses support for Osundare's optimistic vision, which reveals a new world, a peaceful landscape where the destructive agents of the old world become innocuous and hospitable. In the landscape of Irobi's vision, fishermen 'do not return /at sunset with empty fishing nets.' In the lagoon of the new world, 'Sailing boats do not capsizel/in an ambush of water hyacinths' and innocent fishes stray 'into the kindness of crocodile's parted jaws.' This dialogue is a healthy ideational exchange. It is aimed at sustaining the vision of a new order which translates into actual radical struggle as a determination to cultivate a progressive social structure. This dialogue is a valuable prop from a poet to a fellow poet especially at a period in which tyranny and political misrule are dominant practices. The atmosphere of the dialogue Funso Aiyejina's 'And the poet praised the king'²² differs from Irobi's poem. Here, Aiyejina berates a fellow poet

for singing the praise of a tyrannical ruler who "violates and humiliates" the people. He challenges the poet to descend from his Idanre height to interact with his fellow artists and explain how a drunken ruler who truncates the people's dreams deserves the artist's praise-singing.

Conclusion

This investigation and analysis reveal that newspaper poetry is useful for the exploration of social, political and literary phenomena. It intervenes at a period in which the collapse of the book industry threatens literary production with closure. The anxiety in certain quarters about the aesthetic quality of newspaper poetry has validity, since in responding spontaneously to current social, political and literary problems, aesthetic perfection often suffers. But as Osofisan has said, nobody should expect poetry of masterpieces from the newspaper because, in any case, such poetry is hard to come by even in anthologies.²³ The compensation is that the newspaper medium offers the appropriate arena for poets to make a moment to moment picture of their society. Above all, it is a reliable platform to promote and sustain art through debate and dialogue.

Notes

1. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (translated by David Fernbach) (London: Lawrence Wishart Ltd., 1980) p. 42.
2. Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976) pp. 61-62.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
4. Omafume Onoge, 'Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature,' George Gulgelberger (ed), *Marxism and African Literature* (London: James Currey Ltd., 1985) p. 62.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Karl Miller, *Authors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 194.
7. *Ibid.*

- 8 Unpublished Interview with Femi Osofisan, March 12, 1994. (available on tape).
9. Unpublished Interview with Odia Ofeimun, November 27, 1993. (available on tape).
10. Niyi Osundare, 'Bard of the Tabloid Platform: A personal Experience of Newspaper poetry in Nigeria,' Paper delivered at the Canadian Association of African Studies Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (1987) p. 11.
11. Andries Walter Oliphant, 'Forum and Forces: Recent Trends in South African Literary Journals,' *Kunapipi* Vol.xiii, Nos 1 & 2 (1991) p. 91.
12. Niyi Osundare, 'Bard of the Tabloid Platform: A Personal Experience of Newspaper Poetry in Nigeria,' p. 12.
13. George Asinaba, 'Maroko River,' *The Guardian* (April 6, 1986) p. 67.
14. Ogaga Ifowodo, 'Maroko's Blood,' *Daily Times* (January 27, 1990) pp. 13-14.
15. Unpublished Interview with Niyi Osundare, September 12, 1994 (available on tape).
16. David Nwamadi, 'Thought on October, 1990', *Daily Times* October 5, 1991), pp. 13-14.
17. Afam Akeh, 'An African Broadcast,' *Daily Times* (August 22, 1992) p. 13.
18. Tanure Ojaide, 'The Whirlwind,' *The Guardian* (February 15, 1987) p. B4
19. Esiaba Irobi, 'The Lagoon' *The Guardian* (January 11, 1987) p. 8.
20. Ogaga Ifowodo, 'Atop the Rubble of Berlin Wall' *Daily Times* (October 26, 1991) pp. 12-13.
21. Balami Shaffa, 'Some Poets are the Reason' *Daily Times* (October 17, 1992) p. 13.
22. Funso Aiyejina, 'And the Poet Praised the King' *The Guardian* (February 1, 1987) p. B4.
23. Unpublished Interview with Femi Osofisan.'

The Limits of Artistic Freedom: Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*

A literary artist writes within the sphere of his own experience; he writes about the society he knows but refers to other cultures, other social practices, other beliefs only to use them in illustration and comparisons, thus bring his matter into bolder relief. In this situation, the artist expresses himself vigorously, freely but with self-restraint because he knows that even though there is freedom of expression, he has a duty to perform; a responsibility to the community he serves.

The committed writer tries to expose the ills of that society to show how ugly, and therefore reprehensible, they are. He extols virtues and condemns vice. He seeks to make society better. These are dramas of neutral intent in the mould of Eliot (*Murder in Cathedral*), Ibsen (*Enemy of the People*), Soyinka (*The Lion and the Jewel*), Rotimi (*if...*), Osofisan (*Once Upon Four Robbers*), Duruaku (*Silhouettes*) and so on. Life is largely explored in a plausible story.

There are also plays of positive bent: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Aidoo's *Anowa*, Clark's *Ozidi*, Osofisan's *Another Raft*, etc. Critical and criticising, these plays survey man in a higher essence, glorifying his victories, and his ability to find answers. The consequence of the positive attitude is hope in man. The writer of the negative orientation is critical without offering options: cynical, hating, bitter, spitting phlegm, seeing no good in the status quo; complaining, sentimental and sometimes brutish. Virtues are subsumed in the heated passion of fault-finding and virulent altercation. They express the hopelessness of man's condition by accepting despair and sometimes violence, as the answer to charge. The tragedies end with a whimper; the comedies in a sneer; the melodramas in blood and

gore. Their plays have increased commitment levels and the intensity of their messages is the "intense anger of the preacher".¹ Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* belongs in the last category.

An artist should be positive in his exploration of the human condition. Man may be evil but possesses the ability to be virtuous. He, like Janus the Roman god of 'doublespeak', has two opposite sides. He is groomed and urged to ignore the beast in him and utilize the angel therein. The writer should propose this hope. Nagativism can only drag mankind backwards. The writer must explore the positive aspects of his society. He must "re-educate and regenerate his community..."² He depicts the negative aspect in order to show how degrading it is; always pursuing the dictum: "Evil does not pay". Uyovbuckerhi³ agrees that the negative images sometimes portrayed in plays, like violence, frustration and despair may not change society for the better because they "sometimes reinforce the destructive trends of behaviour" that already exist in the society. He concludes that positive images should therefore be encouraged.

This type of argument can be extended to the Christian church which spends almost all sermon periods condemning evil: sex, crime etc., without indulging in the discussion of the positive qualities of love, peace. For them, it is: "enforce love and peace and there will be no war; no crime". The bombardment of the psyche with visions of evil may numb the mind. Imagine a man who watches scenes of violence often. Violence would no longer shock him after a while. He sees it as a way of life. That is, he will be cloyed. Negative images can hardly correct.

Elsewhere⁴ this writer has pointed out that a gangster movie often ends with the legend: *Crime does not pay*. Impressionable minds however look for loopholes in the crime so as to repeat the criminal act with better precision and perhaps perfectly. This is common in stories where the gangster is given the stock hero image of good looks, courage etc. He may be a macho gangster, a handsome rapist, a celebrity murderer, a murder-

crazed scientist etc., a clever criminal who outwits the police which are always made to look like bumbling fools.

Nwokedi tells the story of a young man, Nwokedi, who cannot come to terms with his family and the larger society. In Cycle One, Arikpo has run to the Nwokedi family (he was married to Nwokedi's twin sister) to complain that his house and property have been burnt down by the Unemployed Youths Association in Ugep. As the plot unfolds we discover that Arikpo is a politician of the mould that the protagonist detests. Nwokedi (senior) is also a politician of the same class but has recently lost an election, thanks to his son, Nwokedi. Arikpo is afraid that Nwokedi, known for his virulent dislike of Arikpo had not been told how his sister, Ezinne had died in the six-months old Ugep disaster. His real fear, we later discover, is due to the fact that he has a premonition for death.

Cycle Two is a Youth Corps camp in Bakalori where Nwokedi is doing his tour of National duty. We meet the protagonist for the first time and are immediately alerted by his arresting personality. A rebel to the core, he challenges the established order and preaches revolt. We also get a glimpse of his violent nature, especially established in the flashback scene where he kills a fellow student in a cult quarrel.

Cycle Three shows a Nwokedi who has now come home to perform his traditional duty of cleansing the land in order to usher in the new year. He discovers that Arikpo had killed his sister, Ezinne and the children in a ritual in order to gain political power. He is aghast and the play ends with Nwokedi executing Arikpo in the end-of-year ritual of the Ekumeku Age Grade. His father, Nwokedi Snr. is also beheaded. Indeed, the play is awash with images of death, blood and violence.

The play script *Nwokedi*⁵ presents a young man revolting against the status quo. The protagonist is brazen, courageous, articulate, ruthless, and is made to appear admirable in spite of his mindless bloodletting, shielded by rural faith - the pristine past is superior to the decadent present, and so the salvation of

the youth/future depends on how much of the glorious, albeit brutal, past is preserved and practised. Such protagonists as Nwokedi are products of writers with a song on their lips, bile in their throats and offering little solution to the problems they have identified. They are patriots who love their countries but hate the governments, complaining that the present leaders have mortgaged the future and squandered the wealth of the Nation so that now the job of the youth is to "look for jobs".⁶

Many younger writers pre-occupy themselves with this "revolution". *Hangmen also Die, Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh (Irobi) Morning Yet on Judgment Day* (Ekwuazi), *The Night Before* (Sowande) etc.

Nwokedi takes the bull by the horns by challenging the military establishment in the Youth Corps camp. His peers envy his audacity but cannot join in his revolt because they did not want to die. But Nwokedi prefers to die on his feet to having to live kneeling down.⁷

The opportunity he seeks to cleanse the land of bad rubbish comes in the form of the ritual cleansing of the village where Nwokedi is elected to dispatch the sacrificial ram and usher in a clean new year. Nwokedi sees beyond the mere symbolic gesture. He prefers a man (pg. 37), better still a politician who represents the horrid ruling class.

But Nwokedi is unreal. Hating his father beyond all rural wisdom (which he cherishes), he had helped his father's opponent to beat him in an election. In school, he had killed a cult member in what others saw as a game. Later on, he kills both Arikpo and his father in one fiendish moment of possession. But we do not absolve him of these crimes. He had wanted to commit them even in his sober moments. He thinks nothing of taking life, if only to make a philosophical point. In doing this he is painted as a necessarily ruthless crusader rather than a bloodthirsty villain.

His intellectual depth, vision, commitment, and courage are enviable but we cannot tolerate his mindless atavism. His lack

of solutions to the problems of the society baffles us. He offers none. All we get is what Hagher, in commenting on some of Osofisan's earlier plays, calls "a heavy mass of a supposed revolutionary poetics/Marxist aesthetics..."⁸

This feature makes the play "lose company with art [remaining] a conglomeration of social science slogans and terminologies loosely strung with dialogue; their intentions are suspect, incoherent... stirring up "revolutionary consciences..."⁹ But for the infusion of the ritual idiom, fundamental to Nwokedi's final assault, the play would have been mere propaganda.

Nwokedi goes beyond cynicism, beyond ritual, beyond cause and effect. It has exploited the grey edges of artistic freedom to re-ignite the atavism in man and paint it as glorious. Nwokedi exercises what Soyinka has called "inward-turned predatoriness and savagery".¹⁰ Is Esiaba calling attention to the brutish core in man, masked by a veneer of civility and polish? I think not. His protagonist is a warped personality with a mission that cannot possibly solve anything. If Nwokedi commits murder under the cloak of revenge or protected by a suspect return to traditional values and primeval rites, it does not absolve him of the guilt, nor is the heinousness of his crime diminished.

What drove him to kill the Capone? Not just his fine sense of values but his murderous inclination. The infusion of the cultic campus situation, almost extraneous, further shows this evil in Nwokedi. What is the writer contributing here to the anarchic situation in Nigerian university campuses? Surely he is not extolling rape, murder and mayhem. But *Nwokedi* is a study in brutality and campus secret society movements. The protagonist is at best presented as a role model, at worst a traditionalist. The play seems a salute to the unfortunate campus problems and "the survival of the strong" concept. The power of the play is in the language and deft transitions,

especially in the flashback in Second Cycle. But these diminish in the narrow lanes of a writer's responsibility to his society.

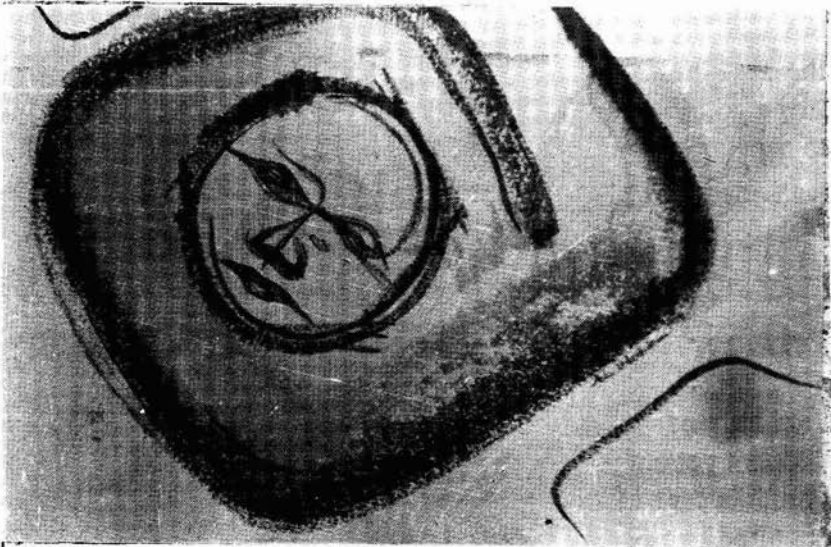
The choice to express the creative energy unfettered is not necessarily liberty. The effect of liberty upon individuals is that they may do what they please. Perhaps we ought to "see what it will please them to do before we risk congratulations, which may soon turn to be complaints."¹¹ The total and uncompromising rejection of a status quo may not be completely out of season, but there must be a recipe for the improvement on the old order.

Esiaba Irobi is a thorough theatre man and is possibly a great believer in the shock tradition expounded by Antonin Artaud, and modified by Grotowski and Peter Brook. In this scenario, the name of the game is shock. But Brook warned against confronting the audience with so much shock that the shocker will bludgeon the 'shockee' into what may be called 'Deadly Theatre'.¹²

Would all not have been lost to the "artistic Antichrist" if the writer exploits his artistic freedom to dwell in zones of negative teaching? Nwokedi is painted a hero, irrespective of his mental state and physical disposition. With many people like him, tall on fault-finding and short on solution, anarchy would reign supreme and only the strongest would survive. The kind of literary freedom exploited here may well encourage the monster called censorship, I think.

References

1. I. H. Hagher, "African Literature in Search of Policy," in Emenyonu and Nnolim (eds), *Current Trends in Literature and Language* (Ibadan: Kraft Publishers, 1994), p. 146.
2. Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 30.
3. Atiboroko Uyorbukerhi, "Responsibility of the Theatre to the Nigeriann Community," in Sonni Oti (ed), *Nigeria Theatre Journal*, Vol 2, Lagos, 1985 p. 155.
4. Toní Duruaku, "Drama as an Interactive Agent of Mass Address", paper delivered at the 1991 WAACIALS conference in University of Calabar, p. 6.
5. Esiaba Irobi, *Nwokedi* (Enugu: Abic Books, 1991).
6. This same "refrain" dominates *Hangmen Also Die*, a 1989 publication by Irobi.
7. Irobi, p. 27.
8. Hagher, p: 147.
9. Ibid, p. 149
10. Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), p. 51.
11. David Tribe, *The Rise of Mediocracy* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1975), p. 27
12. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 62.



*TUNDE OLU-OJOMO***Runaway**

Another day breaks
the noise begins
I have to wake
the mother shouts
the children scream
they surely do
disturb my dreams
from dawn to dusk
the noise goes on
I have no choice
I have to run
run to where my solace lies
where there is peace
and no children cry

but soon,
the day is fast gone
like a prodigal son
to my home I must return.

Prisoner

I am trapped
I cannot get out
I am in a cage
engulfed by my own rage
I am in chains

I am not free
I am in the dark
I do not see
I search for peace,
I seek release
I want to see
I want to fly
Like the birds high up
I want to be free.



*PIUS ADESANMI***Defeat***for Yetunde Osunfisan*

Squeezed tightly between
Ten tired bodies
Wriggling for space
Scrambling for air
In a space meant for two,
He scratched his nose impulsively
In a hopeless battle against an army of anopheles.

The night wore on.
Suddenly, nature beckoned
The bowel's weight
Must be lessened
He edged his way
to the dung depot.
Foul air collided
With his nostrils
He switched on the light
And his face dissolved
In a mask of horror.

Stretched before him
From the door to the dung depot
Little pyramids of human waste
In various stages of decay
Occupying every available space
He rushed back to his place
Amid ten tired bodies.
In the morn he pretended
Not to be hungry and
Headed for the lecture room

The lecture room was airless
Sitting, standing, stretching, swaying
In various stages of discomfort
The embattled learners hussled
For the words of the tutor:
"The assignment is due tomorrow!"
He went to the library but the books
Were on French leave.

For four sessions
He endured this adventure in hell
Then they found him worthy
In character and learning
He headed for the ministry
via the company
NO VACANCY.

Defeated, he wondered aimlessly
Along the streets, beyond caring
The minister's car zoomed past
"Avoid that crazy man!"
He yelled at his driver
And lighted a fat cigar.

Chess Game

Listen friend, a bomb has just exploded in Gaza.

Do you remember Netanyahu
the carpenter who made your wooden bed
that's his blood flowing into the gutter
leaving a snaky crimson patch in its trail

Surely you still remember Fatima
the pregnant woman who sold rice at the factory gate
she won't feed factory workers on rice any longer

for her flesh and foetus feed fat flies over there
And there's Abdallah the tailor too
he won't patch your rags for you this year
for the near-perfect paste of bones and steel yonder
is our friend and his Singer machine crushed together

But on your way home buy new batteries for your radio
For it will rain today
On VOA, BBC, RFI and Deutsche Welle
Torrential rains of familiar vocabulary
From the slippery tongues of the shepherds up North

Washington will
condemn in very strong terms acts of terrorism
London will
express shock, disbelief and utter disgust
Paris will
stress the need for vigilance in the civilised world
Bonn will
urge the Security Council to beef up security in trouble zones

Thus the rains will fall
Until dictionaries are stripped naked
Chess game! Friend it's all chess game
The shepherds play their game with our destiny
And each time it turns sour
A bomb explodes in a busy street among the flock

Then it is theirs to manufacture new words
and ours to dig countless graves
console broken widows
answer the questions of underage orphans

Bombs, if you must explode
Pray, spare the flock.

ADEMOLA O. DASYLVA

Plant a Tree

The other day

The whole *Abuja* was agog -

‘Plant a tree’, the radio jingles,

‘Plant a tree’, the television, in rainbow beams,

‘Plant a tree’, screamed the dailies,

The net-work news, and all-

The planting General under the frying

July sun stooped, sweating to conquer

As he bore in his royal palms a lucky treelet.

The following morning,

The treelet had multiplied

On the pages of national papers,

A miracle! with two fishes and five loaves ...

With one treelet President-General had fed

Our eyes, not our rumbling stomach, a miracle!

Like the General, state governors and

Local chairmen planted a treelet each,

Fed our starving eyes too, a miracle!

Urbanizing the Rural Woman, the Farce and the Facts: A Perspective on Tess Onwueme's *Tell it to Women*

That Tess Onwueme is one of the most prolific African female playwrights of our time is not being controversial. She has literally become an icon¹, another notable Nigerian offering to the literary world, closely following the footsteps of the highly acclaimed female dramatist and playwright, late Professor Zulu Sofola. Onwueme already has at least eleven published plays to her credit, the most prominent being *The Desert Encroaches* (1985)² which has won prizes and accolades for her at both the national and international levels. However, her latest play, *Tell it to Women* (1995) which is the subject of this essay is her most ambitious play yet. The play which has a Nigerian setting is a version of her earlier play *Go Tell it to Woman* (1992) which was published in the United States of America.

That Onwueme is a symbolist dramatist (Amuta 1989) is further confirmed in *Tell it to Women*. The play presents an epic battle between the urban woman and her rural counterpart for social, physical and spiritual relevance in an ever changing, dynamic world. The play is also a satire which ridicules the patronizing, self centred and self opinionated attitude of the so call First Ladies³ of most African countries and their sycophants (usually wives of highly placed public leaders and government technocrats) to the pitiable plight of the rural, illiterate women. This category of urban women - the First Ladies - usually devise various programmes which in theory are meant to correct the disadvantaged position of the rural woman vis-a-vis her urban counterpart. Onwueme however attempts to show that in actual practice, supposedly humanitarian gestures are nothing but fraudulent schemes aimed not at helping the

disenfranchised rural woman, but at creating a powerful platform for social relevance for spouses and mistresses of the ruling class.⁴ The implication as revealed through the play is that an avenue is being created for this class of women to syphon off funds meant for such programmes⁵ into private pockets. Thus the rural woman still continues to wallow in the quagmire of political alienation, economic exploitation and social deprivation. Definitely, there is no doubt that Onwueme has always championed the cause of the oppressed in her work since 1985. This fact is buttressed by Chidi Amuta (1989) when he states emphatically that as early as *The Desert Encroaches* (1985) Onwueme had shown:

a certain confidence in the power of the downtrodden, echoing an apparent leftist inclination even after condemning both capitalism and socialism in earlier parts of the play.⁶

It is therefore interesting to note that Onwueme follows her usual practice of speaking against oppression in *Tell it to Women*. The play emerges as a powerful indictment of the African urban woman, of feminist-oriented or feminist-motivated ideals which tend to relegate African customs to the dustbin. Seen from the layman's point of view, the struggle for dominance between the urban and rural women in Africa is a struggle for power, on both the spiritual and the physical levels which has a stabilizing emotional fulfilment on the homefront.

The urban woman with all her elitist ideals is unprepared or ill-equipped for this titanic challenge because she lacks the basic moral and spiritual foundation fundamental to cope with such a monumental battle for the psychic retrieval of WOMAN. It is indeed a test of wits and wills. Onwueme brings into focus the highly subjective prejudice of the urban woman upon which her entire worldview is predicated; ideas which do not accept the rural woman as an equal partner in progress in the fight for the emancipation of the womenfolk, but as dreg of the society whose fortunes ought to be subjected to her whims and caprices. Indeed, that the urban woman at the slightest

opportunity has always ridden on the back of the rural woman as vividly exemplified in *Tell it to Women*.

At first, the struggle between the two contending forces appears to be an unequal one, especially in the light of the powerful "arsenals of warfare" at the disposal of the urban woman, the most important being her access to Western education. Unfortunately, the 'weapons' also constitute her greatest undoing. She, therefore, emerges as an epitome of selfishness in contrast to the homely and matronly rural woman in this play.

Tell it to Women has a total cast of 12 major characters - apart from a chorus of women who play a supportive role⁷ - with Daisy, Ruth and Yemoja all of whom are female characters playing the most important roles. Daisy and Ruth symbolize the truly modern urban woman. Through these two characters, Onwueme shows that the call for women liberation in all spheres of human endeavour is indeed, a study of moral decadence in society as evident in the acts and utterances of these so-called 'liberal' and 'emancipated' women. In fact, Onwueme's thematic preoccupations in *Go Tell it to Women* (1992) are anchored on this same premise.

The third important character Yemoja,⁸ embodies the hopes and aspirations of the rural woman. Her name is very symbolic. It is a name with a religious and cultural significance. The fact that the play's leading rural woman character bears a name associated with a highly revered female divinity underscores the importance that Onwueme attaches to the inherent spiritual essence of WOMANHOOD, an essence which is associated with the rural woman, yet untainted by the sophistication of and exposure to modernity.

Tell it to Women has a total of five movements. In the opening scenes of Movement One, Yemoja is given two levels of interpretations aimed at establishing one of the major thematic concerns of the play: the advent of the unwholesome radicalism evident in modern feminism which brings sorrow

and a feeling of pessimism about what the future holds not only for the urban woman in Africa but women the world over.

In the first stage setting which Onwueme situates in Idu Kingdom - the rural homestead - Yemoja, the leading rural female character is assertive, independent and full of vitality. We see her as she dances with a group of women, preparatory for her departure to the city as the representative of the rural women, in furtherance of the government's policy of emancipating the rural woman from what government technocrats had perceived as social, political and economic denigration through a Better Life for Rural Women Programme.⁹

The atmosphere breaks into a chant of Yemoja! Yemoja! Yemoja! We see figures of women organizing themselves around a space that appears like the crossroads¹⁰ in a market place. At the centre is the figure of a young woman who apparently is the subject of the chant for the women have encircled her, drumming and chanting Yemoja! Yemoja! Dance... Yemoja is bashful but soon warms up. The entire atmosphere is filled with figures of women drumming, dancing and chanting...¹¹

Onwueme's portrayal of Yemoja when she arrives in the city is in contrast to the liveliness she had displayed while dancing at Idu, as depicted in the stage direction above and this one below:

Light reveals Yemoja alone in her waking moment at one corner of Daisy's parlour. She starts and gropes with her hands as if in search of her bearing. It is clear that she is disturbed, confused and darting her head, from end to end to capture the voices around her. She rises from the sleeping mat on the floor. Her mind is heavy as she searches for the women in her sleep, wondering where the women could have gone.¹²

Thus, right from the beginning of the play, Onwueme attempts to establish an incontrovertible fact that the radical transformation of the rural woman from her 'primitive state' into the age of sophistication as it is being advocated through the BLRWP is contrary to government's official statement,

kely to create chaos, dislocating the rural woman socio-mentally, and thereby making her lose her bearing and personality completely. Onwueme is insisting that the transformation should be gradual; that there should be a period of tutelage for the rural woman during which her potentialities become more apparent. In other words, she becomes an asset and not a liability.

Daisy, both a typical urban woman and government official with whom Yemoja stays in the city becomes rather too artificial in her language and contemptuous in her manners, that in the long run, she contradicts and consequently destroys everything she claims to embody. Daisy is ably supported by Ruth, a university lecturer and an avowed feminist. In the early scenes of the play, both women are able to intimidate Yemoja psychologically and physically. To Daisy, rural women are 'crude, uncivilized and naive'. She tells Ruth emphatically:

These people are just so crude, so senseless and so irresponsible that the best thing to do is just not to bother with them. It's best to leave them as they are, in their darkness... You gotta know it: rural maids are nothing but stubborn pigs full of shit!... What on earth will improve the lives of these people who are so fixed in the past? Don't you realize that for them the present died in the past?¹³

The question then is: If the rural woman is considered unimprovable and pathologically daft, why all the noise about government-backed efforts and determination to modernize and shape up the rural woman? This question we shall attempt to answer in this essay.

When Daisy and Ruth first arrived at Idu to speak to the people about the BLRWP they are well received by the rural women who see them as precursors of the good wind of social, political and economic change which is bound to blow in their direction. For Yemoja, Ruth and Daisy are role models and symbols of the ideal she has striven to attain through western education but which she never succeeded. Later, Yemoja becomes aware that Daisy and Ruth have corrupted the ideal of

the independent, self-reliant individual which western education has conferred on them. It is, in fact, the many opportunities which the access to western education offered the female folks that endeared the women of Idu to the BLRWP when the idea was first mooted by Daisy and Ruth who depicted to them a utopia where women would control their destinies themselves.

However, the rural women of Idu are definitely not unaware of the negative, corrupting influences of modernity and some of them subject Daisy and Ruth's proposal to a very objective, critical appraisal. One of such people who take the urban women to task is Adaku¹⁴ who incidentally is the oldest and wisest woman in Idu. She sees through the facade presented to the women of Idu by the urban women and realizes the subterfuge behind the whole scheme which trust upon the women of Idu some bizarre ideas which they are being deceived into accepting:

In fact the more I hear you people talk, the more I want to look inwards... into our lives to see how this new life is better. I am yet to be convinced. They may be far ahead of us in terms of money. But values... especially things to do with the spirit, moral values and the community. Hm... These modern people are yet to show me their humane essence.¹⁵

The old woman also recognizes that modernity brings with it loss of self-identity and self-alienation from one's root. Before, it was common knowledge that the cultural heritage of each African society formed the foundation for its existence. With the advent of modernity, the emphasis hitherto placed on sustaining elements of the African cultural heritage as a means of social, economic and political stability has been undermined in favour of sterile and very artificial values from alien cultures.

The urban woman as portrayed in *Tell it to Women* as a hybrid of two or more badly digested cultures and Adaku queries this. To her, Ruth and Daisy are self-alienated beings whose basis for independent existence is the very reason for

their unsuitability for the tasks their access to Western education had hitherto assigned to them.¹⁶

Eventually, the women of Idu reach a consensus about the need to cooperate with the government over the BLRWP and it was as a result of this that Yemoja becomes the link between the urban women and the rural women of Idu. This marks the beginning of an adventure to discover who the true emancipated woman is. As soon as Yemoja accepts to be the representative of Idu women in the city, her heroic potentialities begin to manifest. She confronts the parochial, self-centred and rather subjective views of the menfolk. Gradually, she becomes a more refined version of the more traditional norms and values which form both the spiritual and physical bedrock of Idu community. Koko, Yemoja's husband and his father, Ajaka are the first men to face Yemoja's wrath in her new role as the symbol of Idu women's assertion of their collective will over the tradition-bound regime of the men of Idu. Ajaka feels slighted that his daughter-in-law has accepted to serve the interests of the women of Idu in the city and he protests vehemently. At one stage, he retorts angrily in response to a statement by Yemoja:

Ajaka: ...Is this what a wife bought here for my son with my own money? (Silence) Yemoja, you have forgotten you are just a wife?¹⁷

Ajaka uses the word 'bought' instead of 'brought'. This implies that Yemoja, including every other woman who is also a wife, is a slave of her husband and in-laws. Yemoja is torn between her role as a dutiful wife, loving mother, obedient daughter and her yearning for freedom from what seems to be a male-informed cultural enslavement. Thus, she asserts her right to self-determination by disagreeing with Ajaka's insinuations:

Yemoja: I have forgotten nothing. My people gave me to your people as wife, not as slave. A wife is a wife not a slave! And if the women of Idu make me their choice, I accept to be...¹⁸

In accepting to be the 'eyes and ears' of Idu women in the city, Yemoja is presented with a plaque by Ruth. While handing the plaque to Yemoja, Ruth makes the mistake of saying 'plague' (57). I am of the view that what Onwueme has done is to deliberately play on the meaning and the sound of 'plague'. The pun on the two words has again helped to emphasize the playwright's conviction that the BLRWP as an example of feminist liberalism being propounded by Ruth and Daisy is indeed a plague capable of destroying the very positive qualities of the rural women if it is not carefully supervised.

The playwright also shows that in African rural villages, as exemplified by events which take place in Idu during the flashback scene in Movement Two, the women are already aware of their rights and are beginning to fight for them. The reason why the women of Idu eventually accept the BLRWP is because they feel that it can help them to articulate their views and opinions about issues, events and situations affecting their lives in a more efficient manner. In other words, the playwright is trying to say that any scheme aimed at improving the lot of the rural women economically, politically and socially in Africa must attempt to upgrade and modernize the homegrown ideas of the rural women first through formal education, rather than impose on them foreign ideas which further degrade their personalities and turn them into cultural albinos. Onwueme has her reason for taking this position.

The impression most people have is that in African traditional settings, men dominate and determine the socio-economic and cultural life of their people. However, *Tell it to Woman* is here suggesting an entirely different view altogether. For example, Idu women, contrary to the belief of their urban counterparts, are not marginalized in the strict sense of the word. Through Adaku and a few other characters, the playwright tells us about the Umuada, a socio-cultural group where the women take important decisions which affect the life of every member of the society including the men. Onwueme

uses the confrontation between the Umuada otherwise called the daughters of the land and the men of Idu which occurs in different parts of the play to show the immense authority wielded by the women at the grassroot level of the society. We find the women of Idu defining their position in the scheme of things at almost every given opportunity. According to Adaku:

...And no matter how important a man even our own son thinks he is, his right ends where the right of Umuada begins... We are the womb of the earth. From our wombs, sons sprout to earth. It is the life power, the mystery of womanhood. Women are the powers of the earth.... that no man will ever possess, but us...¹⁹

This statement further confirms that Idu women are movers and shapers of events in their immediate community. The immense clout which they wield is unassailable. Therefore, while the urban women are still struggling for relevance in their so called modern society among their male peers, their rural colleagues already know and are aware of their rights as equal and even major partners in a society supposedly dominated by men. For instance, one of the most important areas of any society is the market which in Idu is controlled solely by women.

Ajaka: Yes no matter how powerful the king cannot reign or exercise his control or powers in the market place. Only the Omu²⁰ can. And our Omu is a woman among women.²¹

The Omu herself, Adaku, ably ensconced in her role as the village matriarch, again restates the pre-eminent position of women by her declaration as she warns:

...I do not need any school teacher to tell me where the real power lies in the family. A man who wants to die quick should try to provoke his woman's wrath! Modern women do not know how much power they are losing by trying so hard to deny their natural rights of womanhood and powers of motherhood...²²

Even the men of Idu²³ admit unreservedly that their women are bastions of strength and authority on the economic,

spiritual, social and domestic fronts. Let us listen to Koko and Okeke:

Koko: Look who is more powerful than the Omu of Idu? Can any man dare stand his ground in the marketplace?

Okeke: You are asking that, does any man even have any space in the market place?

Koko: Women control the market place of Idu. Where else does power lie?

Koko: It is clear our women do not know what they have.

Okei: And it is clear people don't know what they have until they lose it...

Koko: I wonder if these women ever remember the role of the Umuada of Idu when they talk about power. Who wields more power than the Umuada of Idu?²⁴

The nagging question is, why does the urban woman seek a power which is already bestowed on womanhood? The play, again, has a clue to this question. It is only when she gets to the city that a character like Yemoja discovers that the urban woman's sudden love for the rural woman is simply borne out of the former's quest for self aggrandisement. The subjugation of Yemoja's restless, energetic and vibrant spirit by Daisy coupled with Ruth's highhandedness, and criticism of her actions by the duo, make her to realize early enough that the BLRWP is nothing but Bondage Unlimited for Rural Women.

One of the things Yemoja also discovers in the city is that to the urban woman like Ruth, 'Husbands and children' constitute shit and aggravation. Throughout the play, Ruth's influences rub off on Daisy and we find the two women taking their struggle to the extreme to the extent that Okei, Daisy's husband, sees a progressive retrogression in his wife in the performance of her wifely duties.

Using Daisy and Okei as a case study, the playwright presents the conflict that occurs in the homes of many so-called modern or literate couples as they find a balance between the traditional values about marriage and the more modern,

genderized ideas about female empowerment. Okei, for instance, plays the role he and Daisy ought to play together in the upbringing of their children, especially Rose, whom Daisy had taught to regard her grandmother Sherifat as a witch. However, despite trying to assert her independence, Daisy shows at different times in the play that she still depends on Okei for succour - in times of distress. This, of course, is Onwueme's method of stressing that the urban women should not undermine the role of men as pillars of support. A very good illustration in the play is when Okei informs Daisy that the rural women are coming to town for the launching of the BLRWP. Daisy becomes jittery because she is not prepared for them yet and she quickly turns to Okei (for support).

Daisy: (Rapidly and nervously)

...And if they come now, no arrangement has yet been made for their accommodation. Okei, you know them better. I am lost and confused. How am I to deal with these village women?²⁵

With the arrival of Sherifat, Okei's mother, in the city, Yemoja is transformed from a servile housemaid to a politically aware young woman struggling to be recognised as an independent human being with views of her own, and not through feminist labels. The assertion of Yemoja's right to self-identity becomes more evident when she incorporates elements of ritual dance into the march past rehearsal ordered by Daisy in preparation for the launching of the BLRWP.

When the rest of the women of Idu finally make it to the city to join Yemoja and Sherifat to witness the launching of the BLRWP, they are treated shabbily. It is very easy for the women of Idu to find fault with various aspects of modernity which the urban woman is trying to integrate them into. Such things include modern ways of cooking, dressing and taking care of the home. It is evident that the rural women and their urban counterparts stand at two opposite extremes. The rural women believe that motherhood symbolizes the inherent power

the Supreme Being has bestowed on women, while the urban woman as represented by Ruth, sees motherhood as a kind of yoke which has been evolved by the society to keep the womenfolk in perpetual bondage.

However, the rural women decide to exercise their independence by not acquiescing to the format of the launching programme prepared by government officials led by Daisy. The affirmation of their independence at the launching is borne out of their view that women are already powerful and do not need to seek what is already theirs.

Chorus of Women: Earth is power!
Power! Power!
Mother! Mother!
Mother is power!
Power! Power!
Power! Power!
Power is Women!²⁶

This is the kernel of the message that the rural women deliver to the urban team - male and female - at the launching. To them, modernity has made the urban woman a guinea fowl who roams the forest jumping from one end to another and never owning any place or space of her own (278). This theme has been stressed earlier by one of the rural women.

Tolue: These people (the modern people) need to be told that we know where we are, and then they can meet us somewhere. We cannot just be running after them.²⁷

The rural women therefore understand that their urban counterparts are hybrid or rootless personalities that most urgently need cultural restoration. It is very obvious that the rural woman is also in the best position to help the drifting urban woman find her bearing in this ever changing world. One further argument posited by the playwright is that while the fight by African women against any kind of male domination or exploitation may be justified, female activists at the vanguard of such a struggle must allow some amount of decorum to guide their relationship with other members of their sex -

whether literate or illiterate - who are involved in the same struggle.

Thus, while Onwueme concedes the idea that the rural woman must shed her toga of backwardness by becoming more enlightened, she (the playwright) also enjoins the urban woman to accept that the rural woman is a fellow combatant. In other words, Onwueme's admonition is that both of them must strive together to achieve the same goal an objective which is freedom for women in all spheres of human endeavour. What this suggests is that there must be a careful selection and synthesis of positive ideas from the two seemingly opposing extremes; a transformation that must lead to the emergence of new, generally acceptable, feminist values and ideals which would be espoused by both rural and urban women in Africa.

This is why in the final movement of the play, the collision between Adaku and Ruth is very symbolic. Adaku dies as a result of the collision while Ruth sustains injuries and is taken to the hospital. But the feeling one gets is that she will leave the hospital a changed person because Adaku's death will always act as a restraining force to curb her from her usual extremist positions. Although Adaku dies, the culture and tradition which she symbolizes in the lives of the rural women do not die with her. Left to shoulder her leadership responsibilities is a woman like Yemoja. With the little bit of western education that Yemoja acquires,²⁸ she is in a position to help fine-tune a synthesis of traditional and modernist values for the purpose of lifting WOMANHOOD from the abyss of self-destruction. This probably explains why Bose and even Daisy are co-opted into the ritual dance movements of Idu women towards the end of the play.

Furthermore it must be emphasised again that *Tell it to Women* has been specially adapted for the African audience. This explains the absence of the kind of expletives introduced into the language of some of the characters in the first few scenes of the American version. Therefore with regard to

language, it is obvious that the playwright has taken into cognizance the traditional African way of life with its strong emphasis on decorum in the use of language for communication purposes.²⁹ Onwueme softens the tone of the language employed by characters like Ruth and Daisy who typify the urban woman. The language of the characters from the rural setting like Yemoja, Adaku and Tolue is rich in traditional African idioms, idiolects and proverbs.

However, this should not be misconstrued to mean that the urban woman in the play does not assume a strong feminist³⁰ outlook in her attitude to issues, events and situations. For example, Onwueme raises the issues of lesbianism in *Tell it to Women* through the female character who espouses the feminist/modernist position.³¹ A lot of Africans believe that lesbianism as a way of life is a western-oriented, social malaise. Onwueme contends that such a notion is wrong. In treating the subject, however, the playwright adopts a very subtle approach which suggests rather than proclaims emphatically the existence of lesbianism in Africa. Onwueme's audience therefore has to guess the extent of the urban woman's revolt against norms and values acceptable to Africa's largely 'conservative' traditional societies.

On the whole, *Tell it to Women* conveys a topical message about the need to evolve a distinct, African brand of Feminism - Womanism - in such a unique way that attests to Onwueme's creative ingenuity and artistic versatility.³²

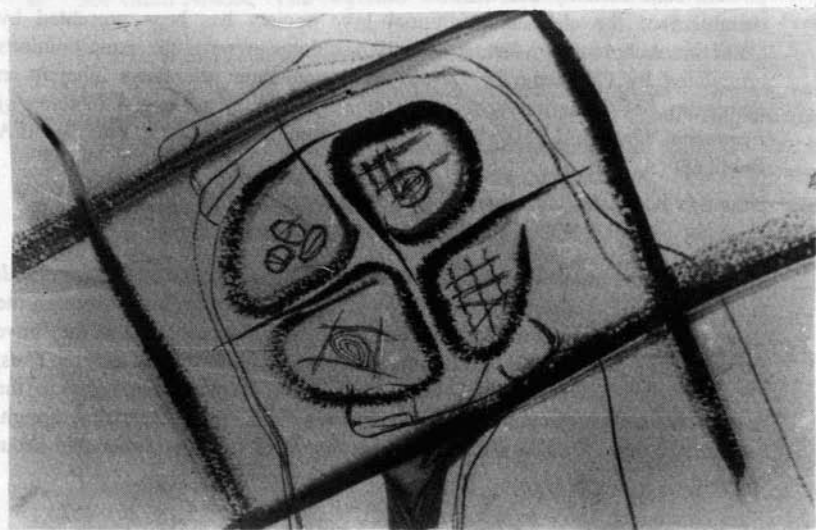
Notes

1. Onwueme was awarded the prize for the distinguished Martin Luther King/Cesar Chaves/Rosa Parks Writer and Scholar at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A. Onwueme was also Professor of Multi-Cultural Literary Studies at Montclair State University, New Jersey. She later became Professor of African Studies and English at Vassar College. Tess Onwueme is currently at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. See the blurb of Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995.

2. *The Desert Encroaches* helped in no small measure to establish onwueme's creative writing career as a playwright in Nigeria. Upon its publication, it won the Association of Nigerian Authors Literary Prize in Drama for 1985. Although there is a paucity of resource material on Onwueme, the recent demise of Professor Zulu Sofola has made many literary critics to acknowledge Onwueme as one of her few successors. See the Editorial of *The Guardian*, Wednesday, October 5, 1995, p. 12.
3. The idea of having First Ladies is not uncommon throughout the world. The most prominent First Lady in the world is the wife of the American President because of the prestige and glamour which go along with the office. There have even been cases of First Ladies replacing their husbands as President after the latter's demise. A very good example is what happened in Argentina between 1974 - 1976 when the late President Juan Peron (1946-1955, 1973-1974) was replaced by his wife, Maria Estela Peron, Vice President, (1973-1974), President (1974-1976).
4. Of recent in Nigeria, there has been the conceptualization and consequent evolution of mainly female oriented schemes like Mrs Maryam Babangida's much discredited Better Life for Rural Women Programme - which is central to the plot of *Tell it to Women* - and Mrs Maryam Abacha's Family Support Programme. Apart from this, a Ministry of Women Affairs under the headship of a female Minister, Ambassador Judith Attah, was created in 1994.
5. Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, p. 85.
6. See Chidi Amuta, 'The Nigerian Woman as Dramatist. The Instance of Tess Onwueme', Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo (eds) *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*, Lagos, Malthouse Press Limited, 1989 p. 57.
7. The female chorus acts as an observer and at various occasions voices independent opinions either to support or disagree with views being articulated by one or more of the major characters. The technique of using the chorus to comment on events in dramatic texts was perfected by Greek playwrights. Onwueme was only following a pattern set by foremost African playwrights like J. P. Clark Bekederemo who adapted the Greek format, gave it a distinct African flavour and incorporated it into the *Song of a Goat* (1961).
8. Yemoja is a river spirit regarded as a goddess of procreation and fertility among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. Apart from this, the name Yemoja also gives the character who bears the name, a solid spiritual foundation, unshakeable by the vagaries of modern society. Occasionally, Yemoja is used interchangeably with Onokwu, the Igbo goddess of the Sea. See Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, p. 21, p. 256, etc.
9. Henceforth BLRWP.
10. It is significant that this meeting of Idu women takes place at the 'crossroads in a market place'. In African traditional settings, crossroads, - which are often the meeting point of three or more footpaths or roads coming from different directions - have a spiritual connotation which again shows the emphasis placed on spiritualism or supernatural elements by the rural women depicted by

- Onwueme in this play. Among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria for example, fetish priests often instruct their patrons to offer sacrifices at crossroads in order to make such an offering acceptable to the gods. According to Margaret Thompson Drewal, "crossroads ... is a physical representation of the intersection of the phenomenal world and the other world." See Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 26.
11. Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, p. 3.
 12. Ibid p. 4.
 13. Ibid p. 7.
 14. The literal meaning to Adaku in Igbo is 'the first daughter of wealth'. This is a very symbolic name, considering Adaku's important role in *Tell it to Women*.
 15. Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, p. 39.
 16. It is interesting to note that Daisy was a native citizen of Idu, whose acquisition of western values had propelled her to discredit her cultural heritage. See Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Woman*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, pp. 40-42.
 17. Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, p. 55.
 18. Ibid pp. 55-56.
 19. Ibid p. 61.
 20. A much more comprehensive analysis of the executive, legislative and judicial powers controlled by the Omu as head of the market and the Umuada, as daughters of the clan, in traditional Igbo society has been presented by Catherine Acholonu. In fact, it is as if Acholonu presents the same opinions articulated by Onwueme in *Tell it to Women* about the flaws inherent in Feminism. See Catherine Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative of Feminism*, Owerri, LHP Women in Environmental Series, Vol. 3, AFA Publications, 1995.
 21. Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, p. 217.
 22. Ibid p. 218.
 23. Onwueme deliberately de-emphasizes the role played by male characters in *Tell it to Women*. Although the men of Idu, for instance, seem to see through the deception that turns out to be the BLRWP, we can safely assume that they have come by this extraordinary awareness as a result of their biased nature. Thus, the male characters only play inconsequential roles when compared to the roles of the female characters in *Tell it to Women*. This is not surprising though, because *Tell it to Women* is basically a play by a woman, for women and about women.
 24. Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women*, Ibadan, Heinemann, 1995, pp 261-262.
 25. Ibid p. 111.
 26. Ibid p. 272.
 27. Ibid p. 212.

28. Yemoja had had some educational training at a Teacher Training Institute. Her wish to acquire western education was scuttled by her parents who decided to send one of her siblings - her younger brother - to school because he was a male child.
29. Any conservative African with a strong sense of traditional, religious and moral values would frown at the blatant use of profane language in *Go Tell it to Women* as a way of presenting the liberal American attitude to issues, situations and events which have helped feminists in America to adopt an extremist posture in their revolt against established norms, practices and conventions.
30. It is very ironical that in *Tell it to Women*, committed Feminists like Daisy and Ruth do not recognise the rights of the rural women in Africa to self-definition. For more about the philosophy of Feminism and its emphasis on gender equality and women's right to individual choice, freedom and responsibility, see Dale Spencer (ed.) *Feminist Theories*, London, The Women's Press Limited, 1983.
31. Ruth, an aspiring Professor of *Feminist Studies* has a penchant for creating new words - derived from already existing words - which proudly proclaim the feminist/modernist position. Examples abound in the play - 'sheroes' (84) from heroes, 'womenopause' (149) from menopause and 'queendom' (98) from Kingdom.
32. See Chris Dunton, *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970*, London, Hans Zell Publishers, 1992, pp. 95-107.



*ONUORA OSSIE ENEKWE***Homeless In The City**

See the greatest wonder of civilization--
scavengers loose in the streets,
picking old clothes, cans and bottles,
hunting for food
in the anus of the city.

Eyes are arrows
aimed at the road,
eyes of chicken
that peck grains from dust.
Nostrils of flies
suck up the muck
in the corridors of decay.

Hunger drives the wren
into the open jaws of death.
A homeless child shivers
beside a granite mansion.
Hunger gnaws his belly.
Wintry winds nip his chest.

To wonder is bliss
to feet that feel no pain:
day after day
trashing through rain,
night after night
ready to fight through death
for a grain of light.

He tumbles along city streets
stumbles through alleyways
until madness mercifully claims him.

BOOK REVIEW**A Poet for the City**

TITLE: *Fingermarks*
AUTHOR: Tunde Olusunle
PUBLISHER: Kraft Books Ltd. Ibadan, 1996
REVIEWER: Wumi Raji

When The Curriculum Center of Carnegie-Mellon University in the early seventies, commissioned Michael P. Weber and Anne Lloyd to do a book on American urban life, one of the very first subjects the authors turned to was poetry. Very appropriately so, because, according to them, poets over the ages have always turned to the city in their search for inspiration. More sensitive and perceptive than most of us, the "poets often find beauty, love, loneliness or despair in urban life".

It seems very interesting reading Tunde Olusunle's collection against a background knowledge of Weber and Lloyd's chapter, "Images of the Contemporary City". But as a kind of textbook on urban geography, Weber and Lloyd's *The American City*, on urban geography can hardly provide the norms for a poetic response to the contradictions, heterogeneity and social novelty of city life. Given that Third World societies are contending with crises that have their sources ultimately in the colonial experience, there are special challenges for poets concerned with the emergent cities of these places. Such a writer needs an even higher degree of sensitivity and perceptiveness. These are qualities that one finds in Olusunle's *Fingermarks*.

The collection, in the main, grapples with the tone, texture and pace of the modern Nigerian city, and therefore helps the reader not just to come to terms with the chaos and violence, but also offers the means of positive transformations.

There are three parts to the collection. The first one, subtitled "Vistas", contains the largest number of entries. This is where Olusunle articulates his perception of the urban environment of contemporary Nigeria. The very first poem is on Lagos, the city where Olusunle first practised as a journalist. The poem's tone is delicate and well-balanced: Olusunle is on familiar terrain, the city being his favourite. The reader's imagination is arrested right from the very opening line. Lagos is a city of opportunities and innumerable wonders. What with the overhead roads, the skyscraping buildings, and the massive villas. But Lagos is also a city of unimaginable agonies and contradictions. Side by side with the mansions and villas are the shanties and shacks. There are also perennial traffic bottlenecks, accommodation problems and the general rat-race. It is a measure of Olusunle's confidence that he is able to appropriate effectively in the poem the Yoruba traditional praise-names for the city to buttress the precarious situation of Nigeria's foremost urban centre.

Two poems further dwell on the fascinating city. The first is "Lagos Rain" which, as the title suggests, focuses on that peculiar Lagos phenomenon which never ceases to generate awe in both the visitors and inhabitants. The second poem "Drop" further underlines the nature of the social inequality of the urban centre. In Lagos, a taxi ride is an expensive luxury which can be afforded only by those with bulging wallets. The impoverished majority pack, sardine-like, in rickety molue and kombi buses.

Poems like "Benin Revisited" and "Lokoja" provide us with an opportunity of differentiation between urban environments in Nigeria. The former is a nostalgic piece. Benin, the Edo State capital was where Tunde Olusunle grew up and started his

elementary education. Then it was a rustic community with small children engaged in unending carnivals and innocent ladies performing to *ivie* music. Returning there after seventeen years, Olusunle discovers that the old order has been displaced, giving way to special kind of urban violations.

On the whole, Olusunle's response to the city has been characterised by disgust and revulsion. The poem "City Life" summarises these feelings. In section three, however, the poet puts forward what he perceives as the alternative proposals to the reality of city dislocations. Appropriately titled "Visions", Olusunle's specific projection in this section is that of revolutionary violence. The time is ripe, as he contends in one of the poems, "when the underdogs suddenly shall rouse/From their depressed slumber and deathly nap/Hewing recklessly the harbingers of their calamities" (63).

With *Fingermarks*, Olusunle becomes the first member of Ilorin Writers Unlimited, the transformed association of former members of the University of Ilorin Creative Writers' Group, to come out with an individual collection. This is only to be expected as Olusunle is one of the most artistically gifted and committed members of this group.

In fact, his contributions to *Rising Voices*, edited jointly by David Cook, Olu Obafemi, and this writer, the first and only published anthology of the group, are arguably, among the most polished and stylistically sophisticated poems in the anthology. The present collection is fulfilment of the expectations raised by this earlier effort. The wit here is sharp, the images vivid, and the diction just right. Of course, there is the occasional verbosity and what is suspected as a rather overbearing influence of Niyi Osundare, the highly charismatic Nigerian poet. Also, a number of readers may want to question the relevance of the title to the collection. But, on the whole, there will be no doubt as to the high quality of the poems, stylistically and thematically.

AMECHI NICHOLAS AKWANYA

Nkala's *Drums and the Voice of Death* and the Power of Events

Review Essay

Publication Data:

AUTHOR: Nathan Nkala
TITLE: *Drums and the Voice of Death*
TYPE: Fiction
PUBLISHED: Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1996 (218 pages).

Narratives looking back on a mementuous event of the past account for a large number of the major works of the growing archive of Nigerian literature. This fact has impressed itself on several readers of African fiction, and they have reacted in different ways depending on their expectations of the novel and favourite narrative modes and genres. And there have been explanations offered in terms of the 'great shadow', the 'immense prestige', or the 'influence' and 'example' of Chinua Achebe, who was first, in our cultural world, to write in that vein. But it may equally be argued that the historical imagination is a favourite mode of expression, which has been imbibed as part of the cultural world view. A case for the latter may be made from the abundance in the literary works themselves of stories of the type,

once upon a time,

or when the specific event a happened

x did z, resulting in y,

hence, xy/or hence zy.

What we see in this sequence is the formula whereby the individual becomes part of an event, producing a new totality or

character. We see this, for instance, in the madness of Ezeulu; we see it also in the transmutation of Kanayo Akunnia, the protagonist of *Drums and the Voice of Death*, from a forward-looking and broad-minded young undergraduate student to an amoral and blood-thirsty brute, who submits himself to such unworthy passions as revenge and self-gratification, and is driven by them into very serious crime.

But this study of the twisting of an individual's mind or, to use the language of *Drums and the Voice of Death*, the *fouling* of his life, nevertheless has a positive value. What literature can do, and I think, most credibly of all human enterprises, is to single out the individual, particularly, the one that has failed, to take interest in him as a person, to see the world through his own eyes, to think his thoughts, to relive his experiences; and sometimes, even for a moment, to let the reader change places with him. This is why there always seems something inhuman about the satiric stance, in which the narrator climbs up a secure tower, from which high eminence to look down upon an individual embroiled in a situation he takes very seriously, but which the observer can only see as ridiculous. Writes Paul Ricoeur:

We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative (*Time and Narrative*, 1984: 75).

We do not know what happens to Kanayo ultimately. But we have thought his thoughts, and seen the world as he himself sees it. What we know, which he only vaguely suspects, hence his desire to tell his own story in its entirety, to take us by his own hand along the path he has lately travelled, with all its sordid and glorious turns, is that the character we are looking at has been shaped by what Achebe has somewhere called "the power of events". And we can take it that what we have seen is only a microscopic view, which encourages us to take the

objective accounts in the history books with a grain of salt, to notice the individual caught up in the turmoil, to take his side, and to see his actions in the light of the experiences imposed by these events that have taken hold of him, and shaped him in ways that no one could predict. Whether this is the way things *really* are is beside the point. What is pertinent is that this is a way of looking at experience - which alone is literature's way of handling or talking about experience: it cannot tell us what is the truth, the final truth of experience. On the logic of this perspectivism, Lukacs has written:

Now if experiences such as these are linked with the knowledge that similar upheavals are taking place all over the world, this must enormously strengthen the feeling first that there is such a thing as history, second that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it has a direct effect upon the life of every individual (*The Historical Novel*, 1962: 20).

The historical novel is the elaboration of this hunch that the individual's freedom of action is a conditioned freedom.

This, then, is the theoretical infrastructure which guides sense-making in historical narratives, which must be the case, as well, in Nathan Nkala's *Drums and the Voice of Death*, which takes place as a tracking of the history of Kanayo Akunna, and of a small human community, at several levels, who have been drawn into a social upheaval they do not understand, and out of which they have not come out as they have gone in. Nkala's novel not only reflects the historical imagination which I have argued is inevitable in an intellectual tradition where the explanation of the singular fact is by linkage to large movements following an unpredictable course, it is also self-consciously a literary work. This is going to be the focus of what now follows.

The first thing about a literary work is that it sets up its own situation; the second thing is that it articulates this situation. By this, the individuality of the text is established. For a text, individuality first of all connotes autonomy; hence the work

does not require validation by outside events. This is true even of a novel like *Drums and the Voice of Death*, which is framed by datable events of which the significant moments may be corroborated by outside facts. However, the autonomy of the text is at a cost: it diminishes the reality of the experience it purports to grasp. And the judgements, viewpoints, and attitudes supported by such a text can only be individual and subjective.

Of course, in the actual context of a published work, the setting up of the novelistic situation is the same as articulating it. It is often forgotten that a poem, a novel, or a play is encountered by the reader as a finished product; as such, the motivation, the process and logic of composition, the revisions and changes, the succession of drafts behind the work are a secret known to the writer alone. These have become part of his memory, and subject to forgetting, editing, rearrangement, distillation, and all the various processes by which a memory is reduced or enriched.

Sometimes the writer tells us his secret, which we may be wise to treat as another fiction. When the telling of this secret is part of the text of the novel itself, it is undoubtedly *fiction*. The construction of this fiction, is what we are treated to in *Drums and the Voice of Death*. We read in the Prologue, for instance, that:

I started [this story] on the sheafs of football coupons my predecessor in the cell had spread on the bamboo bed. Even while here, at this last beachhead in the struggle for survival, he was still 'perming any three in eight games.' Perming for his future wealth. Laying up his store. Right on this bed. It was the type we called *Alawa-Aghara*. He too has gone beyond and left it to me. I did not meet him here though. But true to its name, it had been left to another human derelict. That's what everyone who enters this cell should be. Refuse heap of this stinking jungle (p. 4).

The 'I' in the narrative is a convict awaiting execution. He is writing the story of his life impulsively: it is a confession (p. 3).

But he wishes to make the story interesting. He is already doing this in his reflection on the character of his predecessor in the cell. The man had been a gambler, and had continued to gamble to the end. The proof is 'the sheaf of football coupons' the narrator has found on the bed. Obviously, he has chosen not to explore other possible explanations for the introduction of the football coupons into the cell - as a left-over from the writing of another history, for instance. In a typically novelistic short-circuiting, he unveils for us a gambler. The figure of a gambler at such a passage in life is certainly interesting, because it is potentially productive at the imaginative level. As such, it is superior to the 'facts', if these be no more than materials connected to the processes of documentation. An objectivity which would require that such facts be stated, for the simple reason that they are *the* facts, is according to Roland Barthes 'castrating'; whereas the imaginative object liberates.

Our narrator seeks to make his story still more interesting by substituting for himself the third-person of the novel. And he wishes us to take this third-person device as a separate individuality:

I think I should place myself at a distance and write about Kanayo and his father, about how Ichere Aku fouled the life for Kanayo. Him, the Kanayo-not me! He too was hounded out of the university when bleeding mourners and swollen eyelids filled the face of the earth, found himself drawn into a war he had no hand in starting. You must never link Kanayo with me. Nor link any of the characters with any one you know, however true my story sounds (p. 5).

This is a strange way to announce the intention to write a novel, because it says frankly that *here is fiction*. So we are to take the characters we encounter *for* real: no one speaks through another; each character is his own proper person, and his speech is proper to himself. The confession we are promised is in fact a 'redemption pact with [an] unknown voice' (p. 5). This is fiction announcing the setting up of its own context. From now on, the voice that speaks the narrative is attached to

its narrative, and is identified by this function. It has no separate individuality apart from that created by the necessity of telling this story. Its owner, as much as its history, is unknown to the reader. It is unknown equally to Nathan Nkala. The individuality of this voice is utterly personal and irreducible. Only thus can we accept the high light-heartedness of the opening chapters, which has apparently nothing to do with the mind of a person awaiting execution in a few days' time, and sufficiently terrified to be becoming unbalanced, as it is having hallucinations (pp. 1-2).

Two emotional levels are created in this work; for the atmosphere of terror and bleak despair created in the Prologue is not dispelled by the narrative that follows, even though its tone is animated throughout. The events of the narrative are reconnected in the last chapter to the situation portrayed in the Prologue, but not the tone. Even in this last chapter, which brings us by a long detour to the present 'reality', the agitated voice is not recovered; the tone has remained transcendent. This duality in tone is one of the many issues of literary craftsmanship which are raised in Nkala's book.

The story itself splits into two at the level of plot structure. The Prologue is concerned with a personal tragedy, and this is picked up again in the last chapter, where we are told that the protagonist, Kanayo, is in fact a surrogate for Emeka, the man actually facing execution, and where the confession promised in the Prologue, and denied early in chapter 18 ('You were expecting a confession from me... Sorry-oo! I can't help you, I have no confession to make'), is finally, furtively made almost at the very end:

What worried us was Ichere Aku, the renegade lawyer who flaunted his affluence in our face. And paid dearly for his folly. He has been paying for our daily palm wine, at least. And the wrong people were apprehended for it. (pp. 207-208).

At this level, therefore, we are dealing with the story of a man going into his own past to establish the network of

relations and causes, of events and sequences, where the one 'mad' act of armed robbery for which he is awaiting execution has its origin and context. Historical thought which is the general ambient of the work itself is reproduced at the level of the character's own consciousness. Strangely, all the explanation he can offer is personal revenge, sexual jealousy, and sheer want. But we know that there is more to it than this. Chinyere is the character on whose behalf Kanayo-Emeka's sexual jealousy is aroused. And she is a central figure in his consciousness, as her personal presence has enough force to make his world to 'stand still' (p. 197). At pages 72 and 73, we see him, in fact, act irrationally in her presence.

By contrast to Chinyere, who drives the hero towards irrational behaviour, the father, Mazi Akunnia, another towering figure in his consciousness, is the one who elicits from him the most noble sentiments of self-sacrifice in the pursuit of a common cause, and leads him to heroic achievement precisely at the juncture where he has forcefully driven Chinyere from his consciousness. But she will return, at the end, with some violence; and when she does, he finds himself propelled into the commission of another irrational act, which will seal his fate.

The introduction of the third-person narrator has this important consequence, that it relativizes the personal fate of Kanayo. By striving to give an *objective* account of the events, and since these events are momentous, concerning the chapter in the history of the *Nno* people, when they are massacred, hunted down, and expelled from all over Awusaland (p. 80), and are subsequently tricked into prosecuting a war of secession (p. 114), these events become the focus of attention: in a truly Aristotelian schema, the importance of the person takes second place after the 'action'.

Interwoven with this *historical* plot, and the making-narrative of the impact of these momentous events on the small Uvwungodo community, is a plot touching upon love and

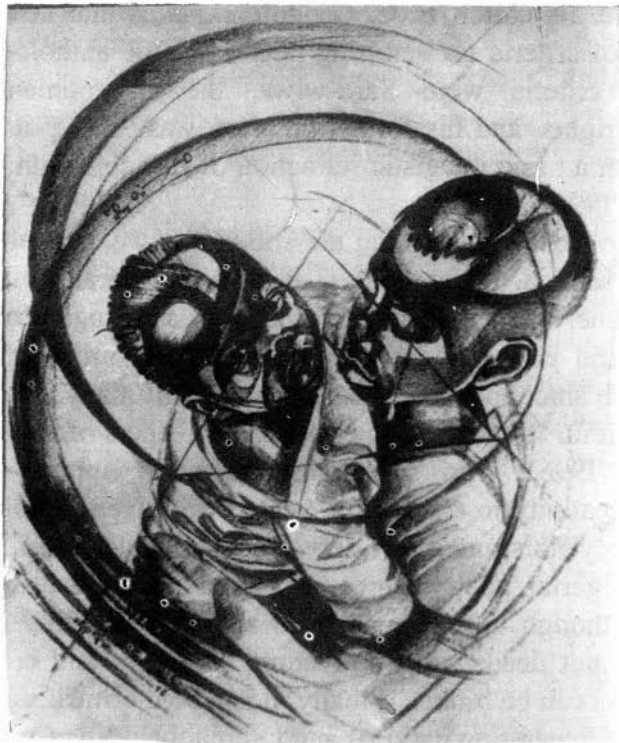
marriage, the fare of the realist novel. In this story, three men sue for the affections of one young woman. We see her definitely rebuff the oldest of the three, Ichere Aku, whom her father wishes her to marry (p. 127); we also see her early commitment to the protagonist Kanayo (p. 130), and her indecision, subsequently, between Kanayo and the latest comer, Sam Obikwelu (p. 129), and finally, her marrying Ichere Aku out of expediency (pp. 174-175).

Nkala's novel contains several interesting technical manoeuvres, though as we have already hinted, there is something uneasy about the tone. There are also quite a few questions pertaining to technique. Such a problem is encountered with the flashback device. The saving of narrative time by recovering a past event in the space of the present makes technical sense if it takes place in a character's consciousness; whereas in pages 50 to 51, we observe a banter between Kanayo and Boy Yokolo trigger off a memory for the narrator! This memory is not shared by any of the participants in the sequence. Therefore, it has the air of *filling in*. The attempt to link-up to the present (p. 52) does not come off. But there are equally difficult strokes which come off very well. For example, in chapter 3, there is a reporting of several events happening at the same time. The fact is that perception, like thought itself, may be instantaneous, but the reporting of it is bound to become linear, causing delay. This delay, which is part of the structure of narrative is complicated in this particular 'frame' by the inserting of remarks overheard in the nearby drinking place. In the event, the narrative is repeatedly interrupted, but without breaking down altogether.

Another fine touch in the management of the narrative is the frequent heightening in the process of presentation by imagery. For example:

Akunnia was really boiling inside. Rivulets of sweat were pouring down his face, effervescence of the fire cooking its pot of bitter brew inside his heart (p.83).

Not only is Akunnia's extreme anger and disappointment betrayed by his copious sweating, breaking to the surface, as it were, despite strenuous efforts at self-control, these emotions are also felt as a raging fire, and a pot boiling and frothing over inside. Imagery here not only fixes a mental picture, but involves the reader in constructing the picture. This is but an instance of what comes out again and again, in different forms, creating the sense of a field of immense energy, of a text drawing the reader by its intensity and urgency into the action, no longer merely as a witness seeing through the eyes of the narrator, but as an active participant. Reading, decidedly, is not a passive receiving of information, but a construction, truly an experience.



Book Review

- TITLE: *For Ken, For Nigeria: Poems in Memory of Ken Saro-wiwa*
EDITOR: E. C. Osondu
PUBLISHER: Service and Service International, Lagos, Nigeria

For Ken, for Nigeria is a collection of dirges memorializing the execution of one of Nigeria's foremost modern artists - Ken Saro-wiwa. Its editor, E. C. Osondu, explains that he applied two sets of criteria for selecting poems for the anthology. His thematic criteria were Saro-wiwa, the environment, and minority rights, and his formal criterion was "being at least a poem with a basic imagistic refraction of its subject universe." (Osondu: 1996).

Before closely examining the anthology, we can safely say that it is seminal in the history of Nigerian literature for four reasons: one, it is a pleasant affirmation that though academic literary, and economic activity in Nigeria is probably at its lowest ebb since independence, there are still many and varied writers within "a resilient inner nation of keepers of the dream" (Osondu: 1996), who could respond with vibrant, robust literary creativity to a national event. Two, given its topicality and recency, this anthology serves as a reliable mirror of the state of Nigerian poetry. Three, it is an indication that the book industry, though under shock from aliterary elements in high places, is not dead; with motivation, hardwork and creativity the barriers can be broken. Finally, it is a bold critical statement capable of generating national and international literary debate and discussions.

The ninety-two poems in this anthology can be divided into two groups, namely: The fifty-nine poems dealing solely with the execution of Saro-wiwa, and the thirty-three dealing with the three themes, Saro-wiwa, the environment and minority rights in various admixtures.

Taking the pure dirges first, we find that almost all of them are excellent one way or another. Among them, they wade through the full range of mourning, emotions - numbness, disbelief, denial, guilt, fear, anger, and acceptance/grief. Let us take as our example the first and the last poems in the anthology - "the icon lost" by Victor Abochi (p.15) and "refusal to mourn the death by hanging of ..." by E. C. Osondu (pp 156-157). These two poems combine anger, denial, acceptance and grief. In the former, anger is made palpable in the use of such words as: "swine", "garbage", "dung", "carnage" and "cruelty", as well as in the choice of imagery: "swine after garbage", "kneading a cake of dung", "sinews of the heart... torn by the weight of tune" etc.

But in "refusal to mourn..." anger comes to life in biting irony in which words connoting joy, morality and beauty such as "chaste", "austerity", "carnival", "beauty", "symphony" and "gently" clash with those picturing solitude, violence, tyranny, and death, viz: "death", "hanging", "macabre", "rifles", "hangman", "silence", "guillotine", etc. It comes through too in the image of the hangman floating.

The world of silence

Freshening the noose of

The hangman

The condemned man nourishes his soul

With its exquisite morsels

It is particularly exciting to notice the poet's play on "silence" when we remember that the subject of this dirge refused to speak during his mock-trial. This apparently had the dual ironic effect referred to in the above quotation. We cannot miss the metaphysical wit in these lines:

Death by hanging becomes

Poets

Dreamers whose tongues breed their own sorrows

Recommended

For their mouth is close to their

Neck

In "the icon lost" immediately after stanza one, there is direct accusation:

They have killed man!

They have nailed innocence to the cross!

We mourn for the Icon lost!

Stanza two counters with a denial:

No! the man is not dead!

The son of courage

Danced at the edge of the world

He gazed with contempt at the rope of death

And declared:

"I am not flesh

But spirit and idea that cannot die

Sunk deep into the masses."

Though we can read this as a typical grief reaction - the It is not true! it cannot be true! please say it is a lie! syndrome, (all meaning, of course, I do not want it to be true), we can also read it in another sense. The sense brought out in the last lines of that stanza - the man died, but the idea, the spirit of the struggle lives on "sunk deep into the masses".

The denial in E. C. Osondu's poem starts in its very title and permeates the whole poem. "The refusal to mourn the death by hanging of..." even refuses to name the subject of his dirge. Preferring to focus our attention on the experience of death by hanging, he describes it variously as "chaste austerity", lacking "all dignity", better done at night - past midnight". But he promptly denies all of this in his closing stanza. In a climactic direct address to his unnamed subject, he declares:

Your hanging has cast myriad lights
Into that chamber
And the flood-tide of your dignity
Makes me want to shout
HANG ME, IT SUITS MY SOUL

This paradox compels the reader to re-evaluate his attitude to the death sentence and accept the poet's final statement that it is dignifying to die by hanging for speaking out.

In spite of all of this rhetoric, these two poems do accept and grieve over the death of their subject. "The Icon lost" remains an icon lost and "the refusal to mourn the death by hanging of..." is nothing but a poignant cry of the soul.

Ezenwa Ohaeto's "a village owns the voice of the cock" is outstanding in the whole anthology because it manages to introduce a note of solace and lightheartedness. This it does by means of, first, the image of the village cock. This is a calming serene image. The cock crows at regular hours through the night when the rest of the village is peacefully asleep. It, therefore, represents the watchfulness, consistency, and loyalty of nature. It somehow reminds us by subtle association of emotions that life will go on, and that the event itself though tragic is part of a natural order of things.

Second, having calmed us a little with this imagery, it proceeds to delight our senses most delicately by means of puns. Puns, though basically comic, have had serious literary uses. In *Romeo and Juliet* (III 1. 101) Mercutio bleeding to death, says, "Ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man." And John Donne's solemn "Hymn to God the Father" puns throughout on his own name and the verb "done". Yet whether used with serious or comic intent, puns are vehicles of humour for the wit they convey. Hence these two stanzas:

I will think, of your voice
As the question mark

On the question of life;

Some will remember you
 As the full stop
 To the sentence of disaster,
 Or as the bone
 In the bone of contention,
 Or as the bitter sting
 In the tail of the scorpion
 Or as the water
 That has flowed under the bridge

are strikingly refreshing in an anthology full of pain.

Of course, some of the poems go to such extremes in the “imagistic refraction” of their “subject universe” that unision is blurred. An example is “Knell-wail” Kunle Okesipe (p. 126). Even the most adept metaphysical critic will have difficulty in understanding or enjoying his last stanza:

Their wraiths pluck, the song,
 Eve, a light
 From the swallow’s lamp
 Bay, at bay the dawn
 Hush blots the voice.

This reminds one of the old Hopkins disease. The sprung rhythm along with the obscure allusion to Eve are tell-tale signs. The allusion is obscure not because the character is unknown, but because the connection is not clear at all. Therefore, the wail in knell-wail hardly comes through.

This contrasts sharply with the simple, yet most effective “beyond our ken” by M.S.C. Okolo (p. 127). The profound emotional impact of this poem appears to be based on the fact that it is just a letter, a very short one at that:

Dear Ken,
 remember those days
 when we thought

that between earth and heaven
are only peace and joys

Those green days
of abandonment
to the wonders of free breathing
in the fold of our magical environment

Now my tears
Fall on crusted mist
upon a fist
for you who once listed
this land as ours
this land now beyond our ken.

One cannot miss the intimacy with the subject/hero and the nostalgia conveyed in the first two stanzas by the use of simple but highly emotive words: "dear", "Ken", "remember", "we", "peace", "joy", "our", "those", "fold", "magical" and "wonders". Nor can any perceptive reader fail to feel the increase in intensity of these emotions as the poem progresses very rapidly from "those green days/of abandonment" to "Now my tears". The eerie drop from "our magical environment" to "my tears" and "this land now beyond our ken" transmits vividly the sense of loneliness, collective as well as personal, felt by the poet. Note the change in the antecedents of the same pronoun "our" in the last two lines.

In fact the poem seems to grow in our minds as we read it over and over again. It bespeaks high poetic talent to pack so much emotion into so few simple words. The epistolary form appears also very affective; for who would address a letter to a dead man, but one caught in the depths of despair.

Now, coming to the thirty-three poems combining the three themes, we find them equally exciting but certainly not as emotionally satisfying as the pure dirges. But they also explore the emotions of grief, anger and guilt, in their tripartite scope,

in which the theme of corruption in high places is introduced. In "sound of the bugle" (p. 16), by Ayo Adedun for example the poet complains bitterly that the people (writers and other alike) do nothing to stop the rape of the land which is going on. With sarcasm, he describes the anger of Nigerians as "covert and their threats as "innocuous, of no calendar" because "man are too ignorant of battle... to understand the use of No. Instead of heeding the bugle's call for battle, the "women' wailing" is outsounded by "Noise of carousal at home". On wonders whether this sarcasm extends to the poet's own anger and threat expressed in his closing couplet:

If I could choose my gunary day
Herod, I would blast you dead.

The allusion in,

Noise of carousal at home
outsounds the women's wailing -

to the unfortunate inaugural ceremony of the River's State Chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors only twenty five days after the hanging of Saro-wiwa seems to confirm that the poet is sincerely lampooning the anger and threats of the writers themselves.

Kayode Aderinokun's "primordial cocoon" is a long poem that massively criticizes the ruling class - civilian and military. He lampoons the slogans of the various revolutions as sermons that "ring rickety and worn", quickly put together "To perjure with contrived pledges", in order to evoke a bend of fraternization and rest the pen of critics.

He does not spare the citizens either, for he sees Nigeria a "land of masquerades" where "No sin is too grave to forgive. Nor scar too squalid to forget."

The expansion of theme in this group of poems even leads to a dialectic on the forms and model of fighting available and legitimate for the artist. Adagogo Brown in "Betrayal" (p. 6) accuses writers (including himself) of an outright sell-out. "What a shame" he remonstrates:

A score and five days
 After one of their own
 Was forced home
 They gathered
 To celebrate their being
 Wining and dining with those
 Who had them humiliated
 Plucking away a plume
 Off their wings.

But G. E. Fefagha in a response "Betrayal" (p. 85) who admitting all the charges, argues that:

The might of the hare
 Is not tested before the tiger
 But when tiger retreats
 The hare can challenge the elephant

He rationalizes the loss of a "master" as the price to be paid because:

The wilful pursuit of truth
 Sometimes sprains the neck;
 Its fierce light
 Can blind the probing eyes.

However, aesthetically, one of the most satisfying poems in this group is Esiaba Irobi's "music of the Atlantic" (p.94). As the title indicates, its dominant image is that of the river/ocean with their aquatic and terrestrial fauna. The opening stanza personifies the river as paying its vow of vengeance to the land:

The river kept his vow. And now
 a bearded wave
 framing at the corners of his width
 purses his lips
 throws back his head and spits upon the shore.

This image of an angry river vengefully breaking its waves relentlessly on the shore introduces and sustains the theme of

anger and retribution through the poem. The second stanza says why the river is vengeful:

Here where king Pepple of Bonny sold ten men
for every box of matches,
mortgaged the future for bottles of whisky
seafuls still survey for oil wells
as they recite your history in stanzas of laughter.

In the last two stanzas, "the pebbles went", "the corals cry" and "the ringing reefs weep." Where are the human inhabitants of this eerie river land? In a most ironic twist, dismembered human parts are the only ones around - Fingers of dead men sprout from the mud... and wave to us in a language of signs

Islands of skeletons like question marks
punctuate the paragraphs
of a saga written in blood, mud, and water.

Although the theme of the anthology is not mentioned explicitly in this poem, the imagery overwhelmingly transmits the message clearly. This might be exactly what editor Osondu referred to as imagistic refraction of a poem's subject universe - showing rather than telling. The reader is taken into confidence and allowed to infer by association what the theme is. There is an aesthetic distance from the tragic event which only the two poems by Esiaba Irobi succeeds in conveying. Perhaps these poems were written before Saro-Wiwa's execution. If not, then, he as a poet succeeds better than all the others in this anthology to refract his theme. However, the desirability of this quality in a dirge is highly debatable considering the fact that the subject is heavily charged with emotion.

All told, this is an anthology that will satisfy the poetic taste of many critics.

Bibliography

Brinkley, R. F. (ed) *English Poetry of the XVII Century*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1936 p. 75.

Chinweizu, et al. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: FDP. 1980.

Clarke, G. & Wright, W.A. (ed) *The Plays and Sonnets of William Shakespeare* vol.1 London: William Benton, 1952, pp. 285-319.

Osondu, E. C. *For Ken, for Nigeria*, (Poems) Lagos: Service and Service International, 1996.



**Beyond the Limits of Experimentation -
A Review of Ada Ugah's *The Ballads
of the Unknown Soldier***

PUBLISHER: Harris Publishers Ltd, Enugu, Nigeria, 1989

Ada Ugah is indeed an 'indefatigable' author. To his creative credit are the following works - *Naked Hearts* (1982), *Song of talakawa* (1983), *Hanini's Paradise* (1985), and *The Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* (1989). His poetry has already received significant critical attention. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1988) describes his poetic voice as engaging and disturbing.

It is, however, with his literary experiment - *The Ballads of Unknown Soldier*, sub-titled "A Novel in Ballads" - that we are concerned in this essay. Chidi Ikonne, in his Foreword, calls the book an 'incongruity' because, according to him "though narratives, the novel and the ballad belong to different genres". Yet, he sees the incongruence as creative because 'it spells experimentation, which is what African literature needs now if it must outgrow the shibboleth of its dated and sterile matrix.'

Concerning the genesis of the work, he states: though its conception is prose, its production is poetic. From an almost unbelievable story in pedestrian prose which appeared in *The Herald* of 6 October 1988, has emerged a mould in which a myth materializes under the very nose of the reader. Though Ikonne concedes that students and lovers of literature may argue about the appropriateness of Ugah's attribution of the form "novel" to his lines of poetry and poetic prose, he is convinced that Ugah's book is a bold contribution to the restructuring of the African literary landscape.

It seems obvious to us that this work, as well as its foreword, needs a closer look because of its implications for the criticism of African literature. On the one hand, the book,

because of its sub-title, raises the fundamental issue of the formal definition of the African novel. On the other hand, its foreword begs a number of critical questions: What is the "shibboleth" of African literature's "dated and sterile matrix"? What do these strongly negative words "dated" and "sterile" mean in their context? What antecedent do they qualify? Is the African literary landscape in need of a restructuring? etc. For a reasonable depth of analysis, this essay will take up only the issues of formal definition of the African novel in relation to length, subject matter, as well as structural and textural complexity. This issue will be discussed further in another essay.

The subject of the definition of the African novel as an autonomous genre has received exhaustive critical attention. Witness Abraham 1962; More 1962; Achebe 1964; Tibble 1965; Roscoe 1971; Povey 1972; Palmer 1972; Larson 1972; Leslie 1973; Izevbaye 1975; Obiechina 1975; Chinweizu et al 1980. With standards gleaned from these and other sources, let us take, first, the issue of length. This book covers 177 pages. As a guide to the actual content, however, this is misleading. Altogether, the eight ballads making up this 'novel' contain 1,500 words. The average African novel contains about 69,488 words, with some - like Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* getting to about 140,000 words.

Chinweizu et al (1980: p. 27) discuss with much critical insight the question of length in the definition of the African novel. While defending African fiction writers from Eurocentric critical charges of brevity, they clearly indicate that the African novel must have considerable length. This is not because they want to ape their western masters, but because the African antecedents to the novel - the epics and epic cycles - are lengthy by their nature.

This claim appears to be substantiated, not only by the first generation of recorded African epics,¹ but also by more recent recordings (Azuonye & Udechukwu 1984: pp 4-20). Take as an example the epic *Ameke Okoye*,² "Enu Nyili-Mba," just one encounter in the epic (equivalent of one chapter in a novel) contains 9,270 words. "Told in its entirety, this tale can last well over five nights," say the researchers. Can the modern African fiction writer learn from these his oral predecessors? In the words of Chinweizu et al, he can and has: "these oral narratives have made thematic, technical, and formal contributions to the African novel. Among the formal are contributions in the area of *length*, structural complexity, and textural complexity" (1980: p. 27).

This issue of length is cardinal to the formal definitions of the novel because its other characteristics depend upon it. The African novel is defined as "an extended fictional narrative treating African bourgeois reality" (1980: p. 19). In general it portrays all varieties of human experience, not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective (Watt 1957). It is characterised by such things as complexities of character, situation, theme, plot, technique, etc. To be true to its nature, and explore all these ramifications of individual experience, the novel (be it African or Chinese) cannot help but be extensive.

Hence, it goes without saying that a collection of eight ballads of 1,500 words cannot, by any sleight of hand, have a complex structure, plot, characterization, theme, and situation. A ballad by definition is a form of verse to be sung or recited, and is characterized by its presentation of *one* dramatic or exciting episode in simple narrative form. It pays slight attention to characterization or description; its transitions are abrupt; its action is largely developed through dialogue. It presents tragic situations with utmost simplicity and

¹ The Mwindo Epic, & Sundiata

² Performed by Jevizu Okaavo of Aguleri.

incremental repetition. It makes sparse use of the imagination and when it does it appears in brief flashes. It presents exciting episodes of dramatic nature (Holman 1936).

Going by the above, *The Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* is well within its generic tradition. One, it presents a dramatic episode: A Nigerian Soldier, Patrick Eje Oiji, kills with his bare hands a 3.9 metre long gigantic python. Two, it is told in simple narrative form (albeit highly poetic prose). Three, it pays very little attention to character. Altogether there are five characters in the ballad, viz, the hero, his fortune teller, his fellow citizens/travellers (a nameless faceless crowd), the rulers, and a flutist. True to the ballad tradition, these characters are merely introduced. They are not developed. Of all of them, only the hero has a name. Although the hero's birth, boyhood, and adulthood are flashed up in the song, they remain mere flashes. There is no progressive, complex, narrative development. In other words, the transitions are abrupt.

But Uga's ballad is African. So while exhibiting the aforementioned universal characteristics of the genre, it carries a definite African identity in rhythm, narrative style, and use of imagination. Its rhythm is incantatory as shown in these stanzas from the invocation:

Ballads! Ballads! Ballads!
Poetry must be the season
Surely at this hour a ballad can be sung.

Let this then be a celebration
Of the man from middle belt
On a highway to Ilorin.

Let this still
be our ear-shot ballad
Of the epic combat
Of man against destiny.

The incantatory style is seen in the short lines, repetitions, and profusion of strong stresses which musically approximate

the tonal structure of African languages. It seems to be chanted to the beat of a drum. That is why it reads very well.

In addition, its narrative style differs from the definition in two ways. First, according to Holman's definition, "in the ballad, tragic situations are presented with utmost simplicity" (1936: p. 52). But Ugah does not present his hero's tragic situation with simplicity. He builds up to it by rich flashes back into the life and milieu of his hero - a milieu "where clowns are clowns/even with a crown". "The Ballad of the Fortune teller" heightens the style by introducing a supernatural mysterious element. Foreshadowing trouble, he warns the child hero:

Child
 Darkness thickens around you
 Despair not... (p 42).
 I see tomorrow
 Full of Palm-oil colour
 All over the land darkness thickens
 In coming times let no ant cross the elephant's path
 (p. 55)

He heightens the anticipation of evil by widening the scope of his prediction:

Your wailing is for the next compound
 A neighbourhood in distress
 No callers, no climes, no deeds
 Can calm your mood (p. 44).

In the "Ballad of October" the build-up to the tragic climax is intensified:

We are travelling as prodigals
 We are pleading for a pathway
 We are looking for our destiny.

Then, the "Ballad of the Unknown Soldier":

On this early morn of October dawn
 I arrive unknown to meet a kilometre long queue
 The cause of this impromptu vigil on the highway
 No one knew
 Why then this unending time-keeping?
 They said

There was a lake of mysteries
 They said
 There was a raging flood
 Unlike others I refused to wait on the highway

[I walked on
 I saw an elderly man in the middle of the road
 I approached
 And like a midnight nightmare
 Within a distance of only a pole
 The elder turned into a python
 Flames flamed from the mouth
 The eyes were like thunder
 I looked back to beat a retreat
 And lo! seven other pythons barred my retreat
 I remembered the mysteries of my land]
 (pp. 98-99)

There is no simplicity here, only complexity. First, the poet persona and hero dramatically appears, takes the floor, and addresses us directly. Ugah achieves this by switching from the third-person narrative voice to the first person. "I arrived..." Consequently the narrative speed increases and he moves from poetry to poetic prose. More words are used in this 7th ballad than in the other six put together.

Second, imagination is strongly present in this work from its beginning to the end, contrary to what the definition states. The journey through the hero's biographical landscape and that of his people is highly imaginative. The account of the titanic struggle is a piece of fiery imagination.

.....
 It shook its head three times
 I shook mine seven times
 Unarmed combat
 We fought mystery to mystery
 We rested seven times and fought again

[Suddenly
 It became annoyed
 Brought me to parade
 Wrapped me up

Turned the day into darkness
And rose skywards]

Gallons of hot slimy saliva
Emptied on me like a rainfall of a full wet season
And its gape wide-open
To swallow three pregnant cows
I remembered the words of my ancestors
And I disappeared

[As it groped for me
I jumped and grabbed its neck
Twisting with all my might
And in my eyes were seven Pythons
Each with a gape wide-open
I refused to let go
I saw
Warriors with bows, arrows, guns rushing towards me
I refused to let go
I twisted still with all my might]

Suddenly
It went limp
I twisted
It remained limp
I let go
A fatal mistake!
A mighty conflagration erupted
Like a burning bush in harmattan season
I remembered the mysteries of my ancestors
And I disappeared

[The fire raged on
Then went out
As it groped for my ashes
I grabbed its neck
Twisting with all my might
I felt a distant shock
Coming from its tail
I refused to let go
It moved nearer still
My whole body was on fire
I refused to let go

Twisting with all my might
I remembered the mysteries of my land]

The fire in its mouth went out
I refused to let go
The thunder in the eyes went out
I refused to let go
I heard the groans of a dying man
I refused to let go
It used its tail to uproot trees
Like three bulldozers at work
I refused to let go

Then it was all over
(pp. 101-108).

The imaginative narration of this story certainly fills out our experience of this combat. We feel every bit of the hero's emotions - fear, psychological support of ancestral wisdom, stubborn courage, remorse at a tactical error, and victory. The line "we fought mystery to mystery" carries a hint of the possibility that the soldier had a charm or an amulet. This is the only explanation for the fact that after the python coiled round him, he remembered the words of his ancestors and disappeared. Thus freed, he could then launch a counter attack. Again when the python spat out fire to consume him, he disappeared till the fire went out and the fight continued.

But Ugah's greatest imaginative feat is turning the image of the python into the image of a mysterious, demonic, despotic leadership of a God forsaken nation, and the journey of the soldier and his co-travellers to the journey of self discovery for that nation. The elderly man in the middle of the road is the political leadership (supposed elders in society) who instead of leading the people on the road into national self discovery become a mysterious road block - nay seven mysterious roadblocks - whom the people or one of them must battle in order to make progress.

In developing this theme, the poem is so suffused with metaphors that it seems futile to pick them one by one. But let us take just two examples:

... its gape wide-open

To swallow three pregnant cows!

This is a clear metaphorical reference to the financial corruption that has almost swallowed this great country. With all our oil wealth (pregnant - in the soil) we are individually and nationally impoverished because a few giant pythons are swallowing it all. Also, note the pun on "wait on", in "unlike others, I refused to wait on the highway". On the surface level it means wait with others on the highway. But on a deeper metaphorical level it means "wait on" in the sense of slavish servitude. Waiting on the highway then stands for working for the nation loyally and waiting to be paid by the elder/python.

In fact, Ada Ugah's African ballads are so rich that they put their western counterparts to shame. Be that as it may, it is not a novel. Granted, African novelists have been and are still in the process of developing new forms out of contributions levied from both the European and African traditions (Chinweizu, 1989). We acknowledge this need for experimentation in creating, from different traditions, a novel adequate for probing African realities. Nevertheless, such experiments must be within limits. It should be clear to the writer and his audience³ which formal features are coming from where. Experimentation is not a license for frivolity. A hybrid is a child of two or more native stocks, not a freakish creature. The African novel is a hybrid; Ada Ugah's "novel in ballads" is a freak.

Fortunately, the problem is only that sub-title. The ballads themselves are delectable. Perhaps, Ugah and his publisher may consider editing out that sub-title. Let them present the book

³ "Audience" here refers, not to the casual reader who reads only for entertainment, but to the critical reader, the analytical reader who dissects the material for deeper appreciation.

simply as *The Ballads of the Unknown Soldier*. It is among the best in its genre. Ada Uguh is indeed a highly talented poet.

Bibliography

- Abraham, W. E. *The Mind of Africa*, London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1962.
- Achebe, Chinua, Foreword to *A Selection of African Prose I: Traditional Oral Texts*, ed. W. H. Whately, vii-x. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, Enugu: FDP, 1980.
- Holman, Hugh *A Handbook to Literature*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Publications, 1936.
- Izevbaye, D. S. "The State of Criticism in African Literature." *African Literature Today* 7:1-19.
- Larson, Charles R. *The Emergence of African Fiction* (revised edition) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.
- Moore, Gerald, *Seven African Writers*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Obiechina E., *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Palmer, Eustace. *An Introduction to the African Novel*. New York: Africana Publishing Co. 1972.
- Povey, John. "The Novels of Chinua Achebe" in *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, ed. Bruce King (pp. 97-112). New York: Africana Publishing Co. 1972
- Roscoe, Adrian. *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Tibble, Ann. *African English Literature*, New York: October House. 1965.
- Watt, Ian, *The Rise of the Novel*, Reading: Cex and Hyman Ltd. 1957.

Journal

- Azuonye, "The Romantic Epics of The Anambra Igbo: An Introductory Survey" in *Uwa Ndi Igbo* No. 2, 1989, pp. 4-17.

Notes on Contributors

J. O. ABOLADE is a staff of the Federal Ministry of Education, Federal Inspectorate Service, Lagos. His poems have featured in past issues of *Okike*.

Boye ADEFILA, B.A. (Dramatic Arts), is a creative writer. He is currently working with Res: NOVA Advertising.

Pius ADESANMI works as a translator and has published scholarly articles. He is also interested in creative writing.

Toyin ADEWALE-NDUKA, M.A., writes poetry and works in advertising as a writer. She is currently co-ordinating women writers of Nigeria and co-editing the first anthology of short stories by Nigerian women writers.

Tony E. AFEJUKU, Ph.D is Head of Department of English, University of Benin.

Babatunde AJAYI, is a literary columnist and has taught English and literature in various places. He won poetry and essay prizes as an undergraduate in the University of Ibadan.

Amechi N. AKWANYA, Ph.D, is a lecturer in the Department of English, UNN, and author of *Orimili* (Heinemann, 1991) and *Semantics and Discourse* (Acena, 1996).

Amiri BARAKA, formerly Le Roi Jones, is a leading African-American poet and dramatist. His best known work is the play *Dutchman*.

Charles BODUNDE, Ph.D., teaches literature and creative writing in the Department of Modern European Languages, University of Ilorin.

Ademola O. DASYLVA, Ph.D., teaches Oral Literature, Poetry and Drama in the Department of English, University of Ibadan.

Toni DURUAKU teaches literature in Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri. He is an actor and playwright. His latest publication is *Silhouettes* (a play).

Victor EKPUK, a painter who lives in Lagos, works as an illustrator and cartoonist for *Daily Times*. His works have been exhibited in Nigeria, Switzerland and South Africa.

Onuora Ossie ENEKWE, poet, novelist and playwright, is Professor of Dramatic Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His most recent work is *The Last Battle and Other Stories* (Lagos: MINAJ Publishers, 1996).

Ubong ETUK, a painter, works as an illustrator and cartoonist for *Daily Times*, Lagos. His works have been exhibited in Nigeria.

Dan IZEVBAYE is a distinguished Professor of Literature at the University of Ibadan.

Marcia KURE, a winner of the Uche Okeke Prize for Drawing (1994), is MFA candidate in painting at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Her works have been exhibited in Nigeria, Germany, U.S.A. and Switzerland.

Alex MUOKA lives and works in Sabo-Yaba, Lagos.

McPhilips NWACHUKWU, B.A. (Hons. UNN), works as a journalist, and has published poems in literary journals.

Chika NWANKWO, lectures in the Division of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus.

Maik NWOSU, is a poet/journalist who has won the Nigerian Media Merit Award for Arts Reporter of the Year (1992), the Journalist of the Year Award (1994), and the ANA/Cadbury Poetry Prize (1995).

Wale OKEDIRAN is a medical practitioner and novelist. For many years, he was an executive member of the Association of Nigerian Authors.

Tunde OLU-OJOMO is a poet, based in Lagos.

Emmanuel Babatunde OMOBOWALE teaches in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Chijioke ONUORA whose works have been exhibited in Nigeria, Germany and South Africa, is a lecturer in Sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Niyi OSUNDARE Professor of Literature at the University of Ibadan, is one of Africa's leading poets.

Wumi RAJI, Ph.D, is a lecturer in the Department of Modern European Languages, University of Ilorin.

Jimi SOETAN is an artist in advertising.

Ladipo SOETAN works with Siji Soetan Co., South West Ikoyi, Lagos.

Ada UDECHUKWU a poet and artist, lives and works in Nsukka. Her works have been exhibited in Nigeria, where her book of poems, *Woman, Me*, was published in 1993.

Diiyi WILL-WEST is author of the collection *Not Waiting For Crumbs*.

Friends of Okike

Aka Ikenga

Hon. Justice Phillip Nnaemeka-Agu (rtd)

Agunze Chib Ikoku

Dr. Stanley Macebuh

Chief Chris Mbadiwe

Dr. Chris Ngige

Chief R.C. Okafor

Chief S.O.N. Okafor

Dr. Pat Okeke



OKIKE

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING

P.O. BOX 53, NSUKKA, ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA.
Phone: 0234-42-770981, Fax: 0234-42-770981

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Tick as appropriate:

Renewal subscription

New subscription

RATES - One Year

Individual	\$30.00
Institution	\$50.00
African Institution	\$40.00
Post	\$6.00 extra

Nigerian resident	N900.00
Nigerian institution	N1,200.00
Post	N150.00 extra

Back-issue rates available on request

Allow about 8 weeks for delivery

PREPAYMENT REQUIRED IN US DOLLARS

(or NAIRA - for Nigerian Residents only)

Drafts, cheques or enquiries to:

OKIKE MAGAZINE,
P. O. BOX 53, NSUKKA
Enugu State, Nigeria.
Tel./Fax: 0234-42-770981



OKIKE

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING

Published **THREE** times a year.

- The influential African literary journal is back. The most recent numbers are: 31 (1995); 32 (1996); 33 (1996).
- **Silver Jubilee Issue** - No. 34 (October 1996) will focus on *Nigerian Literature in the Last Decade (1986 - 1996)*
- **Other forthcoming numbers** will focus on Post-Apartheid South African Literature, African Women Writers, African-American Literature, The Greying Generation, The Laureates.
- Manuscripts are welcome - Poems, short stories, one-act plays, essays, interviews, reviews.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

● RATES - One Year

Individual	\$30.00
Institution	\$50.00
African Institution	\$40.00
Post	\$6.00 extra
<hr/>	
Nigerian resident	N900.00
Nigerian institution	N1,200.00
Post	N150.00 extra

- Back-issue rates available on request
- Allow about 8 weeks for delivery
- **PREPAYMENT REQUIRED IN US DOLLARS** (or NAIRA - for Nigerian Residents only)
- Drafts, cheques or enquiries to:

OKIKE MAGAZINE,
P.O. BOX 83, NSUKKA
Enugu State, Nigeria.
Tel./Fax: 0234-42-770981

ISSN - 0331 - 0566