



OKike

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



44

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O K I K E

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for new writers for more than

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“One of the most difficult aspects of publishing long established journals literary or otherwise, is improving on or maintaining the standard set by its founder. While some have fallen by the wayside, others have simply retired to the attic, and yet a few have blossomed as a result of the managerial skill and intellectual savvy invested in such ventures. To this last group belongs *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*, established in 1974. In among other things, “it discover new writers, publish them, and to set a new school of thought for the critical standards of African literature.” — *The Post-Express*

GBENGA ADESANYA

African Democracy

African Democracy
Is an ABIKU.

The mother drank eyes' water
Before she stayed
The father had a sweaty bath
To tame her soul

But this familiar stranger
Is too slippery
In the hands of
Political spiritualists

The Day Shall Come...

Seemingly circumferent
Is the life of oppression
One minute a friend of misery
The other an enemy
Swinging forth and back
As a pendulum

The architects
Lineage of royal oppressors

Displaying acidic magnanimity
Gullyng the mind of ordinary gods

We dance possessively
The sermonising tunes of commandos
Whimpering with
Plastic faces of joy and satisfaction

"But hear ye this
Legions of command;
Let no man rejoice
Or be perpetually unhappy
For seasons come and go

The day shall come
For chaffs to be sifted.

'Lone Voice of the Wild'

Want to enjoy I said
Cold, green booze they piped me
Want to feel high I said
Webbed between my fingers was cannabis
Said I needed scholarly wisdom
Incantative knowledge I was fed
Letters craved I to carve
Mortals they asked me to knife

No limitation, no restriction, no constraint
They sugar-tongued me
Enslaved freeman that I am
Revelling in fettered bravado

How can I overcome
Survive
Escape
Cope...
This drunken stupour
This drugged smoke
This daylight bogy
This mortal butchery

Checkmate can I
This unintended WOLFISM
This courageous MONSTER
Fearful of unseen HUNTERS!

Mekunnu's Prayer

our officers
who live in stations
roads and barracks
hollowed be thy name
thy handcuffs strong
thy will be done in public
that the cells may be empty
give us this day
our security right
and collect no more *egunje*
that transporters
may forgive commuters too
lead us not into chaos
and deliver us
from stray bullets
for thine is the *kondo*

the gun
and the cell

for ever
and ever, AMEN!

Irony of Poverty

We can do nought
But watch
The merciless flood
Then see if redeemable
Those liberated sailing packs...

Husband
It's our child
And a pack load of naira!

I see.
Logic versus humanity
Scale of preference
Versus sacrifice...
Which one are you for
Child or money?

What value holds the money
If the child is wanting
My lord!

Stop lording me
The money first
Another child comes later
From joyful sleep.

OSITA EZELIORA**EAGLE ON IROKO: for C. A. at 70**
(To the background throbbings of the drum and flute)

I wrap this song in the silhouettes of your tales;
I sing in this twilight of songs the cadence
Of your common tones;
I sing of the sublime Eagle perched on the giant tree;
The tenor of the rendering plucked from the rhythms of *Idemili*.
I stand on the rock of our forebears
To dispense kolanut radicles to known deities;
My mug of palm-wine filled to the brim,
I pour libations to unseen spirits
Even as the living sludge to unknown destinations.

I have traversed the terrains of Nri regal slopes: Amichi To Ogidi;
Aguleri through Umuleri: feasted with Chike
At the bank of the river; and listened to monotonous cackles of
demented voices.
Has the giant tree fallen: do we live on hopes or impediments?
Why have birds of the air flown to unknown abodes?
On every tree and every clime:
See the children of iroko fingering ice
And spiders make palace of our wisdom's citadels.
Ugo beelu n'orji tell me: how do we trudge through
The fragmented terrains of the rising sun?

We had risen for a toast of your songs
But even at dawn, the songs were awry; sour to
The tongues and deadening to the nerves.

Things had shattered apart, fallen to the
 Baboons at the belts of our bleeding eyes.
 The doves sing of peace; the lambs dance with hearts
 Of immaculate robes; the cats seek fraternity of rats,
 Even as the goats choose guardianship of the barn;
 But what acolyte is there for the lion and the goat?
 We had toiled at the peak of sunny moons
 Dreamt of happy days of timeless joy;
 You had seen the trouble with the union,
 Long when your elders were in slumber
 How can there be peace when
 The living are mere trumpeters to rogues and scorpions?
 A child who gives amnesia to its mother
 Surely leaves its hours of slumber in the winds;
 What woman is scared of her husband's
 Nakedness in the privacy of her connubial chamber?
Ugo beelu n'orji tells me: they are no longer at ease.

Yes! I heard your wailings: no one climbs the
 Pepper stem; one only walks about it I heard
 Of the bedbug who summons its scions to taste a mug
 Of chilled endurance, for the scary oven is on
 Pilgrimage to the abode of the lifeless ash.
 We heard your proddings: and we vowed not to lift our
 Fists: for there's abundant bearded meat for the living penis.
 A lone kernel does not disappear in the fire: where are the
 messengers of God?
 Since when have divine arrows missed their spots?
 Must elders stare as mother-goats give birth on tethers?
 The cock has suddenly grown teeth, and the chick
 Celebrates ownership of its progenitors.
 The lanterns are dry:
 The bearers have flown to unknown abodes, and our kins
 Loiter on the margins of Ochanja, Nkwo-Nnewi
 And Idumota for a crumb of stock-fish.
 But *Ugo beelu n'orji* tells me: *Echi di ime, taa bu gboo*:

Morning yet on creation day.
This is the dancing ground.
We are in the arena.
We dance in the savannah of the living; we dance
The dance of our forebears, and the anthills remain transfixed.

I wrap this song in the canticles of your tales
I sing in this twilight of songs the cadence of your common
tones:

Your embalmed-voice echoed from the shells, telling lasting tales
of sublime thoughts.

I sing of *Ugo beelu n'orji* who warned of mere anarchy
blanketing a drunken world;

We recall this day your prophetic calls:

We invoke this day a certain man of the people
whose brutal frankness stung more painful than wasp.

I sing this day of *Ugo belu n'orji* who whispered

To us from where the rains beat us.

Yes, we sing indeed the lasting songs of the EAGLE ON IROKO.

Blistered Tongues

We fellowship this dawn
In the famished paths of tired hopes;
Singing cacophonous cadences for our modest
family:

Bishops and bishoprics;
Lunatics and pastors' paramours.

We dance the fevered beats of crapulent drums,
Shouting 'Halleluyas' to extortionist sermonizings!

Our rite is set;
The crown is set;
The priest is set;
But we stare: dazzled by thousand flappings of dusky midgets;
Vinuous in the vestal presence of sobbing ancestors.

We fellowship this dawn in heavenly sparks,
Fed on Bibles, candles and cannabis.
The priests are here in the temple
Clad in despicuous beauty of mirage smiles,
Preaching alarm for the controlled;
Control for the sober;
and sobriety for the numb.

We've garnered holied-blessings from parsons
 who drink from human skulls;
Our hearts abandoned to saints who rape our
 wives;
We've paid tithes to holies
 who scorn our starved;
Their mansions glittering unearthly colours

We've deafened heaven's ears with thunderous clapping
With cheeks in tongues and tongues in cheeks
We've sung halleluyas to pilferers and well-fed-ists.

Our tongues are swollen,
Fertilized with tons of thorny lies
We've sung the beauty of his Lordship:
The king that smiles on screens, plots at midnight
 and bombs by a letter.

Our tongues are swollen;
We've heard Lady Solomon,
the Helen of the moment who lost her mettle,
Caressed by the toothy-tongues of

our lovely King, threw her wig in the bins, and
annulled the national spirit.

And *they* Sang: 'A Daniel is come to judgement'.

We fellow-sheep this dawn,
In the temple of the King-General, who
Shuns the faces of his subjects;
Dodges their gullied paths
Their stomachs' rumbling echoes;
and the sickly pictures of their wisdom's roofs.

We fell-oh-Sheep this dawn,
Singing of heavenly stars;
but parsons are here,
the bishops are here singing same old tunes:
'Ah! God loves cheerful givers!

And we tithe and title the vultures,
Singing of heavenly sparks;
But our tongues wait, blistered, for
a Second Coming.

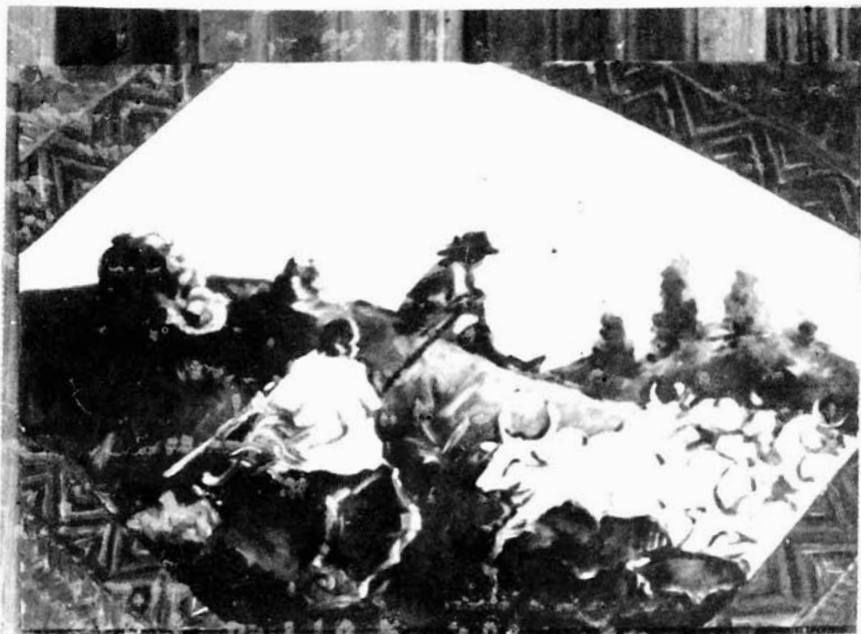
Immediate Effect

My head is summoned in a platter
Summoned for stalking eyes that vision beyond the facade.
He wants it gallowed for catching the chameleon
Colours of his camouflage.

My head is the chicken's egg needed for the rites,
my limbs the yam-tuber-price of the priests;
the hangman has come to have it severed;

the priest is here
painted in pains like the prince of sin.

Some sad faces have surfaced to scorch my tongue
my head is summoned for severance
Even as Herod did of John;
Even as Amin did the Bishop,
Even as Doe dines with Mobutu
Even as the princes did of the pen-men
Like Dele. Like Ken.
He wants it wrapped for homing tongues sharper than
faeces.
And, ah! With immediate effect.



Okpara Chukwuemeka
The cattle boys
Acrylic on Canvas

B.M. DZUKOGI**Potholes in my Dream**

I looked back at the security guard like a cursed child chickening out of home. Tears gathered in my eyes when I remembered that Mr Afflictor: Talauci (poverty) who had found a permanent residence in my life could not be dislodged easily after all. The futility of my trip to El-Rasaki was his source of nourishment. His federating units; inflation, rumour mongering, idleness, anger, quarrel, unending solitude would now flaunt their voodooistic canines with wanton disregard for my well being in their expansionist quest. They would now wish to suck me irreparably. I felt I should have walked on under the sun, through the night, endlessly to death wherever he might be. Nevertheless, I moved on sluggishly.

As I shuffled on, my memory went blank. When it reactivated, the seventy five thousand naira turned up in my head. That would have been stuck in my bag, rest, then to GRAPHICARTS. But not! That morning's blissful dream which was to convey me to fame and riches at sunset had fizzled out by noon. Soon, Musa's warning that the palace dogs' at EL-Rasaki's villa tore out at every unsuspecting beggar who went calling for mercy filtered into me. It compounded my despair and left me more hopeless. When I regained my sanity I still could not drag myself out of the mire; the plots or in Musa's words, 'palace schemes'. I suspected Haj. Omar had played with the unco-operative security-guard at the gate. I did not know where to go. I wondered whether to go home or to the school where I taught?

I touched my pockets and dipped my hands into them and

to my utter dismay there was not even a kobo on me. My salary had never gone beyond the first week after payment though I shunned vices such as drunkenness and womanising. Therefore, dipping hands into the pockets was perhaps an involuntary act that had nothing to do with finding money inside. Moreover, none had been put in there as at the time I left home. The thought of how to board a cab or *kabukabu* penniless became a nightmare when it dawned on me that I was facing the prospect of trekking eight odd kilometres in intense heat: A suicidal exercise for one whose naughty typhoid only retreated with reluctance five days earlier. God! why should my subtle hope; the fruiting apples of my dreams sour after the sweetness of the previous day with El-Rasaki? My thoughts were boundless. My questions were endless. But the answers were scarce. I felt abandoned. I felt that the cord between me and heaven was being axed by the devil. My blossoming dream was warped. And the uncertainties that surrounded me were further compounded by the seeming unfriendliness of the sun towards me.

He became pitiless and masculine. It was expected though. Only the Moon is known for her mercies and calmness; for her soft light and mild ways, and for her feminine grandeur amply glorified by poets from ancient times. Only a foolish astronaut would go to the moon and hasten to hoist his national flag without first, devoting time to the aesthetic magnificence of her majesty.

But, the sun, to many a soul is bitchy, dictatorial, villainous, monstrous, boisterous and arrogant. You could go on and on to the end-time describing him very negatively and be right about his manifest crudity. In fact, the way he deliberately pierced through me when I left El-Rasaki's villa, the way my wholeness was turned into a temporary oven left much to be queried. It was as if he had a personal grudge of some sort. My worry then was who would meditate between us. But, in the absence of anyone, I conceded victory to him and kept walking down the slopy but well laid asphalt road.

The poisonous heat I had carried along since the sun resolved to hold me captive and became hostile began to stench steadily from the concoctions it made in the inner corners of my parts. Sweat sprang lines earnestly from my unkempt hair and ran down my forehead across the eyes, nose, mouth and into my shirt, down the pant to cause a more messy atmosphere below. I hate the nasty odour of a sun-beaten body of a budding writer who refused to take his bath in the morning and set out in search of funds to publish his twelve year old manuscript, his first.

I also hate the security guard that turned me away at the residence of El-Rasaki. I hated him for his wickedness, his loud responses, his harassment, his refusal to recognize me and allow me to see El-Rasaki even though we had met a day earlier. And Haj. Omar too, El-Rasaki's personal assistant, I hate him for deceiving me, for his empty promises to ensure my success. Musa must be right about their 'schemes', their extortion, their pilfering, their unholy help which was more of a mutual robbery. Suddenly, in my realm, I appeared before El-Rasaki collecting a cheque. No! It was several wads of hundred naira note, the new denomination. I kept smiling at the notes as if it were to the portrait of Awo on them. Awo's reply was not favourable. He did not surprise me because I did not expect more from him. His life has been too serious, too academic, too *ecomogic* for my comfort, a cake, too hot for breakfast. Well, he is not alone in that misery. Murtala's dead head on another currency is no less a forced brightness too. May our dreams not die in us unfulfilled.

I refused to allow their frowns; their truncated dreams to abort my own smiles: 'Thank you sir,' I replied El-Rasaki, who warned that the money must be well utilised. "I will...," Paan! A car horn blared noisily behind me to break my fantasy. I had strayed unto the road. Startled by the car, I quickly gathered my senses and glided back to the pedestrian path. The car which caused the stir in me had stopped completely for me to get off the road before moving past. I saw the occupant take a hard quizzzy look at me. I am not mad! I told him inwardly. His constant glances at me told me that he was not convinced. I

maintained my equanimity. Who cares! He was a quick reminder of those of them who looted and did nothing but looting to ride about in assorted cars while we are confined to temporary madness due to poverty. Time will always be on our side. I shall be sane again. I assured his probing inquisitiveness as I walked on, hoping that I would be called back to see El-Rasaki to collect the money. Which money? A voice asked from within me. But, His Excellency promised to give me something to enable me publish my book! I defended sharply. Are you sure he said that? The voice insisted. Then what nonsense do you think I went to do in his house? To smile at the gate or what? In my mental inbalance, I tripped and wobbled into a ditch. My head struck a rough stone on the scarp. The accident wrenched the script away from my hand into the bush. A sharp pain fitfully invented in my head. There was also numerous pains planted around parts of my body. My right foot hung with a broken toe. Blood oozed from the heated veins. I raised my head to face the sky, perhaps I would find the cause of my misery. The sun was there! He scolded my eyes and I repented immediately by becoming remorseful in consolatory tears.

Later, I rose with droplets of sweat dripping from my forehead. Much more ran relay races in my shirt. The nasty odour below had become unbearable. Why this bad day? I asked quietly as I climbed out of the soggy pit. Unable to make it to the top, I farted and slid back into it again. I got stuck deeper. I stayed awhile to summon the remains of my strength and skill; with greater effort I later made it.

Back on the road, I looked round for my script. It rested in the near bush under the custody of a snake. I stayed put, watched the snake and the script. The snake in turn watched me and the script. It was a fairly big snake, short but bold. 'A-ah,' do snakes write? Do you have hands? Do you possess the ability to put ideas into stories? Do you make books? And if you do, is this one yours? The snake kept mute. Then why colonise my script? But the snake preferred to damn me in his continuous gaze. You must be joking, I said inside me. When I bent to pick

up a stone to fight back the naughty resistance of the snake, another sharp pain at the waist forced me to my knee.

On my knee, I thought of how to retrieve my script from the snake. No money, no publishing and no script? Never! This is a fight to finish! Then I saw a short stick about five metres away from our theatre of comedy. I looked at the snake and staggered to the stick. When I bent to pick it up, the pains at my waist region aligned with the snake to foil my plan. I groaned and dropped on my knee again. Nonetheless, I picked up the stick and crawled towards the snake. It was a great risk daring a snake in disability. But, the snake had gone. I sighed and picked up my script with a passionate cuddle, managed to rise, wobbled like a knock-knee to a big tree across the road, squatted beside a running water behind the tree, and then drank from it.

I got into it, washed away the mud on my body, rested under the tree before the *Mu'ezzin* started inviting me to join him on a journey to the Lord. I did not mind him. In fact, I did not give a damn. His loudhailer disturbed me as his calls magnified in my ears.

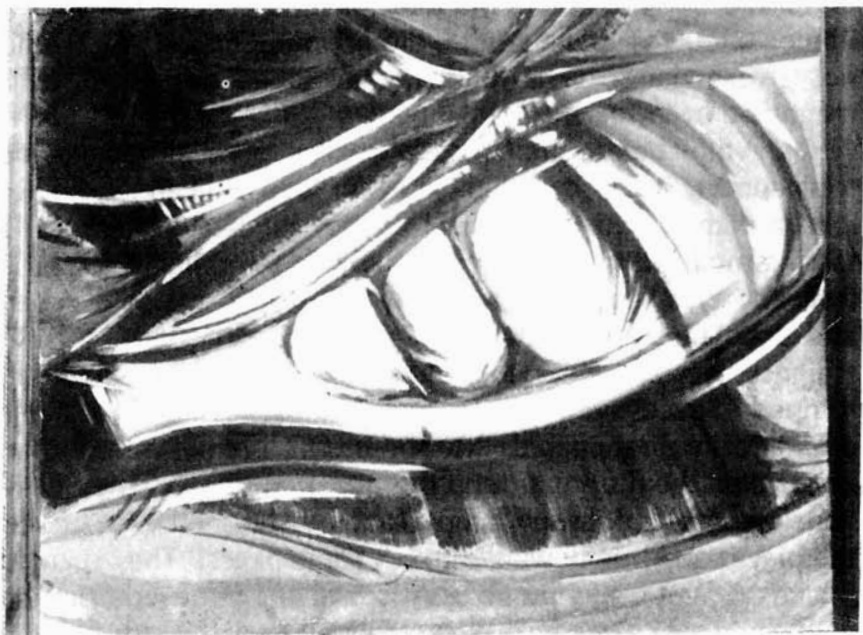
A fitful breeze strolled occasionally around me, edging me to sleep. My stomach wailed wildly for love and care. I did not give a damn. I just sat there haggard, sun-beaten, helplessly tossing my head to rest uncomfortably on the rough skin of the tree. My eyes heavy, intermittently drawn to a session of 'open and close' by the subtle hands of slumber.

I slept and woke to find my script gone! I shouted and jumped. Successive creaks occurred at my waist and the pains dramatically disappeared. My shoes, Oh! I remembered I had not picked them from around the pit. I ran there. They were gone! From afar, I saw my script scattered. I rushed over, picked the pieces and briefly went through some pages. They seemed intact. A faint smile ran across my face as I retrieved from the pathway what seemed my piece of life.

Later, when I had finished, the yellow coat of the evening emerged gradually from the West to usher in the night. I headed homewards. Before I got home, it was already dark.

At home, I collapsed on my bed. It was an idea I carried along with me on my way home. I slept for four hours. I could not remember a time I turned over my body in that marathon slumber. I woke up refreshed after a cold bath. I strolled to the market-place down town to eat. It is not a new thing for bachelors in the city to do that. After eating, I went back home, performed my prayers and the idea of repairing my day with a write up, a story, started brewing in me. Minute by minute the inspiration grew. Seventy-five thousand... El-Rasaki...publishing...snake...sun...Haj. Omar or not, stories must be written either for the world or myself.

As the ordeal flooded back into me, so I wrote them down too. It was the first time I ever wrote a story starting with the title: ***Potholes In My Dream.***



Okpara Chukwuemeka
Homeward Bound
(Boat on Troubled Sea)

ISMAIL B. GARBA**Dreaming**

dream is not a labyrinth
of scary scenes
spattered with the colour
of apocalyptic night
drawn in careless curves
to compose a literal lie

dream is a deed: private-
consecration of the comic
bloomed in the doom
of light on a flight
in the sphere of split sleep
making the *self*
a single mask
couched in the
rhythmic darkness
of a divided mind

A Bang so Loud

I shut the day
with a bang so loud
and peeped at the skimpy sky
through the hole in the night

a lump of light
like a half dead star
with darkish blotches of smile
and a timid grey dawn

I'll shut
one more time
the day
that won't die

I could be
the needle's eye
capturing
the descending sun

A Sheikdom of Dates

romantic as a broken lover
the lone flower unfurls
a hueless petal
the colour of yawning morns.

statues scratch their backs
books undo their spines
and corpses dart
avoiding all crooners
on the cemetary's board

dewdrops have tapped into sea
waves slit - in the drought
of thirsting roots
tides snapshot the ground
with clicks of watery frames

can it hear the click, can it behold the scene
the ground whose stare is subdued
by the face of grinning sun?

can it feel
when bombs grease creaky loins
and shrapnel bloom in desert
like a sheikdom of tall dates?

like a stripper
the flower unfurls her bosom
before lusty red eyes of the day
the flower unfurls her bosom
erotic like an endless kiss

Loss

ink could only draw
could it ever utter a word?

and even if a voice dies
its silence will forever echo

a tip of the needle
will never dig-up a well

I give off love
and opt for life

is it not for being loved the tortoise
got such (a fabled) speed?

and the stomach, for not being loved
is such a spoilt brat, putting a burden on us all?

cellotape can never
mend a tattered heart

nor will superglue fix
the mirror of a broken love

whether in drops or mere trickles
tears cannot be a cry of fear

the burrow may have passages
but only one is the real door

would you first rinse your mouth
before you slake your thriving thirst?

or would you give away the jewels
and keep the crown?

no matter how high the shoes' heels
the dwarf will always remain so

there's a splodge of colours in the sky
is it the rainbow or a trick of the eyes?

we've seen the miscarriage
of so many premature stars

and many malformed moons
in the stillborn skies

dripping bloody darkness in the intensive care of the night
have you ever seen a statue wink?

if silence chose
it could ring better than (perhaps) the phone

the blare of music
will never disturb the deaf

what happens if you embrace the wind
would there be a free flight?

headache cannot be discarded
like crumpled paper ball

can we know the plot of our dreams
before even reaching the sleepscape?

its only by cracking the code of the time
that we could decipher the toc-tic breath of the clock

have we ever stopped to ponder
how vicious the gatemen of hell would look?

can we tell just by looking what treasure
is stashed away in the hump of the hunch back?

what's the worth of a smile
hidden behind a wall of mask?

beauty can only be seen
it can't be gulped down like *zobo* drink

I wait for death like a sheikdom
of petrodollars

for shots are fired first
and questions asked later on

shadows are famous stalkers
they can never be shaken off

could our thoughts be arranged
like clothes in the suite case of the brain?

is it the tongue or the mind
that's the hamper of our neatly-arranged words?

there's a silent rhythm between
the luscious dance of the breast and the lustful trail of the eyes

is there any difference
between a vulture and a kite?

one thing is certain
though:

the sun never goes to sleep
before the advent of dusk



*Okpara Chukwuemeka
African Child
Watercolour on paper*

NORBERT OYIBO EZE

Meaning and Significance in Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*

A book is not self sufficient. It is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence, without which it would not exist. A knowledge of the book must include a consideration of this absence. This is why it seems useful and legitimate to ask of every production what it tacitly implies, what it does not say (Macherey, 1981 : 85).

Young Nigerian writers are often accused of impatience. They are deemed to be too much in a hurry to get their works published, even with certain avoidable errors. Ola Rotimi puts this succinctly when he says:

On the part of some aspiring writers, so much in a hurry! They want to make it overnight, monetarily and in terms of fame (1988 : 43).

This, is perhaps, responsible for the lack of serious critical attention to their works. And even when attention is paid at all, it is usually, to deride and to reveal their imperfections, and the amateurish way they handle their materials. Chris Dunton, for example, sees Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi* as "harsh, raw dramas" (1992 : 9). What Dunton is implying is that the two plays lack refinement. This, perhaps, is the reason Nwabueze feels that "Irobi is clearly a better poet than a playwright" (2000:199). Apropos of *Nwokedi*, Duruaku posits:

Nwokedi goes beyond cynicism, beyond ritual, beyond cause and effect. It has exploited the grey edges of artistic freedom to rekindle the atavism in man and paint it as glorious.... Its protagonist is a warped personality with a mission that cannot possibly solve anything. If *Nwokedi* commits murder under the cloak of revenge or protected by a suspect return to traditional values and primeval rites, it does not absolve him of the guilt, nor is the heinousness of his crime diminished (1996 : 91).

It is germane, from the criticisms, that Irobi has certain flaws as a young playwright. For example, he tends to throw in everything without discrimination. The cult scene in *Nwokedi* is an apt instance where the playwright demonstrates a lack of sense of economy by making an event which has no bearing on the issue at stake consume a considerable time of the play.

However, granted that Irobi has certain flaws, it is wrong to assume that his works are steeped in atavism, "lacking solutions to the problems of the society" (Duruaku, 1996:90-91).

In this paper, attempt is made to articulate the meaning and significance of Irobi's *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*. Effort is also made to debunk Duruaku's atavistic notion which seems to be borne out of what may be regarded as 'misconceived idealism,' since he feels that to be "positive in the exploration of human condition is to remain angelic in the portrayal of human condition" (1996:88). In other words, the artist should not compel his readers or audience to see eye to eye with him on some of the myriad disquieting human possibilities. It is also argued that to talk about "limits of artistic freedom" (Duruaku, 1995:87) is to negate the creative function.

The artist, according to Theodore Shank, "creates to develop and articulate a conception of what it is like to be a human being and what he conveys to his audience or readers is his own understanding of human circumstances" (1972:168). A serious artist does not create to fulfil a theory, but to externalize the essence of his soul, and what it feels like living in his own

age. He "never copies the conventions he has inherited, but he renews them self-consciously, seeking out the possibilities within them which have not been developed" (Berger, 1969). Drama is a dynamic art. As Bharucha says, "it is an activity that needs ceaseless contact with the realities of our world and the inner necessities of our lives" (1993:10). Regarding this fact of dramatic art, Chukwuma Okoye argues that "the artist's material, if he works on the proper soil, is ever the human heart and spirit: the burden on the body and soul of man, the imponderable ways and resonance of the heart aflame or the heart at war with itself or its environment" (1982:9-10). It follows that a truly committed artist should be able to express in his works, what is happening to him and his society, as well as the relationship between what is happening to him and what is happening to his society. Niyi Osundare is of the opinion that "art helps us to bring out what is right in there, to project it to the outside, bring out a manifestation and the truth of reality as we see it, or reality as we conceive it" (1996:9).

Nwokedi and Hangmen Also Die embody a particular historical moment. They are some dramatic encounter with the style and character of a period. Bronowski and Mazlish posit that "the style of a period is a vivid expression of its totality, in which we read as it were, the thumbprint of history - or to change the metaphor, we discover the character of an age from its handwriting" (1970:150). Since works of art are living testimonies of their period, it is hereby argued that to read *Nwokedi and Hangmen Also Die* out of the context of men and events that informed their composition, is to violate them. As Edgar Poe would say:

To read only with the eyes of a reader is to remain blind to the conditions which shape the meaning of the work, to see only, effects. To really know the writers' intention, we must first establish these conditions and then follow the movement that they generate (1978:23).

This means that to comprehend any work of art is, to a great extent, to understand the author and his world. It is only through this that the meaning and significance of any work can be fully appreciated.

ESIABA IROBI AND HIS TIME

Esiaba Irobi belongs to the third generation of Nigerian writers. The third generation writers here refers to the "people born after independence, maybe a year or two before the Nigerian Civil War" (Osundare, 1996:9). In discussing the major distinguishing feature of this generation, Osundare maintains that "it has nothing to go back to" and that what is bequeathed to it is "like a wilderness, an essentially beaten up country, beaten up mentality, deracinated" (1996:9). Irobi's generation does not know that tranquility that characterized the period of the first generation and to some extent that of the second generation writers. His, is a generation of coups and counter coups, a generation that feels the pains of austerity measures and the agonies of joblessness, in spite of good University education. Irobi's period is a precarious one. It is a period where the masses are:

Scavengers loose in the streets, picking old clothes, cans and bottles, hunting for food in the anus of the city (Enekwe, 1996:117),

while their leaders amass wealth, and do so excessively, and by all means. The main objectives of going into parliament is to partake in the "sharing" of the national cake. This is reflected by Arikpo, one of the major characters of *Nwokedi* when he asserts:

I never went into the Senate to make arguments for anybody's betterment....

No, I only went there to graft some skin on the scar itching on my psyche. The scar of poverty and its attendant inferiority complex. Nwokedi, I went into the Senate to hang my portrait on the walls of the

Senate (pp. 72-73).

It follows that the bitterness, anger, fear, frustration and anxiety that characterize Irobi's generation and by extension his dramaturgic compositions are the direct consequences of the socio-political and economic landscape of the period. Thus Osundare is right when he argues that for the fact that writers of this generation "are now on forced exile abroad shows that there is something wrong with us and so we have to use our art, everything in us to right the wrongs that political dictators and political jobbers have forced on this potentially great, but unfortunately, mismanaged country" (1996:10).

MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE IN NWOKEDI

Nwokedi is a play about the schizophrenic state of affairs in a given period of Nigerian history.

SYNOPSIS

Nwokedi is written in three cycles and is woven around the activities of the main character - Nwokedi and his immediate environment.

In cycle one, Nwokedi's father, Nwokedi Senior compels his political supporters to swear to Amadioha, the god of thunder, lightning and rain that they had no hand in his failure at a just concluded election. His failure at the election was occasioned by Nwokedi who mobilized his age-grade (the *Ekumeku*) and the masses to vote all political liars out of office because of their inability to live up to their electioneering promises in previous elections. Nwokedi Senior has just left for Lagos to seek for the annulment of the election result when Senator Arikpo, his in-law and a politician of the same mould enters, in tattered blood-stained dress. He has just been attacked by his own people, the Ugep youths, for defiling their injunction not to campaign this political season, since he could not fulfil his promises in previous elections. In the ensuing discussion between Arikpo and his mother-in-law, Arikpo learns that Nwokedi has not been told of

Ezinna's death. This knowledge compels Arikpo to become paranoid especially as he is told that Nwokedi will be returning home in a few hours time to participate in a traditional festival. Meanwhile, Arikpo had utilized the opportunity offered by the Ugep disaster (where reckless soldiers burnt down a whole town, for an unfounded claim of civil molestation of the military) to make Ezinna his wife (Nwokedi's twin sister) and her three children, ingredients of a ritual sacrifice to fortify his political career. Arikpo's paranoid state is aggravated by the presence of the Ekumeku who comes to know why Nwokedi empowered by the land to behead the sacrificial animal in the festival has not returned, with the festival only hours away.

In cycle two, Nwokedi confronts the authority represented by the Regiment Sergeant Major and his adjutant at Bakalori, his N.Y.S.C. orientation camp. This leads to the extension of his service year by six months. Also, in this cycle, Nwokedi's school life as a cultist is shown. Here he kills their capone for looting their stockade. In the last segment of this cycle, the people of Osioma gather in their shrine to invoke the spirit of Nwokedi, for it is the eve of the festival and he is yet to return. The Ekpe festival is never deferred, being the culmination of the year's rites. What will happen to the land if Nwokedi, the only person empowered to cut off the head of the sacrificial animal, fails to come home at the appropriate time throws the entire village into great anxiety. This anxiety informs the invocatory speeches of the Ufo-Bearer in pages 38 and 39.

In cycle three, Nwokedi returns home to meet an already charged festive atmosphere. He also encounters Arikpo, an object of his hatred. His knowledge of Ezinna's death incenses him. Also, his verbal exchanges with Arikpo, and Arikpo's brandishing a pistol to curtail his threats propel him to confirm his feeling that Arikpo could be responsible for the death of his twin sister, and her three children. This conviction constrains Nwokedi to mobilize the Ekumeku (his age-grade) to make Arikpo serve the purpose of a festival ram.

Meaning and significance in *Nwokedi* can only be

deciphered if the play is seen as a revelation of the reaction of the unemployed, well-educated youths against the practical complexities of the strange style of Nigerian politics which keeps them jobless and perpetually down-trodden. The significance of *Nwokedi* lies in its quest for a forceful change from the government of self-aggrandisement to that which will aid every member of the Nigerian state in the process of self-actualization.

The youths are generally regarded as the leaders of tomorrow, but due to bad governance, the playwright's generation, in his own terms:

seems consigned to a constipated destiny.... They have no jobs and logically, no money. They cannot marry and therefore may never have children (1988:16).

While the leaders plunder the wealth of the nation, and stash away its money in foreign bank accounts, the business of the playwright's generation is to search for non-existent jobs. Elucidating this relational problem, Enekwe argues:

The Nigerian elite class is not creative. It is not patriotic. It has its soul in London and New York, while its anus creates havoc in Lagos. It steals the wealth of the nation and transforms it into nothing. By serving foreign interests, our elite class has ensured that Nigerians will remain unable to manage their affairs in the future, thus perpetuating poverty despite the incredible richness of our land (1990:155).

It follows that *Nwokedi*'s rash encounter with the authorities must be understood in terms of their perception as the instruments of dehumanization. He mobilizes forces against them because he realizes that "the tyranny of the tyrant is determined by the patience of the oppressed (Irobi, 1989:29). *Nwokedi* calls for revolution because he knows, as well as we do, that our world is a world of experience where self-fulfilment is a matter of one taking of one's destiny into one's hands. His

moment is, therefore, a "moment where man forgets his divinity and accepts his physical humanity as the sum and substance of all life" (Gluckner, 1967:xvi). And this accounts for his stance that:

When man waits for God to act and God does not act,
man takes up the role of God and acts (p. 64).

Fear of extinction is that absence that necessarily precipitated the use of violence in the play, *Nwokedi*. Although Nwokedi comes from a rich family, he has to commit class suicide in order to save his generation from complete damnation. In this regard, Irobi could be said to have created the character, Nwokedi, to demonstrate that "every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and strength, the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individual" (King jr., nd: 3).

MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE IN *HANGMEN ALSO DIE*

Hangmen Also Die is Irobi's most prophetic, artistic attempt to "cognize and problematize the contradictions and alienation in human and social relationships emanating from bourgeois ethics and psychology" (Lenin, 2000 : 85). It specifically deals with the consequences and contradictions inherent in crude oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta area of Southern Nigeria.

In this play located in an imagined Izon State, Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a son of the soil and Commissioner for Employment, Chieftaincy Matters, and Rural Development is hanged by the unemployed graduates of Izon state who constituted themselves into a 'Suicide Squad' because he embezzled the three million naira made out to the people by the Federal Government to compensate them for oil spillage. In the end, the associates of the dubious commissioner get the members of the squad arrested, tried and hanged.

In phase one of the play, Yekini, the prison's hangman for male convicts refuses to hang the members of the squad in spite

of threats of retrenchment by the prison's Superintendent because he identifies with the motive behind the action of the young men. As Festus Obute argues, "by using this reversal technique, Irobi not only heightens the suspense in the play, but also lifts the drama from its economic and political concerns into a tragic play" (1999 : 23).

In phase two, we are shown the members of the 'suicide squad' toughened into brutes by the circumstance of joblessness. They demonstrate here that to live without jobs is to live an unfulfilled life. Their resolve to engage themselves in some form of employment, even if it means working dangerously propels them to double as robbers and assassins. The aim is to shake society, and to make it realize their existence.

In phase three, the 'suicide squad' argues that there is a thief in all of us, and that this thief "creeps out when the plague of poverty and hunger falls upon the land like a blanket of darkness" (p. 46).

In the fourth phase, Tamara, a powerful widow, teacher and priestess of the community goads on the members of the squad to disrupt the festival where Chief Erekosima intends to crown himself, the Amatamaso I of Izon State, with the compensation money due to the entire community.

In phase five, the squad disrupts the festival and kidnaps Chief Erekosima to see if it is possible to retrieve what is left of the money.

In phase six, after Chief Erekosima refuses in a pugilistic tone to surrender what is left, the squad hangs him.

In phase seven, and of course, the last phase of the play, we return to the prison yard where, in refusing to hang the young men, Yekini is sacked from work. A hangman for the female convicts, Ekpenyong, is finally used to get the members of the squad hanged.

As earlier stated, a book is not self-sufficient, but is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence, without which it could not exist. The actions of the members of the 'suicide squad' are the necessary effects of what occurs in the

unconscious minds of the well-educated, but jobless and constantly marginalized youths. It is expected that since the land of Izon state yields the crude oil which is the major factor in the development of the nation, the people of the state ought to live in earthly paradise, but this is not to be. Rather, the authorities allow oil spillage, bring about disasters and environmental degradation, as rancid crude oil cordon off the mouths of spring water, fowl the air, damage homes and farmlands, kill fishes in the sea, thereby dispossessing the natives of their main sources of livelihood. Fishing especially becomes hazardous as fishermen often lose their sights when the canoes capsize in oil-affected water. This is the case with Ibiaye in the play (pp. 70-71).

With every aspect of their environment degraded, the youths turn to embrace western education, but the acquisition of good degrees could not guarantee them employment. Their encounter with the Directorate for Employment typifies this.

RIP: Seven years later, we met again.
This time at the office of the
Directorate for Employment ...
which claims that the government is
giving loans to unemployed
graduates who want assistance for
self-employment for small scale
industries.

ACID: We were there seven times a week.

RIP: From eight in the morning to eight
in the night.

DAYAN: We even went on Sundays

ACID: But we never got a kobo.

This situation of joblessness and utter neglect in spite of good University education causes the youths to feel like beings marooned in an unknown Island. They become deprived because they seem to have lost their homeland, and still also lack

the promise of a homeland to come.

As if the pain of joblessness is not sufficient, Chief Erekosima would connive with other dubious members of the government to share the compensation money due to the whole people. What manner of brilliant, gifted, and ambitious youths would fold their arms, unemployed and watch their now, and future torn to shreds by unconscionable, and dishonest political jobbers? The 'suicide squad' is a child of depravity, a child of necessity, formed as a means of walking out of the terrains of neglect, poverty and futurelessness. The members of the squad do not merely want to exist, they want to live, and living means having all the paraphernalia of living, namely, good jobs that can assist them build their own houses, marry and therefore bear children. The fear that these goals of life, at least in Africa, are eluding them propels them to seek to take their destiny in their own hands. This is in realization that "not to do something is to be crippled fast" as Ola Rotimi would say. It is argued here that Irobi created the 'suicide squad', to demonstrate how bad governance can help make the youths deviants.

THE IMMEDIATE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *NWOKEDI AND HANGMEN ALSO DIE*

Nwokedi and Hangmen Also Die have immediate historical significance, at least if only as their activities relate to the happenings in the country in recent times, namely, the change of government (from military dictatorship to democracy) which is what *Nwokedi* is all about, and secondly, the hanging on November 10, 1995 of the Ogoni environmental activists led by Ken Saro-Wiwa which parallels the hanging of the members of the 'suicide Squad' in *Hangmen Also Die*. In the play, the members of the squad are hanged because they killed Chief Erekosima for embezzling the compensation money due to the community for oil spillage that destroyed their environment. Ken Saro-Wiwa and his group are hanged on the pretext that they instigated the murder of some of their Kinsmen who allied with the military junta to further dehumanize a people crying out

against the destruction of their land. At least, the Ogoni people find themselves in *Hangmen Also Die*, and will forever tie that work to a certain historical moment in the lives. The death of the courageous and outspoken Saro-Wiwa and his fellow activists for fighting against "disasters and environmental destruction which years of oil exploration have brought to Ogoni land" (Hans Zell, 1996 : 4), is according to Ezenwa Ohaeto:

part of the knowledge that the issues of injustice, exploitation, oppression and suppression in Nigeria are related to the fact that only some people in Nigeria wield political and economic power. Thus once more the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa highlights the reasons for the tragic Biafra and its subsequent consequences in Nigeria. That twenty five years after the Biafran revolution a one-hundredth part of that nation known as the Ogoni thought of another rebellion is significant. The death of Ken will make that fact important in Nigeria for a very long time (1996 : 2).

The passing of the Niger Delta Commission Bill by the Nigerian House of Representatives, and the Senate recently, is a confirmation that the people of this area whose lands yield much of the wealth of the nation have been neglected by previous governments.

It follows that in its articulation of now an actual historical phenomenon which at its period of composition and publication (For *Hangmen Also Die* was first staged and published in 1989) had remained a secret to history, *Hangmen Also Die* is most prophetic. Since its incidents are paralleled by an actual historical event, widely condemned by the entire human race, it is hereby argued that the play should occupy a good place in the canon of African play texts.

THE ESSENCE OF VIOLENCE IN *NWOKEDI* AND *HANGMEN ALSO DIE*

It would appear that Irobi has a bizarre lust for blood, death and

corpses, but we discover that in *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*, violence is not borne out of the perverse appetite to maim and kill. It is the view of this writer that Irobi does not set out to glorify violence for the sake of violence in these plays. Rather in the plays, violence acquires a revolutionary nimbus. Apart from the burning desire for justice, the playwright employs violence to "tear the mask of hypocrisy from the face of the enemy, to unmask him and the devious machinations and manipulations that permit him to rule" (Fraser, 1978 : 42). If we vicariously enter into the world of Ezinna and her three children in *Nwokedi*, if we imagine their defencelessness and how they slowly perish in the midst of indescribable agonies, in order that a decadent politician would stay in politics, we should never be left in doubt as to why Arikpo should serve the purpose of a sacrificial ram. Arikpo's death shows that it is possible for the uneasy consciences to be caught up by their own contradictions, even here on earth. The same thing could be said of Chief Erekosima in *Hangmen Also Die*.

Violence in these plays is never an exercise in defilement. This is because it is directed against those decadent fellows who make life meaningless, and therefore unbearable for the masses. It is the death of the 'Suicide Squad' and that of Ezinna and her three children that should cry out for our deepest sympathy, not that of Erekosima, the Capone, Nwokedi Senior, nor that of Arikpo, a being that has crossed the boundary between the human and the monstrous. The death of the members of the 'Suicide Squad' is pitiable because theirs is a generation where there is water, water everywhere, but none to drink. As contemporary men, they fortify themselves with sound education, but the evil of bad leadership does not allow them to flower in the direction that would make their society benefit positively from their accumulated knowledge. Hence, their chosen violent style of ensuring that they live is a "caution to the older generation on the need to act on time, before the subdued anger of the impoverished youths explodes into a social conflagration (Obute, 1999 : 34). In the main, therefore, the two

plays *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* typify how things go when people are oppressed, and the resentment that has been gathering up suddenly explodes.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the writer argues that *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* are meaningful, significant, and purposeful plays, if read and analysed within the context of men and events that inform their compositions. This is because they are living dramatic meditations upon the attitudes, style, and mood of the generation of the playwright. It is also argued that violence, the major reason why people disparage these plays is the direct consequence of the socio-economic and political landscape of the author's period. It is a means of pushing for positive change. As Fraser argues, "the right kinds of violent works do indeed involve a concern with and, insofar as they are revolutionary in intention, an attempt to transform the 'real bases' of things" (1978:48). It is the conviction of this writer that *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* qualify to be categorized as works with the right kinds of violence. He feels that these plays also fulfil to a very great extent, Antonin Artaud's notion that 'the action of the (cruel) theatre, like that of a plague, is beneficial, for impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals, the lie, the slackness, the baseness and hypocrisy of the world" (1958 : 31).

The point to note well is that Esiaba Irobi affirms vigour, strength and sheer brute force in *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*. If he seeks to destroy existing standards in these plays, he does so that room might be laid open for better and liberating ones. As a campaign against the politics of self-aggrandizement, governmental neglect and higgledy-piggledy, *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* are never designed to soothe the nerves, but to make the guilty tremble. As Jamike, a major character in Irobi's *Other Side of the Mask* would say:

