Okike

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING

47

O K I K E

An African Journal of New Writing

NUMBER 47, FEBRUARY, 2003

Printed By
University of Nigeria Press Ltd.
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Manuscripts (not more than 15 quarto pages long) 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

OKIKE
An African Journal of New Writing

Number 47 FEBRUARY, 2003

FRIENDS OF OKIKE

Aka Ikenga

Hon. Justice Nnaemeka-Agu (rtd)
Dr. George Obiozor
Agunze Chib Ikokwu
Dr. Stanley Macebuh
Chief Greg Mbadiwe
Dr. Chris Ngige
Chief R.C. Okafor
Chief S.O. N. Okafor
Dr. Pat Okeke

IJE UDE

Dear Daddy

It is a full moon.
And from the other side of the world,
I hear your loneliness.

Each absence is a whip
across our bare back.
Each lie stings like salt
on fresh wounds.

I would have liked you
to gather me into your arms and comfort me
like wind flowing over sand

I would have liked you
to carry me along
gently, and watch me
settle into my
SELF

I wish you peace:
the sudden eruption of truth.
I'll wait patiently
until you are covered in its lava
and flow back into our lives.
You are my soul's mate.
Without you
my heart will always be lonely.

Aisha

Dear Aisha,
Spread your fragile wings
and step into the dark

Our parents
wrapped us in courage,
then let us fall from their arms
into the sky.

Now you're dropping, drifting,
drowning, dizzy, dreary and
depressed.

You're a clay of strength
sculpted with love
and fear is fighting to mold you.

Remember my big head
in your little lap,
you playing with my hair?
Mommy saying I was too heavy
but you just pulling me near?

The sun is within you.
Your doubt is a passing cloud.
You are perfect and have
all that you can't do without.

Your heart is your soul's mouth.
Feed it everyday.

Dream and write, pray and sing.
Dance your fears away.

Your mind is your heart's eye.
Sharpen it with silence.
Listen to the love inside you.
It'll protect you from violence.

Your will is your strength's voice.
Speak it through your goals.
Achieve, reflect, accept.
Celebration revives our souls.

Start to fly
through life's maze of tests.
Only your wings can create your happiness.

Aisha
my perfect butterfly,
spread your wings gently.
Let your soul be free.

N F INYAMA

From the Comical to the Sinister: Charlatanry as Theme in Wole Soyinka's Writing

INTRODUCTION

I start this essay with an assertion. It seems to me that after a writer has produced a number of works, or has practised his craft for a reasonable length of time, certain patterns or elements begin to reappear from one text to another. These may be in the form of character, theme, symbol, setting, and so on. Just as most writers develop individual or peculiar styles over time, a particular theme, symbol, or character may continue to resurface in a writer's successive productions, even if with varying degrees of emphasis, elaboration, or disguise.

Thus, for Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the nationalist struggle in Kenya, with the betrayals which accompanied it, remains a constant theme in his works, even in those that deal with the post-independence era. The theme of power and its manipulation at the domestic, clan and national levels runs through most of the works of Achebe. Apartheid, of course, forms the core of Dennis Brutus's writing. Ayi Kwei Armah's preoccupation with impotent men in a morally and physically dessicated and oppressive society does not begin to resolve itself until we are taken back to a mythical past in *2000 seasons* where a band of young patriots begins a revolutionary struggle against the monsters in their society. In other words, the worlds of *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments* reappear in a different guise in *2000 Seasons*, but the impotence of the characters in the two earlier novels is overcome in the latter novel.

It would appear that many a writer starts his career with a thematic blueprint, which controls his craft from one work to another. From this creative blueprint several narrative and thematic configurations may emerge, but somehow there will be one of them–symbol, character, et cetera–which will always be present, like a fingerprint, with varying levels of emphasis or prominence. To a large extent, the author's perception of his society is embedded in this blueprint, as well as any transformations, which may occur in this initial perception.

But what I have said so far about thematic or symbolic recurrence is not peculiar to African writers. It occurs in the works of European writers, and writers from other parts of the world. Charles Dickens, for instance, returns to the theme of threatened and oppressed children again and again. D.H. Lawrence's works consistently delve into private myths of fecund forces in nature, the problem of wife—husband tensions, especially in matters of sex, and the problem of wife and mother possessiveness. Hemingway's heroes are almost always lonely men at the core, facing Herculean challenges.

There seems also to exist in a writer's creative progress a certain evolutionary process in his perception of society. The initial creative germ seems to undergo a mutation that ultimately colours his perception of characters and events in his world. I think that in Wole Soyinka's case, the theme that appears to be permanent or prevalent in his works is charlatanism or charlatanry, and this element of his writing has gone through mutations of perception and reconfigurations, producing different brands of the charlatan: the comic and the sinister.

DEFINITION AND POSSIBLE SOURCE OF SOYINKA'S PERCEPTION OF CHARLATANISM:

'Charlatanry" or "Charlatanism" is defined as a pretension to ability, knowledge, or power which a person does not possess. This means that the charlatan is a mountebank, a quack, a masker of his real intentions in a given situation, one who hides or

disguises his real personality, usually with negative goals or aims. Charlatans not only exist in Soyinka's works, but their individual personalities have coloured the thrust of the thematic development of these works. Ultimately, they reflect Soyinka's progressively darkening perception of the human being, or the human society.

If, as psychologists have said, our behaviours in later life are often coloured or even determined by early childhood experiences, or even a single significant experience, then it might be possible to locate the root of Soyinka's ability to see beyond the facade to the essential core of an individual's real make-up. I admit the tenuousness of this speculation, but in *Ake,* the first part of his autobiography, Soyinka recounts this almost surrealistic experience:

> Bishops Court, of Upper Parsonage is no more. Bishop Ajayi Crowther would sometimes emerge from the cluster of hydrangea and bougainvillea, a gnomic face with popping eyes whose formal photograph had first stared at us from the frontispiece of his life history. He had lived, the teacher said, in Bishops Court and from that moment he peered out from among the creeping plants whenever I passed by the house on an errand to our Great Aunt, Mrs Lijadu.... the Bishop sat, silently, on the bench beneath the wooden porch over the entrance, his robes twined through and through with the lengthening tendrils of the bougainvillea. I moved closer when his eyes turned to sockets. My mind wondered then to another photograph in which he wore a clerical suit with waistcoat and I wondered what he really kept at the end of the silver chain that vanished into the pocket. He grinned and said, come nearer, I'll show you. As I moved towards the porch he drew on the watch chain until he had lifted out a

> wholly round pocket-watch that gleamed of solid silver. He pressed a button and the lid opened, revealing, not the glass and the face-dial but a deep cloud-filled space. Then he winked one and it fell from his face into the bowl on the watch. He winked the other and this joined its partner in the watch. He snapped back the lid, nodded again and his head went backward till the whitened cheekbones were exposed. Then he stood up and, tucking the watch back into the waistcoat pocket, moved a step towards me. I fled homewards. (4-5)

It seems to me that this half-comical and surrealistic transformation would have left the child with an indelible impression regarding what is real and what is visible on the surface. Is it not possible that from this half-imagine experience Soyinka might have come to see the human person as having a dual quality, the real and the mask which covers it? In other words, someone might choose to put on a different face to hide his real nature—that is, become a charlatan in a negative context.

Brands of Charlatanry:

In creating his charlatans Soyinka's craft seems to have undergone an evolution, starting off with the comical charlatan whom he presents with an amused tolerance, and transiting to the sinister charlatan whose criminal traits and actions he presents from a darkening perspective.

Comical Ch...atanry:

This is the first stage in Soyinka's formulation and presentation of his gallery of charlatan characters. By comical charlatanry I am referring to the comical image of a character like Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel*. He is the out-of-place teacher in Ilujinle. In a narrow sense, he is not the "pure" charlatan, since he cannot be

accused of having an ulterior *harmful* motive. But he is ill-suited to the environment in which he operates.

However, that is as much as could be said in his favour. Otherwise, he has all the essential markings of a charlatan, especially in his efforts to hide or camouflage his handicaps, to cover up. His dreams are beyond his means, but he pretends to have the social and material wherewithal to attain them. He fantasizes about a glamorous city life with Sidi, and makes claims to a modernity he has not experienced, let alone understood. All his claims and strategies are a subterfuge, designed to dodge Sidi's demand or insistence that he pay the bride price if he must have her. The bride price is beyond Lakunle's means, but he hides this pecuniary inadequacy in a fake outrage at the idea of paying money for a wife. It is a custom he considers "Savage... barbaric, out-dated/Rejected, denounced, accursed/Excommunicated, archaic, degrading/Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant/Retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable" (7).

Lakunle's attempts to hoodwink Sidi by overwhelming her with words is not helped by his inconsistency of character—one moment the amorous wooer, the next the frustrated abuser of the object of his love. Furthermore, if we understand that the word "charlatan" is influenced by the word "ciarlare", Italian for "to prate" or chatter, then we can further appreciate the charlatan-like verbosity of Lakunle, the "fast talk" of the confidence trickster or con man.

Lakunle's "learned" prating is pitched against the dignified idioms of the Bale's speech which so mesmerize Sidi that she does not know when she yields to his amorous advances, and in the end becomes his latest bride. Lakunle is indeed a charlatan of a type, in the sense that he falsely claims to have experiences and knowledge of far-away customs, places and habits, and tries to use this pretence to bluff his way through the town. His efforts yield him nothing in the end; they only make him the laughing stock of the surrounding district, where he is known as "the madman of Ilujinle", according to Sidi, who also says that all he

has are his "fine airs and little sense" (3). Furthermore, Lakunle's "modernity" is undercut by his ill-matched "modern" European mode of dressing—"Old style English suit, thread-bare but not ragged ... a size too small ... twenty-three-inch-bottom trousers, and blanco-white tennis shoes".(1).

However, Soyinka deliberately presents Lakunle in this comical light because, in the end, he is a harmless caricature, and even has potentials for reformation and redemption from his ill-imagined modernity. In the end, Soyinka symbolically reintegrates him into the real world of Ilujinle when Lakunle joins the bridal dance that leads Sidi to the Bale. Lakunle forgets his waltzes and foxtrots and succumbs to the exuberant rhythms of the "gan-gan", behind another bottom-flaunting village belle.

What I have said in the preceding paragraph in terms of authorial attitude could apply to Brother Jero in *The Trials of Brother Jero.* The play is not an indictment of prophecy or religion but an amused look at religious credulity and hypocrisy. Like Moliere's *Tartuffe* which it has frequently been compared to, *The Trials* is a study of the ways of a religious hypocrite and charlatan. But there does exist a subtle distinction between Tartuffe and Jero, and that is in the underlying humour in the presentation of the one (Jero), and the almost total absence of it in the presentation of the other (Tartuffe).

Tartuffe is a thoroughly sinister character, with a well-designed criminal goal, not to talk of his notorious criminal past which he cloaks in fake piety. Jero, on the other hand, and in spite of his self-confessed skill at manipulative "prophecy" is essentially a somewhat clever but amiable practitioner on the gullibility of his followers, whom he calls "customers". Religion is a tool for making his daily bread, but his real genius lies not in actual schemes to inflict harm (like Tartuffe), but in his ability to scheme himself out of sticky situations. So, he says in *Jero's Metamorphosis,* he has "but little gifts" but knows ... how to "make the most of them"(48).

Soyinka's projection of Jero as a genial rogue—as a

"showman" as Enekwe calls him—rather than as an evil plotter ameliorates the reader's anger or disgust with the prophet's manipulating propensities. Jero is not the comical figure we see in Lakunle, but the pervading humour of the play—in spite of the doom-laden curses of Jero's mentor, the Old Prophet—underscores the author's attitude to an perception of the trickeries of Jero, and the pretensions of an ill-nurtured modernist in the shape of Lakunle. Essentially, this authorial attitude is one of good humoured accommodation or toleration, not only because these characters lack genuine qualities of evil, but also because society will always have them; and furthermore, because their brand of charlatanry is not the type that could harm the larger community at its core.

It does not appear to me that authorial intention favours the extermination of Jero-type charlatans, even though they are not to be encouraged. They will always be a feature of the social environment, especially as long as there exist characters like Chume and others whose credulity will remain common fodder for the skilled trickster. It is here that Enekwe's insightful article "Soyinka's Brother Jero As Narrator, Character and Showman" seems to judge Jero too harshly when he concludes that "... we can now see him as someone who is not only evil, but glories in his viciousness". I would rather see Brother Jero as someone who see's life as a game of wits where an occasional hard tackle will yield a dividend, without hurting the opponent too severely or permanently.

I shall briefly point out one more example of this kind of comical/religious charlatan, and that is the albino who calls himself Lazarus in *The Interpreters*. Again, this is someone who has a certain charisma, like Jero; and again like Jero, he deploys it for holding people in religious thrall. His claims to a resurrection, like the biblical Lazarus, are palpably false and the Interpreters who visit his church are not deceived, in spite of his valiant efforts to convince them, and in spite of his tedious sermon. His spiritual claims over the young thief whom he rescued at some point in the story do not stand up to scrutiny.

The spiritual transformation he says he has effected in the boy does not exist because the youth's problem does not lie in a lack of spirituality but in a lack of proper identification with the surrounding environment. He is only a step away from acute schizophrenia, and society for him is not to be felt in spiritual terms but in terms of its exploitable potentials via thievery. Lazarus is, of course, aware of this; he is equally aware of the falseness of his claim to resurrection, but he has a mission to mesmerize his congregation and his most powerful tool is to lay claim to a non-existent mystical religious power.

From *the Interpreters* again, we will extract another shade of charlatan—the academic type. He is Professor Oguazor. He and his wife labour so hard at being genteel that they are an embarrassment to some of the people in the university where they function. Professor Oguazor is remarkably fatuous. Although we are not told that Oguazor is an intellectual fraud, he is a moral masquerader. Professor Oguazor pontificates on the moral ('meral') lapses of the young students, casting himself as a moral censor and an upholder of moral propriety—all of which is a mask over his own moral failings, for he has an illegitimate daughter by his maid whom he has hidden in a far-away school in England—"the plastic apple of his eye", as Soyinka describes the child.

Professor Oguazor's false public image finds symbolic expression in the plastic flora with which his house is festooned, and in his strange accent—"herve" (have), "meral terpitude" (moral turpitude) 'bet' (but) 'fend' (fond), 'chendeliers' (chandeliers), 'prectical'; and his darling wife is 'Ceroline' (Caroline).

The Interpreters is actually replete with different sorts of charlatans presented with different degrees of elaboration: Chief Winsala, Sir Derinola, Ayo Faseyi, Dr Lumoye, etc. all wearing different masks over their real selves.

In spite of its generally moody tone, the charlatans of the novel are not yet evil enough to be guillotined. They are still closer to Jero and Lakunle in their comic configurations. But at

the same time the darkening of Soyinka's perception of the essence of charlatanry has begun.

Sinister Charlatanry:

Sinister charlatanism is different from comical charlatanism. As I have already stated, comical charlatanry is embedded in easily discernible humour. It provokes ready laughter, or merely provokes mild contempt from the reader. But there is no conviction of absolute evil. Sinister charlatanism, on the other hand, is deliberately scheming, negatively motivated, and ultimately evil.

My first example of the sinister charlatan is Professor in *The Road*. Petty forger, apostate, and petty thief, he has found accommodation among the denizens of the motor park whom he manipulates and confuses with his false mystique. He makes pretence to secret quest—the quest for what he calls "the word," a nebulous concept whose meaning eludes his companions and to an extent, even the reader of the play. Wrapped in his cunning mystique, Professor is able to live off these characters in various ways, but principally by parasiting on the proceeds of the "Aksident Store" which they run at the motor park.

But in spite of his outdated outfit and his somewhat comical appearance, one can still feel the sinister essence of the character as soon as he appears. His opening speech immediately points to what the readers shall witness later on: the ability to mask the ordinary or the commonplace in mysterious verbiage, the true mark of the charlatan.

Professor is truly sinister, both in words and action. The driving licences which he forges put unqualified drivers on the road; and this in turn increases the rate of accidents and fatalities on the roads. The crashed vehicles are then cannibalised by his companions to stock their "Aksident" store which nourishes Professor and his crowd. Professor is a necrophilist, a lover and creator of death; in fact, one of the characters complains of his habit of pulling up road signs. Indeed, when he first appears he

is carrying a road sign with the word BEND on it. Had he pulled it off to generate an accident? Isn't the ambiguity of the store's name deliberate? Is it a store where fake parts are sold in order to create accidents, or one from which parts could be bought for vehicles that have had accidents? Or further still, is it a store that stays open through the cannibalisation of parts of vehicles involved in planned accidents?

The Road is generally a dark play, and coming after *The Lion and the Jewel* ('63) and *Jero* ('64) and in the same year as *The Interpreters* ('65), we can see the shift from the tolerant humour of the earlier plays to the now darkening perception of charlatanry by the author. In *The Road*, the consciousness of death and near-death incidents is all-pervading, and its "lighter moments" are mostly recollections of deaths from the past.

The most memorable character in the play is also the most dangerous and sinister. The comic limit in this play is professor's physical appearance which, in fact, is a disguise for the evil quest he pursues. Apart from that, he knows that he is a manipulator and that his mystique is a deliberately nurtured cover for his pretence to the possession of a non-existent deep and mysterious knowledge and power. One is therefore not surprised that death should come his way.

The death of Professor is for me the first concrete indicator of Soyinka's new perception and re-evaluation of charlatanism. The toleration which he grants Jero, Lakunle, and even Oguazor and his type in *The Interpreter*, would be inappropriate for Professor who has an essentially evil core. Mere comicality would be inadequate a label for his sinister nature. If Jero makes a living through laughable tricks on his "customers", Professor is a ghoul who schemes deaths in order to live.

The other brand of sinister charlatanism is in the political sphere, and this is preeminently demonstrated in *Kongi's Harvest*. Kongi is not just a dictator and egomaniac but an image faker. He attempts to hide his real nature through the creation of a contrary image. The typical heavy-handed ways of the

megalomaniac need not concern us here. What is of interest is the fact of Kongi's efforts to project a fraudulent image of himself to the world. Kongi has brought disharmony and disaffection into Isma, but he has instructed his Reformed Aweri Fraternity to project him as the source of harmony. Harmony will be the theme of the next five year [non] development plan.

An international photographer has "managed" to make his way to Kongi's mountain retreat in spite of 'strict orders" to allow no one up there where the leader is "meditating". He will take photographs of Kongi in various poses and these will be appropriately labeled and published worldwide:

> —— A Leader's Temptation. —— Agony on the Mountains —— The Loneliness of the Pure —— A Saint at Twilight —— The Spirit of the Harvest.... The Face of Benevolence .... The Giver of Life. (39).

Of course, the years are to be dated after him from henceforth. Kongi wants to be seen as a leader of the people, but he is only a leader in the dictatorial sense, leading a band of self-serving sycophants and time-servers in the oppression of the citizenry. His distance—spiritual or otherwise—is symbolised by his retreat to the mountains from where he determines the cruel fate of those who stand in his way, and schemes the consolidation of all power.

Again, fake mystification is a tool in sustaining this brand of charlatanry. By withdrawing from the people, Kongi's real nature and intentions can only be speculated about. No one must know the "Leader's" real intentions. That is the mystique of power, and no one should be allowed to see behind this sinister, and negative mask. Kongi's transformation into what he is at present was deliberate, not accidental. The choice between being "a benevolent father of the nation" and being the megalomaniac he is at present was his, and he chose the later. As Segi says, "Kongi was a great man, and I loved him" (45). In

In the USA.
Where entrance to Negroes,
No matter how sanctified,
Is denied,
Where race, not religion,
Is glorified.
But say it—
You may be
Crucified.

A similar point is made in "Ku Klux" which closes:

A Klansman said, "Nigger,
Look me in the face—
And tell me you belive in
The great white race."

While humour is often the cachet of Hughes' work there is no humour in "Christ in Alabama", where he associates the lynchings of black men with the crucifixion of Jesus the Christ. The tone is cutting and accusing both the unknown power and the racialist society:

Christ is a nigger
Beaten and black
Oh, bare your back!
Mary is His mother:
Mammy of the South
Silence your mouth.
God is His Father
White Master above
Grant Him your love.
Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the cross

other words, what Kongi is now is a negative copy of what he probably was before; from being a great man he has become a perverse dictator and oppressor by his own choice.

It is in this perversion that we find the link between *Kongi's Harvest* and *Madmen and Specialists*. Again, someone has chosen to abjure what is good in order to wear a different mask and serve an empty but ruinous ideology. Dr Bero was a doctor before he joined the military mafia. But within a short time, he mutates into a perverse worshiper and advocate of "AS". "As" is the same thing as the 'Ism' of *Kongi's Harvest* and 'Kongism'; Dr. Bero's transformation is totally antithetical to what he ought to be—a healer. But he has allowed himself to turn from benevolence to malevolence, like Kongi. He has put on the ugly mask of the negative ideologue, which suppresses his humanity and gives him a perverted and sadistic sense of power.

In *Madmen* and *Kongi,* Soyinka stretches the meaning of dictatorship and ideological fanaticism to the limit, and the ultimate consequence of this addiction to ideology without—humanity is the spawning of monsters like Bero and Kongi.

Obi Maduakor has observed that Soyinka's "works are one long protest against AS in its various manifestations" (229). Between *Kongi's Harvest* and *Madmen*, we also see the deepening of Soyinka's awareness of the dangers of charlatanism when intelligent men resort to it for whatever purpose. What Maduakor says of *Madmen* could equally apply to *Kongi's Harvest*, or even started in this particular play: "pessimism and cynicism have been nurtured to a point in both Soyinka himself and the characters...." he creates (229).

The Tools of Charlatanry: Language and Ideology

One prominent feature of charlatanry in Soyinka's works is the manner language functions and is manipulated by the charlatans. Simply put, language is deployed as a tool of deceit, and is a complementary element of fake ideology. Lakunle's

"adolescent exuberances and... artificial rhetoric" (Maduakor: 192), in *The Lion and the Jewel,* is aimed at confusing Sidi. It is comical and amusing to the reader, but it is still the language of deceit, for Lakunle imagines that by overwhelming Sidi with words, by "Chirruping like a Cuckatoo" (7), he will win her hand without paying the bride price. His "fast talk" is a known trade mark of all confidence tricksters— "con men" as they are conventionally called.

Resorting to pompous and obfuscatory language is not exclusive to Lakunle. Chief Winsala falls back on that subterfuge when he is nearly disgraced by a hotel steward when he goes to extract a bride from Sogoe. Finding himself in a quandary, he lets fall a rapid string of irrelevant saws until he is mercifully rescued by his intended victim. I have already mentioned Professor Oguazor's own comical linguistic facade, which doesn't need further elaboration. But between Lakunle, Oguazor and Winsala, the comic element in the charlatan's use of language ends.

The tone becomes more sinister in *The Road, Kongi's Harvest* and *Madmen.* What Maduakor says of language in *The Road* might, with minor modifications be applicable to the other plays:

> Language... has mystifying potential, which Professor can exploit in order to cheat. Dialogue between him and his followers operates on different wavelengths, and Professor relishes the confusion he inflicts through his mastery of words. Rhetoric or fluency of speech seems to be more important to Professor than communication (213).

Professor uses his language for mystification and deceit, but not all his followers are totally deceived. Samson claims that Professor can't scare him with his "mumbo-jumbo" and "that nonsense about the word". But Professor is a sinister and cynical

character and maintains his manipulative linguistic acrobatics till the end.

Briefly, we will mention language in *Kongi's Harvest* which is based on ideology. Just as the 'Ism' of the play is as nebulous and harmful as the 'As' of *Madmen,* the language of the ideology is aimed at mystifying and confusing the citizenry. Kongi's Reformed Aweri Fraternity members are trying to fashion out a new way of speaking, different from the familiar and normal cadences of speech, a kind of Orwellian "newspeak":

> Fifth Aweri: Ah yes, Nor proverbs nor verse, only ideograms in algebraic quantums. If the square root of XQY (2bc) equals QA into square root of X, then the progressive forces must prevail over the reactionary in the span of .32 of a single generation (13).

Not even the parroters of the formular understand what it means! But as a means of baffling the masses, it is perfect. Mystification, manipulation, ideological heavy wind—these are tools that a practised charlatan employs for success in his trade.

Conclusion

I started off with the assertion that one theme often creeps into an author's different works, with different degrees of intensity or elaboration. That theme in Soyinka's works considered here is, in my view, charlatanry. Its progression is from the light comicality of *The Lion and the Jewel,* through the genial roguery of Jero to the sinister hues of *The Road,* and finally, to the grand perversion of the good in *Kongi's Harvest* and *Madmen and Specialists.* The transition from one level to the other is a reflection of the author's changing perception of society, and perhaps, it is in this phenomenon that society's ills are in fact anchored.

WORKS CITED

Maduakor, Obi. *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to His Writing.* Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991.

Enekwe, Ossie Onuora. "Soyinka's Brother Jero as Narrator, Character and Showman". *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* 1 1987. 67-74.

Soyinka, Wole. *The Lion and the Jewel.* London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

_____. *The Trials of Brother Jero, Jero's Memorphosis* in *The Jero Plays.* London: Eyre Methuen, 1973.

_____. *Kongi's Harvest.* London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

_____.*The Road* in *Collected Plays,* Vol. 1. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

_____. *Madmen and Specialists* in *Collected Plays,* Vol. 2. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

_____. *Ake: The Years of Childhood.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 1991.

MCPHILIPS NWACHUKWU

To my kinsman, the Delta...

From here, the dung hill of war,
I stretch my hands to feel flaming rays:

The five horsemen saw the danger early.
They read the prophecy in the sky.

From this dunghill of war,
I feel the flames of Jesse:

I saw that gory sight: charred human beings;
Bloated yam tuber
In a bornfire of shame.

The five horsemen saw the danger early.
They read the prophecy of the sky.

From this dung hill
Where I nurse my bruised ego,
I smell the death of Odi...

I see the randy victory of
Errant ants,
Sniffing the backyards of Odi mothers and daughters.
He goats on rampage.

I can read your pulse, the anger in your face

As you watch theatre of destruction and ego
In the land of your birth.

The five horsemen saw the danger early.
They read the prophecy of the sky.

From this dunghill
I witnessed death of a clime's man...
Echo of the horsemen
Who challenged the horsemen:
And he died, killed like an animal,
Strangled by the hangman

Ken Saro Wiwa, the son of Ogoni.
Ken Saro Wiwa, the myth maker.

The five horsemen saw the danger early:
They foresaw annihilations in our camps

They rolled out their spirit and dared the monster.

But, we sabotaged them.

Ken Saro Wiwa, the son of Ogoni.
Ken Saro Wiwa, the myth maker.

Now, the inconclusive question:
The polity hunting us like an aggressive lion,
Incarnating quota system, resource control
And revenue allocation as siblings.

Ken Saro Wiwa, the son of Ogoni.
Ken Saro Wiwa, the myth maker.

Members of my clime are still nursing their bruised ego;
Their un-fair representation...

They pay the supreme price of neglet.

Ken Saro Wiwa, the son of Ogoni.
Ken Saro Wiwa, the myth maker.

But the Delta is among the chosen:
Providing their men and the launch pad...
The beautiful bride of the hour.

The bridal love lost a place of pride;
The chief bride got hanged.

From this dunghill,
I read of the terrific death toll on Delta kinsmen:
I feel the death of Iteskiri, Ijaw and Ogoni youths;
I feel the death by pipe explosion.

The bridal love lost a place of pride;
The chief bride got hanged.

I feel orchestrated death,
Of wild life and aquatic...
Of acid rain and gas flaring;
Of depletion of the ozone layer.

The bridal love lost a place of pride;
The chief bride got hanged.

From this dung hill of war, I take stock
Of Delta death, our death.

I remember
The five horsemen,
Revolutionary voices at the advent of time.
I remember infant lives snuffed out in their prime ...

The bridal love lost a place of pride;
The chief bride got hanged.

Mcphilips
April 15 2004

EBELE OSEYE (Ellease Southerland)

In a Sacred Tone: A Comment on Religion and Langston Hughes

"I have always accepted as my religion the liberation of my people," Charles Langston said. And his grand nephew, Langston Hughes, who also did not embrace an organized religion, shared that view. In his literary works Langston Hughes was conspicuously "more Christian", more charitable than the cross toting lynchers, the slavers before them and other civilized racists who quote or misquote the scriptures to support their unsupportable views. Langston's works, in sharp contrast, come from a generous spirit which regards and records the full spectrum of African-American life in ways which make sacred a people so frequently denigrated and disregarded. If to be "religious" is to show moral responsibility, then his writings are sacred. If religion is designed to help the dispirited return to emotional and spiritual harmony, Langston's writings in expressing hope for harmony, qualify as religious. In tone and in word Langston speaks of brotherhood as natural for all members of the human family. The lore and language of religion enriches many of his works. He does not go out of his way to exclude religion, but he will not, out of "structural necessity" use religion to mask historical reality.

Elaine Pagels observes that what is "heretical changes with time; and this point is made dramatically by William Tyndale (1492-1536), the scholar who translated the Bible into English, and who was subsequently hunted, finally caught and burned at the stake by "good Christians" who considered the translation blasphemous. That same translation would later be accepted as the King James version of the Bible. And the "good Christians"

would make him a martyr. Also accepted were the decisions of the Nicene Council (32 AD), presided over by Constantine who was not a Christian; he gathered religionists from many regions, forced them to create a uniform doctrine, ironed out contradictions that could lead to political unrest; this council bullied by Constantine (a man who had his wife boiled to death in her bath), decided which religious beliefs were "true' and these beliefs are still held as true today.

The Europeans who came to North America to flee religious persecution, themselves practised religious intolerance. In 1620, the Separatists (those not of the established order) did not believe in religious freedom in their own colony. No non-Catholics could vote in their colonies which were French or Spanish. In Massachusetts, all non-Puritans were driven out. A Baptist minister was arrested for preaching without a permit from the Anglican church. In 1760, when the Baptists arrived, the forms of toleration were barely better than outright persecution. Religious hostilities certainly have their precedents in this country. Directed against people of colour (the indigenous people of North America), these hostilities took a more vicious turn. What ever happened to "Love your neighbour as you love yourself?"

It was from ancient Egypt that the above expression originated. From the Grand Lodge at Luxor came the advice to love yourself, love your family, love mother and father. Hughes would not have to quarrel with organized religion if it did not go out of its way to nurture self-hatred in African people. Bartolomew de as Casas, who later became Pope, added religious sanction to enslavement indicating that Africans were not fully human. And this continues to be the thinking of many who want to believe that American slavery is justifiable. That African people have dark skin proves their sin, according to religious bigots. Don't eat licorice, one of Langston's teachers advised a white classmate. "Do you want to be black like Langston?" The lessons in self-hatred were so effective that African Americans today are willing to risk great pain and

possible injury not necessarily to look more beautiful, but to look less black. As though to be less black is to be more Christian. How can you possibly love your neighbour if you do not love yourself?

In Langston's novel, Tempy demonstrates this self-hatred. She is the oldest daughter of three. Early in the novel, her mother, Hagar Williams and a neighbour Mrs. Whiteside, discuss Tempy's church-going habits as follows: "I hears from Reverend Berry that Tempy done withdrawed from our church and joined the Episcopals," the neighbour observes. And Hagar Williams confirms the rumour adding, "The last time I seed Tempy, she told me she couldn't stand the Baptist no mo' too many low Niggers belonging she say, so she's gonna joint Father Hill's church, where de best people go." Tempy not only avoids the black church, she also avoids her black family. Through Tempy, Langston comments on many that see African heritage as a religious handicap.

What a paradox that the European Christian religion has African, Kemetic (Egyptian) origins. And in Ancient Kemet, the colour black was the colour of reverance. In a country where the land is 96% desert, a red, dry desert representing death, the Nile overflows to deposit rich black soil along its banks to give the people life. On the walls of tombs and temples, the most venerated figures are painted blue black. Blackness represents life. Ancient Egypt is called Kemet, which translates the black land. When the Pharoah died, it was no ordinary scarab placed on his heart, but a black scarab to symbolize that he will live again (the scarab represents creativity). How then did blackness come to represent divine disfavour, to be the visible sign of a curse which could validate slavery (the children of Ham are cursed!)?

Race replaced religion. "It would be too bad if Jesus were to come back black." Hughes writes in "Bible Belt":

> There are so many churches
> Where he couldn't pray

Of the South.

Here is commentary on the sexual abuses during and after slavery; a black man could be lynched for whistling at a white woman, but a white man, the paternal figure, could rape a black woman with impunity.

The matter of race and religion is examined in a different tone through the character Simple who in "Temptation" opens with the question "When the Lord said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light, what I want to know, is where was us coloured people?" "We must not of been there said Simple, "because I am still dark. Either he did not include me or else I were not there." Again as sense of exclusion, "I never did see anybody look like me on a Sunday school card," Simple says later in the same essay.

In 'Cracker Prayer', another simple tale, the racist prays:

> "Oh, Lord help me to get right, do right, be right, die right before I ascends to Thy sight. Help me to make my peace with Nigras, Lord, because I have hated them all my life. If I do not got to heaven, Lord, I certainly do not want to to go to hell with all them Nigras down there waiting to meet me. I hear the Devil is in League with the Nigras, and if the Devil associates with Nigras, he must be a yankee who would not give me protection. Lord take me to Thy Kingdom where I will not associate with a hell full of Nigras. Do you hear me Lord?"

What contradictions! The next request in this prayer is for a mammy in heaven, since the prayer does not have a mammy on earth. This southerner has already decided that hell is the proper place for black people, but for his personal convenience he would like a mammy, a black woman, in heaven. He has already acknowledged his hatred for blacks as wrong, yet continues as though the hatred is somehow justified.

Hughes celeberates blackness in a literature that joins blackness and beauty. He does this in "Dream Variation", where he speaks of "Night coming tenderly, /Black like me." And again in "My People" where he says "The night is beautiful/ So the faces of my people." Twice in "Dream Variations", Hughes associates peace with the image of a tall tree, and again in "Daybreak in Alabama", he refers to "tall tall trees"; and it is no simple reference. This is poetry which heals, which restores the world as beautiful. The tree is the channel between heaven and earth, the path to heaven. It had been denatured through lynching and had been twisted into a death symbol. The rivers had become a death bed, especially the infamous Mississippi. The south had become hell, at night a time of terror when the KKK covered in sheets rode with flaming cross, sometimes to terrorize, sometimes to kill. With this in mind, "Daybreak in Alabama" becomes something of a miracle, with its dream of racial harmony, putting the human family together, in touch again, again connected to the earth.

When we consider the magnificent array of animals in this world, we observe that they are suited to there habitats; the polar bear with white fur and black skin; white fur to blend in with the arctic snow, black skin to absorb heat; male birds have bright colours, the female who sit on the nests, dull colours to provide camouflage, with the exception of the female parrot whose tropical surroundings are brilliant. Humans too, are suited to their habitats. Africans are dark by design; those born near the equator, darkest; those born in places of high altitude, lighter. A full nostril dissipates heat; crinkled hair provides protection from the sun. The pull of gravity is greater at the equator, and those born near the equator have a denser body structure, and a broader foot to support that structure. It's no wonder that heavy weight champions and track and field athletes are often African. It is purely malicious to suggest that physical appearance is proof of divine curse.

Before 1509 when Michael Angelo painted his cousin and his uncle's wife as models for the divine Mother and Child, there

was Kemet's (Egypt's) Isis and Horus. (There are many such statues at the Cairo Museum). The idea of divine kinship is a conspicuous part of the Egyptian religion where Pharaoh's not only claimed to be the son of God, but added emphatically, the *son of his own body*. The full name of Rameses II, Pharaoh of the XIXth dynasty, Ra Meses Mery Amon, Useret Re, Setep N Ra, translates, born of Re, beloved of Amon, power of Re, select of Re; where Re, the sun, the centre of the solar system, represents the revealed aspects of God, and Amon, the unseen, the hidden aspects of God, recognizing that there is more to God than that which the eye perceives. The word "Amen", sung at the end of Christian hymns has Egyptian origins. The judgement scenes decorated the walls of Egypt's tombs long before they reached the Bible. The tomb of Ramesis VI depics a snake turned into a rod becoming a snake again. The temple of Seti I, father of Ramesis II, records the Tale of Two Brothers, which becomes the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar. When a black choir sing "The Lord is My Light and My Salvation", they sing a song four thousand years old. What irony that this religion should become a tool used to disinherit the descendants of that religion.

Hughes life is an integral part of his poetry. Travel in Russia provided freedom to attack religion's failings in "Good Bye Christ". In Russia, the great stretch of frigid landscape, his close call with death, and the scarcity of food all deepened his introspective mood. He carried with him Black American music, which many Russians listened to, but when advised that jazz had no place in the revolution, Hughes simply rejected that notion. This music was his religion. He was respectful of people and their places of worship, visiting the synagogue of his classmates and the cathedral in Mexico. He seems to have bathed in the rhythms and energy of the Black church in poems such as "Feet o' Jesus":

> At the feet o' Jesus
> Sorrow like a sea.
> Lordy, let yo' mercy

Come driftin' down on me.
At the feet o' Jesus
At yo' feet I stand.
O' ma little Jesus,
Please reach out yo' hand.

He could not have written poems such as "Fire", "Sunday Morning Prophecy" or "Tambourines" if he had not sat respectfully among the worshippers. For Hughes religion had to serve the people. Religion had to be useful, considerate. While a Red Cross member asks an impoverished couple "Have you been good?" Hughes asks if the cotton's been sold and is not happy to hear that the man has not seen any of the money, and the woman has not been to town for four years. Hughes certainly was not impressed when the coloured Red Cross man assured the couple that God would help them and that they shouldn't worry ("I Wonder", page 175). Again in Mexico, when three religious sisters gave the poor small packets of charity, including a thin shaving of soap, he recommended that fewer be given larger gifts. But they resisted the suggestion.

In his many readings, Hughes gave much to his audience, especially to the young children who needed a positive image. They needed a black poet who sensed the divine in his people. The neighbourhood children from P.S. 248 would attend his funeral, May, 1967; many were children who helped him with his garden and ran errands for him. His is a literature that participates in the eternal, connecting the African soul to the world's rivers in 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'. Dr. Joseph Ben Jochannan defines religion as the deification of one's culture. Langston's regard for his culture approaches deification:

> Let the blare of Negro Jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the coloured near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy"

> and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Geogia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear of shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If coloured people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.

These words from "The Negro Artist and the Racial mountain" recall the dignity and power of our culture. They restore our souls.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berry, Faith (1983) *Langston Hughes*. New York: Lawrence Hill and Co.

Ben-Jochannan, Yosef (1970) *The African Origins of Major Western Religions*. New York: African American Heritage Series.

Hughes, Langston (1974) *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage

_____ , (1963) *The Big Sea*. New York: Hill and Wang.

_____ , (1986) *I Wonder as I wonder*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

Lichtheim, Miriam. (1980) *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Vols. I, II, III. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pagels, Elaine (1988) *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*. New York: Random House.

Wilson, Ian (1984) *Jesus The Evidence*. New York: Harper and Row.

IRO AGHEDO

Weaverbirds

A weaverbird
perches on a coconut tree
weaving images
from stalks and palmfronds
in tune with nature.

A wordsweaver
lingers on meditative silences
creating images
from the cauldron of ideas
for the pot of life.

Birds of a feather -
hunted;
caged in solitary confinement;
fed on crumbs;
trapped; and catapulted to death.

The Daughter of Eve
(for the prostitute)

Silver-gold, silkthread hair
Kissing the rhythmic buttocks

Eyes of a goddess sparkling
Like the waves of a moonlit ocean

Sugar-coated, deceit-laden tongue
Talkative like a weaverbird's

Bleached skin punctuated with black spots
Radiant like honey in the sun

Waist of a wasp; legs of an antelope;
nails of a cat painted in rainbow colours

A broken reed
Catapulted to and fro
By the protean hand of fashion
Dressed nakedly to madden
The libido of the sons of Adam

Ride on this chariot of sowless reaping
To the drizzling roots of the firmament.
But the banana leaves cannot escape
The sure wrath of the storm-cloud.

Ossobô." Carlos Espírito Santo postulates that "ossobô" comes from a corruption of the French "oiseau beau" (beautiful bird). I find this dubious, for surely there are far more beautiful birds on São Tomé and Príncipe, like the gorgeous São Tomé sunbird (all black with a yellow band across the chest). In forro, "obô" is the word for the forest and surely "ossobô" (far more often heard than seen) is the troubadour of the forest. Is "ossobô" a corruption of Portuguese and forro "voz do obo" (voice of the forest?) Or is the Portuguese "osso" (bone) at play here, "osso" suggesting strength or power?

Herculano Levy (1989-1969) himself is an interesting figure. More or less unknown until Carlos Espírito Santo ressurected him, Levy was the son of a wealthy Jewish plantation owner and exporter of cacau and coffee and his African wife. Like Costa Alegre and Tenreiro, Herculano Levy lived most of his life in Portugal. He wrote sentimental poems in stanzaic forms. Many of his poems sing of love dreamed of, love lost, love regretted. These are songs of innocence. There is also in Levy a body of poems celebrating the luxuriant beauty of Santomean landscapes. Levy seems to have rejected totally his jewish identity and even goes so far as to adore the baby in the manger in Bethlehem. His best poems are love poems to his wife, a woman nineteen years his junior. As he grew older, Levy recognized how essential she had been.

São Tomé and príncipe marched to independence in 1975 after seasons of struggle, and as was the case throughout Africa in the second half of the 20th century, writers played a significant role. Like "ossobô", they announced long awaited seasons of harvest. The outstanding poet-activist was and continues to be Alda Espírito Santo. Born in 1926, she is a living national monument, a point of reference for an entire society. Poet Frederico Gustavo dos Anjos calls her "a única camarada que nos resta" (the only remaining comrade). She has been Minister of Culture, Minister of Information, Minister of Education, President of the National Assembly-and she never got rich!

Like Niyi Osundare, she is a poet with a sense of

communion with ordinary people. She expresses their hopes, their suffering, their humanity in a language that is accessible. In her poems, myth and history are literary masqueraders.

Alda Espírito Santo and I talked for two hours. We talked about a variety of subjects from "ossobô" to Forro itself (a language rich in proverbs). We talked of literary generations. Her generation, which she calls the Generation at Cabral, was motivated primarily by idealism, by a desire to build the city of the universality of man. "We acted, we wrote out of a sense of *purity*," she explained. "Succeeding generations lost that purity, that untainted love of man. What has replaced it is an egotism throughout Africa, throughout the world."

Alda Espírito Santo spoke of her sadness upon learning of the death of Mozambican poet and friend, Noémia de Sousa. She spoke of her admiration for Angolan poet António Jacinto: the "simplicity in his writing is staggering." She spoke of her admiration for Angolan novelist Pepetela, who has continued to be productive for the last thirty years. She spoke of her student days in Lisbon, her friendships which included Agostinho Neto. With pride she got out a copy of Neto's *Sacred Hope*, turned to his poem on the Massacre of February 1953 in São Tomé and noted that the poem was dedicated to her. There is among African writers of her generation a sense of community. History and the Portuguese language combined to create a literary society from Cape Verde to Mozambique, from Angola to São Tomé and Príncipe.

At 76, she is a dynamo. A new book, a collection of stories, *They Murdered the River of My Childhood*, is soon to be published. She is active in helping to promote rural development. This African writer, this great African woman, comes from the smallest country in Africa, a country with a population of about 140,000, a country with one airplane with nineteen seats. It would be a good thing if Nigeria sees in São Tomé and Príncipe something other than a potential rival for oil. It would be a good thing for Nigerian writers to honour Alda Espírito Santo. After all, her office in the Writers Union is closer to Lagos than is Kano.

Santomean writers and intellectuals hunger for books from Africa. I visited the home of Filinto Costa Alegre. His library includes works by Soyinka, Achebe, and Okara, as well as hundreds of volumes of works from lusophone Africa. Obviously greater contact between Nigeria and her island neighbour would enrich both peoples. This letter is an attempt to reach across atlantics of ignorance.

Since independence, literature has not flourished here. Poet Frederico Gustavo dos Anjos told me that several factors have inhibited literary productivity—a repressive socialist government that ran the country after independence; lack of funds to print and publish books; a general decline in the quality of education. However, The Camões Institute under the direction of a Portuguese woman, Ms. Neves, has in the past year come up with sufficient money to publish a series of poetry books. The texts are attractively presented. These books unfortunately are expensive. The average cost is about 20 US dollars.

Batê Mom, a literary-cultural journal, is edited by Alda Espírito Santo and Inocência Mata, a professor in Lisbon and the author of several books on Santomean literature. *Batê Mom* (the name is forro for "clap hands") comes out rather sporadically. But it is inexpensive. The most recent issue (June 2002) includes several poems of Olinda Beja, a tribute to Maria de Jesus Agostinho das Neves, an activist and educator who died in her late 90s in late 2001, pieces on foreign writers including Fernando Sylvan of East Timor, the Brazilian Jorge Amado, and Senghor. On the front page is a forro proverb: dignidad' ji çá tamén dad'ji (dignity goes beyond age.)

São Tomé and Príncipe has not been prolific in producing novelists. Two Portuguese, who lived for years in Africa, Ricardo Reis and Sum Marky, write novels. Sum Marky, born in São Tomé in 1921, has been writing since the mid 1950s and in 1999 published an important novel on the Massacre of 1953, *Crónica de uma Guerra Inventada (Chronicle of an Invented War)*. He is greatly admired in São Tomé.

Albertino Bragança from São Tomé is the best known contemporary prose writer. Caminho, in Lisbon, published his *Rosa do Riboque*, a collection of stories, in 1997. They capture the essence of small town life within a political and cultural framework. Rosa of Riboque lives in a poor quarter of the capital. She will not betray to the authorities the hiding place of dock workers who are on strike. Beaten, tortured, she will not give in. This story suggests the dignity and suffering of those victims of the Batepa Massacre in 1953. Many Forro words spice the narrative, resulting in a Santomean prose, rooted in African experience and African language, even though the book is written in Portuguese.

In the southeast corner of São Tomé live the Angolares, a unique people, like the Maroons of Jamaica, who fled into the interior to escape slavery and have more or less succeeded in maintaining for centuries a certain cultural autonomy. Descedants of Umbundo people from southern Angola, who were brought to São Tomé in the 16th century, the Angolares, continue to live both apart and within Santomean society. There is not a single representative from among the Angolares in the congress.

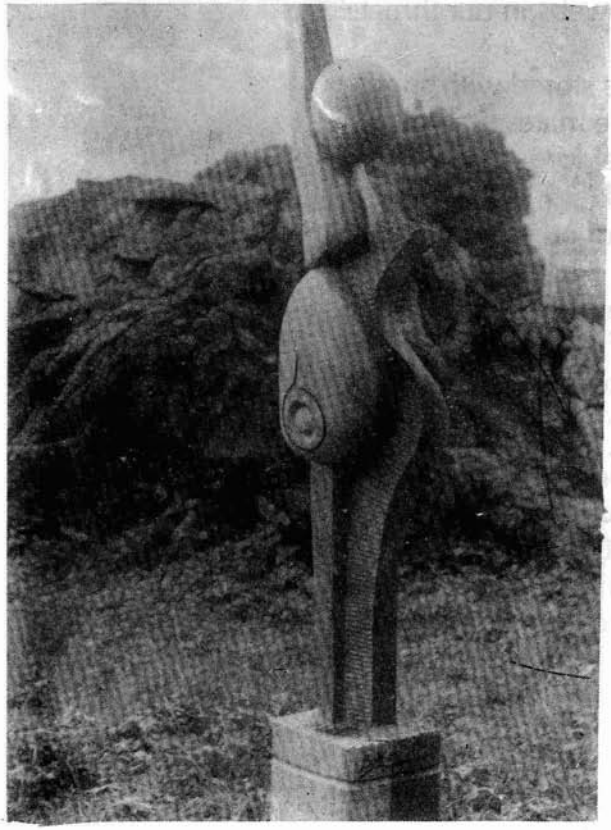
The Angolares have their own language. A distinguished poet and dramatist, Francisco Macedo, lives in Lisbon. Angolares themes dominate his work. A play, *Capitango*, was performed at Expo 98 in Lisbon. "Capitango" is the name of a river south of São João dos Angolares.

Nezó is an Angolar musician and painter. He lives in São João dos Angolares. I met with him in his studio. He was working on two large oil paintings commisioned by a telecom company in São Tomé, the capital. Since fishing has been a mainstay of the Angolares, Nezó includes fish in many of his works. This was the case in the oil paintings he was working on. Nezó has exhibited in various African countries and in Europe.

The recent discovery of oil between Nigerian and São Tomé means that these African neighbours would do well to understand each other. And literature can serve as well as

anything to help create the city of the universality of man. Like Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe has a rich literary heritage. For such a small country to have produced a rich constellation of poets from Costa Alegre to Tenreiro to Alda Espírito Santo is no mean achievement. "We are all Africans," Tenreiro asserts in his poem "Mãos" (hands) and we are all linked: "Hands that molded in terra cotta the beauty and serenity of Ife/hands that in lost wax manifested the pride of Benin...hands that at desert shores opened Kano to the attraction of caravans."

Bom Bom Island —Príncipe
January 19, 2003



NDUBUISI NNANNA

Filled with Nothing

On trees of such fruits
that make gods drool
and plead aloud
we perch
with cobwebs in our throats!

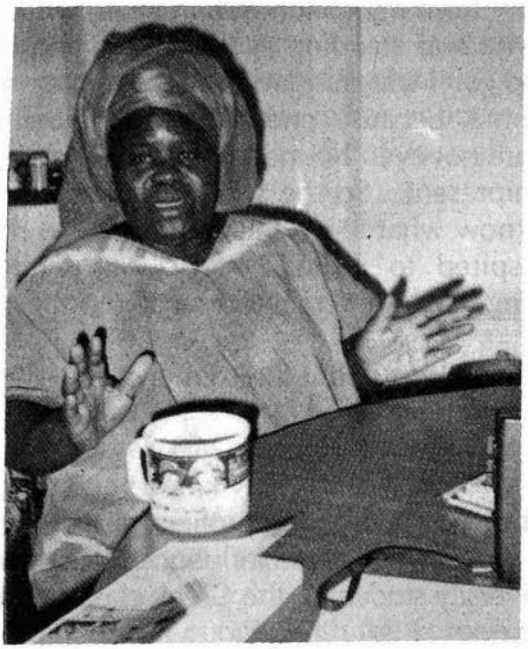
On lands stored with spoils
that make mates marvel
and kneel for just a tip
we stand
beggars of our own barn!

On waters filled with such fish—
grains of gold
that make The Nile mad and jealous
we drift
eaten by hunger!

Which Christ-like rat
will bell the cat?

ONUORA OSSIE ENEKWE

Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo*



Enekwe: Prof. Ama Ata Aidoo, it's been a long time I have been trying to interview you. It was very difficult knowing where you were, until I went to your discussion in New York University several months ago. And that was a very good break for me, because I think you are one of our most important writers.

Aidoo: Thank you.

*This interview took place on June 12, 1993, at Clinton, New York State, USA.

Enekwe: It is not usual for playwrights to achieve that kind of freshness and spontaneity in their plays when they are starting off. What factors contributed to your achievement in writing *The Dilemma of a Ghost*?

Aidoo: You are asking me a very difficult question, because ... I don't know the factors that went into it. How am I to know? I just remembered a story from my childhood: a play story from my childhood, in Fanti, which is about a ghost who was standing at a junction, and didn't know where to go. I was intrigued by the mention of a ghost in a dilemma, because one had learnt growing up, that ghosts are not even bound by time and space. They can be omnipresent. So the whole notion of a ghost who didn't know what to do seemed to me, so ridiculous. I was inspired to write a story. And right from the beginning, it came to me as drama.

Enekwe: You are talking about the source of the story.

Aidoo: Yes.

Enekwe: What of your method in putting this in form of drama. Would you say you were influenced by what you learnt as a university student ... the Greek classical tradition, for instance?

Aidoo: Well, I don't use the word classical to refer to the European classics. For me, this is one of the things that I fight against. We are struggling against this same orientation—when people say "classic," and they mean European classic...

Enekwe: I am talking about the Greek classic tradition.

Aidoo: I didn't do Greek. I did Latin when I was in school.

Enekwe: You didn't read Aeschylus and Sophocles and the rest of them?

Aidoo: What I mean is the least that I knew about Greek drama. I just read in translation. I didn't even do any Greek drama. In a way this is very interesting for me, because any time people ask me these questions (normally they are Europeans), I say, "Why do you imagine that the whole notion of a chorus is Greek?". The part of what I imagine African drama to be is that for Africans, the chorus part is a dimension of the totality of our culture, of art and of life. What people say about you is almost as important as what you say about yourself.

Enekwe: Yes, because it is communal.

Aidoo: Yes, so for me, that is not Greek at all.

Enekwe: The reason I am asking the question is not because I feel that you must have tried to model your play after the so-called Greek classical tradition, but because a lot of people writing about your work, especially *The Dilemma of a Ghost,* seem to suggest that you must have tried, because of your orientation in school and —

Aidoo: The thing is that people with the Eurocentric education met the chorus in Greek drama. So their assumption therefore is that its only in Greek drama that you have a chorus. My point is that a chorus part, is just a chorus part. And from my awareness of, for instance, contemporary African religious music or African dance, the chorus as a principle is so African, as far as I am concerned. And I actually know that I didn't do any Greek drama as a discipline. I read a bit of Greek drama in translation, here and there, just like I read about Greek and Roman wars, as literature, from books or anthologies.

That is the only way I met Greek drama. So my contention is that I couldn't possibly have taken the notion of the chorus from Greek drama.

My perception of African theatre art is that, just as some people feel that if you don't have music and dance as the integral part of theatre in Africa, then you don't have African theatre, I think that, if there is an African play that doesn't have any choral part at all, it is just very thin. The notion of the chorus can be incorporated into the part of the plot. I am thinking right away, for instance, of Soyinka's *Death And The King's Horseman.* The drama incorporates that notion. It brings to the attention of the principal characters, what the community thinks. So to me, this is very much part of my own thought as an African writer. It has nothing to do with the Greeks.

Enekwe: Thank you very much. I am going to ask the second question. If you were to re-write *The Dilemma of A Ghost,* what would you do?

Aidoo: And what wouldn't I do, right?

Enekwe: That is, considering what you have gone through in the last twenty years or so —

Aidoo: Why would I want to re-write the play?

Enekwe: I am just curious to know whether you ever wished you could have done this or that.

Aidoo: Okay. Honestly Enekwe, I have realised for a long time that *The Dilemma of A Ghost* is a controversial play. People see *Our Sister Kill Joy* as a controversial novel. These are supposed to be controversial works. When I was working on them, I didn't know they would be

controversial. What would I do today with *The Dilemma of A Ghost*, that I didn't do twenty years ago? The only thing that I can think of may be in the first place, not even writing the play at all. Because I don't think I have the courage now which I had then to write *The Dilemma*. I know a little too much today, and I am fairly aware of how sensitive the entire issue of the relationship between Africans and African-Americans is, how we relate to one another, and the prejudices that we harbour against one another. So I think today, in the first instance, I wouldn't even write a play like *The Dilemma of A Ghost*. All I can say is that I am glad I wrote it when I did. Now, if I had the courage to write the play at all today, I probably would not come out so naïve. But otherwise, I watched a production of this play at the University of Pittsburgh in 1988, and I was surprised at how relevant the play seems to be, even today. So I don't know if there is much that I would do differently.

Enekwe: That is one of the reasons I asked the question, considering that at that point in time, you were an undergraduate.

Aidoo: Yes.

Enekwe: For you to have that kind of perspective to decide to write such a serious play.

Aidoo: I think that may be I was protected by my innocence.

Enekwe: Now, you watched the play in 1988?

Aidoo: Yes. One of the latest productions that I'd seen.

Enekwe: Who were the actors and actresses? Were they African-American students?

Aidoo: Yes.

Enekwe: How did the African-American audience respond to the play?

Aidoo: People seemed to love it. The production was by a mainly African-American group based in either the African Studies Department, or the Theatre Arts Department. The director and producers were all African-Americans.

Enekwe: That is very interesting because, considering the relationship between Africans and African-Americans, this seems to be a play that needs to be seen by not only Africans, but African-Americans.

Aidoo: Yes.

Enekwe: A play that needs in fact, to be shown everywhere because it is a kind of confrontation with one's identity, one's reality, things that people want to wish away. It is a way of coming into direct contact with the things that we pretend are not there. In that way, it has a way of throwing certain feelings that people don't like to talk about. Now, what are the problems between Africans and African-Americans at this moment that the play could help to solve?

Aidoo: The issue of the relationship between Africans and African-Americans is very serious. I think that we need to know more about one another.

Enekwe: What are the problems, for instance?

Aidoo: I think that, precisely given the kind of educational system that we go through in Africa, first during the

colonial period, we are not really made aware of our own history. So, how come black people in the Americas and the Caribbeans, are not, to use your own word, confronted by the system of education. This is a theory that is attributed to me, so I don't mind quoting myself. I feel that as part of our still on-going collective problem as a people, we do not receive any information from our homes, growing up. We do not learn about the slave-trade, for instance, the Atlantic slave-trade, from our home and environment, because, again, it's one of those traumas that our people have gone through which have made them want to forget the whole issue. Nobody talks about it at all. I don't know about your part of Africa, but in Ghana, indeed in South-Central Ghana, where we have these castles, including El-mina castle itself, standing right there at the beach, people pass the castles on their way to the West, to Sekondi and Takoradi. Coming from the West, they will have to pass the castle, every time to get to Tekos, to Winiva to Accra, to Derma, Afflaou, and then to Lome. This castle is there, and yet at home, there are no legends around these castles. People seem not to be aware of how to get to the door, and that is very painful.

Enekwe: It is unbelievable. There are many Africans in the United States who are not even aware that African-Americans are Africans. They regard them as foreigners.

Aidoo: Yes. They regard them as foreigners. They make silly jokes about them. On their part, I think that African-Americans, including some people who should know better, have so internalized the general put-down that Africa and Africans have had through the media, that they don't even know when they are showing negative prejudices towards Africans. So, I think that thee is a lot that needs to be cleared between us as a people. It's one of the important exercises that have to be undertaken by

African people, for themselves and for one another, if we are going to really regain our mental wealth, and move on.

Enekwe: Thank you. I am sure you must be surprised that I am laying so much emphasis on *The Dilemma of A* Ghost. I am not trying to flatter you, because I am really —

Aidoo: Well, you better not try.

Enekwe: I really feel that this play will be good as a movie, because the problem of language will be solved. If you look at the films of Ousmane Sembene, he would allow the characters to talk in their own indigenous language. So, especially when you have people from different languages coming together (you have Eulalie, speaking English, and the mother, speaking Fante), it is a bit awkward to have her speak English, and then expect the audience to pretend that her mother doesn't understand what she is saying.

Aidoo: What do you mean by it is awkward? You know perfectly well that this is one of the incredible things that have been debunked. You are in the theatre, and you know that this is what happens in African drama in the modern European language.

Enekwe: Yes, I am not criticizing per se, I am talking about the genre.

Aidoo: As a genre, it belongs to a whole world of itself. I know that there are problems. But I just want to be sure that everybody is aware that this is not a problem that is peculiar to *The Dilemma of A Ghost*. It is a problem in contemporary African drama.

Enekwe: I am not looking at it as a problem in the play. I am looking at it as a problem in theatre in comparison with the cinema. I am saying that cinema will solve that problem and that the production will be more effective.

Aidoo: Over the years, I have had all sorts of people express interest in filming one or other of my works. But these discussions never get anywhere. So, although I like hearing you say that it will make a good film, it's not something I want to dwell on, because no person cares these days. Sembene films his own works. I have nothing against it. It is brilliant. But African directors don't have money, and they certainly have not gone to look into existing contemporary African literature to see which will make a good film.

Enekwe: So I am the first person to say that?

Aidoo: You are not the first person, but you still belong to the area of discussion and talk.

Enekwe: When I suggest filming, I am not talking in terms of doing the play in the way it is now, but having certain people speak Fanti, and then, having sub-titles.

Aidoo: You are right. Even when people pretended they were discussing the possibility of filming this play, the idea that they would do it in the two languages never came into the discussion. So in that respect, what you are saying is pretty unique.

Enekwe: I would say that maybe it will be a good idea to start working towards it by yourself. I mean, think of doing a screenplay —

Aidoo: Can you imagine that?

Enekwe: Yes. You can do a screenplay.

Aidoo: For whom?

Enekwe: During the African Film Festival, a lot of plays were done by all sorts of people. These movies were shown in the Lincoln Center, and they were very impressive. I don't see why a play like *Dilemma of A Ghost* cannot be filmed so that the whole world can see and hear what is going on. It has a very powerful message. Now, of what significance is the theme of conflict between the traditional African cultures, or ways of life, and western-imposed traditions?

Aidoo: With regard to which of my works?

Enekwe: Your two plays, because these issues come in sometimes.

Aidoo: Looking back to these plays, obviously I was fascinated by the whole notion of us as a conquered people — Africans. We are a conquered people. The conquest is normally euphemistically described as colonisation, imperialism and all that. But at the end of the day, we really are a conquered people, and obviously, this so-called conflict of cultures arises from the fact that, as a conquered people, everything about us is negated by our conquerors, who have then proceeded to impose what they consider to be their ways of doing things on us. It seems as if I've been always intrigued as a writer, by how this has affected us as a people, and how we are managing to deal with it or not to deal with it.

Enekwe: Some writers, notably Wole Soyinka, have been insisting that the clash of cultures is of little significance in the African experience. Especially, let's say, in the

play, *Death And The King's Horseman*. Does it mean you don't agree with him?

Aidoo: I can understand Soyinka's irritation with critics who seem to read nothing into African Literature, except clash of cultures, because that is a kind of reductionist viewpoint. Right from Charles Larson, and all these commentaries on contemporary African Literature, it seems as if nothing we deal with as writers, is of any importance. It is like they are dogs sniffing out clash of cultures. If they can sniff anything remotely smelling like clash of cultures, then that is it, they understand the work. I sympathize with Soyinka, in the sense that one can get irritated with this. Is that all? In any case, when people even talk about our work in terms of clash of cultures, they are not really dealing with the concept in its profundity, as what has happened to a whole people, resulting from the fact that we were conquered. But they use it as some kind of a tag for what they perceive to be the so-called modern African inability to deal with certain Western cultural factors, because we are Africans, because there is a clash of cultures. I think I am fatally in sympathy with Soyinka there when he says, "don't tag my work as a clash of cultures". Because Wole knows that once they do that to your work, that is the end of any genuine effort, on a creative path, to understanding what it is, your work is about. We are being manipulated all the time. So again, I am just saying that if there is a clash of cultures, it is not some kind of superficial notion, but really we are talking of something that is immensely profound. So if we are looking for it, we better look for the genuine thing, instead of using the notion of clash of cultures as some kind of excuse not to deal with the work.

Enekwe: Thank you very much. It is very clear in your works, especially the two plays, *The Dilemma of A Ghost*, and

Anowa, that you are very much concerned about the relationship of men and women. It just happens that in the two plays, the husbands are not strong enough. The women are stronger. Is there any reason for that?

Aidoo: I think I grew up in an environment where I perceived women to be very strong. We are trying to do a kind of author-analysis, and you know that ab-initio, this kind of analysis is bound to be flawed. I feel that somehow, I have been through life comparing the men I meet with my father, and they don't match up. My father was a very clear, individual.

Enekwe: Like you.

Aidoo: I don't know whether I am clear.

Enekwe: You are very clear in your writing, very clear.

Aidoo: He was very clear-cut, and I seem to be a bit irritated with the kind of African men that I come across, for what I perceive to be an almost endemic lack of clarity. I haven't said this publicly anywhere —

Enekwe: Not being strong enough?

Aidoo: Yes, to stand up for issues. In the meantime, we are so busy appropriating power. I think this is what hurts me. Maybe it comes out like that in my plays. On the one hand, our men are so fast to appropriate powers and yet they don't seem to be strong and clear-cut enough to even put the power to good use on our behalf.

Enekwe: Is it possible that the colonial experience might be partly responsible for this?

Aidoo: Of course, the colonial experience is partly responsible

for it, because as colonized people, we were all denied access to power and use of power. But my question is, having seen that this is partly responsible, why don't we quickly get out of it, because we don't have forever to undo colonial damage.

Enekwe: Actually, what I am saying is that the males in the colonial system were suppressed by Europeans. They worked as labourers. But the women were still carrying on, most of the time, with their own profession. So the women did not go through that kind of suppression, for the most part.

Aidoo: I am glad you said for the most part, because we did not escape colonial brutality.

Enekwe: Yes, because the Aba Women's War in 1929 indicates that women were actually more dynamic at that time. The men were not always doing much to confront the Europeans. It was women who organized themselves and fought because their rights were being taken away from them. So you would say that the same problems that African-Americans face in this country are also faced by Africans, because the African-American male was more suppressed than the female. The society did not feel so much threatened by the female, so they allowed them more freedom.

Aidoo: Not more freedom. A certain leeway, or that women were not the primary object of their hatred, their resentment and so on. I can see it. Actually this discussion is very interesting. We talk about it all the time, but we also have to be very careful because women did not escape colonial torture at all.

Enekwe: No, women did not escape. But in the African-American experience, women very often were used as

domestic servants. They worked in the houses, looked after the children of their masters, sometimes became mistresses of their masters. So in that case, they did not go through that mental subjugation that —

Aidoo: Most of this relationships were not like lovers, and it had full consequences. But okay, so who sees the problems? What are we to do? You have as much right on this as a playwright as I do. How are we going to get out of it?

Enekwe: We have talked about the problems that Africans and African-Americans have in their relationship, and this will help us to clarify this relationship. The two groups are in the same situation. The same thing that happened under colonialism had happened under slavery. It's just a question of the levels. So we agree on that?

Aidoo: We do agree on that.

Enekwe: The next question I would like to ask is, Why, having started so well as a playwright, you seem to have stopped writing plays?

Aidoo: That one again, I have been asked a hundred times. The answer is clear, though not so much so simple. After my second play *Anowa* came out as a book, before I had seen a production of it, I swore to myself that I was never going to write a play again, unless and until I led a stable life in which I would be in close touch with a production company, which would produce my plays, and I would see my plays as pieces of theatre, before I edit them for publication. The whole business of seeing a play as a book before I had seen a production of it was so traumatising an experience. In a way, I never got over it. Since then I have seen several productions of *Anowa*, since three years now, very good productions, and of

course, it works as theatre but somehow, I never really just got over that initial play. It was a decision that I took, and since then, as fate, chance would have it, I have not led a secure existence. I have been traveling around, which really means that I have not been in close touch with any theatre group and I have not had the time to form my own. So then, I never wrote another play. It's only as simple and as truthful as that.

Enekwe: So you have been to so many parts of the world in the last ten yeas. Where have you been to?

Aidoo: You know I lived in Zimbabwe. I have lived in Harare.

Enekwe: For how long?

Aidoo: From late September 1983. This September would make it ten years.

Enekwe: So most of your latest works were written while you were there in Zimbabwe?

Aidoo: Yes. I wrote *Changes* in Zimbabwe, and I collected my second volume of poetry in Zimbabwe and did a lot of writing for children in Zimbabwe.

Enekwe: In what ways has Zimbabwe influenced you or affected your writing?

Aidoo: Certainly not much, in terms of what has come out. I suspect that one day, I am going to write something based on my Zimbabwe experience. But so far, I have done one short story for children, based directly on Zimbabwean life. I think that, in a way, living in Zimbabwe has given me a slightly more solidly African perspective. This perspective is not manifest in my work yet, or I don't think it is.

Enekwe: When you talk about African perspective, what exactly do you mean?

Aidoo: A more continental perspective. Well, as early as *Our Sister Killjoy*, quite clearly, I had the continental perspective, but I didn't know Southern Africa. I had some vague notions of Southern Africa, but certainly, living in Zimbabwe has given me a more intimate notion of the continent, from the south. I am from West Africa; I lived in East Africa for a time; and now I have lived in Southern Africa, so I think that Zimbabwe kind of rounds off my notion of Africa. What I need to know a little bit more is North Africa. I know next to nothing about North Africa, although I have been to Algeria. What I am trying to say is, in living in Zimbabwe, I have acquired a certain awareness of other Africans which I couldn't have had if I had never lived there.

Enekwe: What is peculiar to East Africa, and what is peculiar to South Africa?

Aidoo: These are very big questions. I think that Africa is by and large the same. I think that our languages are closer to one another than different. I think that deep down, the cultural and artistic factors are the same. In details definitely there are differences. When I say that I gained a perspective which I wouldn't have got if I hadn't been in Southern Africa, I am really speaking again, from the other side. I have acquired a notion of the wholeness of Africa which I didn't have before, because again when we were growing up, in school, what was emphasized was how different Africans were. What I am trying to say is that as far as I am concerned, the more I have lived in African places, the clearer I have become about the fact that Africans are not as different as people try to emphasize.

Enekwe: Thank you very much. It's been a very fruitful and wonderful learning experience. You have been in the United States for at least one year now —

Aidoo: You are not asking me about my other works. Why do you concentrate only on plays I did more than ten years ago. You are not at all interested in anything that I have done since then.

Enekwe: I will. I am interested, but there is a question I will like to ask ... anyway, its good that you raised the issue right now. I think I better ask you about your latest works. You are a poet, a playwright, and a fiction writer. How do they all come together in your works?

Aidoo: I think that I am a writer. Some writers are playwrights, some are poets. Some of us are writing, which really means that basically, our craft is writing, and then, depending upon how a subject matter or story hits us, then we translate them into poetry or prose as in the novel or prose as in the short story, or as drama. So for us, it really also depends upon the material itself. Like we were talking about *The Dilemma.* It was never a short story. It never occurred to me to do *The Dilemma* as a short story or as a novel. Right from the beginning, when the idea occurred to me, it occurred to me as a play, whereas some of my short stories or all of them, occurred to me as short story. Once in a while, something occurs to me ambivalently. First I begin to do something, then after I have done it I realize, oh, it could have been better as a novel, which is really what happened with my last novel. But basically, we are writing. Those of us who operate like that are writers. We write, and then the materials themselves decide the genre.

Enekwe: *Changes* has been reviewed in *West Africa,* but I don't

remember exactly the details of what was said in the review, but because of the problems we have in publishing in Africa, I am sure that a lot of people have not read the book.

Aidoo: I know.

Enekwe: And the situation seems to be getting worse. In what ways do you think that *Changes* is a movement or a development from your earlier writings.

Aidoo: I think that I was fascinated by the notion of doing a love story.

Enekwe: But you have always been involved with love stories. What is the difference between the love story in *Changes* and the Love story in *The Dilemma of A Ghost, Anowa* and others?

Aidoo: This is interesting, because I had always denied that I was writing love stories. The love story that is in *Dilemma* and the love story that is in *Anowa* are different, simply because I was not so self-conscious about them. I thought I was interested in other things and then used the marriage or love story as a vehicle, whereas for *Changes,* I was interested in a love story itself, and how it gets worked out, caught in the dynamics of our contemporary lives in Africa.

Enekwe: But its very interesting how from the beginning, the two sides of human experience come together in your work; the social, historical, political strands and personal psychological strands all come together very well.

Aidoo: Thank you.

Enekwe: So, I am very lucky that I am able to really interview

you. But when I read your fictional work, your poetry, your drama ... you know, poetry is always struggling, trying to penetrate into the work. It seems almost as if poetry is the life current of your writing. Do you ever go out and say I am going to make this short story or this play poetic in a very self-conscious way.

Aidoo: No. Never. I just set out to write a short story or whatever, but as I said about the choral part and how essential it is to drama, I think that life itself is not a continuous narrative, you break into some work every now and then. So, I think that poetry for me, is important in that kind of way. First, I didn't even know that that was what it was with me. It was a little more unconscious. I realized, like you are saying, that poetry was always coming, intruding, or at least breaking in, and I realised that I shouldn't keep it out. Life is not all prose. So now I am aware of it, and therefore whenever I am doing a short story or a novel and the poetry wants to come, I let it.

Enekwe: It is very interesting, coming to really get into your work. For a long time now, it seems as if whenever you read African Literature, it's almost as if you exclude human relationship, personal relationship. The kind of relationship you see between lovers, between human beings.

Aidoo: Yes. We are busy writing about clash of cultures.

Enekwe: Yes, writing about corruption of our leaders, about revolution and all that. So, sometimes, it seems as if we don't have other aspects of life—people are not going to school, and things like that. So I think that in that sense, you have been consistent in bringing in the personal, human element into your work all the time, in spite of the

fact that you are discussing social and historical problems. I hope it is going to continue like that. I am asking this question because I read an anthology in which the editor was talking about excluding writers who are not committed, and so one begins to wonder, what does he mean by commitment. You know that when you write about the problems in a country, the colonial situations, that suggests commitment. But does it mean that when you write about the mundane things going on in Africa, like people falling in love, relationships, friendships and all that, does it mean that that is not commitment? What is your own view about that?

Aidoo: I must be honest with you, and say that I used to have that notion of commitment, that when one says that a writer shows some form of commitment, one referred to the ability to deal with matters political and social. I think that that is relevant up to a certain point. *Killjoy* is like that. It is a very strongly committed kind of work, although, of course, because it was written by a woman, people hardly read it. They don't even know what is contained in the book which is very interesting. But anyway, *Killjoy* belongs to that phase of my life when I shared this notion of commitment. I think that we limit ourselves a bit when we think that it is only when we discuss socio-political matters, that we are being committed. I think we should expand our notion of the concept to include any sincere, sensitive honest portrayal of our environment, of our people. Any appreciation of African life is commitment.

Enekwe: Yes. Because we may get to a certain point when we begin to give the impression to the world that nothing ever goes right in Africa.

Aidoo: Never mind giving an impression. It does not really

matter what impression we give to the world. What matters is what impression we give ourselves. The world doesn't really matter. They don't even care for us anyway. Whatever we do, people take them or leave them, according to how they perceive us. But, what impressions are we giving ourselves? What are we leaving for our children. How are we defining ourselves. How are we talking about ourselves to ourselves. I think that it is this lack of awareness of what it is that we say to ourselves which for me is also so deadly and dangerous.

Enekwe: The other issue I will like to ask about is, again I read an anthology in which the editor was saying that fantasy fiction has now become the norm in Africa. In other words, people should move away from the discussion of social and historical problems and now go into fantasy and this writer mentioned—

Aidoo: Okri?

Enekwe: Okri, yes. I will like to get your response, because I begin to wonder whether it is right for any person to pontificate.

Aidoo: Who was pontificating like that? If the person has already written it down, name him or her, because people have to be named. Who said that?

Enekwe: I am talking about the anthology of African short stories from Heinemann, edited by Chinua Achebe and Lyn Innes.

Aidoo: And who said that? Was it Lyn Innes or Chinua Achebe?

Enekwe: Lyn.

Aidoo: I think that is so ridiculous. First of all, my theory is that

people are writing the fantasy novel because they cannot really deal with the realities that is our life in literature. That is not to put down anybody but people are escaping into fantasy because one, the brutality on the continent by our leaders is so overwhelming. Even before you talk, they are cutting your mouth. Then on one hand, they share the immensity of the poverty, of the dangerous reality that our people are trying to cope with and then look at their political response—insensitivity, brutality and marginalization. And I think that we are finding it very difficult, we African writers to deal head-on with this reality. Now to come round to say that our fear, our inability should now be sanctified and institutionalised, is very ridiculous and dangerous. We are taking a route out because we cannot do what we should be doing. And now to say that this escapage route should become the norm is nonsense. And in fact, it's a very dangerous phase in African literature, and writers like Ben Okri are doing these things. But we should also be absolutely clear of what this kind of writing is. We are doing this kind of writing in lieu of confronting the issues, because we cannot. Because the issues are so heavy we cannot deal with them and if the possible political repercussion, even if we could deal with them, is so threatening, then we can only write fantasy. The newest concept is magical realism isn't it?

Enekwe: That is what Ben Okri writes.

Aidoo: Exactly. Magical realism. Long ago, I said to myself, rather than not write anything at all, letting ourselves be terrorised into non-writing, which is the total abyss for any writer, any form of writing is better than no writing at all. And as far as I am concerned, that is where I put magical realism and fantasia. You know, rather than have the writer shut up, let him or her write fantasy. But then to

sanctify it, to institutionalise it, and to prescribe it seems to me a very dangerous thing to do.

Enekwe: We keep complaining about Joseph Conrad and the very negative image he presents about Africa, in his *Heart of Darkness*, but at the same time, we are finding more and more that our own writers are beginning to write about Africa almost in the same vein. When they write about snakes and all that crawling in the jungle, isn't it as bad as *Heart of Darkness*?

Aidoo: The point is that when somebody deals with Africa the way Joseph Conrad deals with Africa, that is racism. That is imperialism. You see, we have a right to look at our own selves and deal with ourselves the way we deem fit. When somebody like Conrad writes about Africa as a dark continent, Africans don't talk.

The *Heart of Darkness* is a very depressing novel. It's depressing on one hand because he didn't even see the continent. Joseph Conrad didn't know Africa. On the other hand, an African writer surely must be writing, you hope, from his or her own perception of our continent. Now, if the writer is adopting a certain kind of disdain or distance that a colonial writer like Conrad had when he was dealing with Africa, then, of course, there is something dangerous happening here.

Enekwe: I am talking about stereotypes. The stereotypes about Africa. Because in the West, Africa is a jungle.

Aidoo: Who are you talking about.

Enekwe: I am talking about Ben Okri.

Aidoo: Oh, you are talking about Ben's work like *The Famished*

Road.

Enekwe: Yes.

Aidoo: Yes. So certainly the way Europeans see Africa contributes to that kind of literature because they are the consumers of that literature. Well, you see, I am a bit nervous about tagging any African writer as sort of caged in the European thing. This sort of accusation has always got bad. But I think that when an African writer has lived abroad—Ben has lived, I don't know how long, in England, —I am not saying African writers shouldn't live in England, but there is this cage, one in which an African writer is so physically removed from the continent that it is almost the only literature he or she can write. So we have to learn to accept that literature, recognize it for what it is.

Enekwe: But, we should not present it as the ideal.

Aidoo: Exactly. That is it. Because now Ben has won the Booker Prize, people are trying to say all you Africans, write like Ben Okri. But who is listening anyway to this kind of people. Any African writer who is going to read what they are saying and say ah, now, I might write like Ben—

Enekwe: But if the person shall decide—

Aidoo: Yes, that this is the kind of literature I know, then it becomes another way of marginalising Africa.

Enekwe: Like the way Innes is presenting it in the anthology. It is just like saying, okay this is now the way writers should move in future.

Aidoo: Unfortunately, people do this only with African literature. Either we must be writing clash of cultures, or we must all

be writing fantasy.

Enekwe: They don't allow us freedom.

Aidoo: Yes. I keep saying it. That is part of the problem that has always ducked *Our Sister Killjoy*. The novel came out and people decided: Eh! This is not the kind of novel we expect from an African woman writer. That is the story. And *Killjoy* has managed to be in existence, in spite of this kind of thing. Every now and then some one claims to know what Africans are writing about, and therefore they know what Africans should be writing about. We should just ignore them, or stop them one way or the other. My theory is that Ben Okri is doing something brilliantly. What he is doing is one writing brilliant literature borne out of an almost total physical exile from Africa, and also a kind of response to the immensity of African horrors, the political repressions. It is okay. They have done it in Latin America.

Enekwe: As long as they don't present it as the ideal.

Aidoo: Exactly. And mind you, this was the Latin American writers' response to military dictatorship and horrors. Obviously, it always crops up when writers simply cannot deal with the socio-political realities, and it is valid.

Enekwe: Valid, but dangerous when carried too far.

Aidoo: Yes.

Enekwe: What do you think of Buchi Emecheta?

Aidoo: I am a writer, she is a writer.

Enekwe: I am talking about a novel called *The Moonlight Bride*.

Aidoo: I haven't read it.

Enekwe: In it, a girl goes into the forest and then sits down on what she thinks is a log of wood, which turns out to be a big snake. I mean, how can somebody sit on a big snake, thinking it's wood, and this is exactly written for the consumption of Europeans.

Aidoo: Yes.

Enekwe: And that is the kind of literature that is considered to be real.

Aidoo: Let them write it. That is the only thing they can write. The thing is, we cannot worry about it. People have to write. I think, let them write it. We also have to remember that precisely because of the situation we confront in Africa, so many would-be writers are not writing, because on one hand, they seem to be completely overwhelmed by the reality around us. So, the writers like Buchi and Ben who are in England, at least, can write, and this is their way out. Let them write. People do not have avenues and opportunities for artistic expression. But if we express ourselves, let it be as mad as possible. That is not going to hurt us. If any honest literature, however negative, could hurt people, England would be hurt. Look at Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, showing whole-heartedly how the Industrial Revolution dealt with people. If literature could hurt a people, wouldn't the English be hurt? Even look at Shakespeare... Falstaff, I mean, his portrayal of England, when he wasn't even extolling the virtues of England. So its not the discussion of the negatives that hurt the people. My thing is that, let people write. This is not what is going to hurt Africa. What will hurt Africa is the fact that life on our continent is now so brutal that writers are dying

before they are old. Our art is being stifled. This is what we should really worry about. As for Buchi and Ben, let them do their thing. What I do not agree with is holding them up as examples of what we should all be doing:

Enekwe: Exactly. I will now like to ask this question about how you think as the author, your present works, *Sister Killjoy, Changes* and then the new poems, are different from what you did before.

Aidoo: As far as I am concerned, I am the same person. But we all change at least. Something like *Changes* is an insight to the reality of Africa. After I was sacked as a Minister—

Enekwe: You were? In Ghana? When was this?

Aidoo: 1983.

Enekwe: I was in the United States, part of 1982; but in Nigeria, early part of 1983.

Aidoo: I meant writing a novel about my experiences in the government. But, of course, you have heard about my experiences in the government. I thought well, this is the time for me to write a love story. Of course, everybody has pointed out how conceited the love story is. But I am saying that I, as the author, cannot really stand back and say *Changes* is different from *Killjoy*. Somebody else has to do that kind of verifying differentiations of one work from the other. I think it is just another dimension of me as a writer, don't you think.

Enekwe: Yes. Now, I will get to the final question, and that has to do with what probably will be your response to Alice Walker's *Possessing The Secret of Joy* which seems to be all bent on trying to portray circumcision as a barbaric tradition. And she seems to be going further, in fact,

planning to do a movie on African circumcision. What do you think about circumcision, because it comes in a lot of works by African authors, and one teaching in the United States right now has to confront it from time to time. What is the meaning of circumcision from what you know about African society?

Aidoo: Well, let me first tell you that I don't come from an ethnic group that does it. So then the whole issue of female circumcision, I confronted first of all, only through literature. The Akan do not perform any form of female circumcision. In actual fact, the Akan are on the other side. They feel that the genitalia of a young woman growing has to be sort of nurtured, has to be even more sensitive, and so on and so forth. Obviously there is no awareness of anything like that in the current discourse. I mean nobody seems to be aware of any African people who do not go mutilating the genitalia. So, for me as an Akan woman, it is the one-sidedness of the discourse that is the problem, as if all of Africa is mutilating female genitalia. I didn't even know about cutting genitalia, until I started reading others writing about it. Certainly when I read *Possessing The Secret of Joy*, my first reaction was enormous anger. I was very angry at the book, and with Alice. What I see in the book is enormous well of resentment.

Enekwe: And spite.

Aidoo: I mean the book is full of spite and resentment. I was angry with Alice, but then I later on said, but Alice is an African woman. The thing is, if we are going to define the global Africaness, we have to simply allow African-Americans and African people to deal with African data like their own, because it is their own. When white folks write about African patterns with racism, that is a different

issue. When an African deals with her own culture, like the way we were talking about the literature that is being written by people like Ben Okri, it is the critique of Africa coming from our learned people. Alice has as much a right to write about these things as anybody else. But I still think it is a hateful book. In terms of details, there are several areas of the book which make me say that it is spiteful, because I think that as somebody who has a bad leg myself, I could not believe that in 1992, '91, or whenever Alice was writing this book, she would make the woman who was performing this thing, who was supposed to be a big source of evil in the society, you know, somebody with a bad leg. And the insensitive way she handles this woman's physical defects, it is incredible. Did Alice have to give the woman this kind of physical defect. Alice is being very primitive in the fashion of ancient writers in Athens who equated physical deformity with spiritual deformity. It is almost as if in the book, Walker is saying that only a woman with a bad leg would do this thing to young children. For me, that was that. I just could not handle that one. Then the conclusion she gave the book, that America therefore becomes the big liberating hope, as opposed to Africa, that I could pick, given the role, precisely, that America has played in the lives of Africans. For me, that is the most complete rejection of Africa in all literature that I have come across.

Enekwe: And this is coming from an African.

Aidoo: Yes. Only an African-American can so totally reject Africa, or an African-Caribbean person. Only a child of the Diaspora can do this, and I allow what they say. But that doesn't mean that I can't deal with it. I can understand. After my initial anger, I have just been trying to put myself through the discipline of trying to understand this book, where it is coming from, and how

we can deal with it. It is coming from the pain that is the reality of African life in the New World. And when we Africans get angry with Walker, we have to bear this in mind. It is not an easy book to read.

Enekwe: But the danger in this kind of book is that it is not based on research. There is a lot of fabrication.

Aidoo: That it is a fabrication isn't important. The most important thing is that there is female genitalia practice in Africa. As I said, as an Akan woman, my notion of the practice is as ignorant as anybody else's, because I did not encounter it when I was growing up. But my point is that it is not a very nice thing. I think we have to agree that wherever this thing comes from in our culture, it is a very cruel thing. There is no way we can defend female circumcision. On the other hand, what we have to understand is where it comes into the culture. What I disagree with Alice is having to make the women who practice it evil. They are as much victims of the history of their practice as the girls themselves. They are all caught up in a culture dynamic. What we need is education, not only in terms of formal schooling, but to let people know that this thing is wrong. Africans are not the only people with wrongful practices. In India, they kill widows or sell them, and so on.

Enekwe: Circumcision is also part of the ancient Hebrew culture.

Aidoo: It still doesn't make it right.

Enekwe: What I am concerned about is whether one who wants to write this kind of book is not obligated to do as much research as possible before one begins to make categorical statements. For instance, if she had researched the topic, she could have found out that Akan people do not practise circumcision, as you just pointed out. But the

point is that this is a novel, yet she presents it as if what she is describing actually took place. And many people may forget that this is a novel, because a novelist can do whatever he or she likes. But when you write a novel and present it as if it were based on actual experience, then there is a danger there. The danger of falsification.

Aidoo: We have to stop being so sensitive about these things. This is not what is going to hurt Africa. Let Walker do her thing. She is an African woman or African-American, whatever. Today, it is very much the thing to talk about female circumcision. Even the whole job of genital mutilation is a negative concept of it. It is a fashion that will go away. I say that because this discourse is not touching the lives of those African women who are practising it. I hope Alice knows that. It will generate a lot of controversy. She will sell a whole lot of books. She will possibly make a whole lot of money. Let us hope that something of this will go to the women who practise it, so that they will begin to see that it is wrong, because it is wrong. The fact that it is sanctified by culture and tradition, in thousands of years of practice doesn't make it right, because it hurts the women. Sometimes children die. We have to stop it if we can. There is no way we can defend this. But like I said, I am talking as an Akan who doesn't come from a culture where it is practised. So, the chances are that I am as wrong as Alice.

But any cutting up of peoples genitalia and sewing their vagina up is not nice. When you circumcise a man, it is a one-act, if you do it neatly; the wound heals, the child is okay, and he grows into a man. But in the genitalia thing, because of the whole complication with menstruation, with childbirth, and sex, it's a life-long problem for the women who go through it. I understand there are three stages. One operation is only one part and

that is almost like male circumcision, they cut something and that is it. But I don't know too much about that.

Enekwe: The point about sewing-up the women, is it recorded elsewhere?

Aidoo: Yes.

Enekwe: Where?

Aidoo: Let me consult my daughter (calls Kina, her daughter, who enters) We are discussing *Possessing The Secret of Joy*. Did Dyali talk about the sewing-up piece?

Kina: Dr. Olayinka Kosotoma is a Nigerian doctor married to a Sierra-Leonean. She talks about the three types. The first part is when they remove the *Labia majora*- called Sunna. The third part is when they remove some part of the *Labia minora* and the clitoris, so the woman has a small hole through which she can urinate. In some cases they undo the stitches so she can have sex. They use the intestine of a cattle.

Enekwe: But talking about the diversity in Africa, do you thing that all this stitching occurs in all African circumcision.

Kina: The different types?

Enekwe: You talked about the three stages.

Kina: There are three types.

Enekwe: Not stages?

Kina: I think the most common one is the *sunna*.

Aidoo: The one that is equivalent to male circumcision. They

remove the *Labia majora*, then the woman is treated after, and she is fine.

Daughter: Yes.

Aidoo: But in the second and third types where you actually go into the second and third stages, the processes are not gone through by all societies. But that is not the issue. I have been telling you that as an Akan, I know that what we do instead is there are processes for nurturing the female genitalia.

Kina: As they do in Zambia.

Enekwe: Which group is that?

Kina: I don't know.

Enekwe: I will like to ask you a question about *Possessing The Secret of Joy*. You have read the book. Do you think that the author did some research before writing the book, or has she tried to be balanced in her presentation, even though it is a novel?

Kina: I think that she probably did some research on the process itself. However, I think that it would have been nice if somewhere in the book, at the beginning or at the back, she had made it clear that this is a very sensitive issue for African women. There is no reference for you to get a clinical, objective view of what is going on in that situation.

Enekwe: Ama, you have got another child of your father in your daughter. She is very clear. Already talking like a professor.

Aidoo: The other thing I found a bit unacceptable in the book

was this whole business of Alice using her own African language. Africa has so many languages. That again is not nice. It's like what we speak is gibberish.

Enekwe: Joseph Conrad.

Aidoo: We are back to Joseph Conrad.

Kina: The fact that you are an African-American does not necessarily mean that you know everything about African-American people, or Africans. You don't have to make up your own African languages. Alice Walker doesn't research, she doesn't do her books justice. She is not humble in approaching the culture.

Aidoo: One problem with Alice is that she is always much of a missionary in her orientation. I don't know where she got this complex from. She always approaches her characters through the missionary garb. But anyway, we could go on and on. Obviously there are problems with the book.

Kina: Why would she even have an African-American missionary in Africa. That is insensitivity or ignorance or not even bothering to check what is the connection with christianity and colonization in African history. I mean how many books do you read where there is an African-American missionary in Africa. Maybe there were but that is very insensitive, it's wrong.

Enekwe: I am getting more and more interested in this matter, because I have become aware that a lot of African-Americans are taking Africa for granted and they take Africa as a dumping ground. It seems as if Americans want Africa to be in a certain way.

Aidoo: But look at what they have to cope with from the media.
Kina: That is the ordinary African-American. Obviously the

ordinary African-American in Harlem, in New York, is not Alice Walker, and is not in the same category. She knows that anything she writes is going to be big news. She has a responsibility as a writer.

Enekwe: And she is campaigning all over the world. In fact, during the last Film Festival in Burkina-Faso, she was there. She is planning to do a movie on the issue of circumcision

Aidoo: How should people react to this.

Enekwe: Well, you won't be surprised if in Africa they give her the television station to broadcast, and people will begin to say what she is saying is right.

Aidoo: But that is true. That is what I am saying, that female circumcision is wrong.

Enekwe: Yes, but we have pointed out here that they are different types. Which type is she writing about.

Aidoo: The type doesn't matter.

Enekwe: We are dealing with the question of research.

Aidoo: The issue is that if we are talking about female circumcision, mutilation and the whole lot, we do know that it is a problem. The question is, maybe like all issues that are important in Africa, either we come as the Akans, or as some people in Zambia, or in Uganda do, from ethnic groups where it is not practised at all, so we don't have to deal with it, or the people who are caught up in it are themselves so caught up they can't deal with it. Maybe it will have to take an Alice Walker to help generate some kind of debate on it.

Enekwe: To break down the resistance. That is right.

Aidoo: Yes. What we are saying of Alice is that she should stop being a missionary. She should really do some research before these books come out.

Enekwe: And also do it in good faith. It's a question of balance. Anyway, I understand what you are saying. For something to change, there has to be a drastic situation like this, so that people become aware that something has to be done away with. But, it is necessary for Alice Walker to know how people feel about what she has done, because in this country, everybody is praising her, but it is obviously because she is doing exactly what they want her to do. They have a stereotyped view of Africa; Africa is primitive, Africa is ignorant, Africa is savage. They don't want to hear anything else. If you say that African children are going to school, they don't want to hear that. If you bring photographs of an African child who is healthy and another who is sick and diseased, they will prefer the photograph of the diseased child. So it is a question of lack of balance.

Aidoo: Yes, but how other people perceive us is really of little significance. How we perceive ourselves is the most important thing. Let us face it. Who continually make us vulnerable to these negative perceptions other people have of us are our leaders. The thing is what are we doing about it. If we were to organize ourselves tomorrow as a people, it will be completely irrelevant how we are portrayed in the American media. As far as I am concerned, the quarrel is out there. We all agree that Alice as an African-American woman has really done a terrible thing. She has done a good thing terribly. But the thing is the West has never wanted to see Africa positively. So we cannot forever worry about that.

Enekwe: Look at what is happening in Somalia right now. They are now killing them because Pakistani troops were killed.

But there have been killings in Cambodia, there have been killings of United Nations officials in Yugoslavia, in Bosnia, and nobody has launched an attack on a whole city. Now, it is happening in Africa, because anything can happen to Africans.

Aidoo: Yes. But who made this possible? When the United States was thinking of going in, did you hear any African leader speak against it? Did the O.A.U. say anything? A whole bunch of African men sitting out there. You could have prophesied. You didn't even need a crystal ball. It was going to come to this, as a result of the United States sending troops to Somalia. But did anybody object? They didn't say anything. Maybe they can't do it in Bosnia, because they can't do it in Bosnia. Because the Bosnia leadership isn't going to let it happen. In Africa, there doesn't seem to be any voice. What is our leadership doing?

Enekwe: Our own leaders are being controlled by them.

Aidoo: When I say leadership, I do not mean political leadership only. We could have gone to the United Nations and said, "We don't want American troops into Somalia because this is really military aggression..." but we didn't do anything. There are lots of Africans, there are lots of Ambassadors. Do they ever get together to say anything?

Enekwe: One of the problems that Somalians face is that they cannot make up their minds whether they are Africans or Arabs. It is a disaster.

Daughter: Are we trying to say that if something like this happened to Cote d'Ivoire or to Nigeria, that would make any difference.

Enekwe: There is a lot of difference because even from the beginning, when things started to happen in Somalia,

African countries didn't seem to be involved because these people have said that they are not Africans, that they are Arabs. Then when this started, the Arabs didn't even bother with them.

Aidoo: Yes, because as far as the Arabs are concerned, they are Africans.

Enekwe: And now, the people are pursuing the Arab soldiers who are in Somalia around the streets of Mogadishu.

Aidoo: That is very interesting.

Enekwe: Well, Ama I must say I am very grateful for this opportunity to interview you, for the hospitality that you have shown to me since I have been here; and I hope we will keep in touch and continue to discuss the problems of Africa in future. Well not only the problems, but also the hopes of Africa.

Aidoo: Thank you Onuora. It's been a pleasure having this discussion. I also appreciate the fact that you took the trouble to come all the way from New York for this interview, and I wish you luck.

Enekwe: Thank you. I also like to thank Kina Likimani (Ama's daughter) who is going to be one of our doctors in future, for her contributions during the interview. Kina, I will like you to say a few things.

Kina: Thank you. It was a pleasure meeting you, and I think I can say I like arguing and discussing with my mother quite a bit.

Enekwe: Thank you.

J O J NWACHUKWU-AGBADA

Interview with Femi Osofisan

Femi Osofisan belongs to the 2nd generation Nigerian playwright corps. He has written and produced over thirty of his plays and published more than half of them. He is also a poet, critic, scholar, actor, producer and a stage director. He is equally into song writing and musical composition, particularly as accompaniment to his dramatic renditions. When this interview took place on 10th March 1986, he was a visiting Professor to O.A.U, Ile-Ife. He was later to be a Professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan from where he became the General Manager of the National Theatre in Lagos.

J.O.J.N.: You are one of the newer Nigerian writers who have started enjoying some popularity because of your slant of dramatic focus and impact. Are you comfortable with the status of the writer in this country at the moment?

Osofisan: Certainly not. There are certain pressures which writers are subjected to at the moment. Some of us have been lucky to have overcome them. There are so many who cannot surmount them, as a result of the prevailing attitude to writers and writing in the country. The problem is the current estimation of literature in the country. Literature, the work of the artist, and the artist

himself, I am afraid, are marginalised at the moment. There are pressures from Philistines, for instance, who will say to a writer: 'Go and start selling cement'. You can get this kind of comment from even more sensitive areas. A writer may also be impatient as a result of the pressure from another side, of people who you think are supposed to know better who will say: 'Literature is no more than dreaming and writing, and we don't have time for such a thing now, forget that.' Of course, gradually one may get involved in one of these digressions like a citizen and completely become immersed in such digressions. The value of literature, I am afraid, has not been recognised. Even if I personally can take it, some others cannot. Many writers I have spoken to have expressed their predicament. Some tell you they are being squeezed in, they are not given a place, that literature is not encouraged, ... not given the right impetus. If you look at it, it is an ideological problem, not even a political problem, and I have had to point this out in a number of my newspaper writings. In both countries of the West and those of the East, serious attention is given to culture. So the thing that is wrong with us is part of the colonial problem that we haven't got out of, that is to denigrade our culture. We haven't gone beyond it. But look at the attention the Western countries pay to their writers and artists, to musicians. These are even capitalist countries. If you go to the Eastern countries, oh God, you will be surprised at the eminence they accord writers and writing, because they know the value, the artist's contribution. We may not be able to express this value in physical terms, but it's a vital aspect of development.

J.O.J.N.: In one of the literary conferences, you castigated the new Nigerian writers and accused them of not writing enough. In fact, you did say precisely that nobody had

been writing. Are you still sticking to what you said in that 1983 paper or have you moderated your view?

Osofisan: The answer is both yes and no. When I said people were not writing, I was referring to a commitment to writing, not just putting pen to paper. You see I have just complained about society's attitude, but the writers' attitude is also there. Many of the writers function as anything but writers. They themselves don't give value to what they are writing. Hence, when they write, it's just scribbling; they don't even believe that by writing they are making a vital contribution to the process of society's growth. Therefore, that thing you are writing has to be nurtured carefully, you have to think it, you have to evaluate it. You don't just throw it out because writing is very very influential; it reaches people. You have to therefore carefully nurture it before you push it out.

So, my worry is not just a frivolous observation. I was afraid that the way things were going we were going to have seasonal rather than professional writers. Perhaps the only person who is going to be a professional writer is Soyinka who has just resigned his teaching appointment and is living solely by his writing. We don't have professional writers, who are dedicated to writing, who will just say this is what I want to do. Well, society is there. People are not buying so much; marketing is so bad, etc. So there are various reasons for this situation. That much I know.

However, I was particularly referring to a situation in Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) where someone has just published one book and then is called a writer. One play, one novel. That means we are not taking ourselves seriously. There is no measure or evaluation at all. That is not to say that one good book cannot bring

seem to be emphasising a new concept of heroism—heroism through a collective pursuit. Is this another way of discouraging individual heroism or rather, do you regard personal heroism as unnecessary in our age?

Osofisan: It's not unnecessary. Heroism of all kinds is important. But if you really want results then one has to start thinking differently from just achieving heroism. If you really want to change a situation, it is best achieved through a collective effort. Individuals, of course, matter. Everybody's contribution is important. Some may even give their lives in the process. But it's a different thing when someone simply wants to be a hero when it's the situation that matters. The quest to make a name for oneself prevents some people from thinking about the primary strategies to use. So it's reckless, reckless giving of life. This pains me because to lose a human life is very painful in the first place. Secondly, this kind of human life can even be more productive if we can all work in concert. Look at the various prometian figures we have in this country at the moment. Several brilliant, courageous and outspoken people, but they can hardly work in concert. One just regrets that they hardly think of working together. Imagine that they work together, how much more they would achieve. Each one is a lone voice of protest. And so things don't really change. I think that the more that we can subsume our individual egos to a collective effort the more we achieve results.

J.O.J.N.: Your use of Moremi myth in *Morountodun* is your recognition of the worth of African womanhood. What other ways do you think the creative writer can ennoble Nigerian and African womanhood or give it a more creative significance?

Osofisan: I don't know. You are asking me to prescribe. No, I don't. Each person will do it the way he/she likes. At any rate, I don't think it should be a conscious effort to try and ennoble womanhood or anything like that. The thing is just to write and simply present your ideas. If you believe in democracy, and equality of the sexes, it will show in your writing. I don't think it's a question of deliberately setting out to ennoble something. The thing is not there and you are creating false image. No. You write the way you believe, and if you actually believe in the nobility of woman it will come out in your writing.

J.O.J.N.: Would you say the Nigerian theatre has been a progressive one? Are there certain dramatic approaches you resent or would encourage?

Osofisan: I would say it's been very progressive. Even if we have our quarrels, I think that's nice. Quarrels are necessary in order to make progress. Look at Ogunde who has been in the theatre for forty years. Right from the start he did not shy away from political problems. He faced them. Even when he faces metaphysical problems, the ones we were talking about, one's unease does not mean that one has all the answers to these metaphysical problems. In certain situations, you do have areas of emphasis, areas of immediate relevance. By and by, you observe the different experimentations in style and form going on. In fact, in the other art forms, including music, yes drawing and painting and sculpture, the story of the arts as a whole has been a progressive one. Generations rise and fade, and others come up but I think that taken together we have seen a positive picture. Obviously much more can still be done. I think that collectively it's been positive achievement.

J.O.J.N.: We are generally aware of the problems confronting the

theatre person in Nigeria today, but is there anything going for him or her today?

Osofisan: These problems will ever be there. I doubt if they will all be solved at a time. I can't foresee that happening soon. Your question is probably rooted in what I had said earlier with respect to society's treatment of the artist. In terms of winning an audience, well there is an audience for theatre. When Soyinka and his contemporaries started, we saw the problems they had. Now we have an audience. I have just done a play. For fifteen days running, there was an audience every night much more than I had thought at the beginning we would have. So the battle is half won. Reading is a different matter entirely but for the theatre, it's a different story. A play was recently done which attracted a full stadium of spectators. What else do we want? Don't forget that the television has created a large audience for drama too.

J.O.J.N.: In some of your themes you seem to be quite close to Soyinka's perception of the present society. Take the issue of corrupt leaders, both secular and religious, for instance, who erode the trust and confidence of their followers by primarily serving their own interest, or even the love of power by African leaders, etc. Would you regard it as a compliment if you were described as having been influenced by Soyinka? If yes, to what extent?

Osofisan: Yes, why not? It's a matter of pride to me to say that I have been influenced by Soyinka whom I consider a great man, a genius. So if I have been influenced by him, yes, I will be happy to say so. But then I have also been influenced by other writers too. There is no writer who is not influenced by those before him or even those after him. I remember Okigbo used to admit various kinds of influences. Shakespeare too. You see this influence thing

is always going on. Soyinka is quite an enduring influence. Don't forget that our backgrounds are quite similar. It's just that what separates us is the question of generation gap. We are both from Ogun State. We were both in Abeokuta too. We also went through Government College, Ibadan and University of Ibadan. That I decided to write quite early had a lot to do with his influence—what he said, what he wrote, his own reputation, etc. I have continued to be influenced by his sheer productivity. Yes, I have been influenced by him. We share a lot. But I know where the points of departure are, of course. It's in the conclusions. I think he was led to be pessimistic, maybe because he has seen and experienced a lot of things and periods. Maybe we differ here because we are younger. We still see the same failures. I tell you it's very very painful to note all these periods, continuous periods of failures. But what we need to do is to struggle against them, against this pattern of fate. We think that something can be done about them. The roots are quite easy to see, and that we can still change things, however long it takes. This informs the class perspective which we have taken. So that's the difference.

J.O.J.N.: Doesn't art lose its pith when it is propped up on strands of ideology, whether Marxist or otherwise?

Osofisan: I think talent comes in here. Bad art is bad art. There is nothing that can prop it up. It's just bad art. But if people think that what makes an art work bad is the idea it contains, I think this is stupid. As far as I am concerned, every art has an ideological underpinning, whether you like it or not. Every art has intention, the only thing is that some intentions are better channeled than others. What we are saying is akin to a fertile land which we allow weeds to grow on. But no conscious farmer will allow

that. You know it's a fertile land. The question will then be what do I do with it? That's the question. As an artist, you are responsible for planting on that land. Then you can put whatever seeds you like. I think it will be reasonable to put seeds that will be beneficial to society. An artist puts ideas that people can gain from, particularly with societies that usually have too many problems. So it has to be good art in the first place, that's the fertile land, that's what I am talking about. Land has to be fertile in the first place. So you have good artists and bad artists. Whether there are ideas or not, a bad artist is a bad artist. Being a good artist means a mastery of the form first and foremost. It depends on what moment of history you stand in. If people are starving, what is the use planting flowers? You can write a piece of work that is akin to planting of flowers. It will be beautiful, aesthetically fine, but it will be functionally useless. Or you can plant food which a lot of people eat. You can help people to take care of their hunger. First, the artist has to be careful about his style, and secondly there is his sense of responsibility to his society.

J.O.J.N.: By writing your revolutionary plays, do you see a revolution as a solution to the problem of social inequality in our present society?

Osofisan: First of all, I don't set out to write revolutionary plays. I don't know what revolutionary plays are. Really these labels don't mean much to me. I try to write about situations. The subjects choose me, I don't choose a subject. I live in society; it's just that as a writer I put my own reaction on paper. That's all. Some people will act differently to a bad situation; they may go and get drunk. For me the subject eats away my mind until I write the play. Like the shooting of Vatsa and others, I know in the end I will write something about them. That's the kind of

person I am, the kind of man I am. When I write about a situation I try to write about it as truthfully as I see it. I try to look at the situation to write it to deduce the forces that are behind these events. Obviously, I try to project beyond that. But the forces like these, what are they likely to be or if they are so bad, is there any way of getting out of them? In any case, we try to look for a solution, how do we get out of these things? So, in the end, what I write is try and lead people to understand these things as truly as possible and to suggest the way out, which all of us thinking together have to arrive at any way. It's not a question of sermonising, describing. No, these are suggestions. This is what the situation is, this is the objective truth.

J.O.J.N.: If a military approach or guerrilla warfare would be part of the solution to changing society to what you would like it to be, would you, like Okigbo, take part in such a struggle?

Osofisan: That's speculative. I don't think Okigbo would have answered that question before the Civil War. You never can know what you would do until a moment of history comes. You can't say these things in advance. It depends on the pressures of the events, on some other issues you are acting on. All these things are mostly decisions of the moment; you can't really say in advance accurately what you will do. Violence again should not be seen as an end in itself. A lot of people talk of bloody revolution—violence and all that—as if that is the goal. That is not the goal. The only way you can justify violence is when it is used to save other human lives, when you use it to prevent more violence. The taking of human lives is such a serious thing. Life is so sacred. Our continent, as Ouloguem puts it the other time, is almost 'bound to violence'. Black people slaughtering

other black people, the cycle of blood all the time. We really need to take a look at it. Mazrui said the other day that, in fact, when you look at it, black people have killed more black people than the whites have done. Why is it that we don't have that basic sense of solidarity among ourselves? So for me, if violence comes, it will be with regret. This is why I see my art as vital, as urgent, as one of those processes perhaps that will prevent that violence. Of course, the criticism has been there that when violence comes, it may prolong the situation of oppression and exploitation. Well I guess that's the risk one has to take, that is violence leading to people losing their lives, and of course some people would always lose their lives in these cases. But it wouldn't be people like us. We would be the first to escape, of course, or we would be the ones manning relief agencies, we would be the ambassadors flying here and there, we would be commanding from the rear. I guess it will be easy for us to shout for violence, etc. But if when you look at the potential victims only, then I don't think there's any other safer option.

J.O.J.N.: As a visionary writer, do you foresee a time that our playwrights will be writing like Amiri Baraka, say like in his *Dutchman* and *The Slave,* etc?

Osofisan: That's another speculative question! Something like star-gazing. I can say yes or no but that is hardly helpful. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. In fact, in a nation like Nigeria, see how fast things happen. From one week to the other there is a new crisis. When you say yes this is going to be, then suddenly there's a new thing again, and we are back again. There is such a rapid turn-over of events, rapid turn-over in actors, in people who man our helm of affairs. There's such a change from day to day, different personalities such that it is difficult to

predict anything. You can't even say what will happen tomorrow.

J.O.J.N.: I'm sorry if I seem to be turning you into a prophet of sorts. But actually what I intended to achieve by my last question was to draw you out as it were, based on your knowledge of the present to project into the future. However, let's not belabour the issue anymore. I want to ask a question in relation to your presentation of characters in *Who is Afraid of Solarin*? in which there is a lot of laughter even in the midst of the confounding corruption that we find in the place. Is this a deliberate artistic approach?

Osofisan: *Who is Afraid of Solarin*? is a farce. So we must create laughter. The situation was just like that. The new government then was headed by Jemibewon. Some people even say I had him in mind. No. It was not about any individual person. It was not about any one person, it was about a whole climate of corruption, something so bad that I myself saw it. Perhaps here was it at last, we were going to have an outburst, a revolution, something that would be close to the Russian revolution because it was like the Czarist period. Of course, we know what happened. The civilians came, and then there was a *coup d'etat*. But the work is still as relevant today as it had ever been. There was so much corruption and I wanted to ridicule it, satirize the figure which I think many people did misunderstand. Some people have asked, why a play like this when you don't even suggest a solution, no positive way-out? It's not in every play that we do that. We denounce by satirizing. This is why I think that the criticism of Soyinka is too harsh on him because by merely presenting that situation to us, ridiculing it, it serves a purpose. At least we do not accept that situation.

It's an attack on that situation. Yes, even if it does not go further than that, he does not suggest a solution he is not going to have that. After watching it, I became rather dissatisfied with it. There was too much laughter and it didn't then seem to me that the play had achieved the purpose of lambasting political corruption. It seemed as if the form had taken over. But that was also as a result of a deliberate choice. Don't forget that for me some of these plays are for experimentation. In that particular play, I wanted something that would be funny and also have a political message. After watching Ogunyemi's *The Divorce* which filled the theatre so many nights, I wanted to disprove the notion that only domestic themes would attract huge audiences. I wanted to find out if this was true. In terms of style, I wanted to carry the style of farce to its utmost limits. How far one can go. So I wanted to stretch it to utmost limits. In doing that, what we lost most was the message as I have seen it. In the end, the laughter takes over really, thus leaving the critical purpose diluted.

J.O.J.N.: This question is derived from the response you have just given. Have you felt embarrassed that a particular effect you had in mind does not come across in production or that you have even achieved something else. In such a situation, do you withdraw the play or simply leave it as it is on the ground that ambiguity is part of art?

Osofisan: In that case, as in *Solarin*, I don't withdraw it. I learn from it. Each of my plays is an experiment in different styles. What I am doing at the moment is just experimenting in different styles to see which one in the end I will be using.

I have over thirty plays I want to write as I sit down here. I haven't made a choice as to which is the best style.

From play to play, I try a different style. So having had my problem with the *Solarin* play, I know I won't go that far next time. In order not to go that far, I did *Midnight Hotel.* That one went in a different direction. For me that one was more satisfactory than *Who is Afraid of Solarin*? Except that I haven't done it the way I'd like to do it. So until I have actually presented it, directed it the ideal way I'd like to do it and then I see what happens, then I'd know whether I have really succeeded or not. I don't know yet. You see it doesn't quite excite laughter as far as *Who is Afraid of Solarin?*

The other play is *Birthdays are not for Dying* which people say is a reactionary play. Why do you let this man die in the end? They wanted me to write a different ending. In fact, I'd write a different ending but when I started thinking about it, I was convinced that the ending now is what should be there. Because people reject it, that's why it is a good ending. One has to check a more serious view about the impact of tragedy. What is tragedy really? When people see that that man dies, do they get discouraged? My own feeling is that because they reject this end, in fact that play has succeeded. You see if you write it in a different way, and then the ending is happy, people heave a sigh of relief and leave the theatre. And for them the problem is ended. They get complacent. They are happy. So they clap and go away immediately, forgetting it. But when it ends this way, it shocks them. I think that shock is more positive. I think that the fact that they reject it means that they are angry. They seek me out. Some people want to punch me. That means they have a dynamic attitude to the thing. It means they are going to discuss it. I think in the end that may be the essential thing, you know. But if you take the play literally it may seem that this man has gone reactionary; change is

not possible anymore. But, in fact, when you think of it in a deeper, wider sense, this may be a more positive ending.

J.O.J.N.: *Morountodun, The Chattering and Song* and *Once Upon Four Robbers* are open-ended. What signification goes with this technique?

Osofisan: That was what we were talking about. You simply don't allow the audience to get complacent and say, "Yes the theatre has solved everything", when it hasn't. We want to raise some questions. We want to let people know what the situation is, what the reality is. But the final decision has to be the decision of every citizen. It's what you and I do up there that would change this society, not what I say in the theatre. All I want to do is to present the facts to you, to make sure you know those facts, to make sure you begin to think about them yourself. I want to provoke you to think, to reflect. And perhaps it is an optimism but I feel that when people know all the facts and they think themselves they will arrive at the right solution. A few of us cannot make a revolution; it's what the rest of the people do that will make that revolution. So, you see the vital part of my art is geared towards this, developing consciousness, awareness, exposing the situation, letting people know how history works, demystifying many of these things, but leaving the final decision to the audience itself. That's why those plays are open-ended.

J.O.J.N.: The blurb writer of *Once Upon Four Robbers* says you are 'already on the way to doing for us what Bertolt Brecht did for Europe'. I believe that there is a thematic nexus between some of your theatrical concerns and those of Brecht. However, in terms of mass appeal, Brecht wrote some of his plays in German for the

Germans, and invariably readily got to his people. But you write in English and the majority of our people hardly understand it to the extent of enjoying artistic expressions in it. Are you not disturbed by this situation?

Osofisan: Why should I be? You are wrong anyway if you think that Brecht wrote only for Germans. Most of his plays were written in the U.S. In a situation like this, you have to choose. In a multilingual society, you just have to choose. You write in any of the vernaculars, you shut yourself out already from other people. Don't say if you write in Yoruba, for instance, you reach more people. Is it really true? First of all, not everybody who speaks Yoruba reads it. I speak Yoruba, but I am not very good at reading it. So if you write in English, yes you won't reach every Yoruba man but you will also reach the Ibibio man, the Efik man, the Hausa man, the Igbo man, etc. In terms of population really, which is the larger audience? We don't know. I write for the audience which I consider crucial, the audience which has been responsible for taking most of the decisions that have affected our lives since Independence. That's the educated elite. These are the people who have been taking the most vital decisions that concern this nation. I write for them. I write for those who are just growing to go and join them, the student population, for schools, for the television. I think I am satisfied with my audience. I don't write for a mass audience. But the audience I reach I am satisfied with. When we were to decide on what format *The Guardian* newspaper was to take, we decided against a mass circulation; we decided to have a paper of quality. But see what has happened today. *The Guardian* today enjoys one of the widest reading public. Its English is not a mass audience type but you see many people reading it. The audience I reach is enough. I don't want to reach Baba Sala's audience, Ogunde's audience which are quite

substantial. But we are doing different things. I don't think every artist has to be like the other artist.

J.O.J.N.: In your theatre, you are often preoccupied with attacking cant and hypocrisy—fake prophets, fake priests, fake public servants, etc. Is it another way of saying that once we are through with hypocrites, our problem as a people will vanish?

Osofisan: Our problems will not vanish! If that happens, that will be one way of being static. I don't even know whether hypocrisy can be wiped out from the human community. There are charlatans and hypocrites all over the place. They do a lot of damage in our country because a lot of people follow them. But we can at least expose them a bit. In terms of cleaning the state of them totally, that will be too ambitious.

J.O.J.N.: You have quite a number of plays now—both published and the merely produced. Which of them are you likely to be caught watching again on video or being interested in producing again and again.

Osofisan: I haven't put them on video for various reasons. It depends on my mood I suppose. My favourite play has remained *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Some other plays of mine are quite interesting too. There are quite some of them that are on my mind, that have not been produced yet. It is like having a number of children and you are asked to choose among them. They are all part of me really.

J.O.J.N.: In your use of songs, gesture, action, mime, light, etc, I know you aim at a new communication with your audience. Is it a deliberate effort to de-emphasize speech as a reflection of a certain belief or influence or both?

Osofisan: You are not to de-emphasize, you are to add to it. Speech is very important. Obviously I work a lot on the dialogue on the stage. All the other aspects of language communication have to be used, and used effectively. I guess this is what I have gained from various people I have worked with. I have worked in traditional theatres, popular theatres, theatres in Europe. I pay attention to the use of space, the use of stage properties, the acts of body, etc. They are all part of a comprehensive statement. We do not need to de-emphasize one or the other.

J.O.J.N.: Economy of setting, stage and cast, somewhat akin to the poor theatre theory of Jerzy Grotowski, seems to be at the back of your mind in most of your plays. Is this not inhibiting in some way vis-a-vis the magnitude of your theatrical interest?

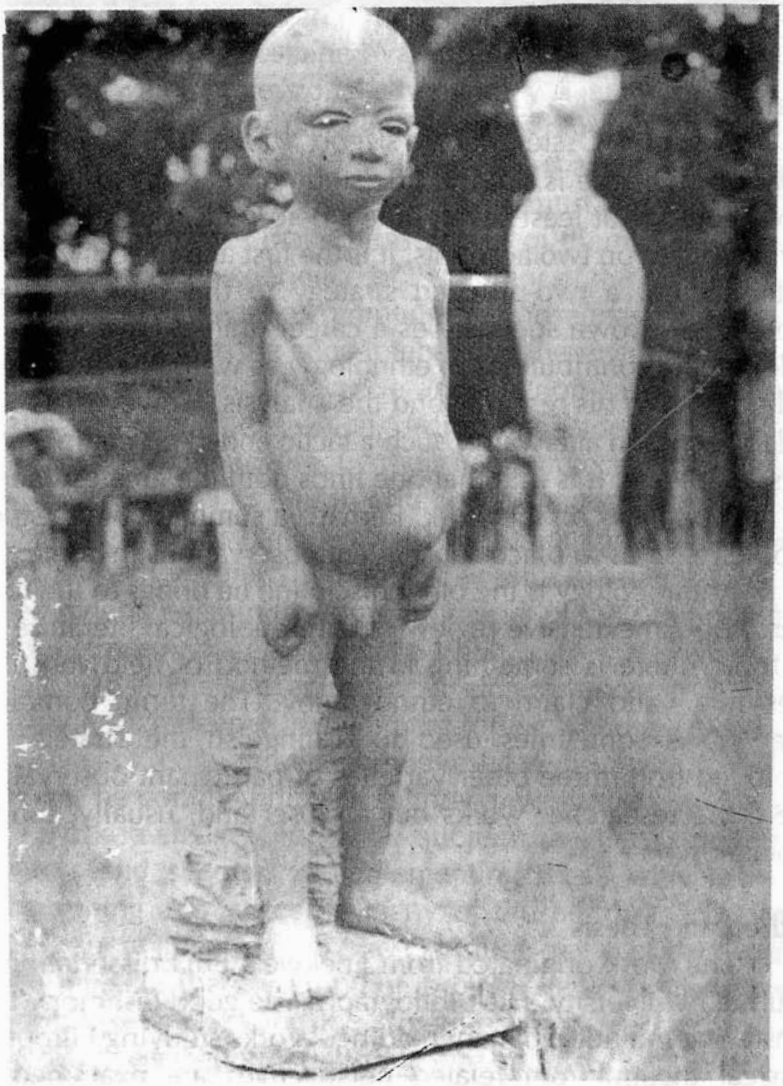
Osofisan: My plays are in two directions. There is a set of plays in which you are right, I am economising. Take *Oriki of a Grasshopper*, for instance, where there is indeed the use of limited space and few actors. Then you take another group of these plays exemplified by *Farewell To A Cannibal Rage*. See how vast the stage is. So it depends. Since I work personally on the stage I have to know what resources are available all the time. So, I do have plays which emphasize economy and brevity. I have other plays that are not in conformity with those in the other category. I don't see why economy should be limiting anyway. It's again part of the experiments I was telling you about earlier. I like to experiment. I sit back and watch them. I very much enjoy *Oriki*. I have a number of plays like that coming up very soon.

J.O.J.N.: Can we know their names?

Osofisan: No. When they are out, you will know them.

J.O.J.N.: Thank you for obliging me this conversation, even at short notice.

Osofisan: I am delighted to have talked with you.



P J EZEH

Enekwe, Mask Drama and Anthropology

Proem

Professor Ossie Enekwe's *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre* is not the first study of masking among the Igbo. There are at least seven others before his, but his book is very important on two accounts. It is the first and the only one so far to attempt a two-pronged strategy to this difficult study employing his own specialty as a career dramaturgist and also exploring the contributions of ethnology, as well. The strategy is applied both in his research and the analysis. However, as will be debated upon afterwards, such a tactic ended up cutting both ways, as it were. It is in it that one finds both the greatest merits and the few flaws on the work. Perhaps a summary of the study is apt here, so as to place subsequent observations in context.

Anthropology is the other discipline he brings to the fore. Apart from an extensive review of anthropological literature on the topic, there is something in the method of fieldwork that gives it a valid claim to ethnography. The term, complete observer, is sometimes used to distinguish the strategy he employed from three other varieties of participant observation where the researcher works out a closer and, usually, longer association.

Method and Thesis

The work originated from Enekwe's PhD dissertation at Columbia University. His bibliography is a good testimony to a painstaking multidisciplinary reading. Works studying European classical theatre from related perspectives are examined to

contrast them with the present treatise. Contemporary literary studies that bear on the topic are richly represented, as are works from the kin fields of music and dance. But outside the author's immediate domain of dramatic arts, the author made personal contacts with the people he investigated.

Given the time available for the inquiry under reference, the vastness of the territory to be covered and the protean nature of the object of the research, perhaps no other strategy would have been feasible. Sustained varieites of this tasking research method for which professional ethnography is intertwined, since Bronislaw Malinowski's path-finding efforts during World War I, necessarily requires smaller communities that may be closely observed over time by the researcher who must live with and for all practical purposes make himself part of them. The contrast can be seen in the experience of the author of the present book in Afikpo, one of the Igbo communities whose mask dancing he investigated. Despite the good intention of the researcher and his seriousness with the subject, he and his non-native assistants were constrained to watch from the sidelines, further handicapped, as they were, by their incompetece in the dialect of the district (pp. 113 - 123). Ottenberg, practising as a career ethnographer was also handicapped by lack of knowledge of the dialect, but at least he could go farther with the mask dancers, himself having been initiated as a member of the *Ogo* cult that put up the masquerade (Ottenberg 1993).

Clearly, Enekwe operated in circumstances that could have made such deeper involvement for each and every one of the scores of communities he investigated impossible. For fieldwork, he confined himself to interviewing such informants that were knowledgeable in the subject like the performers, spectators and scholars, complementing these with filming, photographing and watching many of the performances first-hand. He spent three years on these, visiting many Igbo-speaking communities for the purpose. For the interviews, he employed both the unstructured and the structured models, the latter of which he prefers the term, *questionnaire,* for, although he would

have trouble convincing purists in social-science methods that that particular term was well chosen (p.9).

Argument

The author sets out the background to his discourse in his eloquently argued and fairly elaborate introduction. A number of indigenous and foreign scholars take the view that Africans have no autochthonous drama tradition, insofar as whatever might has been suggested here as belonging to that category has not satisfied the criteria that produced the Western style forms. Enekwe's position denies that proposition. He cites Ulli Beier (1967) and Ruth Finnegan (1970) among those who have written that Africans have no autochthonous drama. He reports that as far as Finnegan is concerned, what may be found among Africans are categories, redolent of drama, but not quite the real thing. We are told that in Beier's view the disqualification lies in the absence of a complicated plot.

Professor Michael Echeruo (1973) is cited as proffering that the Igbo in particular traditionally lack drama since, he is reported to have argued, their myth is trapped in ritual. Myth must be freed from ritual in order for production of drama to be possible. For him a story or myth is crucial to the emergence of drama.

"The European conception of drama as narrative is a major obstacle to the understanding of the theatre," argues Enekwe (p.11). The basic problem here is that Western-style drama, following the Aristotelian formulations that regard drama as inseparable from plot, is reluctant to accommodate any other category that deviates from that model. Enekwe favours the view that, rather than stick to this classical prescription, what should determine the shape of drama at any time and place should be society and history.

Although Ugonna (1976) and Osadebe (1981), using the case of the Igbo, concede that Africans have autochthonous dramatic traditions, nevertheless Enekwe is not fully satisfied with their position. He complains that each tries to force Western

criteria unto the indigenous form. "Ugonna mars his argument," he states (p.16), "by claiming that the Igbo mask drama has the six Aristotelian elements in the following order: character, thought, diction, plot, spectacle, song or melody." His key reason for rejecting Ugonna's position is that he reads it as making characterization as the most important element in the Igbo masquerade. Masquerading among the Igbo, he argues, does not have the same objectives as Greek tragedies which, he argues, deal with choices of individual heroes, their *pathos* and their tragic fates.

As for Osadebe (1981), Enekwe's disappointment with him is that he suggests the modification of the Igbo traditional drama along Western lines. Enekwe will rather that each of the Thepsian tradition was left the way it was. It is the position of Amankulor (1972, 1976) who among the literary scholars is, besides his degree thesis, prolific on this subject that appears to have satisfied Enekwe, saving one point that the latter writer holds against him. Amankulor includes infrahuman elements, for example an anthropomorphized emmolated goat, as a dramatic character in one of the performances that the earlier writer watched (pp 16,17).

It happens though that meanings are not absolute in cultural acts. It is this contextuality of meaning that gives such phenomena as totem, provision of mortuary goods, or even religion itself, for example, their place in cultural practices. You could kill a fish or snake among a certain people and all you have done is that you have killed a fish or a snake. But do the same in another cultural setting and you must be made to make atonement equivalent or even more stringent than killing a human being. To see the problem from Amankulor's, or indeed the Ngwa perspectives, Enekwe has to move closer to his own rule by avoiding a conclusion that is shaped by Western or other extraneous concepts. Things are what a particular human group say it is for them. Symbols in the last analysis are necessarily arbitrary and, usually, make sense in the culture that authored them. Recognition of this basic fact is what cultural relativism is

all about. Once every aspect of the context of the cultural act is taken into account, it makes sense. It is only when categories of extraneous provenance are imposed that apparent untenability may be claimed. Geertz (1973) is known for his advocacy for at least a melange of such autochthonous views with any other that may be considered appropriate, what he calls *thick description*. The common ground in all this is that we avoid the views of the culture bearer to our epistemological peril.

Ethnographic Studies

Boston (1960), Jones (1945) and Ottenberg (1972 and 1973) are only a few examples of anthropologists who have studied Igbo masquerades, exclusively or in combination with those of other groups, as a form of drama. Onyeneke (1985) more recently brought in a sociohistorical dimension to the subject. Enekwe cites all the earlier studies. Onyeneke came afterwards. Elsewhere, Kirby (1976) and Turner (1992:10) have wider theoretical interests that see *shamanic* origins in some genres of drama in all, or at least some, cultures.

While not accepting such formulations wholesale, Enekwe's own thesis finds a common ground with them in holding that rituals as such do not negate the thespian merits of a performance which otherwise should be a drama. He gives in particular the examples of norm-sustaining mask performances of south-central Igbo groups (p. 113):

> In some festivals or performances, disfigured masks, especially those with swollen bellies, appear first in the masking arena in other to search out evil and destroy it while absorbing its powers, just as a vacuum cleaner feeds on dirt in order to make the surroundings clean. Such masks have a hypnotic and paralyzing effect on the audience, especially the ill-intentioned ones.
>
> Lampoon and satire are the key literary tools of such mask

dances. It seems an easier task making a case that these categories are genres of drama. The author illustrates with several of these: *Nwangwu* of Nri, Ayaka, also of the southcentral Igbo districts and *Okumkpo* of Afikpo of northeastern districts. The first and the last of these perform as a cast. *Ayaka* may perform solo. None of these has any parallel in Western-style tradition, without meaning to set the latter up as a model. In some of the cases Enekwe reports, the message of the masked performers is conveyed, starting from their costume. For example, *Nwangwu,* the satirist wears a double mask. Recall that the Igbo word for hypocrisy is *iruabuo* ("two faces"). He names his son, *Odifeafufolu* (rhetorically, "Is there anything that hasn't been found out?").

If it is easy, employing familiar standards, to see cases such as these as forms of drama, the bigger challenge is in successfully making the same case for such ones as the *Okpanam Wonder* (pp. 127 – 132), unless drama will be redefined to include any public show whatever. But such will be stretching the matter. In other cultures, for example, European ones, parallels exist for the Okpanam exhibitions, as described. One conspicuous example will be found in the prodigies of the so-called white magic. Yet anything but drama in the literary sense may be used to refer to this. In the Okpanam example, the aniconic object is capable of all sorts of transformations, starting from what looks like an amorphous mass cloth to an imposing cone. Enekwe recalls, "Wonder" takes all forms of shape, then it flattens out like a deflated accordion, while the men sit on its various parts in order to emphasize that there is nobody inside the mask." In one of the feats, a member of the troupe filled an otherwise porous basket with water without losing a drop.

By all standards, all this is dazzling, but what many will doubt is that it is drama. The only way it could be drama is if any public performance in every culture is. There certainly are some stupendous performances in other cultures, e.g. the so called white magic, among European and Americans that do not by

themselves count as drama, saving of course if they happen to be part of a larger structure amounting to such. Is it not possible then that the phenomenon we call the Igbo mask is therefore protean phenomenon, involving drama as Enekwe succeeded in demonstrating in some of these cases, but also other as-yet-to-be-categorized, in Western scholarship terms, aspects? At any rate, what is the justification in the insistence that Western analogues must be found for everything that is observed in authochthonous Igbo performance? One indisputable fact about social or cultural systems, in contradistinction to natural ones, is their variability. Anthropologists have given the world notions and practices from other human cultures whose comparison with Western lifeways is held to be futile. The strategy then was for the West to incorporate those *as is* into their own knowledge systems. Such are common in the domains of language where, ironically for our present purpose, the Igbo *okwuru* (Hybiscus exsculentis) has been adopted into English as okra, Twi's *haramata* adopted as Harmattan, or cultural acts where such terms as the Japanese *harakiri*, the Ojibwa *totem*, or the Polynesian *taboo* are only a few of countless examples.

In my view, Professor Enekwe's work is very, very important, but perhaps more so for reasons he did not anticipate. The problems that arise from the conclusions he reaches demonstrate the need for scholars to take this aspect of the Igbo a lot more seriously. There is an urgent need for salvage ethnography on it. Institute of African Studies of University of Nigeria has attempted a similar venture with regard to every domain of the Igbo culture but left it unfinished (Nzei 1984). The danger in not doing this is that before long there may not be much left as the authentic picture of the Igbo lifeways. As Kroeber (1966:19) has noted with regard to history, so also it is in social life that leads up to it. People who lose the true facts of their corporate existence risk replacing these with mere myths, broadly defined. These days, for example, many Igbos of the younger literate generation can be heard vaunting all sorts of

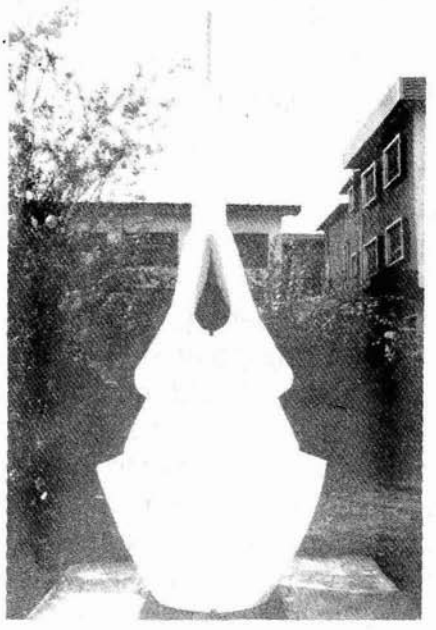
phony origins of their own figment. The late Rev. Fr. Professor Anigbo (1992) used to lament this assault on the Igbo lifeways, but it seems, as Victor Hugo was reputed to have said, no army is strong enough to stop an idea whose time has come.

If we can't stop the present generation of the Igbo from ill-advised cultural suicide, there should at least be undiluted facts about a way of life that preserved this great race for millenia before the contact with the self-serving colonizer and the proselytizer just some ten decades ago or so. As schooled elite, we should be wary of rushing to impose our own suspicions, however well meaning, on this matter. Salvage ethnography should be in the sense of going down to the remotest parts of our land to see if we can still get those on whom the influence of the foreign faiths and Western-style scholarship has been minimum. We must very religiously take their own descriptions and explanation into account. Our corporate inheritance in whatever form is not for ourselves alone; the generations that are yet to come through us are part of it. And they ought to be told the truth about this, as the cliché goes, warts and all. Clifford Geertz (1973) calls such a combination of views from all the affected parties: the researcher, other scholars or authorities and the culture bearer, *thick description*. I find nothing else that is fairer still.

Happily Professor Enekwe has moved even higher from the place he was when he made this effort many years ago. It is hoped that he and other eminent Igbo intellectuals of his kind will make things advance in this direction. One aim of this belated critique is to, hopefully, restimulate debate in this direction. Maybe a starting point should be a reissue of this significant book. The author should seize the opportunity to take a second look at his referencing strategy. If changing of the classical method he employed will help in recovering the rather many incomplete citations to be found in the present edition, so much the better. For example, in his Notes to chapter one, there are no full citations for such entries as Arinze, and Olisa, the same as there are not in chapter four for Ugonna, Odita, Meek,

Boston, Nwabueze, and so on.

He may also run into trouble with Igbo semanticists for some of his conclusions. For example, although *eze*, which he glosses as king, may take that interpretation in some contexts, it cannot in the instant case on his page 45, where the issue is the use of the morpheme in some Igbo person names. *Ezedigbo,* which he cites, and *Ezebuilo* which he doesn't, but which was once cited by another of our eminent English scholars, may not necessarily denote kingship. In those contexts, it may simply mean nobility or even affluence. Polysemy is a well-known phenomenon in various languages among which is Igbo. Nor does the Igbo *udara* (Chrysophyllum africanum*), p. 134,* mean the same thing as the English apple (Malus sylvestris), although this mistake is common among Igbo English speakers. What do we lose by retaining the indigenous Igbo term and at worst explaining it where difficulty in comprehension may otherwise arise? The English have no *udara*; we do.



References

Amankulor, James Ndukaku. 1972. "Ekpe Festival as Religious Ritual and Dance Drama." *Ikenga: Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 37 – 47.

____ 1976. "The Traditional Black Afican Theatre: Problems of Critical Evaluation," *Ufahamu*. Vol. 6. No. 2. Pp. 27 – 61.

Anigbo, O.A.C. 1992. *Igbo Elite and Western Europe*. Onitsha: Africana, FEP.

Beier, Ulli. 1967. "Yoruba Theatre", in Beier, Ulli (ed.) *Introduction to African Theatre*. London: Longman.

Boston, J.S. 1960. "Some Northern Igbo Masquerades," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. No. 90, pp. 54 – 65.

Echeruo, Michael J. 1973. "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual". *Research in African Literature*. Vol. 4, No. 1.

Enekwe Onuora Ossie. 1987. *Igbo Masks The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*. Lagos: *Nigeria Magazine (Department of Culture, Federal Ministry of Information and Culture)*.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Jones, G.I. 1945. "Masked Plays of South Eastern Nigeria", *Geographical Magazine*. Vol. 18, No. 5, pp. 190 – 199.

Kirby, E.T. 1974. "Indigenous African Theatre", *The Drama Review*. Vol. 18. No. 4, pp. 22 – 35.

Kroeber, A.L. 1966, edited by Theodora Kroeber. *An Anthropologist Looks at History*. Berkeley: University of

California Press.

Nzei, A.A. 1984. "Salvage Ethnography Project Report", *Ikoro.* Vol. V, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 50 - 52.

Onyeneke, Augustine. 1985. "The Masquerade: A Social Symbol in Igboland", *Ikoro.* Vol. VI, No. 1, pp. 19 - 36.

Osadebe, Osaeloka Okwudili. 1981. *The Development of the Igbo Masquerader as a Dramatic Character.* A Doctroral dissertation presented to the Northwestern University, USA.

Ottenberg, Simon. 1972. "Humorous Masks and Serious Politics at Afikpo", in Fraser, Douglas and Cole, Herbert M. (eds.). *African Art and Leadership.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 99 - 121.

_____ 1973. "Afikpo Masquerades: Audience and Performers." *African Arts.* Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 33 - 35.

_____ In an interview with Mbey, Emmanuel A. "An Interview with Chief Professor Simon Ottenberg", *Afikpo Today.* Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 32 - 42.

Turner, Terence. 1992. "Defiant Images —The Kayapo Appropriation of Video" *Anthropology Today.* Vol. 8, No. 6, pp. 5 - 16.

Ugonna, Nnabuenyi. 1976. Mmonwu of the Central Igbo: A Study of the Development of a Type of Dramatic Art. A doctoral dissertation presented to University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Iro AGHEDO is of the Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. He is author of several poems.

Bonaventure AKAH is a sculptor and dancer. He has participated in several notable art exhibitions, and owns Bonak Art Gallery in Enugu, Nigeria. His works include "The Ogbakiri Mask", "Adoration", "The Mourner" "The Couple", and "Broken Chains".

Don BURNESS is Professor of English at Franklin Pierce College, Rindge, New Hampshire, U.S.A. He is author of *Red Flowers in the Sand* (poems), and *Horse of White Clouds*, translations of African poetry from the Portuguese, which attracted a Kwanzaa Award from Africa Network in 1990. He is Editor of *Echoes of the Sunbird: An Anthology of Contemporary African Poetry*, published by the Centre for International Studies, Ohio University, USA.

Onuora Ossie ENEKWE poet, novelist, critic and playwright is Professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Nigeria. He is the author of *The Last Battle and Other Stories, Come Thunder, Broken Pots, Trail in the Mines* (biography) and the forthcoming *Marching to Kilimanjaro* (poems), *Gentle Birds* (poems), etc. His works have been translated into many languages, including French, Italian, Serbian, Hungarian, and Russian, and featured in numerous international journals and anthologies.

P J EZEH lectures in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is a linguist and journalist. His works include *Knowledge and Society*.

Nnadozie INYAMA, Ph.D, teaches in the Department of English, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His most recent work is *The Guest from the Sky* (stories).

Ndubuisi NNANNA is a graduate student in Theatre Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is the author of *"Song of the Owl"* (drama), published in *Okike*.

McPhilips NWACHUKWU is the Art Editor of *Sunday Vanguard* Newspapers in Lagos, Nigeria.

J.O.J NWACHUKWU-AGBADA is Professor of Literature at Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria. He is the author of *Love Strokes and Other Stories.*

Ebele OSEYE (Ellease Southerland) is Professor of African Literature and Creative Writing at Pace University, New York. She is the author of *A Feast of Fools,* and *Let the Lion Eat Straw* which was voted into the Black Heritage Series by New York Public Libraries in 1987. She is listed in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature, The Oxford Companion to Women Writing in the United States, Contemporary Authors* and *Black Women in America.*

Ije UDE is a young Nigerian poet based in New York City.

ISSN - 0331 - 0566