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Achebe's Igbo Poems: Oral Traditional Resources and the Process of 'Deschooling' in Modern African Poetics

By

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One of the major directions into which African creative energies are being channeled by the ongoing movements for the decolonization of African literatures (Chinweizu *et al*, 1980; Ngugi, 1975) is the rediscovery and use of African languages as mediums for mainstream literary expression. Part of this trend is what has been described as "aesthetic transfer" from the oral tradition (Raji, 2002). The leading champion of this Afrocentric poetics, Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, has already abjured the use of English as a primary medium of expression. Since his *Caitani mutharaba-Ini / Devil on the Cross* (1980), he has written mainly in his native Gikuyu and occasionally in the East African *lingua franca*, Swahili. For Ngugi, by writing in the language of the masses, the African writer not only breaks the cultural and aesthetic alienation and ambivalence inherent in the use of a colonial language as an instrument for fighting colonialism and its consequences, he is also enabled to reach the masses directly in a way that has been demonstrated by the remarkable success of *Ngaahika ndeenda / I Will Marry When I Want* (1977), a play co-authored with Ngugi wa Mirii, which was performed to extraordinarily enthusiastic audience acclaim in several Kenyan villages. The rapport established when the masses are addressed by their writers in their own languages reveals the roots of the failure of much of the literary expressions of African nationalist ideologies that have been carried through over the past few decades in the colonial languages. Because of the linguistic divide, hardly any of these expressions (Pan-Africanism, Negritude, the African Renaissance movement, or the movement for projecting the African personality) succeeded in bridging the gap in consciousness between the masses and the Western-educated elite. Besides, the growth of African literature in European languages is deemed to have left African languages the poorer while enriching the already powerful European languages. But, because the African writer has already established an international presence and is no longer in a position to withdraw into a solitary cocoon, there will continue to be a demand for the translation of his works into the erstwhile colonial languages which have since established themselves as world languages. Indeed, African writers would, ironically, subvert one of the main goals of African literature, should they confine themselves to their native tongues. In a situation in which there are over 2500 distinct languages (250 in Nigeria alone), writing in African languages would amount to an unwholesome "speaking in tongues," unless there is adequate translation strategies to effectively mediate between various narrow linguistic nationalisms and the postcolonial imperative of fusing a pan-African consciousness through literature as through the other arts. In recognition of this inescapable reality, Ngugi has been offering his non-Gikuyu readers in Africa and abroad English translations (as a matter fact recreations) of his post-1980 Gikuyu writings, the most monumental being his English

rendering of his picaresque political novel, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). But not every African writer can afford to combine such so much energy with the usually strong revolutionary commitment driving his art. Many will continue to write in the colonial languages. Thus, as Echeruo (in Azuonye, 1987: 175) asserts, with reference to his own personal aesthetic, "To try to write in Igbo would be just doing what I will be expected to do now, and, it would be an exercise, pure and simple." But even among those who opt to write in African languages, few can afford to recreate or translate their works into English, French or the Lusophone languages. It follows that, if Ngugi's example is followed to an appreciable degree by other African writers, translation is bound to establish itself as a major force for delivering African visions of the world to a larger African and international audience.

Between 1978 and 1982, Africa's world-renowned novelist, essayist, cultural philosopher, and poet, Chinua Achebe, in fulfillment of a long-standing expectation, published his first two poems in his mother-tongue, Igbo. The full texts of these two poems are presented below with parallel English translations. Both are based on well-known Igbo folk songs and, on the surface, seem to be so close to these oral traditional originals as to be indistinguishable from them. The first, "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo" (lit. Okigbo's Funeral House) is based on a popular funeral song, versions of which may be found in, among other sources, Ogbalu (1974: 184) and Uzochukwu (1978). First published in *Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo, 1932-67* (Achebe and Okafor, 1978), it was reprinted with significant structural and linguistic modifications in *Aka Weta: Egwu Aguluagu, Egwu Edeluede* (Achebe and Udechukwu, 1982). In 2004, a translation of the latter version by Ifeanyi Menkiti appeared in Achebe's *Collected Poems*, a translation which Achebe himself has proudly read at numerous public events such as his appearance at the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, at Harvard University in the Fall of 2008. Also contained in *Aka Weta* is Achebe's second Igbo poem, "Akụkọ Kpulu Ụwa Iru ("The Story That Turned The World Upside Down"), a piece based on a popular story-in-song or folk ballad. A delightful prose variant of this ballad appears as a story-within-a-story in D. N. Achara's allegorical romance, *Ala Bingo* (1933), while a song-version with many similarities to Achebe's poem will be found in Ogbalu (1974: 166-167).

The closeness of Achebe's two Igbo poems to their raw oral traditional sources raises a number of questions which will be dealt with in the discussion that follows the presentation of the texts. One key question concerns the limits of the rights of an individual artist to claim an oral traditional piece as his own intellectual property, be it in a re-arranged form or in translation. At what point does transcription and editing or translation give way to original creation? This is the so-called "folklore phenomenon" on which the International Copyright Convention has, up till today, taken no firm stand, preferring to leave national governments to use their own discretions to protect the rights of unknown or communal authors where there are grounds to believe that such rights have been infringed upon in the guise of re-arrangement or translation (Nwosu, 1982: 64). Does Achebe have any authorial as opposed to editorial rights to the two poems with incontestable oral traditional origins published under his name? Or are we faced with a case of plagiarism from the oral tradition? These questions are both aesthetic and ethical. But there are other purely aesthetic questions with which we shall be centrally concerned in this paper. These questions have to do with authorial intentions and audience. If Achebe can be credited with the authorship of these two poems, what exactly is the value of his ultra-traditionalist approach for African poetics? How does this approach relate to the technical achievements of his earlier and subsequent writings in English in which the

nuances and rhythms of the Igbo language are subtly (as is generally presupposed) worked into a distinctively Achebesque form of syncretistic English? To what extent does this experiment represent a viable model for literature written in African languages? The idea of "de-schooling", extrapolated from Illich (1972), will emerge in the course of our reflections on these questions. In Achebe's English language novels, stories and poems, we have a situation in which the creative process itself is a dynamic process of transcultural recreation, explication and interpretation within forms and conventions with which the readers schooled in the tradition of English letters are reasonably familiar. Words, phrases and fixed expressions such as proverbs are transliterated, explicated or made plain by dint of elaboration in the course of the narration. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for example, Achebe's technique of explicatory translation enables us to take in Igbo belief systems and thought patterns without any interruption in the flow of the narration, as in the third paragraph of Chapter 4, in which the reader is deftly introduced as follows to the role of *chi* in the hero Okonkwo's rise from abject poverty to social eminence and power:

At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands.

Similarly, in *Arrow of God* (1964), the hero, Ezeulu, says to his son "Go and be my eye there"—a transliteration of an Igbo phrase which poignantly combines the ideas of "Go and be my representative there," and of "Go and be my spy there."

But despite the impression that, in the above the examples, Achebe's impeccable English reflects the rhythm of Igbo folk speech, there is in fact no word-for-word correspondence between Achebe's syntax and the Igbo idioms which they invoke. On closer examination, it is easy to see that the illusion of syntactical correspondence has merely been created by dint of local color realism. The aesthetic subterfuge here deigns us to imagine syntactical correspondence when what there is on the page is actual close reference to local beliefs, customs and idioms. But in the Igbo poems at hand, there is a radical aesthetic re-orientation—a complete reach-back again to the idiomatic Igbo phrase in an effort at unlearning what has been imbibed through years of captive schooling in the canons of European poetics. Through this process, here described as 'deschooling' (after Illich, 1972), Achebe has returned full-scale to authentic Igbo folk speech and indigenous poetics leaving the task of explication and interpretation to the critic and translator. In the translations offered below, the numerous spelling and orthographical errors in Achebe's Igbo texts have been left without emendation in order to focus on the problem at hand.

The Poems

I. Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo (Okigbo' Funeral House)

First version, 1978

Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho

Who are we looking for?
Who are we looking for?
It's Okigbo we're looking for

Nzomalizo

5 Ojebe nku, nya nata
Ochub'iyi, nya nata
Ojebe afia, nya nata
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

10 Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

Ojebe nku, Ugboko
elikwania
15 Ochub'iyi, iyi
elikwania
Ojebe afia, uzu afia
elikwania
Ojebe agha, ogbonuke doo!
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

20 Nee egwu k'onabia
Nee ugu n'odaa
Ogu-egwu choo
Dike-ogu chaa
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
25 *Nzomalizo*

Egwu anaa!
Oti-igba muo!
Okolo nnem!
Okolo Igbo!
30 Okolobia n'ogbo mmee!
Ogalanya na be mmoo!
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

Second version, 1982

Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

5 Ojelu nku, nya nata!

Nzomalizo

5 If he goes to fetch wood, may he return
If he goes to fetch water, may he return
If he goes to the market, may he return
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

10 Who are we looking for?
Who are we looking for?
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

If he goes to fetch wood, may the woods
not devour him
15 If he goes to fetch water, may the stream
not devour him
If he goes to the market, may market noises
not devour him
If he goes to war, spirit-agemates, spare!
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

20 See the dance as it approaches
See war as it breaks out
Master-singer *choo*
War hero *chaa*
It's Okigbo we're looking for
25 *Nzomalizo*

The music is gone!
O my drummer!
My precious young man!
Everybody's young man!
30 Young man in the circle of blood!
Lord in the domain of spirits!
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

Who are we looking for?
Who are we looking for?
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

5 Did he go to fetch wood, may he return!

Ochul'iyi, nya nata!
Ojel'afia, nya nata
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

10 Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Obu onye k'ayi n'acho?
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

Ojebe nku, Ugboko
elinia!
15 Ochub'iyi, iyi
elinia!
Ojebe afia, uzu afia
soolia!
Ojebe agha, ogbonuke
biko chaalia!
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

20 Ezite egwu, onye
gagbalayi?
Eseta ugu, onye
gagbalayi?
Onye anakpo nwel'ife
oneme!
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

Ngwa, nee egwu k'onabia!
25 Ifugo na agha awa?
Ogu-egwu choo! Dike-ogu chaa!
Ifurozi na onye anakpo nwel'ife
Oneme!
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

Egwu ebee nibinja!
30 Mmonwu ayi ewelu
mgbachi naa!
Mmili amaa dike, maa
okanga!
Oja n'ajani mmoo
apiari!
Udu n'edu okpa-egwu
awari!
Okolo nnem! Okolo

Did he go to fetch water, may he return!
Did he go to the market, may he return!
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

10 Who are we looking for?
Who are we looking for?
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

If he goes to fetch wood, may the woods
not devour him!
15 If he goes to fetch water, may the stream
not devour him!
If he goes to the market, may market noises
stir clear for him!
If he goes to war, spirit-agemates,
please stir clear of his way!
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

20 When a new dance is learnt, who
will dance for us?
When war is provoked, who
will shoot for us?
Whoever is called is famed
for what he does well!
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

Now, see the dance as it approaches!
25 Have you seen that war has broken out?
Master-singer *choo*! War hero *chaa*!
Don't you see that whoever is called is
called for what he does well!
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

The dance has stopped suddenly!
30 Our mask has departed in the
heat of the festival!
The rains have drenched the hero,
drenched his companions!
The flute that praises the spirits
has been smashed!
The pot drum that spurred on the
dancer's feet is broken!
My precious youngman! Everybody's

Igbo!
35 Okolobia n'ogbo mmee!
Ogalanya na be mmoo!
Okigbo k'ayi n'acho
Nzomalizo

youngman!
35 Young man in the circle of blood!
Lord in the domain of spirits!
It's Okigbo we're looking for
Nzomalizo

Second Poem: Akukọ Kpulu Uwa Iru (The Story That Turned The World Upside Down)

Sole version, 1982

Danda ghelu enini
Ughe njenje
Ji lulu n'ikwu nnie
Na fa rasi k'okpu akia
5 Ji lulu n'ikwu nnia
Na fa rasi k'olu okpia

Diokpa mua kwokwokwo
Si n'оче kwepu ju ana
We sunye agba n'obo-okwu
10 We gbalu fee n'owele
Imacha onu n'opi ede
Ebe ijiji n'akwo aka
Owe mapue nya afo

Ijiji efebe fululum
15 Je febanye Mbe n'imi
Ebe ono n'enu ogo
Welu ata abacha-ncha
Mbe wesin'obunso
Si na nke bu alu emee!
20 Nya bu Mbe nwa Aniiga
Ogalanya ngada-nga
Ka ijiji n'eli nsi
Nesialu feba n'imi
Hia!

25 Mana alu nwelu ulu ya
Nso nwelu ife neso ya
Nke gabu emezughi fa
Ndi-mmoo gaba ogu
Onwu egbube alankasa
30 Owee bunite udu ngwo
Tiwasa Mgbada n'ukwu
Ebe Mgbada n'ezu ike

Nwa Mgbada soba ganagana

Whiteant spinned a yarn
Ughe njenje
That the yams that grew in his mother's home
They were as big as his fists
5 That the yams that grew in his father's home
They were as big as his thighs

Cockerel laughed *kwokwokwo*
Fell from his seat and filled the ground
And pushed his jaw into live-coal
10 And ran into the backyard
To wipe his mouth on a cocoyam leaf
Where Housefly was washing his hands
And burnt open his belly

Housefly flew *fululum*
15 And flew into Tortoise's nose
Where he was lolling in his easy-chair
Eating tapioca with palmoil sauce
Tortoise said it was abominable
Said that a sacrilege had been committed!
20 How could he, Tortoise, son of Aniiga
Great lord of the land
Have a shit-eating Housefly
Fly into his nose
Hia!

25 But an abomination has its profits
Sacilege has things that go with it
Which if not done in their fullness
When spirits go to war
Death will kill people indiscriminately
30 And he lifted up a gourd of raffia wine
And broke it on Hare's waist
Where Hare was resting

Poor Hare ran *ganagana*

Solu ba n'ogbo-achala
35 Namaghi na Akege
Ghasa n'onwo anya anwu
We zolisie nya ose

Akege akpua wololom
Ka satawum n'onu ewi
40 Ebe ewi nata aku
Nyana umu neteghete
Ewi enepuzia anya
Hei!

Beri ife di ogonogo
45 Kodine n'onu uzo ya
Osi obulu ogwu n'ole
Si umu ya n'agha awa!
Si umu ya na chi echiri!
Nyabu owele nalu jide!
50 Osi n'upu tipu gbawalu
Nyana umu neteghete.
Ebe fa n'agba onwu onwu

Ka nwa Enwe no n'enu
Nozi we fuchalia fa
55 Osi n'afua afunene!
Si n'aka n'aka akpoo
We maba sam-sam-sam
Si na nkwa felu n'ukwa
Si na ukwa felu n'ube
60 We tiwasa akwa okwa.

Okwa we kwaba akwa alili
We kwaba akwa ologholi:
Chi jil'eki efon'efo
Chi fol'efo ejin'eki
65 Igwe agbaba okilikili
Enu-uwa maba jijiji

Okpoko belu na ebenebe
Fu k'igwe n'erughali
Fu k'uwa n'emerebe
70 Nu ka Okwa n'eru uju
Melu opi tnye n'onu
We guba egwu uwa mmebi!

*Anu enu n'obu aghao!
Anu ani n'obu aghao!
Anu kpom, ngilima kpom*

Blindly into a bamboo grove
35 Not knowing that Green Snake
Lay there basking in the sun
And bruised him sorely with his feet

Green Snake crawled *wololom*
Ka sawatum into Rabbit's hole
40 Where Rabbit was eating palmnuts
She and her nine children
As Rabbit looked ahead of her
Hei!

Behold a long object
45 Lying at her door mouth
And she said, if this is a charm, may it not work!
Told her children that war had broken out
Told her children that the compound was closed!
So, let the backyard take and hold!
And she stormed out through her exit hole
50 She and nine children.
As they ran with death in their heels

Poor Monkey sitting on a tree
Caught a glimpse of them
55 He said he had seen the unseeable!
Went from one dry branch to another
And jumped *sam-sam-sam*
Jumped from palmtree to breadfruit tree
Jumped from breadfruit tree to black pear tree
60 And crushed Bushfowl's eggs.

Bushfowl cried a cry of grief
And cried a cry of doom:
May night never break into day
May day never darken into night
65 The sky began to turn round and round
And the earth began to quake

Hornbill perched on an *ebenebe* tree
Saw the sky as it was swirling
Saw the world as it was rumbling
70 Heard the Bushfowl as it was mourning
Took his horn and placed it in his mouth
And began to sing of the world's end!

*Beasts of the air, it is war!
Beasts of the earth, it is war!
Beasts kpom, ngilima kpom*

Mbenekwu yagham n'obu oso-o
Anu kpom, ngilima kpom

Kpom! Kpom! Kpom!
Anu kpom, ngilima kpom
Mbenekwu yagham n'obu oso-o
Anu kpom, ngilima kpom

Tortoise-on-heels yagham, it's time to flee
Beasts kpom, ngilima kpom

Kpom! Kpom! Kpom!
Beasts kpom, ngilima kpom
Tortoise-on-heels yagham, it's time to flee
Beasts kpom, ngilima kpom

For a proper appraisal of Achebe's originality in these two poems, it seems necessary to compare each of them with the available version of the oral traditional song on which it seems to have been based. In the case of "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo", the relevant text, contained in Ogbalu (1974: 184) and Uzochukwu (1978) runs as follows:

Ọ bụ onye k'anyị na-achọ?	Who are we looking for?
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
Ọ bụ onye k'anyị na-achọ?	Who are we looking for?
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
E Nweke k'anyị na-achọ?	E, it's Nweke we're looking for?
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
O chube iyi	If he goes to fetch water
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
Ya lata o	O may he return
5 <i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	5 <i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
O jebe ọlụ o	If he goes to work
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
Ya lata o	O may he return
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
O jebe ahịa o	If he goes to the market
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
Ya lata o	O may he return
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
Ọ bụ onye?	Who is it?
10 <i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	10 <i>Zọmalịzọ</i>
Nweke k'anyị na-achọ?	It's Nweke we're looking for?
<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>	<i>Zọmalịzọ</i>

At first sight, the case of mere copying or plagiarism of the oral traditional original seems difficult to refute. The same basic theme lines; the same refrain; and in the slot filled by the name, Nweke, in the traditional text, Achebe appears to have conveniently inserted Okigbo. But on a closer examination, the subtleties of Achebe's structural and stylistic efforts and the resultant artistic distance between the poem and the folk material gradually reveal themselves. Indeed, these effects become more pronounced with each re-reading or better, vocal recital. To begin with, Achebe's poem departs from the simple call-and-answer form of the folksong. The untranslatable refrain, *Nzọmalịzọ/Zọmalịzọ*, no longer occurs at the end of every line in an antistrophic pattern; it rather occurs at the end of each stanza as a motifemic coda, echoing rather than imitating the folksong pattern and cumulatively evoking the "search" motif in traditional funeral ceremonies. In such ceremonies, there is usually a procession of mourners through the village pathways, squares, homesteads, groves and everywhere associated with the dead. The procession is characterized by

ritual stampede, a fact reflected ideophonically in the refrain. The stampede is intended to reveal the hideout of the spirit of the dead if for any reason it is still lurking unhappily anywhere in the human world.

It is true that the basic theme lines and phrases of the traditional song have been retained for the most part in Achebe's poem, but these have been modified at various points to reflect the contemporary situation which the poem addresses and the heroic personality, Okigbo, which it celebrates. Thus, the phrase, "O jebe ọlụ" (If he goes to work) has been changed to "O jebe agha" (if he goes to war), and by the same token a number of new lines and phrases have been introduced to highlight aspects of the hero, Okigbo's remarkable combination of the life of contemplation (as a highly introspective and symbolist poet) and the life of action (as a soldier and *socialite*). Together with the traditional lines, the new lines and phrases combine to present an image of a particular historical personality whose life and death in action nevertheless fall within the orbit of the cyclical world-view of the Igbo, a world-view in which life is seen as an eternal journey from the human to the spirit world and from the spirit world back to the human world in a "returning to the human world" (*ilo uwa*, lit. re-incarnation) and "returning to the spirit world" (*ila mmuo*, lit. transition) that goes on forever (see Azuonye, 1989). As already pointed out, the essence of the traditional funeral rite of searching for the dead, in which context the traditional and modern poems are both set, is to ensure that the dead hero's journey back to the spirit world is auspicious. He is not expected to be seen in the human world again until he reincarnates after a full life in the spirit world. The celebrant thus envisions him as leading a normal life in the spirit world (going to fetch wood and water, going to work and war, etc) and it is his abiding hope that he does not fall into the hands of malevolent spirits as he journeys towards the dignity of ancestral status. Achebe's poem reifies the hints in the traditional song and creates a more coherent picture of the dead poet's glorious transition. At the end, we see Okigbo in the fullness of ancestral splendor—"Ogalanya na be mmoo" (Lord in the domain of spirits). The loss has been transmuted into joyful gain.

Achebe's conscious refinement of the traditional song into a personal statement reveals itself in a number of other ways in the revised version of the poem (1982), and these pose intriguing problems of cross-cultural and cross-aesthetic translation. To begin with, the prosody is reinforced by the introduction of such features as rhyme, pun and patterns of lexical matching in stanza's 4, 5, and 7, respectively. In stanza 5, the shift from "elikwania" (1978) to "elinia" (1982) seems designed to create a pattern of rhyme with *soolia* and *chaalia* while the shift from "elikwania" (1978) to "soolia" (1982) seems occasioned by the need for lexical matching with "chaalia" in the next line. In lines 20-24 of the 1982 version, the homonymous phrase "gagbalayi" (i.e. ga-agbalu ayi) appears to have been introduced for the word-play inherent in placing them side by side. In line 21, it means "will dance for us" while in line 23, it means "will shoot for us". In lines 32-34, pun is combined with alliteration and assonance in *oja n'ajani* (i.e. *oja na-ajani*, line 32) and the parallel phrase, *udu n'edu* (i.e. *udu na-edu*, line 34). The effort at creating a true rhyme (a prosodic feature in traditional Igbo poetry yet to be fully ascertained) in lines 33 and 35 is noteworthy. In general, we find that while keeping faith with the tonality and cultural context of his traditional resources, the poet has managed to create a happy synthesis between the traditional and alien prosodies. In the end, the text is completely wrested from the oral communal setting and the poet boldly replaces the communal "we" ("It's Okigbo we're looking for") with the lyrical "I" (It's Okigbo I'm looking for"). The poem no longer belongs to the oral tradition. The aesthetic transfer from the oral tradition is complete. It has

now been transformed from a communal *gestalt* pattern for ritual lament to a particularized personal statement of grief for a departed friend and fellow artist.

In many respects, Achebe's efforts in "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo" calls to mind one of T. S. Eliot's (1920) comments on the nature of this kind of creative process:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, good poets make it into something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from which it is torn; the bad poet turns it into something which has no cohesion.

Nnolim (1977) is obviously out of tune with these principles when he accuses of Achebe of plagiarizing from an obscure local history written by his equally obscure uncle (Nnolim, snr., 1953) in the composition of his third epical novel, *Arrow of God* (1964). The charge has, of course, been laid to rest by Innes (1978), among other more perceptive critics. However, it is worth pointing out here that what Nnolim regards as plagiarism is in fact a case of derivation from the same pool of oral tradition by two writers with vastly different talents—an immature local historian (Nnolim, snr.) and a mature novelist (Achebe). The two writers have taken, for their different purposes, an Igbo tale-type which occurs in many different variants in the area between the former's hometown (Umuchu) and the latter's hometown (Ogidi), both in the Anambra State of south-eastern Nigeria. But while Nnolim has been able to produce a popular local history at the level of Onitsha market literature, Achebe has created from the same source one of the most magnificent epic novels of the twentieth century. This is not to attribute to "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo" a level of artistic excellence which it obviously does not possess. The poem is—needless to say—an experimental piece. But it seems to have grown out of a process of artistic refinement of a traditional piece which is comparable to that which produced *Arrow of God*.

The great elegiac monuments to fellow artists in the literary history of mankind are those which, like Milton's *Lycidas* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, celebrate a deceased poet in poetic form and by means of conventions which allude to the shared experiences of life and letters between the subject and the elegiac poet. Often, the dead poet is celebrated in lines which echo his own works or style. "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo" is an experiment in this kind of poetic celebration. In this sense, it seems a fitting tribute to Okigbo, whose poetry is full of sequences, strophes and stanzas composed in the same manner as Achebe's poems, by the "stealing", assimilation and refinement of traditional material from a wide diversity of sources and turning them into a vehicle for personal statements (see Anozie, 1972, for a discussion of many of the sources and the rhetoric of their transformation). We are dealing here with a traditionalist aesthetic of the kind outlined in Eliot's (1919) essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

As has been pointed out, the traditionalist aesthetic that informs "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo" is basically the same as that which informs Achebe's early traditionalist novels; but "Uno onwu Okigbo" represents a new direction. The early traditionalist novels—*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*—have been shown in various studies to have some kind of traditional matrix in their plots, setting, characterization and other elements of content and form. They dramatize the Igbo world view—the journey of life from birth to death, the tension between the human and the spirit words, the battle of life and the heroic outlook which it fosters—using the folktale as template and the full resources of Igbo oratory and rhetoric as vehicles for their evocations of vivid and realistic images of Igbo life. Thus, in the novels, we find that "not only the best," to use Eliot's (1919: 14) phrase, "but [their]

most individual parts [are] those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."

In " Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo," the shift from English to Igbo as a medium of expression brings Achebe even closer to his ancestors. The English translation reveals the distance in mode and spirit between those African poems written in English and claiming to reflect folk or traditional idiom and those that have grown out of the oral tradition itself and have been composed *ab initio* in African languages. Indeed, Achebe's experiment reinforces the fact that it is by no means possible to write in English and at the same time claim a high degree of Africanness, be it in vision or in art. This is so because there is always a degree of alienation and ambiguity in African writing in English or in any other foreign language for that matter, for as Moore (1969: xix) has observed, in such writings, Africans find themselves under pressure to define and explain in an alien idiom "cultures and traditions" of which that idiom "and its associations form only a superficial part." By writing in Igbo, Achebe has tackled the dilemma from the roots. Indeed, the English translations of the poems are only an approximation to the nuances of the Igbo texts which, for the most part, are untranslatable and yet simple, clear and unencumbered by the need to translate or describe usages, ideas and cultural contexts as in the novels. Against this background, Achebe's English-language poetic tribute to Okigbo, "Mango Seedling" (Achebe, 1972: 5-6), sounds highly artificial, alienated and academic when set side by side with " Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo ". We shall return presently to "the language crisis" in African literature, especially in connection with Illich's idea of "deschooling."

The touch of originality which Achebe has brought to bear on the traditional funeral song in "Ọnwụ Okigbo" is an extension of the traditional poetic practice into the contemporary literary milieu. This particular recreation and refinement of the text does not exhaust all the possibilities. As in the oral poetic practice, the piece exists as a communal heritage available to as many poets as might wish to use it for their own personal statements. There can be no question of plagiarism in this situation. The freedom of artists to use traditional material is unfettered and it is in this sense that Achebe's effort in his second poem, "Akụkọ Kpulu Ụwa Iru" (The Story That Turned The World Upside Down) can be defended as an original work of art.

Whereas "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo" is in fact two or more removes away from the purely oral traditional piece, "Akụkọ Kpulu Ụwa Iru" is essentially a retelling of a traditional story-in-song with the words, phrases and sequence of events in the oral piece adhered to almost line by line to the very last stanza where a significant deviation occurs. The degree of Achebe's fidelity to the oral traditional piece can be seen by comparing the version in Ogbalu (1974: 166-167) with Achebe's piece:

Danda kọrọ akụkọ	White ant told a tale
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Sị na ji ruru n'ikwu nne ya	Said that the yams that grew in his mother's home
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Nke ruru n'ikwu nna ya	Those that grew in his father's home
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
N'ọ rachaị ka akpụ ụkwụ ya	That they were as big as his calves
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
5 Kwusịa sị onye amụkwala amụ	5 Finished talking, said that no one should laugh
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Di-ọkpa wee mụa kwororo	But Cockerel laughed <i>kwororo</i>
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>

Mụsja sūnye ọnu n'okụ	Finished laughing, dipped his mouth in live-coal
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Wee ga imacha ya n'akwukwo ede	And went to wipe it on a cocoyam leaf
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Wee mabili ijiji ọdu	And burnt off Housefly's tail
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
10 Ijiji wee si na ọ bu aru	10 Housefly said it was abomination
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Wee feba Mbekwu n'imi	And flew into Tortoise's nose
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Wee si n'ike feputakwa	And flew out of his anus
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Mbekwu wee bunite udu aru	Tortoise carried up a big pot
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Wee kua Mgbada n'ukwu	And with it hit Hare's hip
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
15 Mgbada wee zoọ biadabiada	15 Hare marched <i>biadabiada</i>
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
We zo biri Aka-eke abua	And with his feet cut Green Snake into two
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Aka-eke wee mja wororo	Green Snake slid <i>wororo</i>
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Mjibakwu eyi n'onu	Slid into Rabbit's hole
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Eyi si n'upu ọ turu	Rabbit burrowed through his exit hole
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
20 Wee tukwuru Okpoko	20 And went through to Hornbill
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Anu elu na ọ bu agha	Sky beasts, it is war
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Anu ala na ọ bu agha	Land beasts, it is war
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Enwe we maghariwa	Monkey went jumping about
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Wee zojiri nku uga	And with his legs broke <i>uga</i> wood
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
25 We tiwaa nwayi ime ukwu	25 Which broke a pregnant woman's hip
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Nwanyi ime wee zoọ biadabia	The pregnant woman limped <i>biadabia</i>
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Zokwasị akwa okwa okpa	And marched upon Bushfowl's eggs
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Okwa wee chja garara	Bushfowl cried <i>garara</i>
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Si chi jiri eji efo	Saying: May nightfall never break into day
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
30 Ma chi foro efo ejila eji	30 And may daybreak never turn into night
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>

Ha were jee ikpe	They then went for judgment
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
We kpesia ikpe	And after the judgment
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Ikpe wee ma Danda	Whiteant was found guilty
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>
Ha wee gbue Danda	And they killed Whiteant
<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>	<i>Ughe Nje Nje</i>

It is indeed difficult, at first sight, to defend Achebe against ineptitude in his own retelling of this tale in "Akukọ Kpulu Uwa Iru." But we must be circumspect. Originality can be claimed in such a retelling of a traditional story-in-verse on several grounds: first, if the retelling raises the original to an allegorical or fabular vehicle for larger philosophical, ethical or social commentary beyond those inherent in the traditional material; secondly, if the retelling provides an opportunity for experimentation in a particular form of traditional verse; thirdly, if, as in the case of D.N. Achara's (1933) retelling of the same tale as a story-within-a-story in *Ala Bingo*, it forms part of a larger narrative whole and draws new or added meanings from the new context in which it has been placed; and, fourthly, if the retelling polishes the old story in an aesthetically more satisfying form for one type of audience or another. Without at least one of these, we cannot even begin talking about originality or creativity in the retelling of an old tale. The trouble with "Akukọ Kpulu Uwa Iru" is that it does not immediately appear to satisfy any of these artistic requirements. We are kept wondering why it has been published in *Aka Weta* as Achebe's poem rather than as an oral text transcribed and edited by him, like similar pieces in the same anthology identified as the works of particular oral artistic and presented as having been transcribed by Clem Abiazim Okafor (pp. 9-14), Donatus Ibe Nwoga (pp. 18-23) and Chukwuma Azuonye (pp. 24-26).

But here again, as in the case of "Ụnọ Ọnwụ Okigbo," we need to form our judgments carefully, for there are indeed valid grounds for ascribing "Akukọ Kpulu Uwa Iru" to Achebe as his own original work of art. To begin with, the poem is not a mere edition of a recorded oral text but Achebe's remembered and recreated version of the piece, much like Hans Anderson's "Ugly Duckling" in which autobiographical elements have been infused. Although the sequence of events, the humor, paradoxes and delight in ideophonic presentation of impressions and actions is followed closely in the poem as in the oral performance, one can see on closer examination a number of subtle but significant changes. Most notable is the fact that the various characters in the tale have been given sharper anthropomorphic personalities than they possess in the folksong where they simply feature as links in a dramatic chain of events. In the oral piece, for example, Housefly is confused by the burning off of its tail by Cockerel and, in his attempt to wipe off the livecoal from his mouth,

...flew into Tortoise's nose
And flew out of his anus

whereupon,

Tortoise carried up a big pot
And with it hit Hare's hip

But, in Achebe's "Akukọ Kpulu Uwa Iru," Tortoise is given a venerable status which creates a motivation for his action:

Housefly flew *fululum*
And flew into Tortoise's nose
Where he was lolling in his easy-chair
Eating tapioca with palmoil sauce
Tortoise said it was abominable
Said that a sacrilege had been committed!
How could he, Tortoise, son of Aniiga
Great lord of the land
Have a shit-eating Housefly
Fly into his nose

With similar touch-ups in details of action and motivation, Achebe intensifies the tragi-comedy of the tale. Clearly, this is a case of a retelling that prunes inconsistencies and presents the traditional material in a new dress much like Edward Fitzgerald's classic English verse rendition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. But, in fact, the transformation of the traditional material here seems to go beyond surface imagery and the mechanical details of action and motivation. This particular retelling does indeed seem to deviate from the traditional material in a more fundamental way. At the end, we are left beholden to a chaotic order of things, a tragic turn of events created by a series of misunderstandings. By ending the narrative at this point, Achebe may have laid the old story open to a wider variety of interpretations and applications to modern situations. In the traditional story, such wider interpretations and applications are vitiated by the usual tendency among oral artists to round off their tales neatly. In the Ogbalu (1974) version, the origin of the tragic chain of events is traced back to Whiteant who is pointlessly found guilty and executed. In the version contained in *Ala Bingo* (Achara, 1933: 27-33), on the other hand, a delegation of animals trace the tragedy back to its comic origins at which point despair gives way to amusement and reconciliation. Appropriate representations and reparations are made to Bushfowl for the loss of her eggs, whereupon daylight is restored to the benighted world. Achebe, on the other hand, chooses to end his own piece at the point where (to echo the title of his first novel) *things fall apart*, thus establishing a thematic link between the poem and his early novels and even "the fabulous darkness" of W.B. Yeats' "The Second Coming".

Achebe's retelling of the traditional tale can further be defended or rationalized as a mature writer's entry into the slippery domain of narrative poetry, a genre which flourishes in oral traditions but which has as yet not been rediscovered by modern writers. This is an apparently worldwide situation. Thus, in a review of Iona and Peter Opie's *The Oxford Book of Narrative Verse*, Brownjohn (1983: 1423) makes a number of remarks on the recession of narrative verse which seems pertinent to the present discussion of "Akukọ Kpulu Uwa Iru." Most notable is the observation that "narrative poetry has been persistently downgraded in status," hence the common assumption that "poetry which contains stories is really only fit for the young," meaning children. Because of this, writes Brownjohn (1983: 1423), "Narrative poetry first became weaker in technique and more simplistic in sentiment; then advanced in popularity and obtained a secure role in the entertainment and instruction of children, who could be brought into line by reciting it." Narrative poetry seems therefore to have become such a pariah in the society of literary genres that the only thing required of

it is that "it should tell a simple story" and "convey an elementary message usually connected with `tragedy, passion and heroism'" (Brownjohn, 1983: 1423).

Achebe's ending of "Akukọ Kpulu Uwa Iru" suggests that the experiment may have been conceived not only as a way of domesticating a popular form of oral art—narrative poetry or story-in-song—in a modern environment but also as way of going beyond the simple story and the conveyance of elementary messages to more serious commentary in an allegorical framework. But, beyond all these, is the value of the process itself—a process which involves a conscious or even non-conscious withdrawal from European models to an African model and the use of an African language in this process of unlearning what has been learnt in order to be better equipped to write with an unambiguous African voice. In this sense, the close adherence to the oral traditional piece can be seen, not as naive copying or plagiarism but as a process of "deschooling" one's poetic sensibilities from the European poetic standards in which it has been nurtured. If this is indeed the case, as I strongly suspect it is, then we are faced here with a model which needs to be carried through more extensively, especially among the younger generation of African poets and practitioners of other genres.

For Illich (1972), from whom the idea of "deschooling" has been extrapolated, modern society is trapped in the idea of the "school" as the well-spring of all valid knowledge, the teacher as the only transmitter of skills, and certification as the only standard for measuring excellence. By the same token, modern African writers seem trapped in a type of "school" situation so far as their aesthetic standards are concerned. The "school" begins in Departments of English, Classics, Comparative Literature, and Modern European Languages, in which European-language literatures and their aesthetic standards are absorbed. It continues into out-of-school literary practice in which the business of literary criticism constitutes an extension of the school. The "historical sense" which the African writer in this school possesses is not one which links him to "the dead poets" of his own African tradition—"his ancestors," to used Eliot's (1919: 14) well-known phrase; it is rather an alienating historical sense which compels him to think and write like a European, "with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and with it the whole of the literature of his own [in this case, postcolonial] country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." For such an alienated writer, excellence is evaluated by teacher-critics who also dole out honors, distinctions and prizes on the basis of the standards of the alien school. In this school situation, the African elements feature merely as elements of surface local color rather than as constituents of the deeper aesthetic structure of the resultant artifacts. Any radical departure from this school which involves, first, the acceptance of the need to return to the idiom of an African language and, secondly, the humble return to the roots of an African literary tradition in order to acquire its conventions, is what I describe in this paper as "deschooling." This, I guess, is in many respects coterminous with what the famous troika—Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike (1980)—have termed "the decolonization of African literature."

The kind of voice which, it is envisaged, that the African writer can acquire through the process of deschooling or decolonization can be heard asserting itself vigorously in poems on contemporary situations by our oral artists who are unschooled in European poetics. The simplicity, honesty and power of these poems reveal various dimensions of the value of deschooling and speak more eloquently than several polemic treatises on "the decolonization of African literatures." By way of illustration, we shall look briefly at the poems on contemporary Nigerian realities by three oral artists

featured in *Aka Weta*, namely the Anambra minstrels (Ezigbo Obiligbo and Okonkwo Asaa, alias Seven-Seven) and the *Abigbo* Dance Group of Obeama Mbaise.

The pieces by Ezigbo Obiligbo are reflections on hunger in the midst of plenty ("Aguu", p. 9), motor accidents ("Onwu Moto", p.10), and the death of a patron, the record manufacturing tycoon, Mr C.T. Onyekwelu ("Onwu C.T. Onyekwelu", p.11). Using the formulaic images and the allegorical narrative conventions of the Anambra Igbo minstrelsy tradition, Obiligbo revisits his otherwise hackneyed themes with a remarkable freshness of vision and ironic humor. In "Aguu" (Hunger), for example, Nigerians are portrayed as having abandoned fruitful work for European luxuries thus creating room, in the resultant decadent and kleptocratic order - for the emergence of a personified monster—Hunger (*Aguu*)—who blockades the road, terrorizing everybody. In "Josefu na Bulaki: (Joseph and Blackie, p. 15-17), Okonkwo Asaa (alias Seven-Seven) tells the tale of a comic love affair between a poor coal miner and a local black beauty ("Blackie") in a modern town, most probably Enugu, capital of the state of Enugu in south-eastern Nigeria. In his pidgin vernacular of the city, the tension between tradition and modernity in the urban town in which the two essentially rustic couple live out their strange attraction to one another is powerfully recreated. At the background to this deceptively simple story looms the terrible squalor and degradation of the urban masses who struggle for water in crowded "pumps" (taps) and are exposed to the ostentatious living of the affluent minority which they strain to imitate.

While the compositions of Obiligbo and Okonkwo Asaa are the works of individual and original artists, the pieces by the *Abigbo* Dance group of Obeama Mbaise are the compositions of a folk group. But there is here the same vein of challenging social commitment. The pointed rhetorical question in the title of "Anyi nwusija i gakwani ichi onye?" (If we all die who will you rule?, pp. 18-20) is not only applicable to Ukpabi Asika and his allegedly arrogant detachment from the adversities of his defeated Igbo kith and kin at the end of the Biafran war, but also to the detachment of many an African leader from the misery of the silent masses in whose names they rob their nations' treasuries. The other pieces in *Aka Weta* by the same group raise similar socially-committed questions: "Ime onye ukwu la mba o wu ya ka mma" (Being big man in a foreign land is it the best thing?, p. 21), "Uba okporo uzọ o wu uba?" (Is wealth acquired and spent abroad genuine wealth?) and "Giri mediri umu sukuulu amakwaghi hwe?" (Why is it that school children no longer know anything?).

The performances of these traditional pieces reveal the simplicity and power of their homebred poetic sensibility in dealing with modern situations. Theirs is a powerfully revolutionary aesthetic which, unlike that of the European-schooled moderns, is less of faddist posturing than the honest expression of the *angst* of the deprived and abused masses. The images are clear and the tone complex in spite of their deceptive simplicity. We are witnessing here what would be the effect were the oral artist equipped to put his vision and experiences in writing. It strikes me, on reading Achebe's Igbo poems, that his experiment is an attempt at deschooling himself from the Eurocentric poetic praxis and of formally entering the process of immersing himself into the principles of an African poetics. By using the popular traditional pieces, the idiom will eventually mature to the point at which, like the oral traditional poets, he could venture into creative reflections on modern situations using the full resources of traditional poetry and the felicity, sincerity and unambiguity of the traditional masters. Obviously, this process, in which Achebe has ventured deeper into the oral tradition than in his novels, is better suited for younger practitioners with plenty of time ahead of them for growth and maturity.

Younger Igbo writers who have attempted to produce poetry in Igbo without undergoing the process of deschooling have generally ended up producing alienated or pseudo-traditional verses. There are numerous instances of such alienated Igbo poetry in the available anthologies: Ekechukwu (1975), Emenanjo (1982, 1984a, and n.d.), and Ogbalu (n.d.). J. Chukwuenyem Obienyem (in Ekechukwu, 1975: 3-4), for example, ends his hackneyed reflections on death ("Onwu") in lines that echo the Psalmist's apostrophe to death ("O Death, where is thy sting?") but without the power of the original:

Onwụ, olee ebe mma gị dị?	Death, where is your matchet?
Onwụ, i zoro ube gị ebee?	Death, where did you hide your spear?

In the pseudo-traditional verses, we notice absurd heights of vulgarity in the use of oral traditional materials. A typical example is "Ilulu" (Similitude) by Levi Ogunjiofor (in Ekechukwu, 1975: 43):

Mma dị nkọ enweghị isi	The matchet that is sharp has no handle
Nke nwere isi adighị nkọ	The one with a handle is not sharp
Ada ji akụ kwaa nna ya	Let the wealthy daughter bury her father
Ọ bughị ọkpara kugburu ya	It is not the first son that killed him
E sowe ike nkịta riri	If we go by what the dog eats
Anụ ya adoro erighi eri...	Its meat will lie uneaten...

And so on, for another fifteen lines—nothing but a string of proverbs with no formal or technical refinements or linking patterns. This is clearly not poetry but the mechanical stringing together of traditional rhetorical devices. Curiously enough, many of our pseudo-traditionalists imagine and even insist that they are clever by half by reason of this kind of rhetorical masturbation. They even imagine their fathers-in-art to be Achebe or Pita Nwana. But, alas, they have no known fathers-in-art. Unfortunately, such is their numerical strength and high fertility rate that their vein of vulgarity pervades the available volumes of poetry written in Igbo, making it seem, that writing in African languages is such an exercise in futility.

Achebe's traditionalism in his two Igbo poems is a pointer in the right direction, a direction in which the more imaginative of the new poets of Igbo expression are already embarked upon. Thus, for example, "Akwukwọ Oru Ego" (One Pound Note) by J. Chukwuemeka Obienyem (in Ekechukwu, 1975: 42) is a piece in which the riddle-in-performance provides the paradigm for a novel poetic structure. The poem comprises a series of lines couched in the form of riddle-questions, the answer to each of which is the subject matter of the poem, "One pound Note". In "Odogwu Kabral Nọdụ Mma" (Farewell, Great Cabral) by Nnamdi Olebara (in Ekechukwu, 1975: 73-74), the traditional Igbo dirge provides a paradigm for the celebration of a modern political hero.

As already mentioned, in a recent interview, poet-scholar Michael Echeruo dismisses the idea of an established writer like himself attempting to write in his mother-tongue as a type of unproductive cultism:

I am not a cultist. To try to write in Igbo would be just doing what I will be expected to do now, and, it would be an exercise, pure and simple. I can only encourage those who have the ability to do so (Azuonye, 1978: 175).

The position, I think, is somewhat overstated. Ability to write in the mother-tongue should be the

sole deciding factor. But there can be no cultism in the matter. We must either unequivocally acknowledge and cherish our European heritage and abide by it, without making undue claims to African poetics beyond the level of local color and vicarious forms of allusion, or embark upon the next logical step: writing in our mother tongues as part of, or after, the process of deschooling.

One is reminded here of Milton's exultation on rediscovering his mother tongue, English, after years of writing in classical and medieval Latin, and the subsequent flowering of his poetic genius in the rediscovered tongue. Closer home, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's grassroots revolutionary appeal, especially through drama, is tied up with his rediscovery of his mother tongue, Gikuyu. Today, there exists an outspoken generation of African writers of the European school whose general outlook is socialist and whose aesthetic tends toward the revolutionary or, at any rate, the socially-committed. Their problem seems to be that of language. The search for a grassroots medium like pidgin English is often pressed to the neglect of local languages which obviously command a much wider audience and through which so much social mobilization has over the years been effectively done by our traditional poets, dramatists and orators. As Nkosi (1981: 6) has observed:

Clearly, what the African writer lacks...is the silent complicity of his people, the majority of whom still use African languages to express their most intimate thoughts and emotions; in writing in a European language the African writer is alone, operating outside the boundaries of either his own society or that of his adopted language, therefore always on the outside, looking in, increasingly in need of some more specific corroboration of his vision through language that can be consented to, or the authenticity of which can be attested to, by his people.

The process of deschooling of the kind reflected in Achebe's Igbo poems is one way in which our *avant-garde* writers can begin their journey back, with undivided attention, to the versification conventions of their own cultures.

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