Okike

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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
Gullying 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 scarry 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 painfull 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.

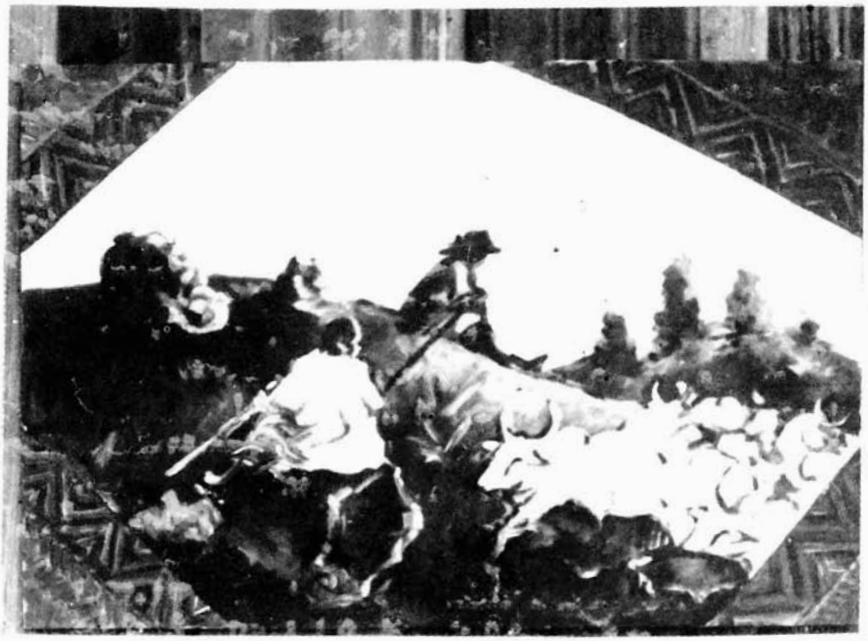
Immediate Effect

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 voodoolistic 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 uncooperative 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 quizzy 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 loudhaler 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
Homeword 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 Signifi\ance 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 extention 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 Osisioma 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 depraved 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, Chie 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.

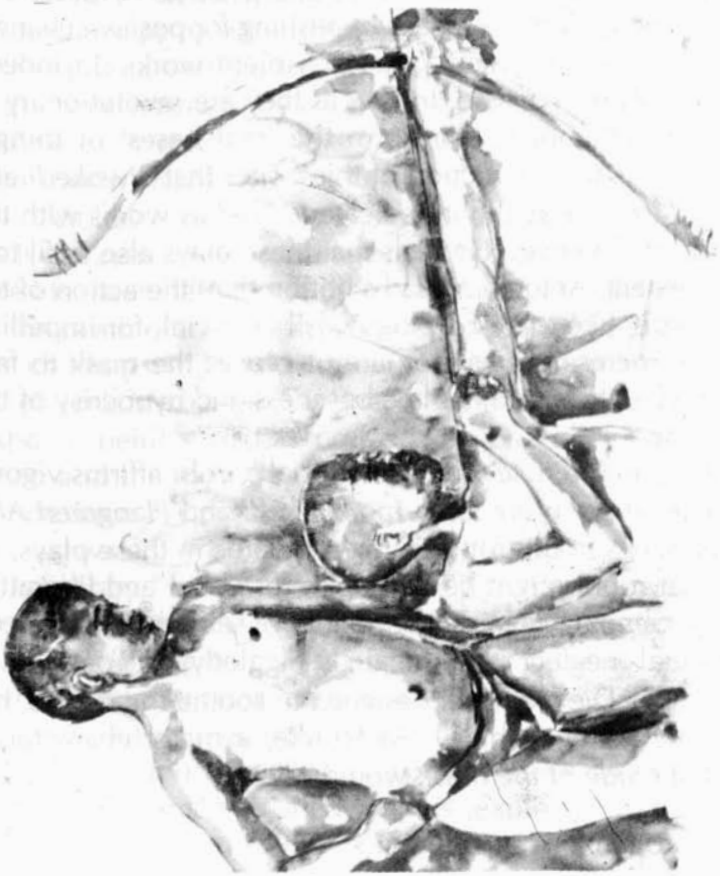
CONCLUSION

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 Artuad'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:

> They are not made to please neither are they made to comfort. They are heated needles pointed at the eye to hurt, to terrify, to shock like spiders on your navel (p. 44).

In the main, it is argued that these two plays are meaningful and significant because they vividly paint to us, the extent the oppressed can go when the chord that binds their patience snaps. Irobi's world is drifting to the point of no return. It would amount to hypocrisy for him in his works, to "seize on what is disquieting and depressing and lift it into a higher realm, a realm where it becomes healing and energizing, where it even becomes a tonic for living" (Irobi, 1999.74).



Chukwuemeka Okpara
Children of Africa (Hunting)
Watercolour on paper

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ABIODUN IDOWU

For Yomi Sorunke(!)

Sometimes our lips cannot express the language
of our hearts
They seem heavy and unfathomable
Our hearts ride on with the words they churn
But our lips stay sealed and quiet
For they are filled with tears.

Sometimes our lips cannot cry the tears
of our hearts.
For salty they taste and bitter
Each drop flows on in the depth within
But our lips stay sealed and quiet
For they are filled with pain.

Sometimes our lips cannot utter the pain of our hearts.
For fierce it is and burning
Each stab plunges deeper into the wound
But our lips stay sealed and quiet
And our eyes fill with tears
For our being overflows with sadness.

Yomi, your brother
cannot express his heart
Because the language, tears and pain

Are too heavy, salty and fierce
For his lips to explain
But know that whenever his body sags
It is because he thinks of you
And he overflows with sadness.

Wish

Starlight, Starbright
First star I see tonight
I wish I may
I wish I might
I wish ...

That we would stop counting our faults
And start appreciating our virtues
That we start forgetting our past
And move on with our future
That we stop hunting for love
And start loving the find
That we stop counting every moment as money
And start utilizing them as gold
That we let go of our fears
And hold on to courage
That we stop shivering in the loveless dark
And bask in the sun of love
That we start loving all that is you
And all that is me.
Starlight, Starbright

First star I see tonight
I wish I may
I wish I might
I wish.

Teach me

Lord,
Maker of mountains,
Teach me to be steadfast
In all seasons.
Lord,
Spirit of the winds,
let me remember
the wisdom of change.
Lord,
Guider of birds,
Reveal the wings of hope...
And Lord,
Creator of insects,
Teach me to build in patience
Lord,
Keeper of the forest,
Let me learn loving kindness
Towards all your creatures.
Lord,
Giver of fields and flowers,
Show me how to be generous
with beautiful things
Lord,

Pulse of the oceans,
Let me be sensitive
To the rhythms of life.
Lord,
Bringer of each new dawn,
May I always be reverent and grateful
And Lord,
Light of the stars and moon,
May I never be too old to dream
To discover tomorrow with wonder.

"Mankind"?

My ducts burst
when I see my world
        subjugated
by 'the man' who
is supposed to be
        the kind
When I am to be
        seen
        not
        HEARD
and my kind rally
in support of bourgeoisie
phallocentric egoes
that limit my
thinking, ability, PERSON
saying I am

WOE unto MAN
and my breasts heave
with damned up
waters.

Chukwuemeka Okpara
My father's wealth
Acrylic on Canvas

OSITA EZELIORA

Aspects of African Mythopoeic Assumptions: Representations of "The Departed" in Nigerian Poetry in English.

All attempts to understand the essential philosophical net-works that define the African World[1] have been explained through the people's insatiable quest for the divine. Across the regions of Africa, it is observed that man's quotidian experiences are spiritually tied to a Supreme Being through the links of the ancestors and other beings who are believed to protect the living from the world beyond. It is also believed that these spiritual beings convey the wishes and expectations of the living to their lineage of forebears. Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, the Supreme Being is called *Chi-Ukwu*, the Great God, or *Chi-neke*, God, the creator; and whereas *Ala*, the Earth goddess, is regarded as a symbol of the collective conscience (Anyanwu: 108-144; Alumona: 23-33), the ancestor is venerated, and his place as the major intermediary between the living and the dead is universally acknowledged. The ancestors are usually considered living in the spirit-world. If they are dead, it is only at the physical plane. No true African would deny the key of the ancestors in the life of the people, especially within the families.

Scholars have, for academic convenience, tried to create distinctions through classification of concepts. Hence while some talk simply of 'the departed', some consistently talk of "the ancestor', while others talk of 'the living-dead' (Mbiti: 75-91; Awolalu: 53-68). Although it has also since been observed that Africans are in all endeavours religious (Idowu: 18; Mbiti: 1 Awoonor: 71-2; Awolalu:3), it is not the concern of this paper to

delve into the religious persuasions of the traditional or contemporary Africans. Some may argue that the religious imperatives have been over-whelmed by the current realities of economic and political problems.

But the ancestors symbolize something more than just the mediational agents between the living and the departed. The ancestors stood for those essential elements that sustained the blackman in spite of all visible and imaginary forces of retrogression. As a child of *Ala*, the ancestor stood for harmony, for peace, for truth, for uprightness and diligence. Our concern in this paper is to explore how the Nigerian poet has responded to his universe within the confines of the mythopoeic image of 'the ancestor'. We restrict our usage of the ancestor to the forebears, the elderly departed, though we might occasionally assess the poet's treatment of the departed young members of the community as a way of understanding their conception of, and attitude to death in the African cosmology. We resume our discussion with poems by two older poets; we shall further explore translated native compositions and thereafter proceed to recent Nigerian poetry of English expression.

II

One poet who has demonstrated profound interest in the transcendental nature of human existence within the African Socio-cultural milieu is J.P. Clark-Bekederemo. Whereas Clark's elegiac poetry mourn the dead and lament death as a tragic final experience of man, he does so within the ambient of modern technology and the limitations imposed on humanity by the modern trends of mercantilism, avarice, arrogance and political gerrymandering. In his corpus of collected poems, Clark-Bekederemo has explored the possibilities of the African metaphysical realities and, so, the commiserations of poems of *The Casualties* extend the pains and frustration arising from the holocaust of the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-70) to both the dead and the living. Earlier in the well-known '*Abiku*', Clark-

Bekederemo had depicted the spiritual link between th reincarnated child who dies and returns to the universe c mankind, unsympathetic to the traumatic experiences of it tormented mother. Out of fatigue for its inhuman and devilis dispositions, the reincarnated child is ordered,

> Coming and going these several seasons,
> Do stay out on the boabab tree,
> Follow where you please your kindred spirits
> If indoors is not enough for you.
> *(A Reed in the Tide, 5).*

The stubborn, unfeeling child is implored in later parts o the poem to sympathise with the tormented woman. But '*Abiku* is just a representation of a religio-cultural belief of most African communities which neither recognize nor underrate the protective capacity of the ancestors for all the living, including protection for the tormented mother. It is in 'The Order of the Dead', that the poet presents a metaphysical reality of the ancestral presence in the activities of the living:

> The dead in other lands are settled
> In communes away from town, and although
> Town in time may grow to encircle commune,
> The dead of other lands sleep sound
> Within their walls, and no amount
> Of traffic, screaming outside their gates,
> Can wake them from their set dream
> Of another land. But here in a land
> Where the dead without blemish
> Are buried in their homesteads, if blessed
> With children, and in their own bedrooms,
> Taken over by their heirs, if titles
> Are clean, the dead do not sleep
> Any more than a mother beside
> Her troubled child at dead of night.
> Though going before birth to that source
> Which is the home for all

That inhabit the land. Knowing no fixed day
That all the dead of the world must wake,
They are quick to rise, wherever there is
The slither of a snake in the house,
And all the town has no stick
Long enough to strike it dead.
And while long lines of descendants serve them,
The dead of this land, praising God,
May come again into town as children,
If at their first coming,
They went away with a sign of great wrong.
(*The Heinemann Book of African Poetry*, 66).

The poet articulates in 'The Order of the Dead' the processes of burial, the expectations of the dead by the living, the omnipresence and care of the departed. Even though general assumptions point to the protective power of the dead, Clark-Bekederemo creates a distinction already explored in Achebe's earliest fictional work. The clarification indicates that the claim to protectivism is not unilateral. The ability to protect is determined by the moral purity and sense of diligence and achievement displayed by the dead while in the phenomenal world. Unoka, Okonkwo's father in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a loafer, a debtor, who had no title to his credit. He was not buried within his compound as was Ogbuefi Ezeudu who took all but the last title in his life time. Unoka was left to die in the 'evil forest'. Lines 1-7 of 'The Order of the Dead' establish this socio-cultural dimension of the African metaphysical assumptions. A befitting burial is essentially catalytic to a peaceful repose of the dead. The tradition of cemetery burial in the outskirts of towns and cities is alien to Africa. Clark-Bekederemo compares the quietness and inactivity of the dead in "other land", ---symbolic of western perception of the spiritual transition of the living to eternal solitude - with the robust energy of the dead in Africa, where,

... the dead do not sleep
Any more than a mother beside

Her troubled child at dead of night.

It is this cultural reception of the phenomenon of death as an unavoidable, yet transitional bio-spiritual experience that checks the excesses of the living, and spurs them towards attaining personal excellence even within the collective aspirations of his community. Curtailment of excesses is achieved by the individual's desire to attain social recognition while maintaining spiritual purity, with the reward of enjoying a peaceful repose through "home burial". The dead whose achievements on earth include having many children are privileged by the extra honour of "bedroom burial", especially when such deceased left "without blemish". Whereas "bedroom burial" is not common to all communities in Nigeria, the cultural attitude towards burial, either in the homestead, or bedroom, springs from the common value of providing protection to the living even while at rest with the forebears. The interconnectedness of the living and the dead has the cyclical dimension enunciated by Soyinka (144) and Awoonor (49-53). Death is simply a journey to the spiritual world where the departed simply observe some rest and "return" to the world of the living. Yet the spiritual world is the eternal home "for all that inhabit the land". The protective responsibilities of the dead within the African cosmology do not recognize boundaries. Even more than "a mother beside her troubled child at dead of night", ancestral presence in the activities of the living descendants is eternally spontaneous:

Knowing no fixed day
That all the dead of the world must wake,
They are quick to rise, whenever there is
The slither of a snake in the house,
And all the town has no stick
Long enough to strike it dead.

Clark-Bekederemo's informative poetry is an attempt to explain a mythology of the blackman whose philosophy suffered

abandonment with the advent of eurocentric theorizing. Another look at Achebe's world would clarify this point. In spite of his purported laziness, Unoka was to pray every morning to his ancestors. As a ritual, a lobe of kolanut is thrown to, and a horn (cup) of palmwine poured as libation to his 'Chi' every morning. *Chi*, here, symbolizing 'the personal god' which links the individual with his ancestors is, by the action, implored to intervene and prevent harm befalling the living. But no ancestor condones laziness and it is little wonder that Unoka suffered a tragic experience. The likes of Unoka are expected to "return" to the world to correct the unwholesome pattern of life they lived earlier by embracing hard work. We recall that when Nwoye's frustration with his father's martial doctrines eventuated in his abandoning of Okonkwo's household, his father's reaction was that 'Nwoye has too much of his grandfather in him'. The implication is that Unoka returned too early to correct effectively and practically his lazy attitude to existence. Clark-Bekederemo has, in 'The Order of the Dead', painted this process of ritual attenuation with the dead by his descendants. It is believed that the reincarnations that follow in most cases are to correct a life badly lived, or to repeat a life well-lived so that such positive qualities could be emulated by the living (ln. 25-29).

Gabriel Okara's interest in the departed is lamentational. As a transitional poet, this interest is an expression of a morbid perception of the current realities of decay and moral atrophy. He yearns, just as the ancestral voices in the dialogue of the gods, for the restoration of African cultural values against the confusing life-style of the new tradition which came with the advent of colonialism. In most of his good poems, he stresses this need for cultural emancipation and restoration from the suffocating system of western civilization. '*The Revolt of the gods*' (58-63), for instance, is a dramatic statement of this feeling of frustration from alien values. Man has been carried away by the trifles of the day and thus abandons the metaphysical realities of his world. The result is that, like a sheep without a shepherd, the living man has no sense of direction. He is drunk in the

follies of the present, and needs total restoration and reinforcement with the positive values of old: Okara's interest in this transitional aspect of African reality is found in most of his poems, especially 'Piano and Drum', 'The Fisherman's Invocation', 'Once Upon a Time', among others. Fred Akporobaro has, for his form and concern, described Okara as 'the Nigerian national poet'. He considers Okara a poet in miniature, but one who has combined a profundity of poetic vision with a simplicity of form and style, so that his writings are at best a "Synecdochichal expression of national experience" (139-153).

III

Available translations of Igbo oral poetry indicate that the African tradition of oral literature exploits images of the ancestors as a result of their relevance in the overall religio-cultural mechanism of the people's life. Much of the invocational poetry of the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria has a common tendency of beckoning the protective and providential ingenuities of the 'Great-God', the ancestors, the sky and the Earth,and so on. The 'Great-God', or *Chi-Ukwu*, sits sky-high above other deities and has as intermediaries the several other links which include the ancestors (Anyanwu: 109). An instance of this assertion in Nigerian poetry could be found in the several translations involving the highly revered 'Kola nut'. In a rather elaborate translation by Lawrence Emeka (1988: 26-31), we hear the call upon the forebears, and recognize them as the closest to the 'Great-God'. The ritual of spiritual affirmation with the gods and ancestors marked by the offering of kolanut recognizes the symbolic relevance of this fruit as 'universally' acceptable for the purpose within Igbo cosmology:

> It is KOLA I bring!
> It's all I can offer!
> A little baby

Can only hold its mother
As far as its hands can go!
Kola is small
And yet is big!
Like the sacrificial food,
It is more important that it goes round
Than that it fills the stomach.
Our father's fathers
And their fathers before them -
All our ancestors -
Saw all the fruits of the land
But they chose kola
As the prime substance for hospitality
And for offerings:
What an old man lying down has seen,
Has the youngman ever seen better
Though he perches on the highest tree?
(In. 28-47)
(A Selection of African Poetry: 26-31)

He continues in a later part of the poem:

It is not that kola
Is the sweetest food on earth,
Or that it fills the stomach fastest;
But it's only with kola'
That we pray for life.
And whoever brings kola
Brings life,
And brings health,
And brings prosperity
And brings peace,
And children,
And what we shall feed them with!
For it's You, God
Who brings kola
And ordains its manner of breaking.
This KOLA
Is like a mound in the middle of the arena,

On which we stand and speak in the assembly
Of people, and of spirits,
And our ancestors.
The TRYST MAKER,
And the words reach the ears they're made for!
So our fathers' fathers' fathers
Hear my voice!
God hear my voice
(ll. 60-85, my emphasis)

The 180-line verse, 'Breaking Kola Nut', is replete with images that signify the role of the dead as a moral guide in regulating and shaping the daily activities of the living. The portrait of the ancestor as the all-seeing and all-knowing figure who chose the kolanut in preference to all other fruits as "the prime substance for hospitality/And for offering", presents every mortal being as a mere "little innocent child who washes his stomach only!" This myth of innocence does not, however, preclude the fact that every member of the community must be conscious of that collective morality which frowns on such negative and anti-social tendencies as adultery, incest, theft, injustice, telling falsehood, murder and so on. Depending on the context, kola-nut breaking often serves as an occasion for bringing those unacceptable attitudes to notice with the associated degradations the poets' imaginations could conjure at the moment; it also enables the people to plead for the positive values and present their needs to the gods and ancestors. It is on such occasions that vows to the all-seeing ancestors are made:

If I've ever touched the wife of a relation
Or seen the nakedness of a sister;
If I've ever stolen what belongs to any human being
Or oppressed a widow or cheated an orphan;
Or borne false witness, or spoken calumny;
If I've killed any human being
With knife or spear,
Or arrow or rope,

Or poison or witch-craft,
If I've done any of these things,
May this our land
And the Mother Earth EAT Me!
But if none of these is my guilt
And my fellow-man would afflict me
Because of anger of the heart or anger of the eye,
Then let whoever comes to kill me
KILL HIMSELF!

(ll. 99-105)

In almost all contexts of invocation in traditional oral poetry, there is a presence of the ancestral figure. In similar but shorter translations of the invocational compositions of the Igbo, Romanus Egudu (1973: 31-2) presents different occasions of appeal for protection, kolanut-breaking and prayers for healthy life. Egudu's work is strikingly similar to Lawrence Emeka's translation in the painting of the supreme reign of moral purity and uprightness in man's engagements. In all the verses, calls for the ancestors either resume the lines, heard in the middle of the invocations, or towards the end, but are never forgotten. These images point to man's yearnings for guidance by the supernatural beings, and echo the positions of such deities as they protect the troubled descendants. Egudu's translations:

(a)

My God and ancestors
I thank you
For letting me see this day;
May I continue to see more
Till my hair becomes white;
May the hoe never cut my feet;
Protect me and my household
From evil men and spirits;
I wish no man evil,
But if anyone says I have lived too long,

Let him go before me to see
What it is like in the land of the dead;
The man who holds on to **owho**[2]
Cannot get lost in the journey.
('Protection')

(b)

Hills, take kola-nut
Earth, take kola-nut
Sun, take kola-nut
Valleys, take kola-nut
Ancestors, take kola-nut:
Go before us
Stand behind us
We don't eat kolanut with its radicle[3]
We eat what is due to humans
We don't (eat) what is due to spirits:
Take, all of you, your kola radicle
Take, all of you, the slices of kola-nut
ISEE . . . . ISE-E[4] (Chorus)
('KOLA-NUT')

(c)

God the creator
Sky and Earth,
Sun of the Supreme Creator,
Our ancestors:
It is life
And what it is supported with -
Wealth upon wealth -
These we ask of you.
('LIFE')

The extracts here indicate that the artist in traditional society

recognizes the presence and relevance of the positive values of the past - symbolized here by the ancestors - in shaping the destiny of man. But the ancestor, even in this traditional context, is not seen as a mere imaginary piece of mythology used to massage the ego of the living, but as a collective symbol of peace, harmony, love, diligence and righteousness.

IV

The concern for the prevalent socio-political realities of contemporary Nigerian society which is quite often the preoccupation of the new poet has not blurred his feelings for his forebears. For some, however, ancestral image does not recur as a matter of cultural sensibility; for some, it is a psycho-social phenomenon emanating from the human elements of memory and ritual: memory of a once dear physical being which surfaces in his imagination and fizzles out after a ritual of calcifying his intellect in practical composition. Gabriel Gbadamosi's 'The Reading' depicts this image of the ancestor. Written in commemoration of the poet's late parents, the poem conjures memories of lovers so dear to each other, and yet so disciplined that they must not betray carnal affection in the presence of their scion - a social attitude which is not acceptable in Africa. But his feeling of their presence is almost obsessional. The quest to satisfy their earthly cravings thus necessitates the ritual of acknowledging their assumed presence:

> I'm doing it again - reading my father my new
> poems/ in a trance-struck/adolescent voice/...
> *(Maja-Pearce 215)*

Essentially, however, the new poetry of Nigeria is a diary of disenchantments. Events of the post-war era have been the major preoccupations of artists. Leadership tussles and ineptitude, the decay in the social and moral order, corruption and various forms of political, economic and social injustice have

arrested the imagination of the new poets, and there is little or nc interest in the essential elements that kept alive the inglorious past of the African. The best of the new generation of poets are avowed social crusaders whose visions of the ideal society think little of that sense of social equanimity which heralded Western explorers.

Niyi Osundare, the best known of the emergent generation of Nigerian poets, for instance, has, in his scholarship and compositions, shut the windows against the primordial world of the living-dead. For this poet, the living man is the ultimate personality whose destiny is better controlled by the infinite possibilities of his imagination. He condemns the Aristotelian artists with their sympathy for the nobility and their seeming conspiracy in frustrating the interests and aspirations of the common people (1986: 22). For this artist, then, writers must shun what he calls 'The Kabiyesi Syndrome' - the tendency to present the history of leadership in Africa as essentially heroic and the subjects of the apparently tyrannical leadership as simply passive (1988: 99-113). Osundare's vision is humanistic and sometimes smacks of agnosticism. His conviction on the best way to improve the condition of the contemporary world is for man to re-address his potentialities and work towards his own salvation. Hence his assertion in *Songs of the Season*, that

> MAN is the centre of this world
> master of everything in it
> and maker of its restless history
>
> that
> MAN has the power to tame the tempest,
> worst the waves and take the bolt
> from the sky's roaring thunder.
>
> that
> MAN lives to work and works to live:
> his sweat fattens the tuber, invests
> baking loaves with their golden crown

that
MAN's mind is infinite as the deepest mines
larger than the largest oceans
supple like a healthy clay

that
the man who sows must reap
the one who reaps must sow,
with hunger fleeing the labouring stomach

that
the grass should rise against the trampling hoof
the tongue against iron muzzles
so those who lie may also reap (147-8)

One observes that in spite of the good number of poems devoted to the dead in *Songs of the Season*, Osundare's attitude to this aspect of African mythopoeia is essentially the same: a celebration of life's positive achievements. The imperative of qualitative and humanistic living foreclouds the panegyric instinct. The pangs of pain which arise from the apparent wastage of a nation's conscientious cultural ambassadors pre-occupy the poet to a point of concentrating on threnody. Four poems - 'For Dele Giwa', 'For Ayodele Awojobi', 'For Olof Palme', 'For Esiri Dafiewhare' - which are dedicated to some of the finest minds the world has ever known could be contrasted to 'A Song for Anini', - "a near-legendary armed robber" who was "caught and executed after one of the longest and most intense man-hunts in Nigerian history"

Yet these must not be taken for songs from an alienated character. For Osundare, like most good artists, remains a product of his society. The writer's inclement socio-political environment has necessarily stimulated interest in several survival patterns. Given such ambience, crime, unemployment, treachery, brutal murder and politically-motivated assassinations dominate the social atmosphere, culminating in the level of disillusionment and frustration which manifest in the writings of

the visionary artist. Osundare's teleological statement to this effect could be felt in the elegiac lines to '...Dele Giwa':

Let my country
My cause
Not
My curse
Let my country be
My beauty
Not
My beast
Let my land be
My grace
Not my grave.
(S.O.S., p. 73)

In the same similar tradition, many of the younger poets - Olu Oguibe, Sesan Ajayi, Afam Akeh, Femi Adediran, Catherine Acholonu and so on - have leaned on the radical perspective of Osundare's concern for social metamorphosis. Oguibe, one of the finest of the new poets has in *A Gathering Fear* (1992) declared a manifesto of social relevance for poetry, though he admits the intrinsic value of its aesthetic beauty. His alibi for a neglect of "roses and rivers" is because he is bound to "the dying mother the widow/The man with a weight on his loins/I am tethered to their moan they are my own/I belong with they who have no voice/They who trudge outside the gate/Those who sigh in their hearts/Who only shake their heads". Oguibe, like most of his contemporaries, does not see any need to picture the Nigerian metaphysical reality, especially the link between the living and the dead as a way of determining the restoration of that morality that frowned on the socio-political tyranny of his society. Acholonu's worried picture of the unborn end-of-the-century Nigeria is a projection of the same hopeless reality of mass hypocrisy, cheating and avarice. Her sympathy for the condition of the Nigerian female child is the basis for "*Other*

Forms of Slaughter", and it is not difficult to detect the rejection of the attitude to women and, in particular, the ravaging gluttony of the Nigerian man (Maja-Pierce (ed): 199-201).

In spite of a strenuous attempt to capture the serene world of rural existence, Akeh's "*Stolen Moments*" is a statement of disillusionment and hope, and what appears as the ruling idea of this young artist is the interest to capture the rhythm of life and the frustration of the people in his country where, as he writes, "living is a cruel contest of muscles" (9). Adediran's apprentice-experimentation in statements of the eternal reveal the norms of his social universe to the effect that memories of the departed are identified only in the conducts of the living. "What do I leave?" is Adediran's personal wish to keep for the living a legacy of positive values as well as a place to mankind, to adopt a social code that will live beyond the perceptual man. But Adediran's interest in this aspect of African reality is either a mockery of his lack of understanding of the metaphysical issue he has touched, or a deliberate choice to scratch at the surface of eternity. Okinba Launko's attitude to these spiritual realities and assumptions is regenerative and hopeful. His lines to the departed hardly celebrate the return of the living-dead; yet they serve to encourage the living generation to embrace the positive values of the dead. Thus, though "Gently falls the rain", yet "the young plant/puts out tentative fingers to feel us -". (43). A good instance is in, 'For Walter Rodney', where the principles for which Rodney lived and died are, urged to grow beyond the imagination of their inventor. Launko's portraiture of the violent death of Rodney re-enacts the violent growth of Rodney's philosophy, which is said to "soar along like seeds", and "spread along like roots" (46). There seems to be in Launko's images of the departed a blend of African metaphysical reality with a radical posture of the living embracing the sad realities of their existence.

Feelings of spirituality pervade the poetry of Sesan Ajayi. But it is a spirituality which is neither reminiscent of Clark-Bekederemo's African metaphysical reality as in '*The Order of*

the Dead', nor does it echo the spirituality of Leo Tolstoy. Whereas Clark-Bekederemo is declaratory of the perceptions and relationship between the living and the departed, Leo Tolstoy is dogmatically assertive in his persuasion that a good work of art must be dominantly religious. By this he implies winning souls over to Christendom (457). Ajayi's spirituality is inherent in the poetry; it is heard in the music and rhythm of his lines. His poetry is a testament to an artist committed to pure poetry without being irrelevant to the social traumas of his universe. It takes an artist like Sesan Ajayi in a highly mercantile and monetized economy like Nigeria's to evoke the spiritual thus:

> O lord, nail me,
> if I can't exorcise
> the demon of naira
> to curse my leaking
> purse: for I have
> a wish:
> to be faithful
> to my obligations *(15).*

For Ajayi, the departed have no cause for worries. This is particularly the case where the departed had lived an exemplary life. In such circumstances, nature and the elements embrace the spirit of the dead even as the living keep their everlasting memory. In *'Without a Farewell* (to Silvester Onyeji, the Sage of Passions)', Ajayi paints a picture of eternity for the dead who abscond from the hostility of the human world. Ajayi's attitude to death and the living is summed up in the epigram,

> *Wings clipped in flight have no season of lamentation.*
> *Only we mortals remember aeons of tribulation (27).*

But of all the "new" Nigerian poets, Tanure Ojaide, more than anyone else, exploits the immense presences of Africa's ancestral figures. Whereas he considers death a "leveller", it is

only as a response to the predominant images of tyranny which pervade his poetry. Ojaide's vision of leadership - all leadership from Africa's historical past to the post-colonial era - is a chronicle of brutality against the common populace. Past political leaders in Africa have re-incarnated in the dictatorships of the present. Death becomes a leveller which humbles even the most tyrannical of the oppressors. It is death that ends "a vicious rule with a deadly smack", with the result that none dare confront God, (the Marshal of the sky) to "appeal and bend the levelling rule" (*"The Levelling Rule"*, (1990:95)). However, Ojaide invokes new responsibilities for all tyrannical ancestors in a new political dispensation. With ease, Ojaide conjures images of Ogidigbo, Ogiso, Esiri and Shaka. These are all historical figures who were violent and ruthless as leaders. Aderemi Bamikunle (1991:78) has noted that for Ojaide,

> *The ancestral past was an*
> *edenic idyll which colonialism*
> *with its commercialization of*
> *Religion, its violence-happy*
> *"Conquistadors" came and destroyed*
> *to set in motion the destructive*
> *process of deculturation ("Labyrinths of the Delta"*
> *Section IV).*

In '*future gods*' (1989:52), ancestral images form the basis of Ojaide's poetic vision. Ogidigbo, Esiri and Shaka were once traditional rulers of the Ijaw and the Itsekiri of Nigeria and the Zulu of Southern Africa. Their mythical heroism is evoked here as a courageous way of surmounting the predicaments of contemporary African nations.

Ojaide's visionary stance, therefore recognizes the respectable values of the departed - not from the philosophical perspective of illuminating the African mind, but from the socialist confrontational position of dethroning all forms of

tyranny. This notwithstanding, Ojaide demonstrates in this section sufficient awareness of that world-view which venerates the omnipotence of the living-dead. The invocation of the departed to rise and "go on fresh exploits" leans on the implicit belief in such possibilities. The call for the resurrection of Ogidigbo, Ogiso, Esiri and Shaka is partly an affirmation of the place of the ancestor in the life of the African, and like the griot in the king's palace, this feeling is better understood when Ojaide addresses them in the collective:

> You were all warriors, and never did you
> come back from wars without spoils.
> Now fight your way back
> to help us in these desperate days.
> Shame on gods who look on, bemused
> as lightning strikes their devotees
> in their own groves:
> *("Future Gods" ll. 26-32).*

But "*Future Gods*" is an artistic appeal to all present and future leaders to be humane to their subjects and show concern for their problems, rather than the alienation that define the leader and the led in most African nations.

What we have attempted here is to explore the image of the departed in Nigerian poetry in English. The interest in the departed is primarily because of the key position of the ancestors in the African cosmology. The African world is one characterized by a great belief in the spiritual. It stands to reason, then, that for any serious engagement to try and understand this cosmology, the new African would have to lean heavily on an episteme that would unravel aspects of his metaphysical universe. The ancestral presence in Nigerian poetry in English has been a device chosen by the Nigerian poet to educate his local and foreign audiences about the essential socio-cultural and metaphysical elements which have always been with the black man and have kept the Africans together. It

is equally an attempt by the poets to explain their world view, their philosophy of life and the peculiarities of their people.

The interest in this aspect of the African mythopoeia occupied post-colonial Nigerian poets as could be easily noticed in the early poetry of Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, among others. Even translated versions of oral poetry available in most parts of Nigeria show the people's affinity to the departed. For the new generation of Nigerian poets, there is a glaring change in the representation and acceptance of the nexus between the living and the spiritual realities of the ancestors. Most of the new poets are inclined to an essentially humanistic ideological persuasion, and tend to operate basically within the ambience and tenets of expressive and pragmatic frameworks of poetry. The implication is that in their hands, elegiac poetry takes on new functions which transcend its traditional role of simply mourning the dead. Here, the departed are challenged to embrace the urgent task of restoring sanity to a society in a general state of chaos and anarchy.

We urge by way of a submission, therefore, that in trying to paint a picture of contemporary African Socio-political dilemma, the new poet may do well in his reminiscing, entertainment, mobilizational and visionary responsibilities to give consideration to the positive values of our dismembered past. In a way, this may help in equally reminding the new citizenry of those inherent beauties which combined as a positive moral force in sustaining the political, economic and religio-cultural harmony of our recent past.

NOTES

[1]The African world is seen here as the totality of the constitutive elements that define the continent of the black people, their philosophy, religion, social and cultural embodiments of which every true African is conscious.

[2]*Owho* (also spelt *ofo*): a sacred staff which is a symbol of innocence.

[3]radicle: said to belong to the deities as of right.

[4]*Isee*: The equivalent of *'Amen'*

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Chukwuemeka Okpara
The Falcon cannot hear the Falconer
Watercolour on paper

KESERO TUNAI

Counting the Remnants

The census officer tried desperately to hold onto the number of times he had asked the question. At every desperate attempt the figure misled him by slipping to a wrong number. In a nutshell, he was losing count of the number of times that he had posed the same question, in almost the same word order, with the same stresses, same pauses, same pleadings ...

An old woman who was the head of the family of three - the family that the enumerator had come to place on the national roll - knelt next to the fireplace squeezing her lungs out to make the half-dry sticks and grass glow. She put up quite a spirited effort-bulging her cheeks, letting her chest heave rhythmically and swaying her shoulders to and from the three hearthstones. When she thought that the fire was about to go start up she retreated, squatted and studied the situation, giving the enumerator the impression of one who had long learnt the signs. On this occasion both were deceived.

"How many children do you have old woman?"

The woman gave the enumerator a glance, the type of look she would have offered a self-important suitor come to woo her granddaughter. Then she let her eyes shift to her right where sat her granddaughter and beside the girl, on a mat, lay an ailing boy covered with a threadbare blanket. Beholding the children her eyes faltered. Tear drops went down her cheeks. In the darkened hut, it was hardly possible to make out clearly the

people present. In full-light one would have noticed a lean woman with a craggy face whose ruggedness was made even more distinct by huge tattoo marks on both cheeks. These marks had been thought beautiful in her youthful days.

She had to get back to the fire to parry the darkness. Even more important, she had to boil some sweet potatoes that she had obtained from the small farm at the far end of their compound. Before she could blow, the trees outside swayed, wheezed and in came a gush of wind. The fire went up in flames illuminating the entire single-room hut. The five people present were now visible and at last four of them were able to see one another clearly.

The enumerator's face brightened. He had arrived early enough hoping to finish recording the particulars of this family before dark. Night fall had set in before he could begin but now the fire had taken his side. He would not have to use a flashlight and that meant some saving.

The woman moved a little away from the fire and settled herself on a piece of sack. Marwa fidgeted on his seat as if he was making himself more comfortable, shifted the log that was his seat and sat adjacent to the woman. He marshalled himself to pose the question, trying to present it differently this time.

"Let me know the number of children that you have here." He thought that it carried politeness but somewhere at the back of his ears it rang an incomplete note. Was it a statement or a question? If a question, did it seek everything?

"You can see for yourself ... you can see the number of children that I have here.... Marwa, aren't you the grandchild of Wangwi? Don't you know me, don't you know Suguta?"

"Suguta, it is the government that wants to know the particulars. This is not for Wangwi's grandchild." The elder who had hitherto sat unmoved spoke, giving direction, probably expressing the only dictate that he could remember from his training as a census guide. He felt a twinkle of satisfaction run through him for he had at least made a contribution, and a significant one at that, of rescuing the young man who had

seemed beaten. But that satisfaction was indeed just a spark of light for it dimmed and was soon swallowed by darkness. Marwa looked at him sternly to let the other know that what he had said was not part of his job description. The responsibility of the village elder as Marwa understood it, was to accompany the enumerator, guide him to homes where he was a stranger and introduce him to members of such homes. After such a preliminary, the terms of reference went on, the elder was to let the enumerator proceed uninterrupted. The elder was like the scout sent out to spot the enemy. His was to report about the approaching adversary not to give direction on the escape route to be followed. Suguta was not a home where Marwa required familiarisation. Furthermore this was his own village, Nyatechi, and even then who did not know Suguta, even beyond Nyatechi; Suguta, who had gallantly held her family together.

"We want to know the number of houses that you have," the enumerator replied rather absent-mindedly. He felt a bit embarrassed by this response and trying to comfort himself, he added: "the government wants to give you more roads, more water and more hospitals." Now, the old woman more intently fixed her eyes on the speaker. The young man smiled, delighted that his training had not been in vain. Before the smile could fade from his face he hurriedly summed up: "*health for all by the year 2020*... your grandson will be cured." He paused and relaxed as an orator would who had just recalled and uttered the key words - the ultimate sentence - to his speech.

At the mention of a cure the sick boy painstakingly rose, tried to lean on his elbows, raised his head and mumbled some syllables, then softly fell back on the mat that he slept on. Upon resettling on the mat he was plunged into fits of grates, coughs and hisses that led him to cling onto his sister's leg nearby. He had called attention to his presence; the others watched quietly and keenly as if registering every movement that he was making. There was no doubt that he had recorded his existence so that even after he had completed his gesticulations a deafening silence reigned as only his grunts pervaded the air. Almost all

the hair had peeled from his head, and the features of the skull stood out pointedly. The eyes had sank into deep sockets and the jaw bones were panga-sharp, making the cheeks depress into the mouth reminding one of a carcass that had just been devoured by dogs. One seeing the boy covered with that battered blanket could be excused for thinking that it was a small pile of rags awaiting disposal.

While the other people stared at the boy, his grandmother disentangled herself and took a detour. The mention of all the expected achievements of the census could not even shake a single eyelash of hers. These enumerators were master recollectors, they indeed had superb collective memories, because she had been told the very same thing in the past five counts. She had first been enumerated before she went through initiation into womanhood and from then on five times-through marriage to widowhood - she had meekly answered to the national call. Five times she had been asked the changeless repetitive questions and in these five times she had given the almost changeless monotonous replies. And now the sixth time, half a century down the road, the selfsame questions were being put at her.

"What do you want?" the old woman suddenly burst from her reverie.

"But Sug..."

"Look there. Those are the last children left. Since you last came to take our number, their parents have gone... have you now come to take my remaining descendants?"

The officer was tongue-tied. He wished he would have the words and courage to assure the old woman that there was no direct relationship between the illness gnawing her grandson and the task that he was here to perform. Everyone in the village felt sorry for her. She had had to contend with three burials of close relatives in just a span of five years. And it seemed that the next calamity was not far for the ailment in the boy was the same one that had killed his mother, his father before her and an uncle before him. The sickness had no known cure and, as a night-

runner come to exhume the remains of the dead, it was talked of in hushed tones. Few spoke about it beyond their houses. Many knew that it was HIV - AIDS.

Outside the old woman's hut the wind went on blowing - it had risen in intensity since the arrival of the intruders. The grandmother found her mind journeying again. In the past that she now met, a whirlwind gathered and, moving like the arrow of a seasoned marksman, went right onto the face of the sick man spread on a hide under a mango tree. The man was seized by a sneeze which gathered into two sneezes, three sneezes, then into a thunderous cough. In less than two minutes these matured into convulsions. By the time these movements ended a group of people stood around him. They simply gazed, first at the man on the ground and next at one another. Each looked at the neighbour with prompting eyes that communicated more than any words could. It was his mother who first stopped the gazing and moved closer to the man sprawled far beyond the hide on which not so long ago he had lain. She touched the feet of her son. They were cold. She looked back at the people still staring. She said nothing. She moved a few steps away, head bowed, and started sobbing.

Time was running out. "Old woman name the people that you have here?" The young man gave a command. Duty demanded it.

"Matiko Swagi," she gave the name of her deceased son.

The enumerator wrote. "Age?"

"He used to say that he was born soon after the war in Burma."

"Exact age!" he pursued the line of seriousness.

"About fifty".

Eyes glued onto his record book, pen stuck between his fingers, Marwa vehemently took note.

A whooping cry split the world outside. The young man looked at the elder as if alerting him that a trumpet had been blowing, summoning the latter to a mission. The elder stuck to his seat as one who well remembered the tenets of his training.

"Another person in this house?"

"Theresia Matiko," she named another departed. Marwa wrote. His companion was perplexed but remembering the severe look that had earlier directed him to confine himself to his terms of reference, he dared not interrupt.

Another whoop shook the skies.

"How old was she"?

"She was born during the Ikorongo migrations."

The officer hastily wrote. He quickly closed his record book. He rose. "Thank you Suguta." He was on his feet.

"But what of the others?" the old woman feigned wonder.

"We shall take care of them... we know them... I will fill their details."

"We move on!" the enumerator ordered the baffled mouth-staring and eyes-gaping elder. It was only after a hard shaking that he was tilted from his dazed state.

The outside world that the two entered was one of shouts, of screams, of pandemonium. This could tell only one thing: someone's kraal had been broken into and his cattle driven away. This was Nyatechi after all, a census day notwithstanding.

"We cannot continue in these circumstances," Marwa ruled as the two penetrated the night.

And as they trudged on into the depth of blackness a cry reached them, coming from where they had left. A different cry. An old woman was mourning.

ONUORA OSSIE ENEKWE

Interview with James Ene Henshaw*

Ene Henshaw

Enekwe: Dr. Ene Henshaw, your plays are very well known to the young people in this country. The remarkable thing about you as a playwright is that you use art to deal with the problems of the country.

*This interview took place on April 22, 1983, in Henshaw's residence in Calabar.

I would, therefore, like to start by asking a question which may seem too simple, though it is very important to us: What experiences inspired you to write?

Henshaw: No experiences at all. Actually, there is no background to this thing. What happened was that when I was a student in Dublin, theatre city, I was the secretary of the Students Union (Association of Students of African Descent). Well, I suppose I used to write very good minutes then. And when the boys and girls wanted a play to entertain our patrons and patronesses, they turned around to the secretary to write something to entertain them. So after a lot of arguments, I had to write a play. Thus, that was how the skeleton of *This is Our Chance* came to be. Everybody thought it was good and our visitors were quite impressed with the little that they saw. Having done that first one, and it was published, there was the urge to do a few more. But in the course of that I did bring in my own experiences and observations, probably, proposals at times. I can't claim more than that.

Enekwe: Thank you. That has taken care of a second question which would have come. And the second question would have been: Why are you not writing like other playwrights? Why are you obsessed with the problems of young people? I know that you then had the urge, but what other reasons or motives do you have for writing the way you do?

Henshaw: Primarily, I started writing for young people. We were quite young, seventeen, eighteen... It has always been clear to me that you have to direct what you are writing to the younger generation who are growing up so they can read and make up their minds and think of things around them. It is obvious that when an elderly person has lived his life or is in a certain track of society and life,

his character is fixed. But, for the youth, it is not only what he wishes to do that counts. The environment comes in his associations, what he sees on screens, on stage, and televisions, etc. Hence, what I have done is simple. And to be quite honest with you, in retrospect, I did not sit down one day and say that I was going to write something jolly good for these boys and girls. But, in the course of writing, the young people are still in my own mind. I bring in the old people, because the young people enjoy things about the older ones. But they also enjoy their "discos" as they too enjoy good fathers and mothers who can take a stand for or against something or the other. Thus, writing for the youth has come naturally. Let me say it like that, without any intentions or pretentions. I write in such a way that it will help teachers too and the good people - people I consider the ordinary people. In other words, I don't write something for which a child will look for a philosopher to explain. I write so that when he asks the teacher: "What is this?" he can get an answer or explanation straight away. Naturally, I won't say that I had been consciously or deliberately working towards it; it has been the modus - that's what I've done.

Enekwe: Which of your plays do you consider most important?

Henshaw: From the point of view of the whole country and other readers, I regard *Enough is Enough* as my most important drama. It is about people who were suspected to be sabotaging the war and were thrown into a detention camp. I saw immediately the advantage: it has a single setting. They are always there during detention. So, it is not a moving stage. It is about detainees in Biafra. For a change, it is deliberately directed not only to younger people, but also to adults and governments, people in general, who should know about the sufferings

that took place in a certain particularly unfortunate section of the Biafran community. Some of these people did nothing actually wrong, but war is war, as Axworthy said. That was how things went.

But of all the plays that I have written, the one I have personally enjoyed most is *Medicine for Love* because it makes me laugh, at the sheer futility of suffering so much to win an election, but ending no where. I should mention that when I was in the postgraduate school in Cardiff, Wales, I started to re-write *This is Our Chance*. That was the version that was actually published. This was an improvement on the one which I said was a skeleton in Dublin years before. And I did discover right from Dublin that thinking about these characters and trying to write something relaxed my mind, since it diverted me from my normal routine of professional duty and life. I think that I am now at a stage in which I can write something and hand it to my children to read and criticize. My wife, of course, doesn't have time for it. If she does, she starts criticizing it, from the very title, saying that the title is wrong. *(Laughs)* She hates seeing unfinished scripts lying about. She knows that whenever she threatens to burn them, I hurry to complete them. She criticized me seriously for ending *Enough is Enough* with "short sentences", instead of speeches as had been the case throughout the book. She said it gave her the impression that I was tired of the whole thing, and wanted to finish it up. Of course, I denied it stoutly. I wrote the play. But it has been always a thing my family is concerned about. Now and again, you are able to get a publisher who asks if you have something to publish. That is how those books have come out.

I think that it is a matter of luck really. A lot of people might have written better things, but they have got

nobody to publish them. They have got quite a lot of trouble with publishers in this country. The frustrated young writers accuse us the older ones of influencing publishers against them. I don't seem to see any basis for this. Though I can only speak for myself, yet I can't see people doing this sort of thing. But expansion of African literature will be difficult without the existence of oneaper, smaller, and more liberal publishing outfits.

Enekwe: I keep wondering: apart from that experience of staging or participating in the production of *This is Our Chance* in the sixties, I have not heard or seen any other production of your play.

Henshaw: That is surprising. The plays are produced so frequently that at times, I am really embarrassed. C.K.C. Onitsha, for instance, has produced every play I have published. We even got invitations from other parts of Africa. My wife and I are usually quite touched about these sentimental gestures across the continent. But you know, honestly, I do not know much about play production. A big play in the hand of a poor producer will become small. A small play in the hands of a knowledgeable and experienced producer will become very big. Since I am not engrossed in the production aspect, when I am invited to those plays, I enjoy them just as anybody else. I am so entertained with a good production that at times I laugh quite loudly with others, possibly to the surprise of those nearby. Perhaps one should not laugh like that at one's own plays. But this seems to be different. It is true I know what is coming up next. But every new group of players, with its own production, is always bringing out something new and distinctly ingenious. As I said, I find that I am very entertained and educated by the plays and their unending varieties in production.

Enekwe: I would like to get some information about your plays that have been staged.

Henshaw: Well, *Medicine for Love* was staged by a group of African students in London some years ago. And *This is our Chance* is very commonly staged. I think it is going on all the time. Once I was here and I got a note from a friend saying that the former Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, said that if I came to Lagos that I should call to see him. But when I got to Lagos, a doctor, an in-law of mine, told me that the Head of State had been on a tour to Ilorin. In the official program, *A Man of Character* was put on by the students of Queen Elizabeth College. It was so successful that the Head of State said that he wanted to see me whenever I came to Lagos. And it was the only time I slipped into Dodan Barracks actually. So, I have seen these plays in secondary schools. I don't know about the universities, but what I know is that before *Dinner for Promotion* was published, I sent the script to Professor Axworthy who was then at Ibadan. He put up the show at the Arts Theatre and then taped the whole play and sent it to me. I was very amused when these tapes were being played back. From the production and how things were going, I knew that in one or two places, he had moved characters a little forward or backward. And from these tapes, just from those two, I guessed what he must have done there. For example, this young man came along and he is hoping that his girl friend, the girl he is wooing, would come into the same room. So he arranges the seats, the way it is done in the original scripts. I gather from the voices and the laughter that he is actually busy. He does not just come and wait for her. He is actually busy so that he can show himself off in a better light. "Well, if she comes through this window, she will admire my beautiful

profile." This was perhaps what I wrote in the script. But from the way I listened to that tape, and what I gathered, I was able to guess what Professor Axworthy must have done in his production. At the last moment, I adjusted the action in the way which must have raised the big laugh from the Arts Theatre, Ibadan audience during a short period of action when no one on the stage was speaking at all. I figured that in the Ibadan production, when the girl Sharia arrived, the young man must have gently edged or nodged her towards the correct chair that would reveal his predetermined profile. So, I made the little adjustment in the final script. At the end of a scene when the two men were hanging up the boss's photograph, the Ibadan production added a simultaneous chant by the two men. "God bless Mr. Sipo." From the tape, I added it into the end of that scene as the publishers were cooperative, and there was just some space left to put in that short line. It was better than ending the scene in silence as I had done. It was the only play of mine that I was able to see or at least, to hear on tape before publication. If I had the opportunity I would have liked to see the script of my play produced, so that one readily sees its faults and inconsistencies, etc, before submitting it for publishing. But I have never had the luck. I am sure by now that people are not interested in any scripts, but in more books. Yes the plays are widely performed by interested people in the universities, but more particularly by teachers, principals of schools, teacher training colleges, lower forms of secondary schools, and upper forms of primary schools. All these people have been using the books for years. (I think "*This is our Chance*" "celebrated" its silver jubilee in 1981). What has been responsible for the reasonable spread of my books is, I think, the generosity of people who have been recommending these books and encouraging both children and adults to read them, especially seasoned and

knowledgeable people like yourself, Dr. Enekwe, who care for the future of the youths of this and other African countries, through the medium of drama.

Enekwe: Apart from the tape from Axworthy, have you received cuttings from newspapers, reporting about your plays on stage?

Henshaw: That used to happen but it stopped a long time ago. To be honest with you, I don't follow up reviews, and seeing my name in a magazine or especially in newspapers in connection with some play or another, or with literary criticisms and so forth. Routine observation interests me only momentarily. Productions, criticisms and reviews, etc, are a different world, that is your own world actually. But I think my own is just to keep scribbling these things, and then letting them go. There are no launchings (I escaped being involved in this, with ETHIOPE), hardly any advertisement. The plays move on their own. Well, as I have said, you are the judges of how useful these things would be to the country and future generations. Talking of cuttings, I remember many years ago, my publishers in London advertised *MEDICINE FOR LOVE* in a magazine in an African country. A letter came to the magazine in reply to the advert. It said "I am very interested in your advertisement about *Medicine For Love*. Please could you send me a sample of this medicine, so that if it proves effective, I can then order more" or something like that. The magazine publishers sent the letter to the publishers in London. They in turn sent it to me, with a note saying: "Well, over to you, please," or something like that.

Enekwe: You seem to be very methodical in the way you reflect African customs and traditions. Why is this so? Do you research your work or do you know a lot about the

traditions of our peoples?

Henshaw: I know quite a lot about Nigerian traditions, but I never want to be bugged down by them. I was brought up to regard tradition as a sacred inheritance, but also to realise its impediments and limitations in the course of progress.

I was born here in Calabar. I grew up and spent much of my pre-school childhood at Ikot-Ene, in a plantation across the Atimbo River at Akpabuyo. I remember it as a very happy place. And I think that my connection with villages from birth started there. There were some six natural streams. One of them was very sandy and we the youngest ones could go as far as the older ones. The sand was so white that it reflected the sun, and little fishes were swimming all over the place, between our little legs and all, in the clean clear bubbling waters. What I have described as "forest sounds" were very varied and interesting, and my grandmother and maternal uncle used to tell us children what each sound represented, especially those of the evening and night birds (which I brought into the Chorus in *Enough is Enough*.)

I also know Igbo and other customs and traditions quite well, or at least reasonably well enough to be able to put them in the correct setting when I am writing, and of course, to try and see and know what I am writing about when it comes to these things. I do not delve into customary and traditional details. I have particularly tried by my associations with, and reading about, African peoples, and peoples of African descent, listening to their stories, to get very close to knowing them, and the way they think and act.

I have, for instance, written a hitherto unpublished play

on the priest Akomfo Onokye (pronounced "Onochie") the hero of the well known golden stool of Ashanti.

Take us the Efiks, for instance, in this matter of tradition, my mother was a very talented person and an Efik poetess. You know here among the Efik, you have to live the culture, the whole thing or none.

That is why I get surprised about critics who say we should stop writing about the two-world theme, and especially by those who, at least, by implication, seem to consider our culture obsolete and primitive. Efik culture, though ancient, is always fresh and new.

But traditions, whether Efik, Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba, Edo and so on, have very many things in common. One play cannot depict the cultures of all peoples together, but of things common to them. That is why my plays try to embrace everybody everywhere in Nigeria, and in fact, in Africa, in themes, names, and other ways. The events in the plays themselves could happen in any corner of this country or the continent. As for the names in my plays, I am indeed aware that some critics become frustrated, or should I say, desperate, when they cannot nail fellows like Damba, Bemoulu, Nene Katsina, Ibiere Sua, etc. to some particular ethnic identity or affiliation, in Nigeria or elsewhere.

Enekwe: Well, I am not among those critics who think that we shouldn't write about our tradition. Tradition is very important. We cannot go on or progress in history unless we understand it. Now, this leads me to another question. In most of your plays, you are preoccupied with the relationship between tradition and change, between traditional religion and Christianity. I would like you to clarify your view.

Henshaw: Well, again there, what I am doing is to deal with what exists and not what we would like to exist. Somebody may like to say, that everybody in Africa is only married to one wife. But, all around you, it is very common to see people who have many wives in many villages and towns. In other words, it is a fact of life in our community set up. I try to put it in its own context. I can't write a book damning polygamy from the top to bottom, because I come from a very big family, my father had, and many of us have relatives who have more than one wife. So that is one life. It is in a specific milieu - that is what is going on, whether we like it or not. On the other hand, our generation who believe in marrying one wife and who will continue staying so will grow. They are very many. They are going to grow. There is no need anybody telling them that what they are doing is very wrong, because it is not traditional. These things have got to feature in literature. Remember, you are dealing with a single man; and at the same time, you are dealing with a community in which people are not doing the same thing that he is doing. The thing is to try and sort it out, and this is where the work actually comes in. And here I agree with you, I should not say a middle course, but I should suggest a course of common concern or unity, or may be, something you write which may be read in the village and could lead to cohesion and peace and friendliness, rather than separating the people. In my view, polygamy among "Christians" does not lead to unity at home or in society.

Enekwe: Thank you very much. What you are, in fact, saying is that we should always be aware of the determinism of history and environment. A lot of things determine the ways people behave. You cannot run away from your background or tradition, even though you still try to change things as you go on.

Henshaw: I think that I am much more positive than you have said. I am in effect, saying that we, the young people, should have the courage, the boldness to move in any direction that is genuinely good, that is not unAfrican. We should not be scared. It is necessary to put it very clearly that, "tradition must not be allowed to stand in the way of genuine progress," which is accepted by the whole human community to be good and to be progressive. I think we must take a stand against tradition in certain areas, as it was done against twins in this part of Nigeria, as you know, and will someday have got to be done about the *Osu* business in Igboland. Something will have to be done somehow. I have written a play on the *Osu*. It is not published yet.

Enekwe: Do you expect to publish that soon?

Henshaw: Yes, it is with Hodder and Stougton in London. It is one of the things that I sent to them. I had written *Children of the Goddess*, dealing with a very bad custom, which was taken at the time to be quite normal. In the latest play, I am dealing with another custom which is bad. These things have just got to get out of the way and let things move. How and when is beyond me in this play. Someone is pleading to be converted into an *Osu* so that he can marry his *osu* girl.

Enekwe: Thank you very much. This takes us to *Children of the Goddess* which is very interesting. And I think it is a very important play, and should be read by anthropologists and people in Religion, who want to understand maybe what happened in Africa in the past. Something fascinates me about this: you have brought in these white people who work very hard to spread their religion, their belief system and who have converted some Africans.

But, at the same time, these white Christians are willing to accept that the African gods should be respected or accepted by their worshippers. For instance, Asari is allowed to thank the goddess of the River. And Caroline says to her that her children belong to the goddess also. What would you like to say about all this?

Henshaw: It is quite consistent with what we have spoken earlier. Ours is a very mixed society at all levels. Apparently, any way you look at it, we don't have the bourgeoisie and the proletariat or all those divisions we hear about in other places, although people are trying to cook them up somehow or other. What is happening, take my father's family, for instance, is that some of us are Roman Catholics and some of us are Presbyterians. We have our Henshaw Town Church which is Presbyterian. Whether you are a Catholic, a Presbyterian, or whatever, you must go and worship at Henṣhaw Town Church sometime or the other. Looking at the various facets and various opportunities and interactions in Africa, I think it is extremely interesting. Somebody has said that these people are still with the goddess, in spite of what God has done for them. You see the white man here will never understand what the Efik goddess means. He will never... Only Efik people of Calabar can understand what our goddess *Ndem* is all about. Okay, a person in Igbo village in Ibibio village or Efik village or any where will understand what a man does when he puts a pot at the foot of a tree and then pours drink there. People think that they are worshipping the tree. Even Talbot, I think, by his emphasis on trees and things like that, although he thinks that they are doing it for the spirits, invariably creates an idolatrous conception in the minds of readers.

It is the same thing as believing that Roman Catholics kneeling before statues are adoring or worshipping

images. I think that I will explain this further by making a little statement here. The Efik live and move on a traditional tripod, made up of the *THRONE* (i.e. King or Obong of Calabar). the *EKPE*, and the *NDEM*. For the "Ekpe" (literally the leopard) we can substitute "*FOREST*" and the NDEM, we can say, the *Water* or the *RIVER*. What I have called the "Tripod" is, therefore, made up of the throne, the forest, and the water, or the King, the Ekpe Cult, and the Ndem Cult.

We all pay allegiance to the Obong. But ritually there is the Ekpe cult which as you know, before the coming of the whiteman, was the former administrating and policing agent. Together with the Throne and the Ndem, Ekpe constituted the tripod which formed the government of the Efik. The Ekpe was (and is still) the most powerful of the three arms of the Efik Government. The Ekpe has its own writings, and its own language. These three were always interacting and reminding the Efik, wherever they might be, that they were united and governed by a Providential trinity which *ABASI IBOM* (God Almighty) had put on earth to protect them.

In *Children of the Goddess*, the THRONE was represented by the King. The NDEM was there, represented by the goddess. The only absentee in this play which could be included in a production was the "Ekpe" or FOREST. This is easily represented by people on "the other side." That was the setting when the missionaries arrived. Things happened. The prayers of the missionaries and their converts were well answered. But Asari attributed it all to the goddess. And the responsible and good missionaries would let it end like that, despite some dismay and disappointment. They seemed to say: "Leave her alone. That is how God

wanted her to live." They were right. After all, her prayers were to the goddess and these too, were answered. Ultimately it was "ABASI IBOM" ("EZE ENU" - See Arinze's book on Igbo sacrifices) who answered both prayers. It, therefore, became a matter of the triumph of deep believers, each sticking to his or her own. The missionaries won converts. But Asari was adamant. What you see there is, I believe, exactly what happens in life. Treat some patients as you like, it is the juju which receives the final "thank you," even when they know the truth. Asari was far more genuine and honest than these.

When I was thinking about the resolution of this play, which could as you know have been done in a number of ways, the obvious and the expected solution was to have killed the children, and let the missionaries suffer from their "presumption". But the missionaries themselves were only praying for the repose of the souls of the two babies and not for a miracle. Or were they? At any rate, Asari's "conversion" would have been rather too sudden, rather unnatural. (She was a worshipper of the goddess and the goddess did appear to her, and had shown evidence of intervening in her favour; even the return of Abraham who had been stolen away in a slave ship could, to her, be a sign of good things to come - through the goddess. Note the water sequence: The "Water" where she met the goddess - the "Water" which took and brought back Abraham - the "Water" which fell in the form of rain on the exposed leaves. Many other things in her mind distinctly pointed to the benevolence of the goddess, whatever the missionaries were doing. At any rate, no matter what one does, no missionary or politician can convert everybody in any given community. Among even those who receive the greatest benefits, some always have "reservations". Asari was not among such. She was firmly with the goddess. The King could not help her. The

Ekpe was (and is) not a woman's thing. It was "Water" that did it for her.

Enekwe: So, you are then saying that the missionaries behaved like missionaries in the *Children of the Goddess*?

Henshaw: Well, I am not an expert on missionaries. I know that the ones I dealt with had to beat me up quite a bit to get me going. I can't say what each set of missionaries would do under the same circumstances. But I think it would be wrong to convert the girl at the last page of the book just to make the Christians win. (Laughs). And it is well to remember that these were most likely Presbyterian missionaries (A man and his wife, etc) and their attitude could have been different from those of other missionaries.

I have mentioned to you that I have written a yet unpublished play on the "*Osu*" theme. In this play about the so-called *osu* girl, there is a character there, a priest, a fellow I call "Ijeoku". He goes around with missionary zeal converting people into the Osu thing (while he does part-time work as a herbalist in a University Teaching Hospital). So, this thing is not the monopoly of Christian missionaries alone. Everyone is against the Osu girl, except one steadfast couple who suffer for their steadfastness. In Asari Amansa's case, there is that uncompromising steadfastness. Both are well rewarded. The Christians "lose" Asari in one play. But Ijeoku loses *ASAYI NWA-NNEM* to public sanity in my play of that name.

Enekwe: What problems have you encountered in terms of technique in your writing?

Henshaw: In fact, I have no idea about the writing profession

(Laughs). As a matter of fact, one thing that keeps me going in writing is that I feel that I am not bound by laws. It is not only that I am not bound by your laws. I don't even know the laws of writing, as you professionals know.

This ignorance itself, I think, is a very good thing in this matter. So having got no qualms about how the characters are moving, all I say to the children is: "Don't stand in front of any person," as any teacher would say. "Let his father and mother see him too." But as you know, Dr. Enekwe, I have been a full-time doctor, very busy. So, the thing that any writer would have finished in two months, maybe two weeks, I'll probably take a year and half writing. And there are so many scruples, because I always have the feeling that I am writing a medical paper, that is, a paper for a medical journal. So, it takes a lot of time. One would like to write the thing and let it go. But, you couldn't, because each time you read the thing, you are not satisfied. So, from the point of view of technique, I think that what I would say is that I am very much interested in the characters I create. The plot is very important. But all the same, I think in writing for young people, though they would be interested in the plot, the story, they would, however, be far more interested in what the characters are, or what they represent on the stage, especially the impressions these characters create and leave on their minds.

After all, when you think of plot, take the famous *Merchant of Venice*, it is rather thin and almost unnatural, even for those days of extremists (which are back again). I think it is the characters of the play and what they say and how they say it, that has made it (in my view) a famous play. I hope this is not literary profanation. Even in *Macbeth* and so on, the characters are more pronounced than the plot (though in *Macbeth*, I suppose,

the plot is so strong that at times it overwhelms some of the minor characters, yet without Lady Macbeth, Duncan and the weird ones, the plot could not have been as forceful. Bernard Shaw, you will agree, is mostly characters and words rather than plots. I have to confess that it is very long since I read or saw these plays.

Enekwe: That is true. Characters are very important. At this moment, before I go into the next question, I think that I would tell you that we know about a medical doctor who was a playwright. In fact, one of the greatest playwrights of the modern theatre, was Chekhov, who was also very much interested in character, very intricate and delicate qualities of character more than many of his contemporaries. And, in fact, most of his plays, we say have no plots. Just people interacting like in real life. How does your profession influence your writing? Because you know that Bambulu for instance in *This is Our Chance* seems to have much knowledge of the medical profession. The way you look at things seems to relate to your profession.

Henshaw: The medical profession being an art, but one that is based on science, gives great intellectual scope to the outburst of latent talents which show themselves in music, paintings, writing, scientific inventions within and outside the profession. I have always had in mind to write some simple plays for young people on public health themes but I have not been able to do so. Perhaps I could use this opportunity to mention a play which I hope will be published for the Centenary Celebrations of the Roman Catholic faith in what was called the *Vicariate of Southern Nigeria*. The play is called *A Song to Mary Charles: Irish Sister of Charity*. This Mary Charles was the historical founder of the religious society called the "Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus". This was the first indigenous

society of Catholic nuns in Nigeria, and gave inspiration to many of such societies that followed. I did not know anything about Sr. Mary Charles Walker, until the Rev. Sister Mary Gertrude Nwaturuocha (H.H.C.J), the then Superior General of the Order, approached me several years ago, to write a historical drama about the founder of their Order. I told the Mother that I could not do it, because I did not know who on earth that lady was. Mother Gertrude, residing at the Society's Convent at Owerri, pressed on with the matter. She sent people round the world: Rome, Ireland, everywhere they know Mary Charles had been, right to her very home and her remaining distant relations still alive. All the archives were dug up for material. At one time, there was so much material that I begged the nuns to stop supplying more.

The great drama of Mary Charles started with an invitation from Bishop Shanahan to the Irish Sisters of Charity for volunteers. Mary Charles volunteered. The Order turned her request down. She appealed to the Pope who upheld her appeal to go Calabar and join Bishop Shanahan at Onitsha. Mary Charles came out as a lonely missionary nun to Calabar, which was part of the Vicariate under the great Joseph Shanahan.

Mary Charles built a whole Convent School at Calabar, opened clinics and Convent schools in many parts of Ibibio land. Later she founded the first African (West African) indigenous society of nuns, "the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus". *A Song to Mary Charles* is in five acts, with some ten scenes or so. It was staged at Owerri and other places and at the African Club, Calabar, where I had the privilege of seeing it acted by the postulants of the Society from Owerri.

Mary Charles was received back into her Order, and from

there, she volunteered again in her old age to go out to Zambia where she formed another indigenous Society of Sisters "Handmaids of the Blessed Virgin." She died and was buried in Zambia. During the occasion of the centenary of her birth, when this play was performed as part of the activities, the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus exhumed her remains from Zambia, and brought them back to Calabar where they were buried in the Convent School which Mary Charles had built.

Most of the scenes of the play take place in Dublin Ireland, and partly in London. Several occur in Nigeria. I think being a doctor did give me a particular scope here to go deep into the issues, analyse them, translate the various arguments and points of view which raged among the different groups among the Irish Sisters of Charity and the Jesuit fathers who were called in to advise the Congregation on whether Mary Charles should be allowed out to Nigeria or not.

Indeed, considering that I visualised what I was going to write about and wrote it freely, I had never been subjected to limiting myself to make and counter arguments which actually took place in real history and whose records are still available for verification. The Nigerian audience in 1981 thought that I did a good job. I too as usual enjoyed the play like others. But, as I said, it was a new experience to write a historical play about events which mostly took place in convents in Dublin and London, and a relatively small part of Calabar. The dedication is to the works of Charity and Education of Ekandem, Shanahan, Heery, Arinze, Moynagh Gertrude Nwaturuocha, Theresa Akuwe, and other foundation members of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. The book of the play should be out by August, 1985, the first publishing ventures of *ETEWA (NIGERIA) Ltd.*

Yes, certainly, being an actor does help in the attitude of the other or perhaps even the musician if the doctor is one. But one has to be careful not to project one's profession too much into the thing. People go to the theatre to be entertained, not to be scared (laughs). The play can be staged in the field there, and the players could come in through the audience. Well, it is not a new idea. You know far more of that than I do.

But this business of screen and no light worries children so much. You can put up a show at a time when people play football in the evening by about 4.30 p.m. By 6.30 p.m., everybody can go home. In one of those, I actually intend that the whole stage should be there, like in the medieval tradition. From here, we enter there and go to the next - but you see, that is too mechanical. It will make them come in and out. I think that what I would emphasize is that the main guiding spirit in my plays is presentation to simple people. Even if words that are not so common are used, then the child is expected to ask his tutor or go and look it up in the dictionary. I use simple words any way, like a man is an *oaf*. Well, just a small word, but it sounds good, but a child may ask, "What is that?" In fact, there is no sophistication in these things, I mean in the intellectual, point of view. But in *Enough is Enough*, where the civil war (serious matter) is dealt with, language and the way of narration are much more serious than in the others.

Enekwe: Thank you. I notice that very often you invent names for your characters and settings. In *The Children of the Goddess*, for instance, everybody would see it is based in this part of Nigeria. But you don't use any familiar name: maybe, one or two of the names of the characters are Efik/Ibibio names. Why do you do that?

Henshaw: Well, that is very deliberately done. I think that I work very hard at that particular thing, what you have detected as "invention." It's true that they are actual inventions or hitherto unlikely combinations. I start a new script with letters or combinations of letters, in which "X", "Y", "Z", "Q", "R", "T", (now that I come to think of it) seem to be used very frequently before other letters come. But before this, I have tried to substitute temporary names for the above characters. The names might change several times before the play is finally written. I don't know what others do, whether they choose the names first before they start to write. It is true that I have now and again made attempts to start with names. But the names seem to be a distraction, and I keep them to the end. The unnamed "X", "Z", and "P" or "ZK" or "PT", etc, give me free scope to create the full character. Having seen the character clearly, then I give him what I think is an appropriate name. I try to "invent" names to avoid hasty coincidences. You know in Africa, coincidences are taken very seriously. If in Europe, a Mr Smith keeps meeting a bad character on the stage by that name, he will believe it is a coincidence. Okon who constantly sees his name being made the "bad" character will start to suspect that if it is not him you are writing about, it must be his father or something like that. But the main reason for what you have asked me now is my effort to achieve a sort of national involvement that is going across the borders. A girl is called Nene Katsina. (Nene is a Calabar pet name). I have another name like "Olu Ita." "Olu" of course is Yoruba. Ita is from Calabar and Ibibio.

In *Dinner for Promotion*, the actor there is "Koyeh" (my short form of the Ibo, "Okoye"). It sounds simple. But it took me a long time to get at an Ibo name that could be borne by any other indigenous communities "without prejudice" on either side. But I am sure many young

"Okoyes" are answering "Koyeh" as others have even Christened themselves "*Damba*", "*Bambulu*", "*Serinya*", and so on.

Then there is the matter of getting known Nigerian names to be pronounced correctly by foreign readers. When my publishers first saw the name "*DUPE*" in *Medicine for Love*, their keen-eyed editor immediately wrote back to say that something should be done about that name, because it will be pronounced outside Nigeria as a name meaning to dupe or a swindler. I immediately wrote back to say that an "H" should be added to it, to make it "DUPEH". And we were all satisfied. So, there are not many angles to this "invention" business. It is hardwork. But I like it. It is original. (In subsequent scripts, "FUNKEH", etc, have come in.) I forgot to mention that "*IBIERE-SUA*" and "*BEKINWARI*" came from Kalabari. Or should I say "Ibiere" is Kalabari, "*USUA*" is Cross River. "Ibiere Usua" is not dramatic, it is not smooth in tone, and if drummed into a line of poetry could cause confusion. But by dropping the "U" in "USUA" I got "Ibiere Sua" which is feminine with almost a "dramatic" ring. "Bekinwari", believed by some reviewers at one time to be a combination "Bekin" and the name of "Warri" town, was actually the name of the mother of a distinguished Kalabari friend. In *Enough is Enough*, a special name had actually to be invented for a certain character - "Ufanko". It sounds Efik or Ibibio somehow. But actually there is nowhere in the Cross River where there is such a name, except perhaps they have already started calling themselves by that name. "Fan" as you know in both Efik and Ibibio, means "a friend", and "ko", means "ever there." Together it means "friend ever there". He was a "slippery" character and it was necessary not to attach any clearly definitive name of those ethnic groups to him. I work very hard, as you can see, to get at these names, to

see that they are suitable, that they sound good for their part. An example is "*Ajugo*" in *This is Our Chance*. Now, let me tell you something that people could be perfectly entitled to disbelieve. I worked very hard indeed to get a beautiful feminine name to substitute one of my "XY" things. It had to be feminine sounding and absolutely original for my favourite character in *Dinner for Promotion*. Just as it took me a lot of sweat to arrive at "Kudaro" in *This is Our Chance*. Finally, I filled two foolscaps, both sides each to arrive at the name *SHARIA*. I was so delighted, I clapped my hands spontaneously, you know the way one does when you are alone in the house, and the "Green Eagles" pull out a good one on a ferocious looking team from any "brother", (or is it) Sister - country. In fact, a friend asked me where I got that beautiful name. Years later you could imagine my surprise when the controversy broke out over the *SHARIA COURTS* in Nigeria. Could you imagine a thing you had worked so hard to achieve, invent being a common name in the newspapers and the radios everyday? Later on, it started to amuse me, but it was not funny at first. Think of all the effort I had made through the years to avoid involvement in national controversies, though making my views clear through the mouth of my characters! When I was invited to the play recently in a University, the producer had changed SHARIA to "SHELLA". I knew why. So, Doctor, this matter of a name is very important in the Nigerian and African context. If the setting itself is so "omnipresent" as to be almost invented too, all the better.

It would be easier and indeed compulsory to use specific names if one is writing about specific deities, and things peculiar to some specific ethnic group. No name for instance was invented as such for *Children of the Goddess*. Occasionally, I have done a little of

"immortalising," as you gentlemen call it, with a few names. No early missionaries in Calabar bore the name "MACPHAIL" or "MCPHAIL". But the missionaries in mind were Scottish. Dr. McPhail was one of the top doctors of the Chest Hospital at Harefield in Middlessex near London. It was and is still a very famous place. The old man discovered my interest in literature. It happened to be his "outlet" too. The other young "housemen" were busy with other hobbies. It was "this one from Nigeria" who was after his own heart. I drove him around to wherever he regarded as the "landmarks of literature" not too far from our hospital. I remember the day he took me to Stock Burgess, I believe that was the name, and actually showed me the Church about which Gray wrote the elegy. "Look doctor" he said, "the ivy mantled tower is till here..."

Enekwe: I don't know if you have read Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel.* I ask because Lakunle in the play seems to have been based on Bambulu. That is the young man that is addicted to the use of the dictionary and big words.

Henshaw: Well, I read the play very long ago... As simple as she is, I would not use Sidi to test the virility of a swine like that. I will never write in such a way. Well, I suppose in literature it is good. But there seems to me to be something which is not exactly traditional in the resolution of that play. An innocent girl, misled, tricked, and assaulted by an old and spent buffoon is normally and naturally shocked, ashamed, and remorseful to the point of suicide when she discovers what has happened to her, being so terrified by her experience, especially by the fact that she has to face the whole village. In an Efik village, no matter how far away from Calabar, this play would have been an unfinished script. Far from her having the temerity to pack into his (the old clown's) house, hell would have been let

loose on the discovery of the crime (against youth, innocence, and tradition itself) and the old sexual maniac and his mad old, desexualised wife, would have escaped from the village for their lives.

Her parents would have brought the matter to "Etubom" of the family. In the quiet silence of the "Ekpe" fraternity, if the old fool were a member, they would have "hummed" like bees at the disgrace he had exposed himself to.

The women would have heard about what the old man had done. They would have simmered with hot secret thoughts about what to do.

If the father of Sidi were not satisfied with the Etubom of their family, they would make their way, through creeks and forests to lay the matter before the throne (The Obong in Council).

As Sidi's companions are deciding how best to ostracise her she would first have appealed through them to reconcile and restore her to respectability, having already appeased her immediate relatives.

Much as I admire and respect Wole's gifts, and appreciate that his literature is bound to reflect him as the angry firebrand who wishes things to be "corrected", not in the "long terms" as the expression goes, but "NOW", yet I cannot help but conclude in remembering this play - which, as I said, I read very long ago - that this, to my mind, is a play which seems to take place in a large glass jar containing four people, and the rest of the world, including what is usually regarded as acceptable tradition among all peoples, is outside the jar. So, it remains for the poor teacher, whatever he was called, to cut out an exit

for himself (perhaps with a small piece of diamond he had hidden in his pocket) to make his way out to the rest of the village and the world. What that mad old polygamist did, in my view, was a RAPE. While Lucrece was assaulted with "speedy deligence", the old fool (with the aid of his accomplice) did his with "cunning deligence". Both as all rape are "a foul offence". But the reactions of both the seduced characters were opposite. That of Lucretia was like what I have described above as being natural and traditional. What character this Sidi, I mean the girl, was, I will never understand. Perhaps if I read the play again, I might be able to understand better, the merits of its resolution.

Enekwe: *Jewels of the Shrine* is one of your best works. It shows that you can be serious and humorous at the same time. But why do you introduce the voice of the grandfather, frightening the children out of the stage in a realistic play. Would you be surprised if a director decides to cut off that part?

Henshaw: No I would not be surprised at all if he cuts off the part, but, bearing in mind the African audience, he has left, but he is still hovering around. In other words, for the children, they can cut it off. You see, the father is having the last laugh, which would be, of course, in the minds of the children or the audience a kind of auditory hallucination, if we should translate it into medical terms.

Enekwe: But, the hallucination is also for the stranger because you say that all of them rush out of the stage. If the stranger had remained, it could have been considered a hallucination.

Henshaw: Yes, he showed some boldness. He had played his part effectively. I imagined that he expected that. And

the Grandfather should be happy. You mean that rules out hallucination?

Enekwe: Yes.

Henshaw: Well, because he is now afraid; you see, even if you don't hear something, then suddenly two strong ("able-bodied") men start to run with panic in their faces, the chances are that you too will follow. At such times, the third party "leaps" first before he "looks". All right, Dr. Enekwe, even if you corner me there, I have still one more "escape route" to your question. That is to take refuge in "dramatic license."

Indeed, I have been surprised how "Grandfather's voice" at the end of this play has, through the years, evoked interest. It was Mr. Alan Simms of Hodder (who took my scripts to Britain and published the first set of plays) who first congratulated me for the introduction of the "voice", even before the play was published.

Enekwe: This has been a very fruitful discussion. I am really very grateful for this opportunity to interview you. Do you have anything that you would like to say, maybe a message to your audience and others, your views on literature, drama, the relevance of literature and drama to our people?

Henshaw: Sometime ago, I think it was during the Festac, I wrote an article in *The Nigerian Chronicle*. The title was "Return to orthodoxy." My theory is that, while we have moved with progress all along and with civilization it has brought, we should occasionally stop to reflect or meditate a little about our own background and the dignity and respect that Africa embodies. I think that when people are involved, for instance, in political

struggle, squabbles and various social antagonisms, to put these things mildly, they should remember that a unifying element remains. It is the basic concept of African traditional life which is common to all and which must never be assaulted by anyone. This I believe exists in all Nigerian peoples and in the ethnic communities. The need for widening the scope of our coming closer together to understand each other better, by means of literature and drama, in particular, has always been there. And there is still a great deal to be done. This better understanding should not be in a vague way, but should be in a really positive sense. The things that bring people together rather than those that are bound to divide them should be emphasized in our writing.

The best way of doing this, I think, is through drama. As I have said in one of my introductions, the novel is not indigenous to Africa. Drama is. It has a larger audience at a time than the novel. So, it is a very good way by which African thought and life can be inculcated. The basic principles in Christianity and Islam - people living according to their precepts and respecting the views of other people in religion and social concepts - can be taught. What I am saying in essence is that teachers and young people should be encouraged to write, read, and dance and express themselves.

Enekwe: It has been a very inspiring meeting. I would like to keep in touch with you, to get more information about you. Actually, I would like to write a book on you - where your plays would be studied, analysed and criticised one by one.

Henshaw: Thank you, Dr. Enekwe. If I might just go back a bit to this matter of getting drama to bring people together. I really wish that dramatists, especially the younger ones,

try to get out from their immediate ethnic surroundings. Let us hope that the present stage in which we all write about our ethnic communities is a basic stage in the development of dramatic writing in the country. The next phase should be more national, more historical in the orthodox dramatic sense, and more optimistic for the future of the country and continent.

It is surprising that after twenty five years of Independence, there is yet to be a play depicting the conflict and the victory of the independence struggle, and so on. Unfortunately, we do see young educated youths who appear to have been born with or indoctrinated with inflexible attitudes. Young dramatists of their own "cohort" should specially direct their plays to them, so as to involve everybody in the process of bringing peoples within the same and between different ethnic communities together. At first, it looks impossible. BUT IT IS POSSIBLE. Others have done it. Why can't we? If different communities don't understand themselves, how can they be expected to understand what Nigeria or Africa is all about? I thank you Dr. Ossie Enekwe, for the opportunity of the interview, for the generous things you have said about me during the interview, and especially for the encouragement which you have given me. I am sure my wife Caroline whom you have met would like to associate herself with what I have just said.

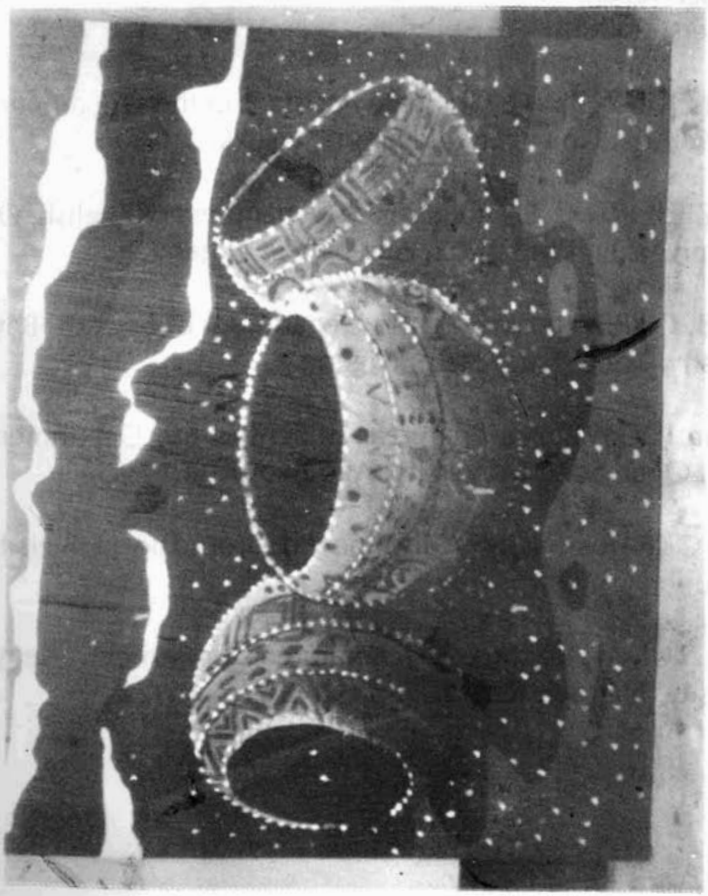
I would not be unfair to anyone if I should say that since these books were published, I have had literally dozens of interviews, questionnaires and correspondence. But in none of these has a clearer literary searchlight been poured, in an almost line by line critique and probe into the plays themselves as you have masterfully done.

Perhaps the reader of this interview may not be aware that

quite a lot too was said as "sidelines" which are not included here.

Both in the interview and the sidelines, I have learnt a lot from you, Dr Enekwe. And thanks for gently reminding me that *Cherry Orchard* was written by Chekov not Ibsen, that Chekov did not write *Rosmersholm*. But Ibsen did. And so on.

Thank you. God bless you and yours. And safe return from Calabar to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.



Okpara Chukwuemeka
African Landscape
Acrylic on Canvas

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