Okike

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EDITED BY CHINUA ACHEBE

OKIKE

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THE OKIKE STORY

When at the end of the Nigerian Civil War I decided to found and edit a literary journal at Nsukka its prospects seemed less than rosy. The territory into which the journal was born had been devastated physically and spiritually by war and defeat, its hopes of recovery cynically mocked by a Federal administration that combined slogans of reconciliation with punitive economic and banking policies.

In addition to this peculiarly inauspicious environment the fledgling journal had also to contend with world-wide economic pressures which were making literary magazines notoriously short-lived everywhere. This high fatality has continued to this day, and as Chinweizu tells us the average life expectancy of a literary magazine today is one and one-third appearances! On this score alone OKIKE is one of the most successful journals of its kind in the world.

The doggedness with which OKIKE triumphed over its early environmental dangers was born out of a conviction that a man chastened by the humiliation of defeat often had deeper insights to report than his conqueror, and that out of the trauma of the Biafran experience something good and valuable might be recovered for Nigerian and African literary development and civilization.

The struggle which OKIKE waged for survival in the first two or three years will be described elsewhere and at another time. But one must mention the moral and financial support which came at critical moments from Prof. Ulli Beier, Dr. Alex Ekwueme and Mr. Arthur Nwankwo. Ulli Beier came to our aid totally unasked; Ekwueme and Nwankwo responded to appeals that had gone out to several Nigerians in different parts of the country.

In recognition of their support these three were made patrons of OKIKE by the Editorial Board in 1979. To prevent possible misunderstanding in these crudely partisan times we should mention that Dr. Ekwueme's donation to the journal and his nomination as patron preceded his emergence in politics. He was and is a genuine patron of the arts.

Because all literature is political, OKIKE cannot but be political. But it cannot be a tool of partisan politics especially of the mediocre and mindless kind practised in Nigeria today. If it is true that a revered politician once referred to Dr. Ekwueme as a political misfit, we in OKIKE can only pray to God to send Nigeria a few more misfits to save her from all the political fits!

My search for support in the 1970's was directed as much at individual donors as to organisations. One likely source seemed the

Soviet Union of Writers to whom I appealed not for a gift but for the release of royalties due on Russian translations of my books. This request was not even acknowledged. However in 1972/73 when I went to teach at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst I was able to persuade the Ford Foundation in New York to depart from its normal spheres of interest and award a substantial grant to OKIKE through the University of Massachusetts. Although the grant was intended to be a "one-shot" award to enable the journal attain financial self-sufficiency in two years such a hope has proved too sanguine in these inflationary times. So the Ford Foundation has made three subsidiary grants to OKIKE in the last ten years.

We are deeply grateful for this support which has helped OKIKE to survive its first ten years. We do think, however, that it would be inappropriate to seek or receive foreign patronage at this stage in the life of OKIKE. It should have given sufficient indication by now of its value for Nigerians either to support it properly or else let it quietly disappear. We of the editorial board on our part think that OKIKE should continue to live and pursue its present and future plans, hence this double occasion of celebration and renewed appeal for patronage.

We should also acknowledge at this point a recent grant of two thousand naira from the National Council for Arts and Culture for assistance in these Tenth Anniversary celebrations. This grant came to us through the instrumentality of the former Minister of Social Development, Culture, Youth and Sports, Mr. Paulinus Amadike, and Mr. Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, Secretary of the Council.

OKIKE PROJECTS

The primary business of OKIKE is, of course, to publish the journal three times a year as a platform for creative writers, visual artists, critics and general enlightened readers in Africa and other parts of the world.

One of the fascinating things about OKIKE from its inception has been the way in which it has gone about making itself a venue for established as well as new writers of merit. Among the first group are such world-famous African names as Soyinka, Gordimer, Clark, Okara, Awoonor, Brutus, Mphahlele, Ekwensi; among the latter: Omotoso, Ofeimun, Nwagboso, Balogun, Okoye, Uka, Ogundipe-Leslie, Vatsa, Aiyejina, Mugo (Kenya) Anyidoho (Ghana). Some major critics who have written for OKIKE are Obiechina, Irele, Nwoga, Moore, Okpewho, Osofisan, Chinweizu, Jemie, Madubuike.

Artists who have lent distinction to its visual quality include Udechukwu, Uche Okeke, Boghossian (Ethiopia), Aniakor, Onobrakpeya, Malangatana (Mozambique), Orakpo, Anatsui (Ghana).

OKIKE is so well known today in Africa and the world at large that practically every major university library in the English-speaking world

subscribes to it. A growing number of public libraries and individuals are also taking it.

OKIKE has been praised by such famous writers as C.P. Snow and Doris Lessing and leading scholars like Professor Molly Mahood. THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT of London had this to say of the journal:

> OKIKE is handsomely designed and produced and the contents are impressive evidence of the range and vitality of African letters today.

Nearer home the DAILY TIMES of Lagos called it "a pacesetter for African writers."

One of the major areas of concern in OKIKE'S second decade will be how to make many more educated Nigerians aware of its rich offerings and its important mediatory role between modern literary artists in Africa and a new and growing discriminating readership.

To this end OKIKE is trying out an innovative distribution system within Nigeria in partnership with a young and dynamic indigenous firm of booksellers, Timek Educational Services of Enugu.

OKIKE EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT

Okike has always had an educational aspiration alongside its creative and critical intentions. One of the most depressing aspects of Nigerian secondary education today is the abysmally low quality of literary instruction. Strangely enough this inadequacy is most marked in African literature. It is curious that most secondary school teachers of literature would rather teach Eliot than Soyinka. This is more than just another manifestation of our colonial mentality. A practical reason is that the teacher is more likely to find a commentary on Eliot than on Soyinka. To fill this gap some sharp people with more interest in loot than lit. have flooded the market with atrocious "guides" to African writers some of which are so bad that they must instantly damage whatever innate literary sensibilities the student may bring to the texts.

To remedy this situation OKIKE began three years ago to publish occasional literary supplements prepared by distinguished academics with a flair for communicating literary enthusiasm. This project is headed by Professor Emmanuel Obiechina of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Contributors are drawn from experienced teachers of literature from Nigerian institutions of higher learning and the results have been entirely satisfactory.

OKOCHI FESTIVALS

The basis of all literature is speech and the oral tradition. This is particularly true of Africa where the written word is a comparative newcomer, and written literature is as yet far less than the tuft of

hair on the head of a giant. The poetic, philosophical and religious genius of African peoples is lodged in their oral tradition. To recover and preserve this must be accounted the pre-eminent task of the present generation of artists and thinkers who partake in modern Africa's double heritage in a way no past or future Africans could or can do.

The literary and artistic activists on the OKIKE editorial board have formed themselves into the Okike Arts Centre for the purpose of presenting to modern educated audiences the best in the extant oral culture of our people. Traditional poets and singers of excellence have been invited to Nsukka to perform not as decorative or peripheral "fillers" but serious and honoured guests, as repositories of our endangered civilisation.

We think it is of crucial importance to stress the spirit behind this enterprise and to distinguish it from the rather anomalous inspiration of the typical Nigerian arts festival where the ruling elite pays vacuous allegiance to "our cultural heritage" by discarding their lounge suits for unaccustomed feathers on ONE hot afternoon in the year to watch a succession of dancers from remote impoverished villages who have been carted by officialdom to the capital to amuse those who control their lives so absent-mindedly.

The Okochi Festival which OKIKE has staged twice so far at Nsukka has featured such professional poet-singers as Ekwegbalu Anyanwu and Afam Ogbuotobo. Their poetry has been recorded and will be transcribed and published in an annual Igbo journal, UWA NDI IGBO as soon as we can obtain the necessary finances for the project which is headed by one of our best historical and literary minds, Professor Chieka Ifemesia.

Meanwhile a sample anthology of contemporary Igbo poetry (some of which was first recited at Okochi festivals) has been published by OKIKE in a small attractive volume entitled AKA WETA which was launched on April 29 by His Excellency Dr. Alex I. Ekwueme, Vice-President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

It is an indication of the immense task before us that this little book of poems becomes on publication the most important Igbo anthology in existence!

PUBLICATIONS OF OKIKE MATERIAL

In addition to publications by OKIKE itself regular publishing houses will from time to time be invited to issue anthologies of prose and poetry from past numbers of OKIKE. This project has taken off to a good start with two publications from the Enugu-based house of Fourth Dimension – anthologies of the most significant fiction and poetry published in the first decade of OKIKE and edited respectively by Professors E. Obiechina and D.I. Nwoga.

The Fourth Dimension must be congratulated on producing such attractive first fruits in record time for the tenth anniversary celebrations.

SCOPE OF FUTURE NEEDS

In order to continue and extend its present programmes into its second decade OKIKE is launching an appeal Fund for five hundred thousand naira and calls on public-spirited Nigerians to contribute to its work.

J.P. Clark

HERE NOTHING WORKS

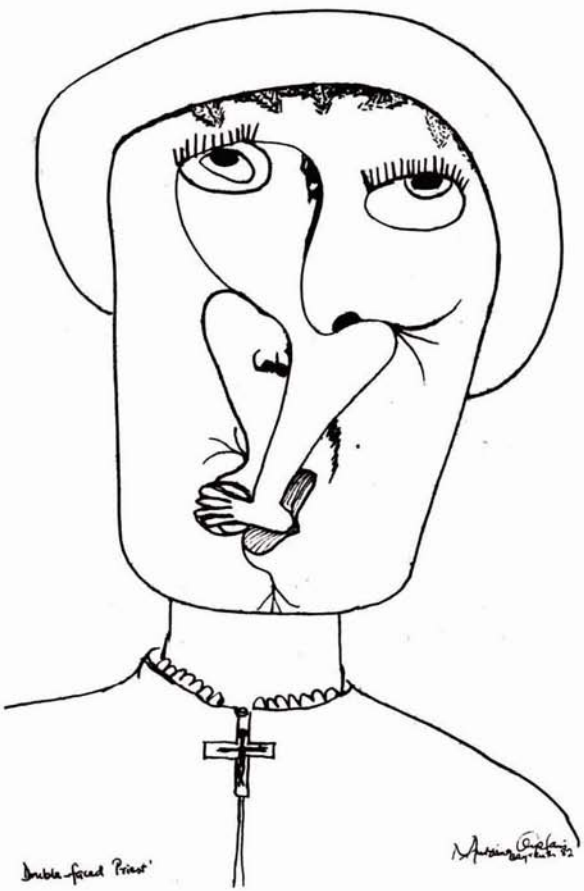
Here nothing works. Services taken
For granted elsewhere either break down
Or do not get started at all
When introduced here. So supply of water
That is basic to life after air
Re-creates for the people
Desert conditions even by the sea,
As every day darkness increases
Over the land just as more dams go up,
And rivers reach levels approved by experts.
What is it in ourselves or in our soil
That things which connect so well elsewhere,
Like the telephone, the motorway, the airways,
Dislocate our lives so much that we all
Begin to doubt our own intelligence?
It cannot be technology itself
In our hands fails us, for we pick up
The skills fast enough as all vendors know
Who sell to us round the world. But the doctor,
Playing God in his ward of death many
Outside are dying to enter, forgets
Or denies his oath, and law that should rule
The land so each may be free to cultivate
His talent for the wellbeing of all breaks down
In all departments of life, from classroom
To courthouse, for many, remembering
The principle, do not believe in its
Practice anymore. So something there must
Be in ourselves or in our times that all
Things working for good elsewhere do not work
In our expert hands, when introduced
To our soil that is no different from other lands.

PROGRESS

The sandboats on the lagoon,
Will they make the last mile
Home by sunset? The wind,
Stalling in their sails,
Has travelled a thousand miles
Since they set out at dawn.

THE REFORMERS

Look at the men who have taken
Over a public pool to wash it clean.
They are themselves so given to filth
Nobody now can see the bottom
Of the pool for the mud they have brought,
And are flinging so freely at the few
They have picked upon as scape-goats.



EASTER 1976

What came uppermost in their minds.
Thirty-odd men walking thirty-odd
Yards to their death on an
Afternoon, a whole city emptied
Upon the shore to watch them?

A drowning man, it is said, catches
The holograph of his life in a flash;
Air, water, soil and sky, he takes
Them in in that gulp, when all
the cumulations of sense and mind
Go out as so many bubbles . . .

But thirty-odd men walking thirty-odd
Yards to their death, what scenes,
What sensations of horror or delight
Came crowding into their minds?

True, every attempt by foi
To change command carries
The actors over the brink to a bank,
Dim even to the lynx by light of day,
And it if fails, they fall into a gorge
With only the echo of their cry
To mock the sky. . .

Gentlemen all, or so they swore
To act, had a woman, mother
Of one among them, known,
When at the great cross-roads of careers
Each followed the path of arms
To service at the top, that her child,
After leading battalions into the field,
Would walk like this one day
To be shot at a stake by the shore,
His own comrades his executioners,
She might well have chosen to pass
Blood all her yielding years.

Officers more than men
Were hunted down in the field,
In offices, in hospitals, at home
Before wives, before children
In a fever that seized a nation.
It only had to be said
Such and such a man had met

An actor at the bar, or played
Polo or ludo with him, and he was
Accused of a part in the wildest plot
Of a gang that called curfew
For morning to evening, having shot
Dead in the middle of a street
Their quarry for crimes they could not
Even pronounce, though heaven knows
The homesteads and farms are many
Crying still, after the passage
Of the buffalo a people
Have taken for their totem.

One there among them I knew well,
Or so I thought, until
The act betrayed the man,
Not the general who in his days
Of power I had met once only,
And now in death cannot
Get out of my dreams, but
A young man, one that should
Have been close to me, if only
For plucking from the same tree,
And bearing it later fallen
To its place of rest, where
One morning a buffalo fell.

So questions were asked at the time
Under breath, and questions more are
Being asked now the matter is
Of no account to the dead, and
The living are learning again to live,
Questions that the great pushers
Of causes convenient still
Have not asked, whether a trial,
Conducted with the regulations
In the book all reversed,
Could ever have found out which finger
In the act touched another
With the blood it did not spill.

But thirty-odd men walking thirty-odd
Yards to their death on an afternoon,
A whole city emptied upon the shore
To watch them, who will ever know
What came uppermost in their minds?

VICTORIA ISLAND

In the interest of the public
They took over land a family
Owned before the country began.
With public seal and money
They reclaimed it from swamp and sea.
Then while the people looked on
In wonder, they parcelled out the land
Among themselves, their mistresses, liars,
And sycophants from Tyre and Sidon.
Now the people may not step on the land
Overnight flooded with millionaires.
Why should the country not be sick?

OF SECTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

There is a tide in our country
Unstable has turned souls away
From cathedrals to the marketplace
Streets, beaches, and sitting-rooms
Now are full of men and women
In direct contact with God
On any matter from queries
At work to sale of rice, while pews
Only fill for marriage and death.

What is there in a flaming candle,
Upheld by figures in flowing gowns,
Draws flocks to their immolation
Upon a bell and a book the best
Of them, shedding incense, cannot
Even read from cover to cover?

Abigail Ukpabi

ONE MAN, ONE WIFE, (a wife's rejoinder)

Na wetin dis, A beg na wetin dis?
Na wetin dis, Aig – Imoukhuede de talk so?
Bible don talk am before say na one man, one wife!
Na so God make am for heaven
Woman na person, man na person
Which man go like him woman
Make i go marry two men, three men, four men?
Man no sabi say woman self get heart
Wey go hala for cheating
Wey go die everyday, every night
For dis share-share of one man.

Dem say na white man culture;
Wetin be white man culture?
White man, white woman,
Black man, black woman,
Yellow man, yellow woman,
Red man, red woman
All get same heart for dis world!

One man, one wife
No so i go be ooooo!

THE PALM KERNEL

Breakfast is ready:
Hot toast, egg and butter,
Bournvita, milk and sugar
But all they want to do,
Is crack some palm kernel,
Eat palm kernel!

Lunch is ready,
Hot 'dodo' and jollof rice,
Garnished with vegetables,
Chicken stew and goat meat;
But all they want to do
Is crack some palm kernel,
Eat palm kernel!

What is this palm kernel?
The village folks know it
It is food for the pauper,
The destitute, the poor,
But all the children
In the rich neighbourhood,
Long for palm kernel
And refuse their own food!

Catherine Obianuju Acholonu

A CHILD'S PLEA

Where's my palm tree,
Mama?
Where's my palm tree?
Phased out
Says Mama
Practice obsolete.
The maternity latrine
Took care of your
Afterbirth.
But Mama
A tiny hole
By a tiny palm tree
Was all I needed.
Why did you deny me
Tomorrow . . .
Today is no use
Without tomorrow.
Mama
Where's my palm tree?

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Kole Omotoso

A FEAST IN THE TIME OF PLAGUE

Any megadi would have been worried but not Saliu. The bald-headed young man had been coming to the gate of this farm for the last one week. He did not ask to be permitted to enter the farm. He did not ask for any one. He simply came, sat down by the gate and began to wrap tobacco for himself. Using his surprisingly clean teeth, he trimmed the points of the cigar. Before setting light to it, he looked at megadi Saliu and winked at him. Everyday he came at the same time, went through the same motions and left at the same time. 7.30 am to 3.30 pm. Everyday for one week. Besides the wink at Saliu he never attempted to make conversation. Everyday, after the first two days, Saliu began to look forward to his coming. Saliu had also begun to worry. If Master went out at all, he left at 25 minutes past the hour of 7 in the morning and came back at twenty five minutes to four in the afternoon. The old-young man seemed to time his coming and going to coincide with the absence of Master. On the seventh day he decided he must talk to this young-old man. But that particular day, the young-old man did not turn up. Saliu then remembered that Master had travelled. He would not be back until the following week. Which meant that the young-old man would not come again until that time? His anxiety angered him and he found the frustration of his curiosity difficult to wish away.

Master's Farm occupied thousands of hectares. He employed five hundred workers, mostly women. Most of the money earned from the farm came from assembling chickens and eggs: one-day-old chicks from Europe added to feeds from Europe produced melting chickens sold to hotels, restaurants, educational institutions – layers and broilers all. This was the grin revolution. Master grinned all the way from the bank manager's office to his pocket. The night Master came back the young-old man was at the gate in the morning wrapping his cigar and winking at Saliu.

– Oga, who you want?

– Na you now. Abi you no know all this time I dey come dey play with you so?

Saliu's initial reaction was to burst into laughter but the dignity of his office as the megadi of Master's Farm demanded a far more stern reaction. Dignity and humanity and dignity contested in his bony chest. Compromise came in a form of rebuke:

– I tell you say I dey marriage, abi I dey wash chief, abi I dey bury my mama tabi my papa that you wan' come play with me?

The young-old man was satisfied with himself. He smoked away as if he did not hear the rebuke from Saliu. He watched the man's eyes, and his kola-nut stained lips and measured his reply to that moment of Saliu's exasperation.

– Wey your mates?

– What you say?

– I say wey your mates, the ones wey no sabi speak? the young-old man was now shouting.

Saliu went back to behind the gate, into the megadi's cubicle and fetched a koboko. As he came out of the cubicle he tested and teased the koboko on his arm. Yet when he spoke it was almost out of reconciliation rather than confrontation.

– Which mates you wan'?

– Your mates the megadi dogs! You, na megadi man, them dogs megadi dogs! Saliu fell on his spare bottoms, fell back on his back and laughed such a laugh the young-old man could not believe his eyes and his ears. He had only a second before been wondering if a personal attack on the megadi would be the best way of getting to know him. All he could do was join Saliu and laugh.

– Getup!

Saliu was on his feet and trembling over the still crouched young-old man.

– I no mind if I laugh, but you why you dey laugh me so? Becos I be poor man?

– I'm sorry, my friend. I didn't mean to laugh at you. I sorry.

– Sorry for yourself.

– You no be poor man o.

– Why you say me and dog na mate?

– I should have said professional colleagues!

– Wetin be dat?

– I mean to say una be the same jobmates, megadis together.

– Like say we dey the same Nigerian Union of megadis? Boy, you too make fun. But sha, na true you talk. True true. Wetin make I call you?

– Boyo, my name na Boyo.

– Wetin you dey want for here?

For a long time Boyo kept Saliu off with all sorts of stories. He worked only on strengthening their bonds until they became close friends. Boyo visited Saliu and saw his two wives and five children huddled in a kennel at the edge of the farm. Saliu could not visit Boyo since Boyo said that he had no house. One day, as Boyo shared a plate of corn pap and vegetable stew with Saliu, he asked him:

– How can the man who keeps the key of a goldmine be a poor man? Anytime he wanted to direct the course of their discussion, he reverted to grammatical English as if the pidgin they used at other times could not bear the burden of their discourse. Moreover, as they became more and more familiar, Boyo also dropped the forced situation where he had to use pidgin in speaking to him. It had started as a means of identifying himself with him and all the uneducated in English all over Nigeria. But then he came to the conclusion that it was better to help them to raise the standard of their spoken English pending the time that he should learn the language that they spoke better.

– Boyo, you come again. What kind question be dat?

– Why you poor so, your pikin na soso formula milk, na 'im he dey drink, na soso gari una dey chop, not be so?

Saliu made no answer.

– Still yet, over there, where Master dey, wetin dem they chop?

– Na God make 'am so.

– Dat na lie. Make you no take God name bring for bad matter. God no dey glad for poor man.

– The fingers no dey equal. No be God make am so?

– That is another story. The fingers might not be equal in length but each finger gets its own supply of blood from the heart. Not be so?

– I dey confuse. Make you leff me. You want drink abi you no want?

They drank in silence. Boyo rolled two cigars and they smoked until the little room was filled with curling fainting smoke and the smell of raw uncured tobacco. Finally Saliu asked the question that Boyo had been getting anxious about, getting worried that he would never ask him again.

– Wetin make I do for you?

– I want a job here.

– Which kind?

– Any.

The following day, Boyo began to work at Master's Farm as one of the packers.

It was a community regimented to the last 't'. Each of the aspects of the process of assembling chicken on the farm had its share of workers – those who unloaded the feed from the lorries, those who cleaned the chicken coops, those who gathered the eggs, those who collected and slaughtered the finished chicken, those who dressed them and, over everybody, megadi's dogs.

There was no work on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. At all other times work from dawn to dusk to dawn. On Saturday nights there were socials where there was drink and weed to smoke. On Sunday mornings every worker on the farm must report for Christian service

and Moslem prayers. In the same hall that had served for the social gathering of the night before. The first Sunday morning that Boyo was on the farm he had to make a special effort to get up and be present at the service.

The preacher came from town. He was something of an actor. In his person he carried three religious personalities, three alternating roles – Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, 7th Day Adventist etc.) reverend, Muslim Imam and traditional babalawo. His text that Sunday morning was from Psalms of David, Psalm 112: 'Happy is the person who has reverence for the Lord, who takes pleasure in obeying his commands. The good man's children will be powerful in the land; his descendants will be blessed. His family will be wealthy and rich, and he will be prosperous for ever. Light shines in the darkness for good men, for those who are merciful, kind, and just. Happy is the person who is generous with his loans, who runs his business honestly. A good person will never fail; he will always be remembered. He is not afraid of receiving bad news; his faith is strong, and he trusts in the Lord. He is not worried or afraid; he is certain to see his enemies defeated. He gives generously to the needy, and his kindness never fails; he will be powerful and respected. The wicked see this and are angry; they glare in hate and disappear; their hopes are gone forever.'

He quoted from the Holy Quran as well as the Ifa Corpus. His audience lapped it all up. At the end of it all the Reverend-Imam-Babalawo called at the Master's house and was paid for his services.

There was a store that sold all the needs of the community. It was owned and operated by Master. It sold children's foods imported from Europe, radios and stereo sets imported from Japan and temperate fruits pulsating with tropical worms buried inside, burrowing through.

Men and women lived in different parts of the farm and the children lived in yet another part. They were mass fed with bottles filled with baby food formulas sold at the store. All mothers had money deducted from their pay for the baby food supplied to their children. The baby food was not supplemented with any other food items. The children's skin looked pink, bleached by inadequate nutrients, their unnaturally red lips and their limbs in various shapes, the joints knobbed and all askew.

For a long time Boyo could not get over the problem of the mothers not feeding their children from their own milk. Theirs was perhaps far more nutritious, it came in more attractive containers and would also help mother and child to get together as mutually responsive humans. Whenever anything puzzled him on this farm, Boyo would seek out his friend Saliu and hint him of it. The first time he mentioned the issue of milk to Saliu the man almost collapsed from fear. He looked round

and watched his jobmates the alsatians growl as if they had an inkling of what he was discussing with Boyo.

– Make you no mention 'am forever, if you want make I dey talk to you.

Nothing Boyo could say or do would make Saliu change his mind. This only increased Boyo's bewilderment. He reported to the Group and his instructions were that he was to be more vigilant. He must find out something.

The first product of his vigilance was that he saw the women going to the women's wing of the dispensary twice a day – in the morning before they began to work at their jobs and at night before they went to sleep. What they did there he could not fathom. Once more he went to Saliu.

– I no know.

Nothing would get another word out of his mouth. More than this, he asked Boyo never to come to his house again. And furthermore, he said he was going to tell the Master that Boyo was making enquiries about milk on the farm. When Boyo reported to the Group he was told to get rid of Saliu immediately. Next morning Saliu Megadi was found shot in his cubicle. His family of two wives and five children had to leave the farm and go back to their home town.

The only way Boyo could make up for the loss of the companionship of Saliu was to make a new friend on the farm. To get nearer the mystery of the milk he would have to make friends with one of the women. He picked on Emiola. She was bright-eyed but weary, the life in her had been subdued, cowed and only intermittent incidents brought out of her the brightness of youth and yearnings. Boyo liked her and he tried never to itemise the reasons but without thinking he would remember her smooth skin, her breasts big and yielding and her naturalness when they slept together. She'd never been married but she had two children. She worked in Master's house.

– When I'm rich, when I become a cash madam I shall choose the men I want!

It took a long time for Boyo to probe her regarding the visit of all the women on the farm to the female wing of the dispensary. When he finally asked her she wanted to know why he was asking.

– I just want to know.

– That's not good enough, she said.

– I'm curious, that's all.

She looked at him for a long time. Boyo was beginning to sweat when Emiola took her eyes off him finally. Could she be a spy for Master?

– We go there to be milked.

– What did you say?

– You asked me a question and I have given you the answer.

– I missed it. What did you say?

– I said that all the women who work on this farm are milked twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. Everyone of the four hundred female workers.

– Why?

– I have answered your question.

Somehow, Boyo had never thought that the answer could be so basic and still be so baffling.

– Emiola?

– Yes?

– I have to find out what Master does with the milk.

– Good lucky to you.

– I need your help.

– I hear.

Boyo knew there was no way he could get her to help. Yet he could do nothing unless she helped him.

– How can I convince you Emiola that unless you help me all of my life would have been lived uselessly?

She fixed him with that her stare, looking through him.

– Tell me what you are up to and I shall tell you if I can mix my load with yours.

He had no clearance from the Group to initiate her into all this. All the Group knew was that she was his lover and she would help whenever she was called upon to. He started by fumbling some story but she checked him and demanded something more intelligent. Finally he took out his gun, fixed the silencer and told her everything, almost everything he knew about the Group. When he had finished his story, she was calm, almost as if she had not been moved. And she too became curious, an item of human feeling which had not come her way for a long time.

– I'm curious and I think you have become important in my life, important enough for me to think of you as a friend.

– Will you help me?

– Anything I can do.

The house stood at the top of the hill that overlooked the whole farm. All around it was a green belt of manicured lawn lit by powerful bulbs and patrolled by alsatian dogs.

– How many dogs?

They were walking uphill, towards the house.

– Four but Mini their leader is the most important.

Boyo felt the lump in his sweating hand, shifted it to another hand and wiped his hand on his trouser thigh. When they reached the gate, Emiola pressed a button in the wall and the doors eased apart. At once

the four dogs bounced on them. The gun dropped from Boyo's hands. Before he could pick it up one of the dogs had it between its fangs.

– Mini, common, here, bring it.

She repeated her entreaty a number of times and Mini came back, reluctantly, and surrendered the gun. It was wet with slippery saliva when Boyo picked it up again. They crossed the lawn now and entered the house.

– I'll wait for you here.

Boyo looked at her and she indicated the stairs and waited at the door.

The house was built around the bathroom – a monstrous construction of bath tubs, pots, showers of cold and hot water as well as showers of different dyes. Right in the centre of all these was an ebony black larger than life bath tub. It was filled with a white liquid. Inside the bath tub a very dark complexioned man lay, leaning against one end of the tub while his face was turned up to the ceiling. He seemed completely unaware of the presence in his shrine. Boyo coughed.

– Who is that? he asked in a thoroughly bored voice. For answer Boyo took a shot at the mirror nearest to him.

– What is that? He was out of the tub and back again and completely unsure where to go now.

– What do you want here? How did you get in? Who are you?

Boyo could not believe it yet. He moved nearer. The white substance in the black bath tub was not water, not coloured water.

– Where are the dogs?

– Just answer one question and then I shall answer all your questions.

There was something strange about his skin from the neck down.

– What question? he asked. What do you want to do with that gun?

– Just this question: What liquid is this?

He did not answer. He pointed a withered hand towards one of the showers.

– Turn that shower on.

Boyo did not think. He walked across and took hold of the knob. For a moment Boyo's back was completely turned to him while he turned on the shower. The man that was known as Master leapt out of the shower and made for Boyo. Boyo turned and emptied the gun on him, shot after shot until the chamber was empty. By which time the Master was already dead, on his floor his blood flowing towards the exit point of the strange liquid in which he bathed. Boyo drew near to look at him. Emiola had run upstairs. She carried a shogtun levelled at Boyo's head.

– What are you going to do with me? Boyo asked, not sure he wanted to know.

– I could have told you that he used our milk to bathe because he had a skin problem which could only be cured that way. But I know yours was not just curiosity. And we were also interested in getting rid of him.

– But it didn't work! Boyo cried. Look at him, like a bird plucked of its feathers. It didn't work!

– It didn't but still he did it. Common, move over. We are going. The women are waiting for me. Let's go.

Outside, solemn faced, the women of the farm were gathered to hear their leader tell them of the death of their murderer and the murderer of their children.

Tony E. Afejuku

LAND SONG

We own this land
And the swamps
The palms
And the mangroves;
We'll die defending them.

The judges may have their pockets swelled
And the courts wring the neck of justice

We own this land
The soil is ours
And the palms
The mangroves
And the swamps;
We'll die in their defence

Our shark brothers may sneak around
And soften official palms

We own this land
The raped land will be chastened and restored
And the mangroves
The palms
And the swamps;
We'll live for them.

ITSEKIRI DANCER

I

With a beaming smile on her face,
Dangling palm-beads on her neck
And horse-tails in hands to fan air,
She sways and hops and struts
To the charm and magic beat of his drum-

II

She is the graceful Itsekiri dancer
Lost in the throb of a drum,
Lost in the aesthetics of her race:
Her hips well-lined with beads of pearls
Twist and shake rhythmically with undying
Love for the sweet beat of the drum-

III

From slow, warm caresses and twists of her hips,
All at once she changes movement and style,
And glides as the drum reaches high tempo,
Approaching sweet crescendo-
And softly, a slow plunge into the deeps!

IV

Now she is in her own world,
A serene trance of peace and love,
Clasping and caressing the EKPO bird
And warmly whispering some sweet music
Of ancient times of experienced virgins.

V

She whispers and breathes hard and clasps him;
She whispers and breathes hard and clasps him,
Resting her shapely, soft pyramids
On him, her love, her EKPO bird
And sinking deeper and deeper
In the must of his embrace.

THAT NIGHT

That night will ever stay pale
In my remembrance, not green,
That night that first brought her to me
That night that led me through that path
That night that threw my mesh on her.

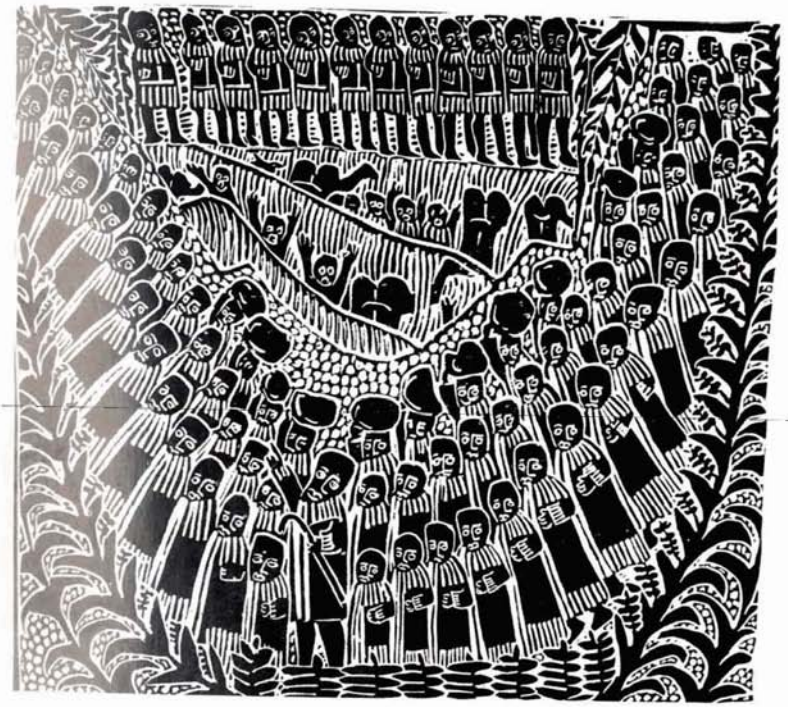
That night is the cause of all this
That night is the cause of all this my misery and woe
That night is the cause of her mockery at me now –

She makes faces at me now because
The world is sinking and drowning me
I, who was once sinking and drowning life
But I don't lament this
It is that night I lament.

That night that brought this sucker to me
That night that led me through that path
That night that threw my net on her
That night that stays pale in my head
That night that will trek to my near end with me.

BENIN PRINCESS

My dagger dangled after it,
Then dropped;
Leisurely I strolled away . . .
Beautiful daphne,
Proud touch-me-not of Benin.



Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo

THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN WRITER IN A CARTHAGINIAN SOCIETY

There once existed two contiguous civilizations each of them wealthy, prosperous and proud; Greece and Carthage. One of these became strong and stable, withstood the denudations of time, retained its ancient majesty and profoundly influences the civilized world today. The other, to borrow Longfellow's now hackneyed phrase, left behind it no "footprints on the sands of time." It has vanished clean from the memory of all but the most ardent antiquarians. Admittedly, it had the singular glory of producing one of the greatest military strategists of all times, Hannibal the Great. But Hannibal was a lone, tragic genius in a land of mediocrities and even his understanding ingenuity was not enough to prevent his defeat at Zama or the annihilation of his country in 146 B.C.

Why is Carthage so markedly unimportant to us today? Why do we hardly have occasion to lament its demise? The truth is that Carthage, by contrast with Greece, had a purely mercantile, mundane civilization in which there was an alarming ridicule and contempt for learning, philosophy and the arts. The gorgeous merchants of Carthage mistook commerce for culture, collection of coins for cultivation of the mind and thought that physical titillation and banal amusements constituted the *summum bonum* of human existence. Theirs was an absolute belief in the absolute power of bullion and under such a stifling, "cash and carry" environment, the life of the spirit and the intellect rapidly waned. It is no surprise, therefore, that to the Romans who eventually destroyed Carthage, that country was synonymous with incivility, faithlessness and treachery.

Is the Federal Republic of Nigeria becoming another Carthage? This question is not intended to implant the fear that Nigeria is in some danger of being destroyed by a "jealous" neighbour. Far from that. We have an efficient Army – foreign trained and equipped? – that can make short work of any venturesome enemy. No, if we shall be destroyed at all – but God forbid – it cannot possibly be by external aggressors but probably by that curious process of self-destruction known as *autolysis.* When the question is posed as to whether Nigeria is becoming another Carthage, the intention, ultimately, is to examine the nature of Nigerian "civilization" and identify the direction of the Nigerian society in order to determine whether Nigeria is headed in the

Carthaginian (retrogressive) as opposed to the Greek (progressive) direction.

The Nigerian society, I suggest, is characterized by barbarism. Although Nigerian citizens wear expensive lace and shoes, their profile approximates what Duncan Williams caustically characterized as "trousered apes."[1] But this analogy seems to be contradicted by physical evidence: Nigeria is well reputed to be viable and striving hard to be "progressive" in every modern sense. For instance, there is an intensive and extensive construction of Federal and State highways; bamboo and wooden bridges are torn down feverishly and replaced appropriately with steel structures; there is "integrated rural and urban development", a laudable scheme whereby pipe borne water, electricity and low cost housing are extended to the hinterland as a matter of basic right; mass education has received a new impetus, scholarships and bursaries have been liberalized and universities have multiplied ubiquitously in geometric progression; and increasing numbers of Nigerians erect tall concrete buildings and magnificent mansions even if the choice of paint and interior decor still remains outrageous; a handsome percentage of the population owns pleasure cars while some of the more successful ones own ships, aircraft and private airstrips; the Agrarian Revolution, whose euphemism is "Green Revolution", is a timely scheme intended to boost local food production and put an end to the distracting importation of rice and frozen chicken by entrepreneur-senators. How, then, can a country that is "doing so well" be associated with barbarism?

We must straight-away discount the idea that civilization has anything *intrinsic* to do with material well-being. Good feeding, tangible luxuries, modern conveniences and other material adjuncts to the physical side of life are merely extraneous to, not an integral part of civilization. For civilization, in a purely denotative sense, is a phenomenon partly of the intellect and partly of the emotion. A society can have supersonic jets, ocean liners, universities and casinos and still be uncivilized. At the beginning of the 19th century, Ralph Ross tells us, the chief form of conveyance was the horse or horse-drawn carriage, exactly as it was in ancient Rome. Agriculture was conducted essentially as it had been on the farms of the Middle Ages. Oil and waxes still lit houses at night. European Princes and industrial magnates of barely eighty years ago did without refrigerators, radios and television sets.[2] They were no less civilized for that. Neither is the Modern Age any more civilized than Ancient Rome or the Middle Ages by virtue of "modern science" and the modern proliferation of sophisticated and sometimes unnecessary gadgets. And talking of science, how much of it does the modern educated man, least of all the Nigerian, actually know? In fact, our educated public of today, to employ

I.I. Rabi's brutal simile, is "as ignorant of science as a healthy Hottentot is of physiology."[3] He doesn't even know the details of what happens when he switches on his electricity. Wole Soyinka's Sir Derin, his obtuseness notwithstanding, is dead right when he chidingly tells Sekoni, the engineer, that "a degree does not make a graduate." A society's attitude towards knowledge and learning, arts and letters, war and peace, freedom and initiative, personal and national security, material acquisitions and leisure; sex, love, marriage, religion and politics; in short the society's world view, the so-called *weltanschaung,* must be revolutionized, homogenized and indigenized before the society can be acclaimed civilized.

Unfortunately, this indigenization of our world view, a necessary step towards real civilization and self actualization, has not taken place in Nigeria. We are still imitative of Europe, with all the dangers inherent in such imitation. A 19th century Lagosian had warned that

> the attempt to develop Africa on European lines can only end in failure. It is like rearing a bird in a cage with the result of vitiated instinct and a gradual pining away which end in death . . . The African, if he wants to progress, must go on his own lines, he must not suffer himself to be pushed suddenly from the twilight of a civilization which has its roots and the first impulse deep in the past of a thousand years. The glare will blind or tend to reduce him to a blinkering idiot.[4]

In the 1960's, the *Daily Chronicle,* the official mouthpiece of the P.O.P., a fictive political party, condemned the dismissed Ministers of the party for their alleged slavish imitation of the white man. The editorial was indeed acerbic:

> Let us now and for all time extract from our body-politic as a dentist extracts a stinking tooth all those decadent stooges versed in textbook economics and aping the whiteman's mannerisms and way of speaking. We are proud to be Africans. Our true leaders are not those intoxicated with their Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard degrees but those who speak the language of the people. Away with the damnable and expensive university education which only alienates an African from his rich and ancient culture and puts him above his people. . .[5]

The *Chronicle* stresses the fact that the dismissed ministers were all university people and highly educated professional men. Of course we know that the party to which the flamboyant Chief M.A. Nanga, "a man of the people", belonged, is likely to be anti-intellectual. We know too that the incident, as recorded for us by Chinua Achebe, is essentially fiction. But one fact at least emerges by implication from the whole scenario, namely, that 20th century Nigerian society is by no means more profound than 19th century Nigerian society; that the country hasn't changed noticeably in intellectual outlook. The picture one gets

is that of a miasmic, anti-intellectual society in which the few intellectuals are both wrong-headed and heading towards the wrong direction.

The position of this paper, then, is that the contemporary Nigerian society is headed in the Carthaginian direction. The modern Nigerian has no proper knowledge of self or society. He lacks a focus and a destination. He is like the foolish man in the fable trying to run a race in iron shoes and not understanding why he cannot move. The average modern Nigerian is a noisy, crude fellow without moral scruples or conscience. His instincts are mechanical, commercial; his tastes are expensive, vulgar and corrupt; his politics is expediency, his religion is hypocrisy. He lies, cheats, steals and evades taxes. He over-eats and guzzles too much beer and whiskey. His sexual appetite is lawless; he is the eternal "he-goat on heat." He is unpatriotic, impatient, wicked and anti-social. He has institutionalized mediocrity, with the result that arts and culture are smothered by barbarian mundaneness and the uncouth resonance of cheap entertainment. In short, the Nigerian society, like decadent Rome, is a vicious amusement park.[6]

What role can the creative writer play in such a society? In the first place, how welcome is the writer in a hostile and anti-intellectual society like ours? Traditionally, nowhere has there ever existed a very cordial relationship between the creative writer and his society. However, there is need to point out that there is a marked difference between the European writer's uneasy relationship with his society and the Nigerian writer's poor relationship with his. The Western artists, whom Ezra Pound tells us were led out the city gates by readers and the ruling class, were professional artists. They were exiled because some of them alienated their middle class audience by becoming abstruse and incomprehensible. A break-down in communication resulted, making way for mutual distrust. Consequently, the middle class reading public withdrew its patronage of the artists. In other words, when we talk of the western artist's exile or isolation from his society, it does not so much designate a physical expulsion from society as it connotes a communication breach between artist and audience, resulting in poor sales and in effect, slim royalties for the former.

Nigeria has an oral, not a typographic culture. We have had singers and dancers and story tellers but not writers. Thus, whereas there has been an age-old interaction between the oral artists and the community, no such relationship exists between the new Nigerian literary artist and his society. Nigerian literature in English as we know it today is a recent thing. Precisely, it was born in the 1950's; and partly as a result of its infancy, there is yet no clearly defined relationship between the Nigerian writer and the Nigerian society. The writer's audience is still unformed,

undefined and nebulous. A greater part (more than ninety percent) of the Nigerian population is illiterate and have no business with literature, while the negligible literate minority, probably because the reading habit is still alien to them, hardly read literature[7] This is one major reason why there is as yet no professional writer in Nigeria. Our writers are, of necessity, compelled to be virtually amateurs whose main stipend comes from their employment in institutions of higher learning or the Public Service. A professional writer needs a steady and receptive consumer audience. We have none.

It would seem, therefore, that the most pressing task before the Nigerian writer today is to create a home audience, to stimulate a wide and effective domestic readership response. "Into the moments of each living hour," the poet Okigbo lamented, "feeling for audience." For, without an audience, the writer's important message would be lost. How is the Nigerian writer going to create an audience? What precisely will he do? Incidentally, Europe cannot help in this regard. To the contrary, Achebe has rightly warned that African writers "should not take for granted the relationship which exists between writers and their audience in another society".[8] Perhaps it is the mistake of some African writers in taking their imaginary audience for granted that has resulted in the writer's disappointment when his or her expectation from the audience is unfulfilled. Buchi Emecheta has complained passionately that many African writers "have never even been heard in their country's embassy" and that the embassies recognize only "actors, strippers or singers" whom they regard as the "real artists"[9] The fictional confrontation between Chief M.A. Nanga, the Minister of Culture, and a novelist, Mr. Jalio, best illustrates the anonymity of the Nigerian writer in his own society. Achebe's narrator, Odili Samalu, "had expected that in a country where writers were so few they would all be known personally to the Minister of Culture. But it was clear that Chief Nanga hadn't even heard the man's name before."[10]

We can speculate that one of the reasons why "many African writers have never been heard in their country's embassy" and why Chief Nanga hadn't even heard Jalio's name before, is that the neglected writers in question have failed to make a cultural impact at home. Their immediate failure to make an impact results directly from the fact that their books were written in a foreign language thereby precluding the patronage of the teeming millions of Africans who are not polyglottal. The logical consequence is that the success or failure of such books written in an exoglossic language can only best be determined by the reaction of the foreign audience for whom they were basically intended. One might suggest, in this regard, that Jalio's novel, *The Song of the Black Bird*, was successful outside Nigeria, judging from "the almost deferential manner in which one of the ambassadors had approached

Jalio with a copy of his book for an autograph"[11] Chief Nanga, who knew just about enough English to express himself passably, simply wasn't well equipped to read Jalio, the Bohemian. For if Jalio, who dresses as he likes, also writes as he likes, his novel is likely to be as inscrutable and surrealistic as his costume is weird.

The inescapable conclusion is that the Nigerian writer who wants to make an impact on the people must write in the language of the people. Like Nanga, he must become a writer of the people. Not in the sense of cheap popularity, this time, but in the Wordsworthian sense of a man speaking to his fellow men in a mutually intelligible simple language. In our context this means that he must write in any of the dominant indigenous languages or in African English, that is, the brand of English popularly known or vilified as Pidgin. When this strategy is adopted, two broad forms of literature will emerge: Ethnic or regional literature written in the vernacular and aimed at promoting ethnic ethos and consciousness; and National literature written in Pidgin and aimed at social criticism and promotion of national consciousness. It should be remarked at once that the two forms of literature are not at cross-purposes. Their aims are complementary. Ethnic literature tries to produce the nationalist. Despite the hue and cry against ethnicity, it could be safely posited that one usually becomes a better Nigerian if one is in the first place a good Yoruba or Igbo or Hausa man.

In ethnic literature the emphasis should be on the story *qua* story, as in folklore. But this does not by any means imply that ethnic literature will pursue *matter* to the total exclusion of *manner.* What we mean is that in ethnic literature, form or technique will be subordinate to the narrative load or content. Nevertheless, ethnic literature will still be belletristic insofar as it will also be concerned with exploring the possibilities of the "dialect of the tribe." In fact, any writer who cannot handle his native language with about as much dexterity as the traditional weaver or craftsman handles his material, cannot be an ethnic writer. He must be skilled enough to maintain that tensile, mystic balance between the wisdom of words and the words of wisdom. Since the ethnic writer must be adept in his ethnic language, he must of necessity be genuinely "rural" in body and spirit. He must be firm footed, far sighted, sinewy, shrewd and sharp. For he cannot wrestle with the ancestral Word in the soft shoes, dark glasses and long trousers of the urban socialite. It is in the sense of his confident, deep rooting in his locale, in the "immense presence of a patrimony, a land, a people, a way of life"[12] in his works, that Chinua Achebe is as much an ethnic writer as D.A. Fagunwa or Thomas Hardy. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is essentially an Igbo novel conceived and executed in Igbo and translated into English. It can easily be re-rendered in Igbo.

Achebe's rural upbringing, his keen listening to his father and the old folks in the village, is pointedly similar to Okot p'Bitek's background. It is not coincidental that *Song of Lawino* resembles *Things Fall Apart* in its bold ethnic frame of reference and purposeful, surefire cultural impact. *Song of Lawino* was first conceived and executed in Acoli.

Nigerian writers have advanced various reasons for choosing English as their language of literary expression. Cyprian Ekwensi testified that he once wrote in Igbo, but because of the distracting wranglings among Igbo scholars regarding which orthography to adopt, he had to give up writing in Igbo.[13] Kole Omotoso avows that he writes better in English than in Yoruba.[14] And John Munonye declares:

> I write more fluently in English than in Igbo, so I prefer to use it. Nevertheless, I feel I don't know enough English. I would like to know the English language much better.[15]

Obi Egbuna writes in English in order to be just a "writer" rather than an "African" or "Nigerian" writer. According to him,

> I like to see myself merely as a writer, and a writer doesn't write African plays or English plays. He just writes. The world is a writer's workshop . . . If I can faithfully portray a Cockney landlady in England, it doesn't make me any less African.[16]

The adoption of Nigerian Pidgin for national literature will arrest our writers' flight to English, a difficult foreign language which even a writer of Munonye's standing "doesn't know enough," let alone his less privileged countrymen. Not only is Pidgin a much simpler language, syntactically, but it is also a practical, viable, flexible language distilled in the alembic of our native sensibility and human experience. This lusty language, which transcends our geographical and political boundaries, grows daily before our very eyes. It is our natural, unifying weapon against the divisive forces of English. In West Africa, English splits; Pidgin unites.[17] To illustrate the welding power and practical utility of Pidgin in a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, let us examine the case of the dramatist, Ola Rotimi, who admits that he cannot write in Yoruba and Ijo, his ethnic languages. He recounts:

> My knowledge of the vernacular is miserable because I grew up in an ethnically heterogeneous family. My dad hails from Yorubaland, my late mother hailed from Ijo in the Rivers State. My mother was not literate, so she spoke to us in Ijo, and we responded in that medium or occasionally in the Nigerian Pidgin English which she also understood soundly.[18]

We can deduce at once that the dramatist's father spoke Yoruba and didn't speak Ijo; that the dramatist's mother spoke Ijo and didn't speak Yoruba; but that both parents of the dramatist as well as the dramatist himself understood and spoke Nigerian Pidgin thoroughly. The conclusion, obviously, is that it is possible for the dramatist's mother – who is the minority here – to relish literature in her ethnic language or in Nigerian Pidgin but *not* in English language. Had the dramatist

written in Pidgin, the Yoruba man (his father) and the Ijo woman (his mother) could have understood it. Since he wrote in English language, the Ijo woman was barred from reading the dramatic pieces of her son. The late Mrs. Rotimi's case is symbolic of the situation of most Nigerians!

The adoption of Pidgin will automatically make the writer national by domesticating his outlook and sensibility. The adoption will in fact constitute the writer's one huge patriotic gesture of homecoming. Homecoming in the sense that the home audience has always been there, latent, waiting for the right writer to address it in a familiar language. The adoption of Pidgin will bring back to the national fold a poet like the young J.P. Clark, "bastard child of the Niger," who was "early sequestered from his tribe" and became a votary of the West. Pidgin will so radically indigenize the artist's orientation that a writer like Obi Egbuna will recognize in humility that every successful writer has, and is strengthened by, a recognizable home base; that it is more African to portray a Calabar landlord in Nigeria than a Cockney landlady in England. Fortunately, Pidgin is a democratic language and militates against social stratification.

In thus having a therapeutic and democratic language like Pidgin at his disposal, the Nigerian writer is enjoying a privilege denied his counterpart in the West where social stratification and literary hierarchy tend to preclude the possibility of vertical literary mobility. One of the serious problems of the West is how to close the unfortunate gap between "high" culture and "low" culture, *belles lettres* and pop art. The intellectual Western writers who now hunger to make contact with the tribe find the homecoming difficult, since they have lived for too long in the rarefied world of high art where they formed coteries of contempt and isolated themselves from the community. In his essay, "Inside the Whale", George Orwell commended Henry Miller for succeeding in casting away the stilted language of literary protocol and high culture and employing instead the real language of real people, the language of the streets. "Miller," says Orwell, "dropped the Geneva language of the ordinary novel and dragged the real-politik of the inner mind to the open."[19]

On adopting Pidgin and becoming a real nationalist, the Nigerian writer can now speak with the knowledge of an insider. He will be enabled to fathom the crisis in Nigeria's soil. He can now expose the follies and foibles of his audience, even at the risk of their displeasure. The charm of our popular music and drama will impinge on his consciousness and he will be moved to probe the source of their power. He will discover that our popular music and drama, because of their essential orality, have a solid traditional base that allows the artist fuller scope and flexibility while at the same time enlisting audience

participation. It will dawn on him that our popular music and drama are indeed our most authentic art in the sense that they grow from below as a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, in their own language, to suit their own needs. In our music and drama there is this constant interplay and perfect congruence between thought and expression, between the human experience and the language that conveys it. There is no barrier of literacy to separate the artist from his audience.

The new Nigerian writer will write novels designed to be heard. He will write as if he is speaking mellifluous Pidgin. Having been freed from the tyranny (form) of the Western novel, he will endeavour to do in fiction what the local musicians and dramatists do in popular songs and drama. That is, the writer will join forces with these artists and become the spokesman and the conscience of the nation. In the face of the most torturing social problems, the born-again writer will not escape into dreamland, but will have the courage to speak as he saw. "I no go 'gree," screams Fela, "mek my broda hungri, mek I no talk." This is an agonized humane cry against social injustice, oppression and bare physical hunger. The committed artist cannot be hushed or intimidated.

In the new community of artists, the singers, dramatists and writers, all expressing themselves in the same linguistic medium will join hands and voices in a common pursuit. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Sonny Okosun, Celestine Ukwu and Nelly Uchendu among others, ought to be viewed as authentic poet-musicians who deserve serious literary study in our institutions of learning.

And what is the obligation, the "common pursuit" of the new Nigerian artist in our Carthaginian society? He will excoriate vice, unmask fake patriotism, pinpoint national errors and dispel ethnic prejudices. He will blast our acquisitive greed and competitive selfishness and the bloated inanities that have jammed the wooden imagination of the Nigerian *nouveau riche.* He will oppose the wielding of horse whip or *koboko* in public places as well as expose kick backs and corrupt practices in high places. He will wage a frontal war against slave labour, child theft and the toting of leather charms and talismans. He will castigate the gluttony, lewdness and lechery that now constitute a status symbol in our G.R.A.'s and Senior Service Quarters. In short, in the artist's task of purifying and elevating the national soul, he will be an executioner and a gadfly.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Duncan Williams, *Trousered Apes, Sick Literature in a Sick Society* (New York: Delta Books, 1974).

[2] Ralph Ross, *An Introduction to Contemporary Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957).

[3] See Rabi's interesting article, "Faith in Science", *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1951.

[4] Michael Echeruo, *Victorian Lagos* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 49.

[5] Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (New York: Doubleday Paperback, 1967), p. 4.

[6] Recently, Archbishop Francis Arinze came down hard on Nigeria's unscrupulous rich people by calling them "rich devils". According to *Daily Times*, "Dr. Arinze observed that some Nigerians, in their insatiable quest for money, were able and ready to take bribe, embezzle government or company money, slice off 30 per cent of contract funds, cheat in market, engage in armed robbery and commit sin with impunity." See front page story, *Daily Times*, Wednesday, September 30, 1981.

[7] See Achebe's comment on the poor reading habit of African intellectuals, "What do African Intellectuals Read?" in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

[8] Achebe's interview in Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, eds. *African Writers Talking* (London: Heinemann Books, 1972), p. 7.

[9] Buchi Emecheta, "The Story Teller," *West Africa*, Aug. 28, 1978. For a criticism of Emecheta's article, see Okeke-Ezigbo, "The Drummer is also a Story Teller", *Third World First* Volume four/eighty.

[10] *A Man of the People*, pp. 61–62.

[11] *A Man of the People*, p. 68.

[12] Echeruo, "Chinua Achebe", in Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan, eds. *A celebration of African Writing* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1975).

[13] See Bernth Linfors, ed. *Dem-Say-Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers* (Austin: Occasional Publications of the African and Afro-American Studies Research Center, 1974), p. 33.

[14] *African Writers Talking*, p. 49.

[15] *African Writers Talking*, p. 39.

[16] *Dem-Say*, p. 16.

[17] We cannot dwell at length on the pathological recoil of our intellectuals from Pidgin. Since the ability to speak and write "impeccable English" is the supratribal mark of the African elite, it is not surprise that most Nigerian intellectuals dare not approach Pidgin without sanitized gloves. We can only state point blank here that Pidgin, or whatever we might choose to call it, is a wholesome made-in-Africa language, quite distinct from, and as respectable as, Westminster or White House English. It might be helpful to remember that the language introduced by the Dutch settlers in South Africa is now so different from that spoken in the Netherlands that it ranks as an autonomous language, Afrikaans.

[18] *Dem-Say*, p. 59.

[19] George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harbrace Paperbound Library, 1953).

Femi Osofisan

ENTER THE CARTHAGINIAN CRITIC . . . ?

– a comment on Okeke-Ezigbo's 'The Role of the Writer in a Carthaginian Society'

I can guess why Okeke-Ezigbo's paper was first sent to me: his tone is bold and acerbic. The editor must have thought of me spontaneously as a kindred spirit. It is promptly to refute this implied kinship that I have agreed to write this commentary.

Like Hannibal's legendary sword then, the prose of our new critic, Okeke-Ezigbo, cuts and swipes with a finely honed edge. And O-E is obviously out too to erect an empire; his essay is filled with lofty fury and dire injunctions, with prescriptions of what the artist should do or not do, what writing should be or not be, all rising to the clamant crescendo of his final paragraph, rippling with epiphanous visions. And why not? After Obumselu, Wali, Irele, Ogungbesan, Obiechina; after Soyinka, Chinweizu et al; after Jeyifo, Ogunbiyi, Onoge, who else? – the time I suppose is ripe. Welcome to Hannibal, the Carthaginian critic!

I shall first attempt to summarize his arguments, although this is hard enough. To get at common sense, one must dodge behind the dazzle of eloquence, the evident command of the assegai of image and metaphor, the intimidating tones. As I understand it, this is our crusading warrior's position, as follows:

1. That contemporary Nigerian society composed of 'trousered apes' is like the now forgotten Carthaginian society, which erroneously and fatally placed emphasis on material well-being to the detriment of 'culture', that is, the things of the intellect and the emotion. Nigeria therefore stands the risk of going the way of Carthage, that is, of dying unsung and unremembered.

2. O-E then asks the pertinent question: what is the Nigerian writer's role in this grim context? He does not answer the question. At least not directly. Instead he goes on to examine the problem of language, which he sees as central to the crucial divorce existing now between our writers and the audience. (Therefore, his reference to 'writers' is only to those writing in English). His solution to this problem is the familiar one: that the writer must work in a language accessible to the public.

What is striking then is his interpretation of the 'language of the people' which he recommends to the writer. In his opinion, there are only two options here: (a) the local vernaculars, which will help create

'an ethnic literature', and (b) pidgin English, which will lead to a 'national literature'. Ó-E's own emphasis is on pidgin, whose use will turn the writer into 'a patriot', an 'exorcist, a surgeon, a prophet, a judge, an executioner, and a gadfly'! (This is one of such moments when one thanks God, that our legislators are illiterate, and so will not read the essay. Otherwise that would have been the fate of all writers in pidgin. . .!)

These – in gross summary – are the paper's salient points, and I shall now attempt to examine them.

1. First of all, the analogy drawn between Carthage and the decadent Nigerian society is obviously a broad generalization, useful perhaps for O-E's brand of polemics. Although I can concede this as a forceful prelude to the point he wishes to make about the lamentable drift of our society, I still believe that the differences between the two societies merit critical attention for anyone out on a genuine cleansing crusade. And the most significant difference to me lies in the fact that, while Carthage was an autonomous state, a naval imperial power, Nigeria is a neocolonial entity, trapped in the exploitative web of international finance, with the patterns of our trade – and hence, of our culture – still being commanded by the giant multinational companies. Thus for the most part, the roots of our decadence, of our corrupt, philistinic tendencies, grow from our state of political and economic dependence. This emphasis is vital to a true, committed reformer: to know the real source of anomy is to begin the process of curing it.

Besides – although I shall not press this – was Carthage really destroyed because of its lack of culture, or simply because of the failure of its military logistics? Hannibal should know. And, surely, the proposed equation, of Greece – culture (i.e. arts and sciences), and Carthage – mercantilism and retrogression, is an unconvincing dichotomy?

The tactic however is familiar: all crusaders work in convenient fallacies and spurious analogies. O-E's tone is as pungent as Hannibal's: '. . .the contemporary Nigerian society is headed in the Carthaginian direction. The modern Nigerian has no proper knowledge of self or society . . . The average modern Nigerian is a noisy, crude fellow without moral scruples or conscience. His instincts are mechanical, commercial; his tastes are expensive, vulgar and corrupt; his politics is expediency, his religion is hypocrisy. . . He is unpatriotic, impatient, wicked and anti-social. He has institutionalized mediocrity . . .' Haba! *All* Nigerian society, or merely the middle class? The characteristics of a very recognizable class of Nigerians, and mostly of the modern metropolis dominated by the ideology of the capitalist market, have been stretched to include the whole populace, whose majority are merely the victims of such orbits of depravity.

And in any case, isn't there a continuous, and visible, struggle *against* this corruption, a dialectical confrontation which is prospective of positive change, and of which O-E's passionate concern is even an evidence? Is the reality of a society's *imposed* ruling class necessarily the true picture of the entire people? I think O-E must re-examine his premises here.

2. The next section, where he examines the role of the writer in Nigeria's sociopolitical anomy is a very unsatisfactory section. The fundamental premise, which is not stated but is implicit, is false – it is not the writer who will correct Nigeria's Carthaginian situation. The writer can help diagnose and increase awareness; he can protest, and move others to protest; he cannot cure or heal . . .

In any case, O-E diverts the whole thing into a question of language. Surely, again, this is merely enthusiastic. Language is merely a tool: it is the subject of language that counts. A *Positive Review* poster once summed it all up: "When Cicero-Senghor spoke, the people said: How nice! When Demosthenes-Neto spoke, the people said: Let us march!" Language itself is neutral; its potential, either for revolution or its opposite, for imparting knowledge or masking it, all this is beyond language itself, and depends crucially on the user of that language, on his competence no doubt, but also on his motivation, his ideological prejudices and limitations, his audience, etc.

There is no inherent virtue in art that makes it necessarily progressive. On the contrary: a writer may choose the most lucid and the most accessible language to his audience – whether some vernacular or pidgin or even esperanto – and still succeed, through what he tells them, his message that is, in adding to their burden of alienation and anguish.

Thus O-E's position needs a great qualification. While he has a point about our writers in English not communicating sufficiently with their audience, he fails to mention that this is mostly due to the level of English adopted. Then he assumes that once a writer succeeds in communicating, then that writer must necessarily be *progressive*. This is a neo-negritude premise, at best, the posture of false authenticity which assumes that once the clock and medium are 'Africanised' then the content is correspondingly positive. But we know now, don't we, from Senghor, from Naipaul and other successful, accessible writers, that the reverse is often the case?

O-E creates a false target by not focussing on the problems of this society of 'trousered apes' as he sees us, but on the problem of the artist who happens to write about it.

3. The arguments reiterated here about the effectiveness of both vernacular and pidgin English as the best vehicles of a literature accessible to the masses are, in the end, a subjective hypothesis. Other

scholars, with even clearer motive and greater authority, have voiced similar opinions before. My own view is that the points usually raised in support of such a stand are mostly romantic – if patriotic – and have no basis so far in empirical evidence. Hannibal certainly does not advance the position here with his display of confused thinking.

Let us take a few instances from his paper. The hatchet posture he adopts towards what will be ethnic literature, or national literature or otherwise, is an exhibition of vulgar prescriptive criticism. He lays down canons, he erects fences, he pontificates, as if only ONE kind of literature is ever valid for a culture. Listen to him: 'In ethnic literature the emphasis should be on story *qua* story, as in folklore . . . form or technique will be subordinate to the narrative load or content.' And so on. If one may ask, which folklore in the world is like this? Remembering all the labours of Chinweizu et al to demonstrate just the contrary in *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature,* to show that the literature of folklore is multiple, various and complex, one cannot but be irritated by this example of reductionism. Furthermore, why, in 'ethnic literature' should the emphasis not sometimes be somewhere else other than where Hannibal prefers?

There are still more astonishing statements: for instance, Achebe, (who writes in English), is like Fagunwa (who wrote in Yoruba), an ethnic writer! And just in case you say 'But . . .', O-E is waiting with a glib distortion of truth:

'Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is essentially an Igbo novel conceived and executed in Igbo and translated into English.' Mendacity has never been the hallmark of good criticism. If one may ask again: were *A Man of the People, Arrow of God, No Longer At Ease* or even Achebe's children books also written first in Igbo and then translated? If not, does Achebe then lose his Igbo-ness; do his books become less authentic parables of the African condition? I don't know how Achebe himself feels about it, but I am personally disturbed each time I come across these Emenyonu-ous attempts to scale down his stature to an ethnic plinth.

Let there be no confusion here. If O-E is willing to sustain the paradox, if he insists that the examples he cites – of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* and Bitek's *Song of Lawino* – are what he means by 'vernacular' writing, then he has my support for the idea, though not for the terminology. From which standpoint I then find it difficult to understand his condemnation of Munonye, whom I personally read always with delight. Munonye's problem is one of depth, but certainly not of language or obscurity. O-E's main error here, it is apparent, is his mechanistic approach, and his mistaken belief that only one method exists for a writer to 'translate' the adopted English into a 'vernacular' English capable of reflecting his peculiar experience. That there are

indeed several possibilities is what makes for the rich variety of Nigerian literature, embracing writers as diverse as – just to follow the 'O' spectrum – Ofeimun, Ojaide, Okpewho, Okara, Omotoso, Okri, Osundare, Obiechina, etc., etc!

4. The weakest point in the essay, in my view, is O-E's aggressive advocacy of pidgin English as the *only* real national language of Nigeria

The arguments here are most unconvincing and exaggerated. Our critic ignores the fact that the strength of pidgin in a multi-ethnic state like Bendel is not necessarily the experience of other states. Hence his beautiful but fallacious aphorisms: 'In West Africa, English splits; Pidgin unites . . . Pidgin is a democratic language and militates against social stratifications.'

Fortunately, for our critic, that last statement is false, or else, how will any writer at all be able to work in a linguistic medium that is supposedly unconscious of the levels of articulation dictated by social, economic, religious, etc., etc., divisions? If it truly 'militates against social stratifications' as O-E claims, how will pidgin then truthfully express the encounters between landlord and tenant, soldier and civilian, trader and customer, chief and houseboy, the dancing salesman Ajasco and his competitors?

However, I am going to take this misunderstanding of pidgin and use it to bring out our first empirical evidence against the claim of pidgin's sufficiency. Adaora Ulasi's world of pidgin was probably in our critic's mind when he wrote his paper. In Ulasi's novels – *Many Thing You No Understand, Many Thing Begin For Change, The Man from Sagamu,* etc. – the narration is in pidgin, and everybody including illiterate herbalists from the heart of Yoruba land, uses it in discussion, in meditation and in communication. If there's to be one proof that pidgin will not always work as a vehicle of literature, it is certainly here, where it is clearly anachronistic, and only helps to widen the gulf of disbelief.

I am forgetting, before I continue, that O-E builds his case on Rotimi's example, to demonstrate that pidgin is the most widespread means of communication among the peoples of Nigeria. Again, let's examine this. According to Rotimi himself, his father is Yoruba, and his mother Ijo; and the easiest means of dialogue within the family was thus pidgin. But can this be stretched therefore to be the case of most Nigerians, who for the most part come from and live in, mono-ethnic families? Furthermore, do even most bi-ethnic families like Rotimi's really use pidgin? I shall return the ball to O-E by citing my own example, of my friend Yemi, a well-known theatre critic. His father is Yoruba, his mother Igbo; both parents met and got married in Kano, where my friend was born and raised, and the common language of the

family was – guess! – Hausa. It is obvious, to use our critic's logic, that since several Nigerians share a similar experience as this, Hausa is the most popular and hence the national language of Nigeria!

The absurdity continues, when O-E assets that 'the adoption of pidgin will *automatically* make the writer national by *domesticating his outlook and sensibility'*. (My emphasis). He goes on: 'The adoption will in fact constitute the writer's one huge patriotic gesture of home-coming.' Why do critics offer this kind of voluntary mystification, I wonder, particularly a critic who lives virtually at the doorsteps of Onitsha Market Literature and who has heard of, if not actually read, *Ikebe Super* and the juicy columns of the *Lagos Weekend?*

How can the mere adoption of pidgin *spontaneously* lead to a literature of 'patriotism' or 'authenticity' when in fact, from all the empirical evidence we have so far, the exact CONTRARY is the case? The literature in pidgin, which will be patriotic and reflect a domesticated indigenous outlook is still at best an aspiration: it has not been written yet. What exists – the Onitsha literature in particular, which was first brought into view by Beier and then by Obiechina – may be truly popular and widely read, but any random page of *Rosemary My Daughter,* of *Mabel the Sweet Honey That Poured Away,* or *Miss Rosy In the Romance of Love* – any, I say, of the pamphlets of Ogali A. Ogali, of Onwudiwe alias Speedy Eric, of Okenwa Olisa, or of any of these prolific writers in pidgin will immediately astound you by their burden of mental and cultural alienation. What they promote and idolize is always a cheap adoption of foreign values and erotic paraphernalia as gleaned from Hollywood films, the conception of beauty as blue-eyed blondes and such distortions, and the appraisal of success only in terms of crass materialistic acquisitions – all the values in fact which O-E claims to deprecate in contemporary Nigerian society.

So, let us again be sensible here: the use of pidgin cannot automatically make any writer patriotic or progressive; that will depend finally on other factors, such as the consciousness and purpose of the particular artist. And literature in pidgin will still have, like others, to create its audience. . .

4. Finally, I shall seize this opportunity to raise one of the questions which have always bothered me. Let me begin by asking: why is O-E's paper not written *in pidgin?* This is not merely an attempt to be frivolous. If the writer is being asked to be patriotic by the adoption of pidgin as his medium, what of the *critic* himself? Should he not show this example of patriotism first, by writing his paper in the recommended language?

What makes the critic believe that he is sheltered from all these barbs he throws gleefully at the writer? Both writer and critic are citizens in the same society; they both have a stake in its history and adventure;

none of them is privileged. Why should the critic too not begin to make himself accessible to the public by speaking in the language accessible to them?

The question is of course wider, and I simply say, enough! Enough of the masquerade: where the most complacent, conservative critic, who has never once in his life spoken out in support of any public cause, even in whispers; who is content to drink his beer and play darts or scrabble in the Staff Club even when his students are dying at the campus gates in a violent confrontation with Police – where this most placid scholar then dares to berate writers for not being 'committed' or 'progressive', and particularly because they have not written in the dialect of his home-town. Enough of the sham dance done routinely for the maestroes of the Appointments and Promotions Committees of various institutions, where the critic, himself using the most complex syntactic forms of English, with paragraphs redolent with obscurantist, pseudo-sophisticated jargon ('autolysis... summum bonum . . . exoglossic, etc.') dares in the same breath to defend 'popular art' and literature written 'in the language of the people' and to crucify writers for being 'inaccessible.' The hypocrisy has travelled too long in the corridors of 'African' criticism. Let the critic also practice whatever he claims to believe.

In the end, I regret that an apparently concerned critic like O-E has decided to imitate this prevailing habit of critics hastily aligning themselves with the currently saleable fashion of taste. For the vogue now as we all know is for editors to swoon over papers having to do with 'commitment', 'social issues', 'popular literature and ideology', and so on. Let this fashion change tomorrow – and these our critics will be the champion salesmen of the new critical commodity, while they go on sipping their beer with the same placidity, and the same indifference to the hideous slums and the gathering violence of our streets.

O-E's tone and gesture suggest a more profound commitment than this 'wheelbarrow syndrome'. But he has mixed up issues and provided a criticism almost as 'Carthaginian' as the confused society he condemns. I share his anger and sense of outrage, but not his form of therapy, which at best, only scratches at the surface of the malady, and at worst, diverts attention away from the disease to the bandages that enclose it.

O-E is not Hannibal yet: but I can hear the beginning swell of the growl.

Uko Akpaide

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

(On the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie)

A whole day may not be enough
One hour could be too long
A year may be very delighting
One month could be quite tedious
Go! enough is enough
It is good to go while the going is good.

Old age may be pleasant
But not when the aged become a nuisance.
Go! enough is enough
It is good to go while the going is good.

Today's soup is tasty
Tomorrow it may be more palatable
Gaining flavour by maturation
The third day's soup is tasteless
And on the fourth day
Soup may become sour
And turn pungent
Go, enough is enough
It is good to go while the going is good.

Haile Selassie was emperor, beloved king
Worshipped, a fetish through and through
But he sat too long
Stayed up late on his stool
His coccyx mained and waned
But he neither stood up nor allowed
His stool removed
His guards bored and tired
Forced out his stool from under him
And his coccyx broke in the dust
Oh! No! Go! Enough is enough
It is good to go while the going is good.

Black Heads lie easy in their crowns
They would not go,
Bury them effigy and body
Six feet deep, they'll come out
Sit on their stools with hardened faces
Order for execution those who buried them
And do they succeed?
We say enough is enough
It is good to go while the going is good.

Ezenwa Ohaeto

GIVE US A STATE

Behind our house
A farm plot
With yams as Governor
With cassava as citizens
Give us a state
    We want it
    Nothing but it
    If we get it
    It will be it.

Behind our farm plot
A rich shit plot
With faeces as Governor
With Urine as citizens
    We want it
    Nothing but it
    If we get it
    It will be it.

For development
We import
    Beautiful dirt
    Sewer perfume
For appointments
We introduce
    Man-know-man
    or-money-for-hand
For recruitment
We insist
    Sons-of-the-soil
    Merit-to-hell
For ideology
We invent
    Something unique
    Socialist-Marxist-Capitalist
Stage set, then
We bite ourselves
Chewing each others entrails
After all; This is it.

OUR SWAN SONG

(For our Representatives everywhere)

I

We sent them
With our eyes
With our ears
        But with their mouths.
They caught the Executive Priest
Devouring the choice sacrifice
We conveyed to the shrine
In the absence of the gods,
        But the Priest beckoned
They joined
The secret festival
In the innermost altar
And covered our eyes
        our ears
But not their mouths.

II

Later, motions, bills, cackling
In the Assembly of Parrots
They pleaded ignorance
When they know
        We felt the heat of the festival.
Breathing teleguided fumes
Of Executive desires
From dawn till dusk
        They then medicate
With syringes of promises
To cure the healthy
And poison the sick, because
We sent them
With our eyes
With our ears
        But with their mouths

III

Period ———
We invoke
Deus ex machina
Before our rigor mortis.

Emma Igiligi

I DO NOT WANT TO RULE

Look at the ambitious mahogany tree,
That dribbles past other shorter species,
Like a well baked footballer
In quest for a gold medal,
In the Equatorial forest thick,
Alone in order to devour the sun's light,
And monopolise the sky's water,
But ends up being wilted,
By the scorching tropical sun,
And drenched with whipping rain,
Thus unconsciously playing the umbrella,
For its beaten brothers,
That complacently squat under their victor,
Free from worries emanating from both.
And so, I do not want to rule,
Let those who can, rule me,
That I may be free to move about,
With other ruled and the ruler,
But I wonder why the sons of men,
Should habitually rage and fume,
Against other competing confreres,
In the same relay race
For the silver cup of power.
Is it for the confinement in it?
Or its concomitant insecurity?

Ezekiel Mphahlele

THE RETURN OF MOTALANE

(An African Tale Adapted for the Stage)

Characters:

CHILEPE)
MADZIMI) – Cattle thieves
TAU)
1st HERDMAN
2nd HERDMAN
3rd HERDMAN
OTHER HERDMAN
BIRD'S VOICE

SCENE: *The action opens in a field with a few trees. Three young men, CHILEPE, MADZIMI and TAU, enter in boisterous spirits. There is loud and excited talk. They stop in centre of stage and deposit their things on the ground. CHILEPE is holding a rifle, while the other two have sticks.*

CHIL: Stealing cattle and selling them is good sport, what do you say, fellows? *(He sits down).*

MADZ: Hei, yesterday I nearly died of laughter.

CHIL: You mean when Tau trembled while he kept watch? *(They both look amusedly at TAU, who sits looking fixedly in front of him, as if suddenly he were no longer one of the company. They both laugh.)*

MADZ: And the herdman climbed up a tree to hide. *(MADZIMI and CHILEPE laugh aloud).*

CHIL: If you see a rhino, climb up a tree! *(They both laugh).*

MADZ: How true – right to the brim! *(laughs)* Remember last week – the man with the rifle? You really gave the old man a fright taking him by surprise like that.

CHIL: *(laughing):* And when I seized him by the throat *(laughs)* his muddy eyes told me he thought the world was coming to an end.

MADZ: Yes, man. You never think a man who has frightened other people many times can himself show fear like a goat giving birth. That old man, for instance, – you told us he is quite a terror in these parts, not so, Tau? *(TAU does not answer).*

CHIL: *(With mock pity):* Oh, poor man! Look at his gun. You know, if his farm were not so far away, I should go back to give him some money for it.

MADZ: Still a good gun too, the way I see it.

TAU: *(with a look of disgust):* It is not far, you can go. But would you?

CHIL: *(His face turning serious):* Oh, our friend is back with us once more. *(To TAU):* What is eating you, anyhow?
(MADZIMI laughs)

TAU: *(Louder than the distance between them warrants):* Why did you have to steal a rifle, eh? Just tell me that. Are you not satisfied with so many cattle which bring you so much money and then you must also take a man's rifle – the only thing he defends himself with. *(looks away to avoid their eyes).* You want to steal simply for the sake of having something that does not belong to you. I said he used to be a terror. He's no more.

MADZ: How could an old man like that change? You've stolen with us, Tau, and you are deep in this business up to here *(he points to his throat),* like us, man. This is the territory you come from, and you have led the way very well. When you met us you still had the mind of a boy; but since we took you into our work, you have grown up, we've made you a man. I do not know why you sit there and weep over the things we do which we must do.

TAU: You have just said it is good sport for you – I mean to say Chilepe. How can you now say stealing cattle is a thing we must do?

CHIL: Can it not be both?

TAU: You did not have to take the rifle. That was just sport. *(CHILEPE shrugs his shoulders as a sign of despair for TAU)*

MADZ: Does Chilepe not need a rifle?

TAU: Does he? For what use? He's not a farmer who has to guard his place. *(MADZIMI shrugs his shoulders).*

CHIL: Look here, Tau. If I want to steal for the fun of it, I shall go and steal a chicken on a man's farm. I can't do much with a chicken. But I steal cattle because they mean plenty of money. If people collect so many cattle, they must be cheating others to be able to do so. We must take from those who have too much. Do you not agree with me?

TAU: I agree, that is why I joined you and Madzimi here. But you beat up a herdman once and left him on the doorstep of death. You remember the old woman you choked because she wanted to scream, just outside the gate leading to the cattle? Do you know whether the poor woman is dead or not? Does it indeed worry you? We can steal without being cruel?

CHIL: You're in the wrong business, my brother. You should be sitting in the field keeping birds away. When you steal, you must expect one day to be cruel, even kill.

(Suddenly there is a rustle in the trees nearby. The three men look up, with faces full of fear, particularly those of CHILEPE and MADZIMI. Their eyes are obviously following the movement of something above the level of their horizontal vision).

TAU: *(almost whispering):* A snake! A green one. It's Motalane!

MADZ: That rifle – er – quick, Chilepe!

TAU: No, wait! The snake is not harmful, Motalane is not harmful.

CHIL: *(fidgeting with his gun):* Where we come from every snake is dangerous. It must be killed at sight.

TAU: No, this one is a messenger from the spirits of our forefathers in our land.

MADZ: *(impatiently but sarcastically):* What news can it be bringing?

TAU: Do I know? He may be moving about so as to see if the children of this land are happy and living well. He is the eye of our forefathers. I know it. My father and my grandfather have told me many times never to kill Motalane, he does no-one any harm. Everyone in our land knows it. My father told me that anyone who kills Motalane will carry the pain here *(beating his chest)* all his life until he dies. He told me anyone who kills Motalane, no matter where he goes, will be forced to come back to the place where he killed it, looking for something he will never find. He told me, he said the man who kills Motalane will come back, always he will return to the place, like a madman.

CHIL: I'm going to shoot before it attacks us or runs away to hurt someone later.

(raises his gun and takes aim).

TAU: *(beating down CHILEPE's arm):* No, Chilepe. Evil is bound to come upon us if we kill it. The spirits will be very angry. Look, it is not even looking at us, to show it has nothing to do with us.

CHIL: I have something to do with it myself. *(He takes aim again, and fires. A long green snake falls at the foot of the tree, writhing).*

TAU: *(wailing):* The gods help us! *(He staggers off stage and disappears, with his hands on his head).*

MADZ: *(with a shaking voice):* If it is true, Chilepe, if it is true . . .

CHIL: Do not be a fool like that – *(signals with his head towards where TAU went out).* Let us throw this thing in the river down here.

(They both use their sticks to push it off, towards the river, Front R. Music can at this instant be heard backstage R, the volume increasing to indicate that the singers are approaching, as CHILEPE and MADZIMI leave L. A company of ten herdmen enter R., some chatting and others singing. They carry sticks, tin cans, small bags, and other paraphernalia befitting herdmen. The men gather centre of the stage. Music stops, and talking continues. There is dancing, and then the party leave, some L. and others R. and front L. Enter CHILEPE and MADZIMI R., looking haggard, bewildered, and lost).

MADZ: We are back, Chilepe, back to the same place where you killed the snake! What is happening to us? We're so far away from our land and people!

CHIL: *(with impotent anger):* It's that fool Tau, he has bewitched us! *(They move L and R, back and forth, their eyes wide open with terror and confusion, amid sounds of wild life. They part and meet alternately. This may be done in the form of a dance).*

CHIL: *(coming up Front):* I see it now! There on the same tree! *(he points, his eyes still dilated, following the imaginary movement of something on the tree tops).* No, it's gone! *(He recedes).*

MADZ: *(coming up Front):* Where is it? I see nothing! No, yes, there it is, no, it's not there! *(He recedes)*

(The two continue to move wildly and they increase their speed as their gestures grow wilder. The field bursts out into a medley of screams, shrieking and wailing. The two men run out. Some herdmen reappear R., talking; others from different points, some carrying fire wood. They stagger in Centre of stage, and sit down, looking exhausted)

1st Herd: Are there no cattle missing?

2nd Herd: No.

Others: They are all together.

1st Herd: Very good, fellows. This was a good day.

(There is talking in low tones They bring together wood for a fire. They sing in subdued voices.

Enter CHILEPE and MADZIMI R. They move slowly towards the singing party)

3rd Herd: You're welcome, strangers!

Others: Welcome! Welcome!

(Greetings are exchanged, introductions made, and the two strangers join the party. There is animated talking)

2nd Herd: You are not of these parts, I can see.

CHIL: That is true. We are from the other side of the mountains.

3rd Herd: Aha! You speak Lotsi. You come from very far. I have never travelled so far before, although I can tell you I have been to many places.

Bird's Voice: *(Off-stage):* Chilepe killed Motalane
guardian of your forefathers' graves
messenger of your forefathers
Madzimi did not stop him
Madzimi looked at Chilepe kill Motalane and wished it in his heart also.

2rd Herd: Chilepe, you're a witch

All: Chilepe you're wicked! Chilepe you must die!
Madzimi you're wicked, Madzimi you must die!

Bird's Voice: Chilepe and Madzimi killed the snake
Motalane the snake
the messenger of your forefathers
they will be angry
they will be grieved.

3rd Herd: Chilepe you're a witch!
Madzimi you're wicked!

All: *(Standing up in menacing unison):* These are wicked men, they must die! *(much louder).* These are wicked men, they have soiled our land, they must die!
(They seize them and lead them out)

CURTAIN.

Ifi Amadiume

LIKE A SWEET ORANGE SUCKED BY A BOY

Like a sweet orange sucked by a boy,
You have sucked all the goodness out of me,
Still like a boy you did not know when to stop.

Like the seed of an orange spat out by a boy,
you have left all the goodness still in me,
Still like a boy you have left my seed to crop.

I was left naked and unshielded by a boy,
It was not the nakedness of the naked,
It was the nakedness of naked earth,
It was the nakedness of birth,
It was the nakedness of creation.

My seed took root again
And my shield in time regained
Full of sweet juice again to be sucked.

FOR CHINELO

Had I known Emeka was wooing so ardently
no way would his love have rivalled mine
What quantities of love multiplied
could reach mine?
Can he reach into the sky
as I have done to pluck a love-star
and tuck it in softly in your belly
as I did three moons now past.
I captured your own wishes in dream.
Last night too in gentle sleep
I safely delivered the star
six full moons before your time
sweet sister; child of my mother.

THIS GARMENT I GIVE YOU

This garment I give you
Let it shield your body
In return please shield my baby.

Just as this garment hides your nakedness
Please hide his nakedness and weakness.

This garment I give you
Sown with tender care,
In return please take care of my baby.

Just as each stitch is sewed with tenderness
Please soothe his sadness and tender tears.

This garment I give you,
One for him, one for you,
In return please be brothers with my baby.

He comes to you sad,
Let him come to be glad,
All for this garment I give you.

Alaboigoni Inko-Dokubo

D. DAY

Today is house-cleaning
So let's get down on our knees
and scrub the dirt away

Then we'll move into our mouth
and brush every speck away
especially our tongues

Finally our souls
need scrubbing real spic and span
so do our thoughts and deeds

By the time we are through
we should be germ-free
ready for D. Day

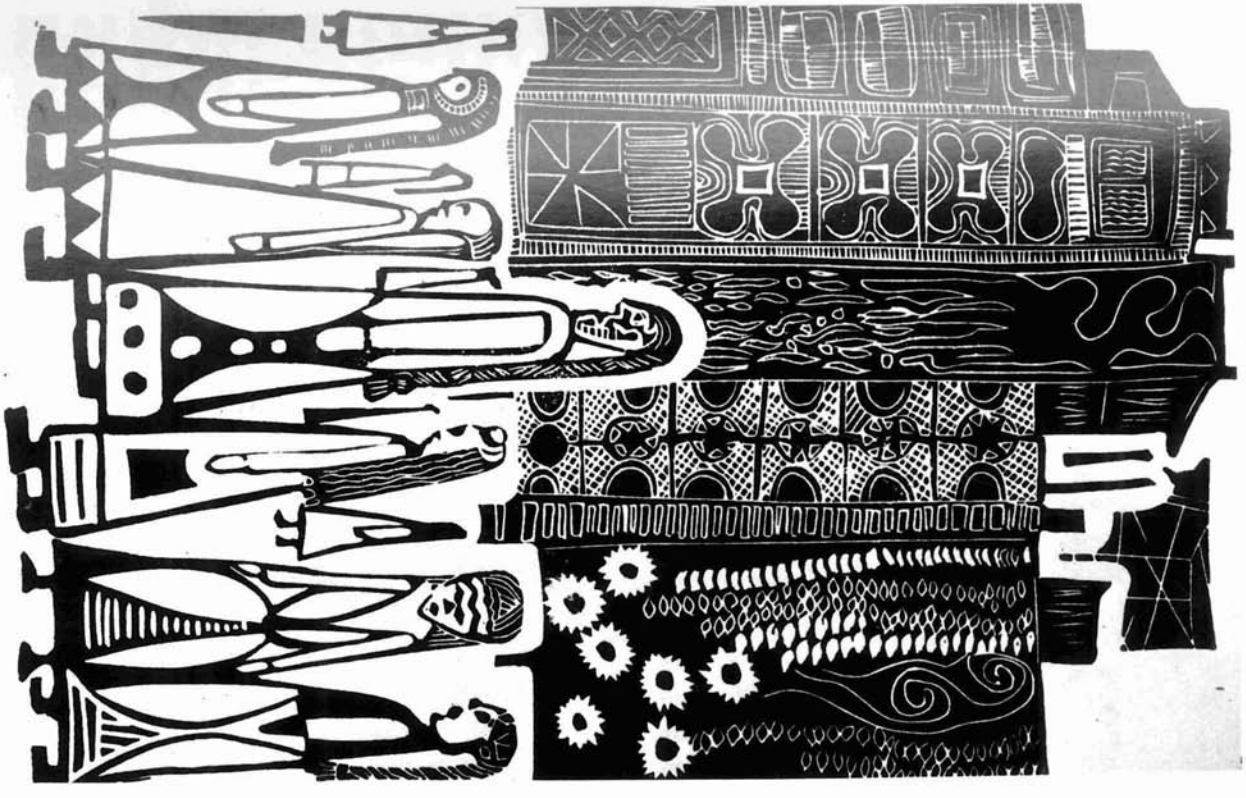
ANNOUNCEMENT

Bruce Onobrakpeya, the Nigerian master printmaker whose work appeared in OKIKE 19 and 20, received one of the eight equal awards at the Fifth Triennale-India, New Delhi, April 1982 for his plastocast painting *The Last Days of Jesus Christ*.

In this issue, we publish an interview with this outstanding artist and present some of his prints.

CORRECTION

On page 40 of OKIKE 20, in "The Ife Book Fair Conversation", reference was made to Kole Omotoso's manuscript, *Fella's Chance*. The publishers are *not* Longman and their Drumbeat series but *Macmillan* and their *Pacesetter* series.



Obiora Udechukwu

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA

Udechukwu: The idea is to find out why some artists in Nigeria find it necessary to go back to myths, legends and folktales as subject matter for their works. I don't know whether you can remember precisely the first time you got involved in using myths, legends and folk tales and what they mean to you in your work.

Onobrakpeya: I think the basis of our aesthetic theory is derivable from the folk tales, the legends and other such events which took place a long time ago and have now become rather confused fact and fancy. Some Nigerian artists have in the past explored folkloric ideas and have blazed the trail.

Udechukwu: If I may interrupt you for a moment. Can you name some of those artists?

Onobrakpeya: I know that Ben Enwonwu used mythical figures; *Anyanwu*, for instance, is one example. Idah, the late Chief Idah of Benin made some elephants, some snakes, made them in cement and carved them and all that. Of course, you know Uche Okeke very well, he used them. And then if you want to go back into antiquities, you will see that Benin culture is all these myths and legends which the people represent copiously in their art work. Although, Aruaran the giant actually lived, how he looked is almost forgotten. The best we know of him now is from the way artists represent him which has become sort of a symbol-with twenty toes; on one foot, five toes facing this way and five toes the other way, and so on the other foot. Then there is this other figure, Ohen, who was lame but was said to have been so handsome a man that they thought that perhaps he belonged to Olokun. So each time they represent him they show his legs as a type of mud fish curved like that with other regalia, the kingly regalia. So, throughout Benin history which has a great influence on me, they are always representing these animals and mythical figures. That was my main influence. If I think very hard I will give you examples of some artists who may not be on the scene now who used animals . . . I mentioned Ben Enwonwu and Idah, but I know there are some others.

Udechukwu: What do you consider to be the significance of these myths? You've used a lot of Urhobo folktale characters, the tortoise, the dog and so on. What is the significance of these tales to you, to the present society and the future ones?

Onobrakpeya: The significance lies mainly in the fact that our literature

is still largely oral and these animals you mentioned are taken directly from this oral literature and so they are very important to us as sources upon which we can draw out philosophies, ideas; a means by which we can study the social behaviour of the people who have lived here before us. The Urhobos as well as some other Nigerians have a way of saying that something which happened to them, if it was bad, happened to the tree or to the animals. You never hear people say, for instance, "if I were to have an accident," but they will say "if my enemy were to have an accident." So, you see, to avoid a confrontation with the society, one uses names of animals instead of those of human beings one knows very well. Because the tales about the tortoise and its cunning actually refer to people and their ways. The moral implication and the didactic possibilities of these tales are also evident. There is no tale that is complete without an ending like this: "This is why today such and such a thing happens" and the popular one, "This is why folk tales are never told in the day time" or if at all tales are told during the day time, it is said to be told by Omokonibia, because one should not indulge in leisure time activities during the day time.

Udechukwu: One other issue I would like to discuss in this idea of universality of art. Do you believe that there are universal aesthetical standards, or separate standard for say African Art. In other words, do you think that blanket terms like African art, Urhobo art, Nigerian art are valid or do you believe that there is one pervasive aesthetic that subsumes all art in the world? I do not know whether it is clear, because some people say they do not believe in African art, that art is art whether it is produced by a Japanese or a Nigerian? What is your attitude towards this?

Onobrakpeya: Well, at a highly refined level one can use the word 'Art is Art,' but when one starts coming down the ladder, one finds that art cannot really be art, because many things go into art. Also, there are idioms, accepted local idioms of aesthetics and it will take time for a person who is not from the local area to get used to such idioms. Now, African art. Yes, there is something like African art but many of us now have passed into the universal aspect of art. We are not practising art as our grandfathers did, although there are still some people today who are practising art as our grandfathers did. We are more of the universal artist types now because our society, our religion, are changing and so we are reflecting these changes in our work. I do not know if that answers your question.

Udechukwu: In other words, in an art work, we have layers of meaning; we have the one which is formalistic, that is, you look at the work, you find arrangements of colours and so on, and then we have the other layer which unless one is familiar with probably the folk tales or other aspects of life that inform it, one might not be able to fathom. In that

case, can one, then say that when you are working, you have an audience in mind and if so, this audience, is it Nigerian or international? Or you just work the way you like to work?

Onobrakpeya: Yes, let me add something to the first part of this question. Now in every art there are certain elements that are common to design. For instance, form, colour, and line. Those are international, every one would recognise those and would like them or would not like them immediately. But where it comes to actually looking into the content, that is where the problem arises. There seems to be no commonly agreed criterion for aesthetic judgement. I think that clears the first part. Now, to talk about the second question. Instead of talking about an audience, I would want to think about the purpose for the art work. Perhaps that would help decide for us what audience. For instance, if the work is for a book illustration, then, of course, I will decide whether it is for children's books or the books for all ages or for adults only. If it is a painting then the size and subject matter will tell me whether it is going to be hung in a parlour or it is going to be used in a big hall somewhere, or it is going to be executed more permanently on a wall. If it is a print, then, the consideration for its mobility, its being able to be put in a portmanteau and taken away very quickly sometimes to distant places. Again, if it is a print, then the consideration for Nigerians and the people who do not earn much money comes to mind. So, prints are first of all for people who cannot afford a great deal of money for very big paintings. Secondly, they are for people who are moving around very quickly and want something to take with them, something really nice that will represent the place, something cheap enough for them. This is different from just a curio. So it is the type of work that determines who the audience is. I do not have a particular audience in mind; it is the type of work that decides my audience for me.

Udechukwu: There is a place where you said you are concerned about telling the present about the future and in the process you take what you can from the past. This, in a way is related to the whole idea of synthesis which you, Uche and a few of your group in Zaria were concerned with, that is, linking the past with the present and the future. But, there is a tendency for some people to challenge this kind of attitude or stance. They feel that it is a kind of intellectualization of art and that it tends to affect the intuitive origins of art. I have in mind for instance, what Grillo said somewhere that, over-chauvinistic synthesis stifles or is detrimental to original creative impulse. What do you think about this?

Onobrakpeya: Now, the statement of Grillo's itself is, in fact, synthesis, because if he were to make that statement in Yoruba, which is his mother tongue, he probably would not be able to do it at all. So, that

in itself is synthesis. Well, I think, this thing comes quite naturally and one just takes it. For instance, Grillo . . . I know he paints drummers and he paints women with children on their backs and all that. Now, if he were painting or drawing at the time of his own father or grandfather, his colours would have been locally made. Grillo himself probably would have been a tie and dye expert. All that would have been open to him at that time might have been some earth colours and indigo dye. But now, the materials he is using, for example, the oil colours come from abroad. Now, when there is cultural change and there are exchange of people and interchange of ideas there is the tendency to retain something that is good and to reject something that is bad.

Udechukwu: I find also in your work that it is not just a concern with the past, with folk tales and so on, but you are also using a lot of traditional or African forms and motifs and this has given your work the quality of Africanness. I do not know whether this is something you developed over the years and which might also be linked with the whole idea of synthesis. Some other artists have also been concerned with every-day life and so on, but their work has not this particular quality which one feels derives from your having studied and understood Adire motifs and other forms we have in this country. I do not know whether this is a true assessment?

Onobrakpeya: Yes, I think it is true. As I have said many times before, for any art work to survive . . . (interruption) . . . I was saying that these motifs which we see in our old works are those that have survived, in time. All sentimental elements of these works having been rubbed off, it is really the essence that remains. If they were bad, they would have gone with the wind long long ago. There is something good about them, I have examined them and have seen what is good about them. Now it is true that other artists may not value my source of inspiration although I have developed my ideas from the past and have incorporated my present views.

Udechukwu: You are not just concerned with folk tales, you are also concerned with the everyday life of people. Do you now see a balance between use of what one might call things from the past and his everyday life? Do you see one as being more important than the other in your work; or you see them as a whole unit, as a totality, that is, there is no division between the past and what is happening today? Do you think that your work is weighted more towards mythology than to everyday life or vice versa?

Onobrakpeya: I will not say that my work is weighted more towards mythology but I will rather say that my work is about life as we are living it now. That picture for instance, there, the new print that I am making, I call it Aro-Osomo. It focuses on the problems of the father. Fathers in all generations have played just this most important role, the

protection of their families. In fact, life in the family revolves around the father. (Interruption). So, in that picture, I have used many symbols and if I presented it as a stylized carving or as our grand-fathers or as an African artist would have presented it today, then what I have done is that I have used the idea and given it new form. Now, I do not just go back to the old art works and just pick an idea which has no relationship at all with the present, which does not help me at all. The idea is of the present but the form is linked up with the past. I use whatever material is available. Now if my father were to carve that idea of Aro-Osomo he probably would have used wood and then he would have used the chisels and other tools forged by local blacksmiths. But now I am using the same idea but in a simplified form, more of line. Now, I am working with araldite on a zinc plate. These two items I mentioned are all new. Although the form of expression, the stylized figure may belong to the African traditional set up, the way I have used it now is very new. So, that form on the plate there can be explained as deriving from synthesis.

Udechukwu: So, one can rightly say that you are involved more or less with using symbols to transmit ideas which range from mythology to broad ideas about life as we are living it today. I think we might leave off this now and talk about other aspects of your work.

You started as a painter?

Onobrakpeya: Yes.

Udechukwu: Do you still paint very much or do you consider yourself a printmaker at the moment?

Onobrakpeya: Well, I am a printmaker now but if we have to analyse that very well, you find that my own form of printmaking is more or less painterly. I do not paint very much now. I treat my prints as if they are paintings. Another thing which I want you to know is that I have a form of painting which I call 'Plastocast.' Well, you are used to the conventional painting, the application of oil colours on canvas and so on. The latest development, (well I shall call it latest; I have been on it two or three years now) is to get the equivalent of my print in a form which is like a painting. It has all the elements of painting, it is flat, it has all the colours in it, but it has an added element which is relief. It is in relief and I think that is the direction in which some paintings are going nowadays. Instead of going into the traditional oil colours, I have been doing quite a lot of this plastocast and Uche [Okeke], I think, thought they were an extension of printmaking but I call them painting. Nothing really prevents me from using oil colours on the background of my plastocast paintings and even using oil colours in the grooves. What is noticeable in the spirit of progress in the present time is that people are doing research and discovering materials and ways of expression. People are breaking away from the conventional ways. So in

a way I will say that I am painting very much now, but painting in non-orthodox materials. Quite recently I have been working with the Mammy-Wate theme. You know, this is the water goddess or spirit which is shown sometimes as part human being and part fish. Usually there are other fishes which go with it and sometimes Mammy-Wate brings fortune to men who are lucky to befriend her; they can get very rich indeed. But the idea which I have expressed in this recent painting is that one connected with the building of the Jebba Bridge, where the mermaid had to be tricked into entering a pint bottle before the engineer could carry on his assignment. And I have done a picture which shows the mermaid resting while fish-like and masquerade-like forms are dancing around her.

Tololwa Marti

PORTRAIT OF A MEMSAHIB

Our supreme lady, Memsahib Freda, was what you could call a good-natured, kindhearted soul, that is, if you chose to believe the stories that all those who remember her would tell you.

They would tell you many things.

They would tell you, for instance, that when Memsahib smiled, as she so often did, you could hardly see the eyes for the wrinkles. So purely, like a baby, would she smile that you would nervously glance behind you to make sure that it was really at you that the smile was directed. Her face, they would tell you, would just crumble into a million lines that rushed in to seize her little face from all directions, making it look like the hide of some little animal, that somebody had folded and put aside to be thrown away sometime.

Nobody seems to have ever seen her young. But most of the time Memsahib seemed quite cheerful, as cheerful as a small girl whose greatest desire in life is to be friends with the whole world, even despite her old age and her apparent loneliness. What had happened to her hsuband, only she herself seemed to know. But it was something she was not telling anybody and over which she did not show much distress; her contentment in the face of a lack of a husband seemed especially intended as a lesson to women, that denying one a husband was the least of the punishments a god could deal a woman.

Memsahib Freda lived atop a little hill in a big big shining house surrounded by a fence tall as the sky, cool shades and the greenest lawn you ever saw, all by herself, with her dog, if you had the kind of humour, that is, to regard as a companion a senile, toothless dog the size of a calf.

As for her coffee farm, it spread for miles and miles, but it was said this was merely the little finger of a vast fortune she controlled. Since she was white, however, nobody bothered to speculate, as would have been the case otherwise, on the source of her astonishing rumoured wealth, or even how she came to deserve so much from her god.

You would be told that our distinguished white lady usually drove around in a big dragon of a car, the kind that you could not find anywhere these days. She would be swallowed up in the car, so completely that the only indication you were given that the car was not being driven around by some invisible spirit, was the milk-white tip of Memsahib's hair as her head bobbed up and down with the car on the bumps. The children, seeing her coming, would dance up and down,

driven by some wild devil in their blood, and they would scream at the top of their voices: Mamsa Pirida! Mamsa Pirida! (that being what we called the dear old lady, her real name being somewhat difficult for the tongue and the lips to grab hold of if you had not been to school).

This was the only time anybody dared call our supreme, white lady by the name, loudly, forgetting oneself. Otherwise nobody, including the children, was bold enough to put forth any sign of familiarity with the old lady. It was only when she was in such metallic motion with all of her whiteness except the tip of her grey head, swallowed up in the big car, that the children came forward to pretend they were chums with her.

On hearing the children's cries, Memsahib would instantly stop, whatever the mission that had that day drawn her out of the big house. The dust would roll over the squirming children, Memsahib would roll down her window with a smile and the children would scramble madly for the sweets and other eatables that their kind white grandmother would shower on them.

She had long come to regard the whole thing as some kind of ritual in which she played a priestly role. It was not only an honour. The way she saw it, it was more of an obligation. The children had to be kept happy, and the parents likewise. Only then could one keep peace with the populace in general. She must have kept in her car sacks upon sacks of sweets and the other good things, for in one trip alone, from her domicile to wherever it was she happened to be going, she could be stopped by the cries no less than a dozen times.

She had no children herself, as far as we could tell, and it could safely be assumed that it did fulfil her little white soul in no small measure, the spectacle of so many pairs of young eyes turned to her in breathless expectation, yes, even despite the prudent scepticism that she noticed in the parents of these same children as they silently eyed the passage of the big car with its lone precious passenger. This distant attitude on the part of people whose children she was showing a motherliness she was sure they lacked at home, she clearly could not comprehend. Wretched ingratitude, she put it down to. It was odd really, she would let it be known, how she was being repaid, considering her many benevolent years with us.

Sometimes the children, being children, would follow the great white lady home, arriving there long after the dust from the big car had settled away all along the road leading to Memsahib's house. They were no doubt itching to find out whether there at the big shining house, there could be found more of the sweetness encountered at the roadside.

In the foolishness of their desires they would for the moment totally forget their fear of the harsh glitter of Memsahib's residence and the

soul-stirring greenness surrounding it. But they would not have gone far in their confidence before the sight of the place they were headed for broke in upon them and instantaneously stopped them short of their objective, first the fence, then the unapproachable serenity within, quickly emptying their hearts of their folly.

They would then just content themselves to hang around, dusty little black boys in patched tatters suddenly reminded of the ring-worms, the jiggers and the lice eating them alive. They would peep through the fence, it being tight but not tight enough to keep out little boys' adventurous eyes.

And there she would be, their loving white grandmother, in her rocking chair beneath her favourite guava tree, now so gone away from this world of little boys into that of a book she would be reading, with only the gigantic, sadly useless dog as her companion in all that vastness of a lawn.

They would watch her rock herself to sleep over her book, so unaccostable now in her lofty calmness, so coolly and easily away from them and their filth and their petty greed, that they would be left wondering where all the sweetness had gone to, and just how it was possible for the woman to so completely and suddenly change herself from the inviting warmth of the roadside into the magnificent coldness they were staring at.

Chukwuma Okoye

TO MUNGO PARK: GREETINGS

(For Afigbo & Dike)

"I saw with infinite pleasure,
the great object of my mission,
the long sought for majestic Niger . . ."

Aflame with the magic of your race
you abandoned the boredom
of ageing shopkeepers,
you conquered alien crags,
trudged uphills and downhills
through swamps and swollen sods,
you laughed tears and plucked
thorns to feed a wearied heart
hoping some day, a livelong hour,
to greet your Star
and weep ecstasy.
But on and on and on,
through long mosquito nights
and crawling sun-roasted days
blind alleys received your peeling soles
and fever-fusty breaths.

Then like a divine riddle laid bare
the lordly Niger lay prostrate
unwedded daughter of the sea god
'Flowing slowly to the east ward'
before your burnished gaze
Geo affili! your soul sang
and danced, wildly triumphant
in the lightning grasp
of life-long hope fulfilled.
Greetings, son of the Niger!

I too have found my Niger
flowing eastward;
my life is in my Niger
and my Niger flows in me
dream-fresh rainbow colours
inseparable from the rainbow's life,
like fire in boiling water
breathing might into every drop.

What coffee *field beauty* was yours
when you drank your Niger's water!
No doubt so much happier were you
than your Lander brothers in their *eureka!*
when with mitred pride of sunlight gods
they landed in our common Delta
and surveyed their unique discovery:
the Niger where my father bathed
and fished from dawn till dusk
and greeted Ptolemy across the main...

I rest content like you
on your drunken day
born into timelessness
but more:
for here,
this Niger
my Niger
is mine
not a thrillion billion men's;
no evil legacy follows my trail,
and no Busa rapids to ride;
here's my home,
I have greeted my star
and this burning sign
shall queue with the night stars
and light the hearts of other men.

HALF-LIGHT, HALF-DAWN

(For Rev. Fr. Oladipo)

Half-light, half-dawn
and I dreamt
I dreamt and beheld beside a river
a skeleton standing erect upon a covered casket
all calm and silent like the candle flame on the casket
and the broken trunk of a tree
on which perched a dove.
A white cathedral stood near the tree
and I heard the congregation weeping and sobbing,
so loud I thought their hearts would break.
And the dove rose as they wept
flying eastwards to the heavens . . .

The evening before,
seventh hour after noonpeak
he sat by my side
my room was all our world
we knew no time
eternity was a big ball of diamond in our hands;
the wall was clear,
and we ate oranges
sharing every one of four between us
and exchanged chapters,
silver poetry of past alchemies.

And we saw a new sun
imprinted with a gold pentacle
and bowed to a new law of service
to be acted out in his flesh and in my flesh.
I felt the liquid power of faith in his tone
and caught the fire-flashed beauty of ecstasy
radiate from his eyes,
eyes that had been the seven stars of the seventh degree,
and a Cross on a rock ring'd with White Light,
and holding my quickened hand in his
he said with solemn softness:
'God abides now and forevermore',
and I nodded ascent,
he fully alive and human
I no less
no dividing line
none –
not until yesterday,
not until time broke into eternity
in a mechanized hug
and Father
Ladipo
died.

Not the past, not the present,
no quarrel with time but eternity,
whose being in us
lures life into a sense of oneness with the stars,
of timelessness in time,
and assured we spread out our wares
a gold piece and leaden parts
systematized into a will and a voice
and live the tides of our wills,
alternating bright and dim lights,
seeing but believing not,
no
though the tides flow and ebb,
not until for a warm embrace
we spread out our longing arms
but enfold a blank space . . .
and we mourn.

The layer of soft green veil is gone
the sharp-eyed rocks are laid bare
by the cold, brown winds;
we tread with bare soles cold rock faces
and in the meandering pain
life-light flushed the labyrinth
and we mourn,
but trudge along and
alone:
we cannot grasp, we do not will
we cannot own and keep
the winds flaps loose and is still:
only hope in a faith spans the restless gap
bridging time and eternity
rust and us:
this trust he had,
and beyond this handful of dust
he saw like us a reality of joy abiding:
may this joy, this love
be his.

Chukwuma Okoye

THE SCARLET PRINCE: A PARABLE

A new song came from the Scarlet Kingdom the other day. Loudly repentant, the Scarlet Prince, invited us to a banquet. The enmity of ages, the attacks and counter attacks, the perpetual waste of energy between life and death, must stop. All men of good will should rally round him and talk peace and unity, the peace that passeth all understanding. He had been converted, and an everlasting pact should be signed. He pleaded for forgiveness; for ages he had been misled; with tears, warm like the blood of maternal love, he washed our feet.

An old man among us, who buried his seventh child the week before, spoke of a dream he had the previous night. We felt the touch of dew as he related the agony of successive child-funerals. In his prognostic dream he saw Archangel Michael and Lucifer warmly embrace each other amidst fanfare in the firmament. He saw a new earth arise, and a tree of life planted on a vast, green field. Within a short while the tree had grown to maturity and gathered to itself all the foliage of the world's great trees. On the trunk of the tree was engraved 'LIFE EVERLASTING'.

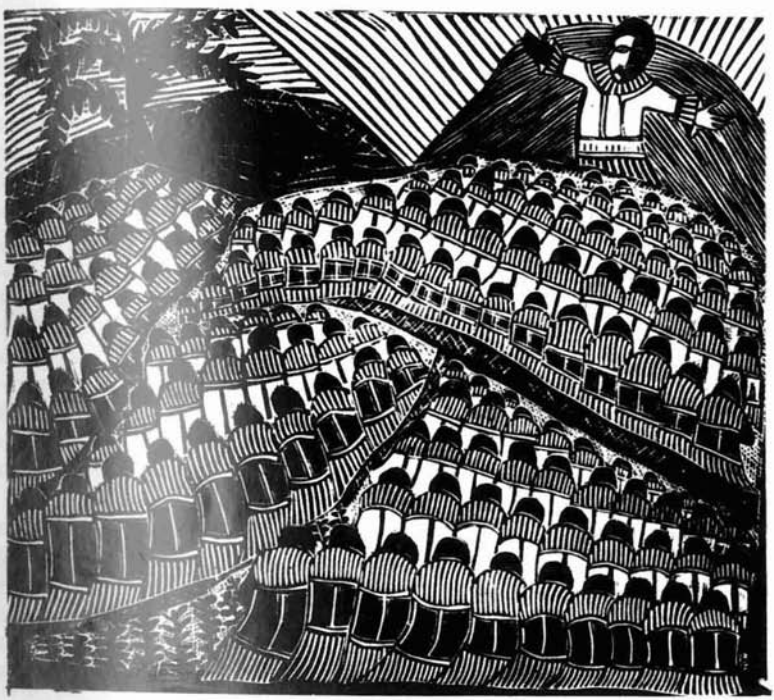
The good, old man urged us to accept the birth of a new covenant, a new earth. The Scarlet Prince, like the Prince of Tarsus, he argued – a very good churchman he was – had at last been converted. After a long period of self-questioning, we decided to give the new order a trial. If this man could forgive, why not we – mere bachelors. We gave our voices to the Scarlet Prince and eagerly awaited the dawn of a new age.

That night the Scarlet Lord sang with an unusually melodious voice a profoundly humane note. He awakened in us new feelings about humanity and life's ecstasy. We saw him utterly transfigured into a new reality. We who had only read the Jewish story wondered whether this was what happened to Jesus. The Prince, I say, sang with the power of unseen presences.

Delighted we ate and drank
and danced thanks till midnight
and went spearless to bed
happy in our vast guest room.

At cockcrow
we heard four-fingered knocks
and voices of rusty locks;
scarlet silence
and awful
separateness
descended among us
you could hear the beating of your heart.

More knocks
and knocks,
a slow turning of the knob
but we knew not,
and dared not guess,
who stood by the door –
armed and
delighted.



V.U. Ola

THE CHRISTIAN WIVES OF JOHN MUNONYE'S NOVELS

The theme of polygamy is a recurrent one in African Literature. Chinua Achebe and Isidore Okpewho have both treated this theme from its two extremes, that is, as a success or as a failure respectively. John Munonye in contrast to these two authors is not directly interested in this topic. His novels are mainly domestic, centred around the family and its problems for the man, woman and even the children. He too has quite often evoked the typical marital situation which normally results in polygamy, especially childlessness, but has in addition rejected polygamy as the solution for such a problem. In *Obi* Munonye successfully dramatizes the pressures on a childless couple from family members and friends especially the mother-in-law and in particular the "umuada" a group which has heretofore not been treated in such detail. These are the married daughters of a family. Their place within the community or in any marriage contracted by one of their "sons" forms one of the sources of tension in *Obi* and *The Only Son.*

In *Obi* the "umuada" are presented as the greatest single source of challenge to the fatherless hero of the novel, Joe. A further topic of the book is the clash between traditional religion and Christianity to which Joe and his wife, Anna, belong. Joe believes in total allegiance to his religion while certain members of the society believe that when the issue of childlessness arises in a marriage religion should be forgotten and a man should be free to take a second wife, especially if there is no male child to succeed to the ruling of the "Obi", the family house. Joe is in this situation but as a special member of the village, one that has lived in the town, goes to church and the whole christian population looked up to him for guidance and good example. His immediate family with their belief in the traditional religion and their hopes for him as their specially gifted son, also had their own ideas of what they expected Joe to be, and do for the family. His allegiance and love for his wife contribute an added problem since he has the responsibility to shield her in a society where she is regarded as a stranger and a useless wife.

However Anna's predicament seems to appeal to the author more than Joe's. She, like Joe, is gifted in some way. She has been trained by the best seamstress at Ossa and has learnt all the usual accomplishments of a lady at the convent. Significantly her marriage to Joe was arranged by the parish priest of Ossa. From this protected environment Anna is thrust into the hostile one of Umudiobia where she has to contend with a moody and impulsive mother-in-law.

Anna's main problem, her childlessness, is a condition for which her mother-in-law has no doubt she is responsible. Their first meeting is marred by the introduction of this delicate topic. She had been planning to discuss the issue with her son and had been prevented by the large number of visitors coming to welcome him. Her initial hostile attitude to everything is part of her disappointment at Anna's childlessness. On the whole Chiaku is depicted as domineering and a bit fastidious. Her response to the gifts brought home by her son and daughter-in-law proves this. She had been surveying all the items in turns:

> Then suddenly, she stopped looking at the things. Rather, she looked steadily at Anna, from the cheeks down to the breasts, down to the stomach. She was studying her for the signs. What was all the property worth when there was nobody – his own flesh – to inherit it? That was what Chiaku was thinking.[1]

This proves why she is not too sympathetic over Anna's tiredness. She had thought it was "a happy sickness." On another occasion, after Joe had started building his house, Chiaku lamented "That a man should undertake to build such a house for rats and lizards and snakes.[2] Chiaku's fears are obviously shared by most of her relations especially the female ones who are much more outspoken than the males. Achebe has demonstrated through Obi Okonkwo's mother what a powerful influence a mother has over her son. Chiaku is equally powerful but her presence does not materialise in anything tragic for the hero, as in the case of Obi Okonkwo. Whatever the outcome the power of the mother-in-law can destroy a family, and often does in the Ibo society.

The position of the "umuada" in the Ibo family is realistically treated in this novel. What emerges from the treatment meted to Anna by her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law is the fact that most Ibo societies regard a wife as a stranger and that in many cases a wife is more important as a producer of children than as a human being. Ugoada says to Joe:

> "We've seen the wife you brought home. We were angry with you at the beginning for marrying a stranger; we no longer are. We think she's well-bred. And she's beautiful too. But then what use is a kolanut tree if it fails to bear fruits?"[3]

A delegation of these women constitutes the most serious problem to Anna since their challenge to Joe and their determination that he should take another wife is difficult to resist:

> "There are many unmarried women in Umudiobia. . . Beautiful ones and ugly ones; tall ones and short ones. You have the money and I don't see why you shouldn't marry up to seven. If you ask me I can arrange for that. Only, whoever you marry let her produce for us.[4]

This hostile and tactless language typifies the leader of this distinctive group whose power even the men acknowledge. Anna lives

with their gibes and taunts right from her arrival in Umudiobia. Her first impression of her situation shows this. She comments on the warmth and humour of her husband's male relations but is hesitant in her opinion of the females whom she considers "fair." They almost succeed in intimidating Joe who is noted for his quiet strength. The fact that the couple eventually decide to consult a native doctor shows how effective the complaints of Joe's relations became after a while. This attempt also fails because Munonye wants the husband and wife to achieve their victory through the strength of their love for each other and their religious conviction. The sermon against polygamy delivered at the height of their crisis is significant from this point of view. It is meant to assure them that polygamy is not the correct solution to their problem. In this conflict Joe would have appeared weak but for the final explosion of his tension which results in his violence on Adagu, the most outspoken of all his critics and the one who eventually questions his manhood. Adague dies as the cource of evil in a convincing instance of dramatic justice. Without this violence Joe would have emerged as a highly incredible character owing to his overwhelming goodness.

But Adagu is not the only repulsive female character in *Obi*. Akueze, the wife of Obieke, is monumental in her unsavoury character, one that is openly testified to even by her husband. Adivisng Anna against any association with her he narrates the story of the loss of his first wife who died in childbirth leaving a little child behind:

> "Yes, I married Akweze in the hope that she would look after the child. She does the opposite. It was for her sake that I sent Obiakizu away to his grandmother's house last year. He returned only a few days ago, and since then she would not let him move about freely in his own father's house . . . See the scar there. See. It's a wound that woman gave me some time ago. But she will meet her deserts one day. Please tell Anna to mind how she goes with her.[5]

This is obviously the lament of a man who has resigned himself to living with a shrew. Obieke believes that his wife is something evil and does not deserve anything good. The climax of her evil deeds is that she almost succeeds in causing a lasting rift between Joe and her husband, an otherwise peace-loving man. Akweze, Adagu, Ugoada and Chiaku form a very unusual group in the novel. They have very little to endear them to the reader. They are portrayed as bullies and destructive critics, highly unsympathetic and dogmatic in their narrow-minded beliefs.

Anna is a direct opposite of these women. She is Munonye's image of the early Christian-trained wife, quiet, respectful, accomplished and very patient. Her talent in sewing is noised about in the whole town and beyond, and her sewing institute is the centre for training brides-to-be in the town. Anna's response to her problems is typical of mission-

trained wives in the Ibo society. In addition to fighting off the hostility of the 'umuada" she is subjected to temptation by the head-master's wife who advises her to befriend a man who is highly prolific. Her strength of character manifests itself in such circumstances rather than through the independent and tenacious manner of Agom in *Highlife for Lizards.*

Anna however cannot be regarded as a striking personality. Her fight in the novel is actually carried out for her by her husband, either through his reassurance of his devotion to her or by openly standing between her and the umuada. Her portrait is even made weaker by the fact that she conceives at the end of the novel, a device which Munonye must have regarded as her reward for all the suffering she goes through in the novel. This outcome is as unrealistic as the fact that Anna never answers back any of her tormentors and the fact that Joe never meditates following the course of polygamy despite all family pressures.

The merit of the novel cannot obviously be measured through characterisation since the heroine is more of a type than a well-rounded character. It is the author's attitude towards polygamy that sets it apart from other African novels on this topic. He indirectly challenges certain stock plots in African literature and presuppositions in African society. Family pressure yields no results in this book. The mother-in-law's position is played down and the hero maintains his individualism, holds on to his principles and rejects polygamy to the end.

As one moves into the latter part of the twentieth century polygamy tends to become less and less a problem in the consideration of women. Women are now considered in literature from their contribution to the problems of society. Their relationships are allowed to grow either inside or outside marriage and in both contexts there is an attempt to portray them as human beings capable of developing their potential for good or for bad. They are quite often allowed to tbe the mainstay of men in their problems in or out of marriage. The town or city environment is also gradually replacing its village counterpart hence marriages are now beset by other realities, such as corruption, poverty and greed which are the problems of most other individuals in the society.

The theme of marriage is central in the novels of John Munonye, such as the problems of a childless marriage which are the theme of *Obi.* In his third novel Munonye examines the tragedy of a man who sacrifices everything, including his own life for the welfare of his children. The tragedy is intense because it is much more personal and domestic. The very little happiness in the hero's life comes from seeing his children healthy, happy and successful at school. At his death a friend comments: "His life was a whole planting season. It is a pity he died so early, before the fruits of his labour began to appear." During

his life Jeri derives most of his courage from his daughter and receives most of his jeers from his only sister. Although Jeri is married his wife is done away with early to make way for his only daughter Celia whose development from a little child to a responsible young lady is easily traceable. This technique is a departure from the theme of *Obi* which treats in depth the marital problems of a childless couple. Marcellina features simply as the typical quiet, hard-working and understanding christian wife of a God-fearing man. She encourages Jeri at his work, worries over his safety and rejoices at his successes. These, in addition to serving as the focal point of a well-organised and happy family are her functions. From Onugo we also hear that she is the only one whose advice her husband takes. As a good mother she settles the little bickerings among her children and serves as a worthy representative of a husband whose unusual job of an oil man compels him to spend most of his time outside the home. But Marcellina dies of tetanus infection; her duties in the family are shifted to her only daughter Celia.

Through Celia, Munonye traces the different stages in the development of a young girl in a typical Ibo family. That he chooses to make Celia the only girl is a way of singling her out and concentrating in her hands the work of a mother and a daughter at the same-time. Celia responds with unusual selflessness and common-sense. Her first significant act in this respect is to offer to stop schooling in order to take care of her family, especially her twin brothers. Her precociousness is attested to even by neighbours:

> She was not quite thirteen years old. Yet the people of Obange had long been referring to her as that Jeri's daughter who had the sense of an old woman. And now, she combined her gift of great common sense with the responsibility of a mother, caring for the entire family, including Jeri himself. Celia would rise early in the morning and rush to the stream, and would return in time to prepare breakfast. She did most of the cooking too. She went to market. She kept the house. And she got on well with everybody, except Lu.[6]

Despite her constant exchanges with Lu she acts as a mother even to him. But her main concern were the twins whom she handled with love, care and discipline whenever necessary. Mostly she was the mediator between them and their father and she did this quite successfully most of the time. Her resourcefulness stands out in her suggestion of the scheme whereby the children cracked and sold palm kernel to augment their father's earnings in order that they could continue schooling.

In the course of the story she develops to a point that she understands the implications of land squabbles in her village. Her disagreement with her father over the renting of a bicycle from Ogonabo who had snatched away their land surprises even her father:

> He gazed at her, head inclined to the right and his hands clasped before him – at the small child born, was it not yesterday? And he was reminded of her early years, when she would blink, or bat her eyes, or retire into herself, in her angry moments. He had always admired that habit in her which to him was a clear evidence of strength of will and purpose. But had there even been any time he hadn't loved her specially – this Celia, the only daughter in the family, Jeri asked himself?[7]

Celia's quick transformation into an adult serves as one of her father's sources of strength. He sees the fact that Celia could rebuke him gently as a good sign. It is after the foregoing episode that she volunteers to carry the oil occasionally to the market for her father since he has just recovered from an accident.

Celia's episode with the cracked oil pot must be seen as symbolic in her development. For the first time she openly resents what she considers a life of slavery. She now comes out as the rebellious adolescent questioning the whole pattern of her life as incompatible with her age and stage of development. Her pent-up feelings explode in a series of rejections of her lot in life to the amazement of her father who could only intervene by using his own life as an example of unrelenting suffering. Characteristically however Celia sees the comparison and a week later makes up for her loss of temper.

From the technical point of view this episode shows Munonye's deep understanding of human psychology for this exchange with her father renders Celia more credible as a character. She eventually reaches the breaking point and achieves relief by denouncing an act which he or she knows is ultimately a question of fate. The fact that Celia is susceptible to anger and frustration makes the assessment of her character more balanced than that of Flora Nwapa's heroines who are generally endowed with only admirable and positive qualities. He rebellion is understandable in purely human terms for after all she has been denied the benefit of education and the normal channels of development through circumstances beyond her control.

Eventually she accepts her role by her final rejection of the so-called arrangement of her marriage between Mr. Brown and her father. But this, in contrast to her former view of her predicament, comes willingly as a question of personal choice. She rebels once more and refuses to be sold in the manner of her father's oil. Ironically Mr. Brown's suggestion was meant to be a joke. Nevertheless her "firm, stiff, grim and defiant" opposition to the arrangement is in keeping with her total picture in the book. It is these qualities that carry her through the difficult task of managing the family after her father's insanity and eventually death. Celia is a girl schooled in suffering which in turn becomes her own preparation for maturity and facing her own responsibility in life.

Onugo is another female character who plays an important role in Jeri's life. Her type has already been portrayed through the difficult members of the 'umuada' group in *Obi*. As the only sister of the hero she reflects the dreams of the society for a son in the family especially when that son happens to be the only one miraculously saved from a catastrophe that engulfs most of the family. Onugo's influence manifests itself in her part in Jeri's marriage. Describing Jeri's wife, Munonye writes:

> When he first met her she was a slim, shy girl, with the disconcerting habit of winking offendedly at most of the boys who tried to talk to her on her way to market or stream. It was the simple style with which she draped her wrapper from above the breasts that impressed him most. Her countenance! It repelled him, unnerved him, and nearly made him give her up. Indeed but for Onugo he would not have married her in the end. Onugo egged him on, assuring him that girls like that made very good wives. The fact was that she had liked Marcellina from the start.[8]

They got married a year after that, but Onugo's perseverance has its negative side as well for she has a literal as well as a symbolic role in the novel. Onugo stands for the place and value of the land in the social structure of the Ibo society, hence she is uncompromisingly opposed to Jeri's oil trade, which she sees as both strange and likely to invite ridicule from the community:

> Palm-Oil trade, they sneered? For such a thing was foreign to the land where nearly everybody was supposed to be a farmer, or at least did farming with other things, and where farming meant no more than growing yams and coco-yams and cassave and melon and maize, enough to feed the family and preserve some against planting in the following year. Onugo held that he was positively insane.[9]

To Onugo an oil-man is not better than a ruffian. The self-reliance and versatility which Jeri mentions as virtues of the trade do not convince her, either; and she carries her jeers right to the end. Her concern is for the land, the 'Obi' whose walls she claims are in utter ruins. She also believes that Jeri's children should be made to help their father rather than go to school. Yet Onugo is very fond of Jeri's children; being childless herself they fill a special gap in her life. Her joint opposition to Jeri's oil-trade and to the children's school give her a significant role as the defender of the indigenous values of the land against the onslaught of foreign ideas. Chastising her brother on his final abandonment of their ancestral land she claims:

> 'You gave up our ancestral land and are not doing anything to get it back. Then, as if it were not sufficient, you've also abandoned the strip of land that adjoins your house. You will not even farm that; you prefer to ride your cycle.'[10]

Onugo, despite her constant nagging of Jeri, is noted in the community as a very kind and generous person. She has retained her vivaciousness and friendly disposition. Though childless she is noted for her love of children; the misfortune has not brutalized her. Onugo's beauty of character is complemented by her physical charm:

> People had long given her the praise-name 'Adaobi,' which meant that among women, she was outstandingly well-bred and respectable. She had also retained her forthright speech, crying out hoarsely against those things that wounded her susceptibilities, of which her brother's oil-trade was one. Onugo would want him to go and till the soil and plant yams year in year out, in the tradition of all the great families of Obange and around. Yams! Yams! Yams! With her it was yams everytime.[11]

She is therefore a typical example of those who must be cruel in order to be kind. She battles for the preservation of the name of their family. She loses, but ironically Jeri dies the madman which Onugo has so often called him. Onugo is a type of Ajanupu, loud but with a heart of gold.

Bessie fights a different kind of fight in *A Dancer of Fortune*. Her hope is to get her dancing salesman husband to his true role of husband father and the responsible family bread-winner. Bessie is not the village wife of Munonye's other novels. As the daughter of a businessman she is convinced of her own worth and considers herself to have married below her rank. All she could do is to try and win back her husband from his clownish job. The circumstances surrounding their marriage are revealed and used as what could be called the heroine's source of lament for her childish infatuation with a rascal. Having made the contract Bessie now struggles to get her husband a more respectable job which would improve their standard of living. In setting, in mood and in theme *A Dancer of Fortune* makes a departure from Munonye's practice. Bessie's problems are those of the town rather than of the village wife. At the end by a neat ironic reversal of events her dreams come true. She and her problems reflect Munonye's lighter mood throughout the book.

Although Munonye's novels contain a recognisable number of female characters he exhibits the same unwillingness or inability of most West African writers to enter the minds of their female characters; by this I mean the inability to create characters with conviction or surprises, not so easily predictable and always shielded from the realities of a changing society. Hardly do they show any awareness of their societies in the sense of projecting their talents or abilities beyond the borders of their homes or the market towards the betterment of the society as a whole. From the emotional point of view they are also

splendidly and consistently mediocre, always reacting with superhuman endurance to their problems. Anna is a good example of such a flat character. Only once does she break down weeping under the pressure of such a central and grievous problem heightened by a host of unsympathetic inlaws.

Marcellina is equally flat and weak in portrayal. Blessed by a happy christian home, a devoted husband and healthy children she makes her brief sojourn in the book, dies and is mourned by almost everyone in the village. Even in the case of Celia the author fails to develop her in any recognisable psychological way. Her little growth is more from accident than design and even her own form of adolescent rebellion does not last longer than a week. She soon falls into the prim and proper young girl she has always been.

It is not surprising therefore that critical commentaries on Munonye's works have generally commented on passing or completely excluded the female characters, for apart from being appendages to the male characters they are generally dull and uninteresting and lack any form of in-depth analysis on the author's part. Women in his novels are in no way of primary importance. They appear because they are needed to complete the pattern of the typical Ibo family and to shed light on some aspects of the heroes' life or predicament. Even Chiaku who escapes, by virtue of being a widow, from being over-shadowed by a husband ends up pining over her rascally son Nnanna. Commenting on Chiaku's role in *The Only Son* Don Carter writes:

> . . . She, protective and anguished, scolding and ear-clouting, fatuously fond and exploit-reciting, prudently seeing about a wife, scandalized by a defection from the honoured pagan ways (of course, but it's managed very well), finally, sensibly and rather socratically, finding another man for herself and leaving the Boy to go his own Way.[12]

This summarises Chiaku's role, one which revolves around her only son just as the lives of Anna, Marcellina and Bessie revolve round their families to the exclusion of the interests of their societies at large. Questioned on his female characters at an interview all Munonye said was:

> In Obi I like Joe's wife very much and I like the oil man's wife too, the one who dies. Actually, her death, moved me more than his did. It was so terribly sad, especially the funeral. How I managed to keep it under control, I don't know. I wrote it all down with a big frown.[13]

Such is the matter-of-fact way Munonye portrays his female characters. They offer no challenge to him neither does he find them intriguing in any way. He simply likes them for being such good wives and mothers and those are their only roles in the books in which they

Funso Aiyejina

A LETTER TO LYNDA

But today I would join you, travelling river,
borne down the years of your patientest flowing,
past pains that would wreck us, sorrows arrest us,
hatred that washes us up on the flats;
and moving on through the plains that receive us,
processioned in tumult, come to the sea.
– Edward Brathwaite

Dear Lynda,
What is incalculably far from us
in point of distance can be near us.
Short distance is not itself nearness.
Nor is great distance remoteness . . .
Martin Heidegger

We who have been separated into one
by the troubled waters of the Atlantic ocean
and united into two by our uncommon pasts,
we must learn with those who have travelled
the snail's trail with the tortoise
that those chased into rocky limits
must grow to pelt boulders at their assailants;
that seas reflect only objects above their surfaces,
none but divers may perceive secrets buried in their wombs;
and that those abandoned to the mercy of water
must practise to swim like the fish
or perish.

I who have wandered across mountains
and across valleys in search of history,
I have recognized myself in the scars
of those who have survived the misdeeds
and the greed of our common ancestors,
ancestors who pandered to the passions
of pale gods from the Atlantic and the Sahara,
ancestors who grovelled after beads after mirrors and
after liquid fires with which to prop their sagging genitals,
ancestors who fashioned crude tools with which they punctured
our radiant early morning dew-drops
so that today our twin summer noons
embrace the same mad ocean of our related pasts.

In the case of *Obi* the author's good intentions are again thwarted by the inability to maintain tension in the work and to produce a convincing end. In this instance he seems more concerned with exposition of a social problem than with the emotional plight and trauma of the individual caught in that problem. *Obi* in this case would fit very well into Larson's slot for situational novels. Munonye's interest is to highlight this problem to the society, an aim which obviously has failed because the human person involved goes through the problem unscathed. Anna suffers in silence throughout and does not even think twice of the temptation from the school teacher who has had seven boys and could have solved what Munonye himself says poses a very serious problem for many Christians:

> Childlessness among Christians was a real issue among the Ibos, quite a common occurence, and there was a lot of unspoken agony about it, even among the best of Christians. This was a crucial testing point of religious faith – an issue as is stated somewhere in the book – on which many a convert's faith has foundered beyond rescue.[16]

It is this interest in the communal response rather than in Anna's individual response that dilutes the latter's reaction to the point where she loses all credibility as a character.

Bessie in *A Dancer of Fortune* exhibits some of the characteristics of a shrew at the beginning but eventually realises all her dreams and has a baby with the implication that from this point she becomes another of Munonye's responsible wives and mothers.

Munonye is therefore more successful in depicting the social norms of the traditional Ibo society than in entering into the minds of his female characters. They are as dull as Flora Nwapa's female characters and represent the complete opposites of Joyce Cary's African women.

FOOTNOTES

1 John Munonye *The Only Son* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1969 p. 31. All quotations are from this edition.
2 Ibid., p. 142.
3 Ibid., p. 99.
4 Ibid., p. 100.
5 Ibid., p. 49.
6 John Munonye *Oil Man of Obange* London, Ibadan; Heinemann Educational Books 1971, p. 78.
7 Ibid., p. 210.
8 Ibid., p. 22.
9 Ibid., p. 23.
10 Ibid., p. 104.
11 Ibid., p. 105.
12 Don Carter, a review of *The only Son* in *African Literature Today* no. 3. p. 54.
13 Bernth Lindfors ed., *Dem Say* Austin Texas, African and Afro-American Studies and Research Centre, 1974, p. 38.
14 Ibid., p. 36.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.

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ancestors who pandered to the passions
of pale gods from the Atlantic and the Sahara,
ancestors who grovelled after beads after mirrors and
after liquid fires with which to prop their sagging genitals,
ancestors who fashioned crude tools with which they punctured
our radiant early morning dew-drops
so that today our twin summer noons
embrace the same mad ocean of our related pasts.

Now I dip my soul into the ink-well
of our past and write to you
across the virulent atlantic pages of our separation;
I sing of you, muse with the full-moon face,
the magic egg of my many journeys,
native of the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago,
the terminal colon that stands your archipelago
in anticipation of future explications.

Lest we should forget so very soon
why progenitors of thunder-wielding ancestors
now chew grass beneath our ghettoes' dirt heaps,
let us remember our related betrayals:
the chains the whips the sea and the sun,
let us remember your stray islands
which are bracketed between two visible Americas
and appositioned to an invisible Africa
and a far Far East;
let us remember so as never to forget.

Antigua
where if you ask what the Kings chamber pot
has in common with the Princess who,
virgin no more, came on honeymoon in the sun,
you will be told by a proud black guide
that they both shared Clarence House
on Shirley's Height which overlooks an English Harbour
away from the shores of England;
where too, at their Carnival, men reverse ancestral taboos
as mere mortals whip bull-horned masquerades
to the tune of God Save the Queen.

Barbados,
the nearest to and the furthest from Mother Africa,
where the apoplectic froth and foam
of Bathsheba Beach mock the complacency
of the populace
(Bathsheba, concubine to King Solomon,
Bathsheba, Mother of the Lion of Judah,
the Jah in Jamaica,

I celebrate your anger;
if the Pacific so desires, let it stay peaceful,
it was never baptised with the blood of slaves);
and at Bridgetown's Harbour,
overseen by Admiral Horatio Nelson,
you can watch the beach boys dive adroitly
for coins tossed by sun-hunters
from abroad the Jolly Roger
into the dark muck of the harbour,
and when the winner surfaces with a large grin,
he is greeted by the silver flash of the cameras
that mask the faces of the offspring of our past massas,
(but some day, dem beach boys going to dive
deep down, deeper down than dem tourists' copper coins,
into the womb of our past to bring alive skeletons
that name the nameless names whose sweat
built these islands in the sun;
but until then,
let dem tourists keep on tossing dem coins
in the name of God, the Father,
God, the Son, and God, the Holy Ghost);
Amen.

Amen to Grenada
(the youngest cousin of Cuba, Cuba, that gonad
of our thunder), Amen to Grenada
where the little people of a little place
have shown that to be grenade-shaped
is not in itself enough for those
who wish to say no in thunder
from under.

Guyana,
(the home of Pat, the widow of our Walter),
Guyana, the land of failed leaders
and evaporating hopes,
we await the fulfilment
of the thunder in your clouds.

Jamaica
gateway for Jah, the King of Kings,
where we went to the super –
market and found nothing for supper,
a nation under siege from itself,
a mecca where not even the gods are safe
as macho-men replace their manhood with guns
and advance the background sound of war
in their reggae to the frontdoors of their lives,
a haven where the failures of Man
have led the women to invite the Sea
into their thirsting wombs.

St. Lucia
Fair Helen that is fair no more
now that redeemers of every persuasion
go dim once they have become popular
and the fires of your fire-eaters are no match
for Soufriere's spit-fire and the lightning thunder
that heralds the hurricanes into Castries.

Trinidad and Tobago,
the last of the archipelago,
a land muddy with the rust of several pasts,
a nation where the leaders start every race
as loud and clear as the cascading water of Maracas
but soon grow slow and devious like the Caroni river
which, navigable no more, now teams up with the Orinoco
to turn the blue of the sea
into the brown of barren deserts.

But above all,
I celebrate the one who says that inspite of all,
let there be a new beginning;
I will strap her like a diver's goggles
and go in search of the clues
to our future imperfect
so that, as the Niger flows into the Atlantic
that washes the early morning face of the Caribbean,
we shall flow together to create new lives
who will swing no more between two extremes
like strung-up hammocks
still only when dormant,
they will learn neither the language

of the ancestors who sold us
nor that of those who bought us,
they will learn only the language
with which the land communes with the sea
such that they will grow to know
if one conspires to offer them
as sacrifices to the other.

Extend
my warm regards to Mum and Dad
brothers and sisters and our mutual friends;
may history preserve us together into the future.

Fondly yours,
Funso Aiyejina,
Ile-Ife,
January, 1981.

Edith Ihekweazu

Book: **Africa: On Her Schedule is Written a Change**
Author: Barbara Haeger
Illustrator: Bruce Onobrakpeya
Publisher: African Universities Press, 1981, 105 pp.

Barbara Haeger's book *Africa: On her schedule is written change* (the title of the German version is *Mein schwarzer Bruder – My Black Brother),* is unique in more than one respect. As far as I know, it is the first time that a German writer has published a collection of poems on Africa and *in* Africa. We find in our bookshops, of course, translations of German authors made in England or America. Those who are interested in literature have heard at least about Kafka, Brecht, Boll or Grass. But this book is different. Unlike the modern German classics (which are just translated for our information), it is a book addressed to the contemporary African. Many of the poems mention names: For Agostinho Neto; Steve Biko; for Nelson Mandela; for Robert Mugabe; for Ngugi wa Thiong'o . . . The book is dedicated "to all anti-apartheid movements" (and the author is an active member of the German "Anti-Apartheid Movement in the Federal Republic of Germany").

These poems are written by someone who loves Africa, not in a romantic or tourist-like way, but with the love of a fighter, the love of a critic, the love of someone who sees even in mistakes the beginning of improvement without the posture of a condescending and patronizing teacher. It is a love which manifests itself also in aggression, even hatred against those who have made Africa suffer and still continue to exploit her – the author's fellow-Europeans:

> Africa – they have cut –
> they have cut you into pieces
> and now, your bleeding organs
> litter the land.
> . . . .
> The phoney three kings:
> America, Europe and
> the Eastern Bear . . .

This is the introductory poem. Whom she means by "they" is obvious, and the author refuses to belong to "them" again:

A house was prepared for me.
I was placed in this house.

. . .

I began to avoid this house
in which I was born –
abandoned it . . .
and especially one guest-house,
one of the poorest it was,
I grew heartily fond of.

. . .

She has her reasons for her disloyalty, like Bertold Brecht who wrote in a poem that he left the class in which he grew up to join the poor and to fight their cause. Barbara Haeger castigates hypocrisy, prejudice, exploitation, neo-colonialism, suppression and torture – the monsters and Leviathans:

I am tired –
I am tired of sitting
in the monster's jaws
in the throat of Leviathan

. . .

I despise all those
who perfume their elbows
with which they push their way around
in order to put themselves
in good odour.

She ridicules tourists from Europe and predicts the decay of the Western world in apocalyptic images and does not mind what her country men will call "soiling her nest". She takes sides with Africa and wants to be accepted:

And if you say:
It's not your concern.
You don't belong
to our folk,
I counter:
Truly I do!
For, wherever
people are
enslaved and suffering pain,
I bear that pain too.

One of her most frequent images is that of Lazarus, tormented, impoverished and despised, not by fate, but by a visible enemy. She therefore ends not with showing sympathy or accusing the culprits, but calls for battle:

For I would rather
see your front with
guns in the hands
than bowed down backs
bearing the stranger's burden.

She warns against "habituation" – the "Vandal wolf" has to be fought:

Patience is futile
where beasts are kings.

Lazarus is not allowed to rest and lick his wounds:

Before the olive branch
comes first the flood
for nothing grows
in soil submerged in blood!

or:

I rather offer you
the olive branch
but just for now, my brother,
take the sword!

Lazarus must not wait for the flood. He has to start himself to sweep away "parasites", "leeches", the whole "blood-sucking race of the rich" (and, of course, the "rich" are not defined by colour). The author believes, that poor Lazarus will win the ultimate battle, will rise "like Phoenix":

But the earth
fecundated with blood
will raise the
liberated child.

It is not only independence, it is also revenge – Barbara Haeger anticipates the howling voice of the still dormant African lion:

When I leap up in a flash
to hunt the shivering knees of despair
when my horrifying howl
gale lashing
red rushing
red glowing lava
will spread over their lands
to intonate my freedom
to indicate their death!

These lines, though, sound a bit too utopian in an age of nuclear armament, in which death no more speaks the archaic language of swords and bloodshed.

Barbara Haeger believes in the power of the poetic word:

But with the power of my word
I will shake
the rigid pillars of:
complacency
unrighteousness
hypocrisy.

She again agrees with Brecht who wrote: "What times are these/ when the talk about trees is almost a crime/implying silence over so many atrocities". She is one who says "NO":

Shall I admire nature,
or wail and whine of love,
when:
slaughtered
tortured
exploited
suppressed
and discriminated
is my brother?
No!

Who knows what the power of poetry can achieve? Brecht thought he could change reality by portraying it in a particular enlightening way. He warned against fascism from its very beginning – and was just able to save his life. Those whom he wanted to enlighten, could not read him. But at least his protest has been known – a document of a humane voice. The complacency of Europeans has not been shaken by any poetic or unpoetic report, not even by unchallengeable documentation on the TV screen – they just switch over to another channel or turn the page. The few who listen and understand are those who know anyway and do not have the economic and political power to change things. Writers are weak allies, allies even with a bad conscience because they sing instead of fighting.

And the African reader? Will he accept the sword from the hand of a German poetess? I think he will rather read her book as a document of solidarity, a genuine manifestation of humaneness across all so-called colour-bars, a declaration of freedom without any hypocritical guise, of genuine "hatebitten love", sometimes a battle-cry, sometimes desperate:

What shall I sing?
There is no ear,
no ear in heaven
that would hear!
The human ear is shut –
silent drinks
the earth your blood.

But in the last analysis the poems show an almost metaphysical hope:

> Don't you know
> that the small sparrow
> can tear apart
> the bird of paradise?

or:

> Let the raven whirl astray
> over seas of tears and blood,
> beneath the island in decay
> emerges bright your Ararat.

Reading Barabara Haeger's poems, one almost forgets to count syllables, accents, rhymes and metaphors. There is a saying that "the opposite of art is well-meant", but at least in this case it does not apply. Barbara Haeger is a sculptor, and she also knows how to mould language (we are not going here into the problems of translation, especially of poetry); there is no glittering and glimmering, no fancy decoration and no flattery for the ear; her language is direct, striking, lean, often harsh or even rude, nothing superfluous, no verbosity: a poetic language which does not deny the example which Brecht has set in German poetry, and also endowed with the secret love and hidden nostalgia for beauty. Brecht said:

> We know, also
> hatred against the evil
> distorts the face . . .
> Anger about injustice
> makes the voice coarse. We
> who wanted to prepare the soil for friendliness
> we could not be friendly.

and Haeger:

> With your soul
> dedicated to art
> your soul, full of poetry,
> and your mind
> enchanted with fantasies
> and creative imaginations
> how can you win
> against
> pragmatism
> militarism?

But she also says:

Oh Africa, may the creative word
not die away in you,
while the murderous number
continuously engenders itself.

I think, it is worthwhile reading these poems and to ponder once again over the definition of a national literature. I would hesitate to call Barbara Haeger's poems "German". What then are they?

Obi Maduakor

Book: *Energy Crisis and Other Poems*
Author: Chinweizu
Publisher: Nok Publishers: New York, Lagos and London, 1978, xiv + 60pp.
Price: N5.00 Hardcover, N3.00 Paperback.

The controversial critic, Chinweizu, also the author of the historical monument, *The West and the Rest of Us*, has gathered his poems into a slim volume bearing the explosive title "Energy Crisis". The book shows evidence of a careful organisation: one-poem Prologue consisting of nine lines, one-poem Epilogue, also a nine-line verse, and three main sub-sections captioned "Wild Oats Farm," "Commentaries," and "War and Other Savageries." The impact of the volume is most strongly felt in the poems of the two major sub-sections: "Wild Oats Farm" and "War and Other Savageries".

"War and Other Savageries" re-states in verse the case already argued cogently in Chinweizu's book, that is, how Europe and how the modern political elite of the Third World have continued to underdevelop the Third World. The tone is polemical, language witty, and occasionally humorous. The humour is evident in the satire on the prototype of modern political third-world elite in the poem, "Praise Song of the New Notable," named Odozi Obodo. The new notable, an unabashed self-confident political heavyweight, proclaims his attributes:

I, Odozi Obodo, watchman of communal granaries –
I stole the grain and blamed the rats,
I feast alone, throw meat to dogs
and pelt with laughter servant faces
beggared by storms I start.
It is I, man of deeds –
I, eater of taxes;
I, graft millionaire;
I, swindle tycoon;
I, lord of Uhuru.

The poem's irony is directed against both the greed of the new notable and the passivity of the acquiescing humanity called the people:

Tiger whose yawn unnerves the daring,
Warlord whose fury scolds the land,
Thunderer, midnight lightning,
Gobble up our treasure halls. O new Black Star!

The new notable has learned his trade from his mentors in the West, the white predators and destroyers. Chinweizu is incensed at the

indignities perpetrated against the Third World by the West. The big powers appear to be the Third World's worst enemies. The capitalist predator has reformulated the Lord's prayer to suit his economic convenience:

War is my shepherd; I shall not want.
It maketh me to lie down in dollar pasture:
It leadeth me beside Riviera waters.
It restoreth my patriotism:
It leadeth me in the paths of intervention
For profit's sake.

This prayer is said by a Church Cardinal. Chinweizu suggests, as so many other African writers have done, that the Church is an ally of neo-Colonialist interests. The wretched of the earth, the dispossessed of the world, are reminded that their own salvation lies in their own hands. Fearless confidence and revolutionary confrontation emerge indirectly as the recommended ideals for the oppressed of the world. The poems sound a clarion call for positive redemptive action through the predators' own language, violence. Chinweizu is critical in the poem, "Elegy on the Middle Way," of the votaries of the Middle Way who dine with the persecutors and sympathize with the persecuted, recommending to the latter the virtues of "transcendent humanism." The problems of the Third World, the poems emphasize, cannot be solved through peaceful demonstrations. There is the hopeful insinuation in the last poems in this section, "The Rise of the Dispossessed," that the dispossessed of the world are proving themselves to be equal to the challenge of the times. The "beautiful Ones" among them, called the "new agents of history," have learned to gather their strength in order to

Rush the stage
To seize and salvage and blaze afresh
Civilisation's flicker that's dropping to die
In the occident's sly, white sky.

The poem of "War and Other Savageries" reek with Images of waste and death, loot and carnage, Violence and terror. The poet's vision here is apocalyptic.

"Wild Oats Farm" is a poetic festival on love – frustrated love, broken love, jealous love and jealousy of lovers, agony of separated love, marital infidelities and broken marriages. Chinweizu wrote these poems in high gusto. He is much more at home as a poet when the theme is love. "Spring Memories", addressed to a "woman of a thousand tendernesses," is a powerful evocation of happy memories of love and of the anguish of separation. Emotion, image and rhythm are sustained all through on a level of intensity:

And night after night after night
a thirst for your lips bruised my lips
and I carried dazedly about
a ramrod manhood
with nowhere to go.

There is a slight note of bathos in the last line which is obviously a filler line, a forced adjunct to the previous line. Still, "Spring Memories" is a powerful love poem.

But by far the most successful of them all is the title poem "Energy Crisis" which seeks unsuccessfully (and herein lies the poem's success) to disguise the sexual innuendoes worked into the OPEC undertones of the title. The energy crisis spoken of in the poem is not fuel shortage but the temporary loss of "man-power" the speaker in the poem has suffered after he had satiated his sexual hunger on his first female callers including the best of them all ("sleek Cadillacs," "chevrolets,") and the not so elegant ones among his customers ("pick-ups," "VWs," and banged-up Volvos). The form is nearly allegorical. A hungry woman's visit to her lover is parallelled to the scramble for fuel, in these days of energy crisis, at the filling stations. "Gas" and "tiger pumps" are metaphors for the male sex organs, and the "gas tank" is the female receptacle for the man's "gas."

Readers familiar with Chinweizu's impatience with the irritating obscurities of modernist verse would naturally expect his own poetry to embody the virtues of simplicity and of transparent lucidity in the use of image and symbols which he advocated in his essays on poetics. The expectations of the reader are adequately provided for in this regard. The language is simple syntax uncomplicated and the allusiveness of the images easily decipherable; but in some of the poems of the third section, "commentaries," the simple tends towards the simplistic. Some of the commentaries carry little substance as poetic statements. Here is his commentary on originality:

He who must do
Something altogether new
Let him swallow his own head.

This amounts to down right outburst of fury and ill-humour. But Chinweizu the poet is still at the crossroads as he himself says in the Prologue. One watches with interest further developments of his talents as a creative artist.

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