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Christopher Okigbo's Intentions: A Critical Edition of a Previously Unpublished Interview by Ivan van Sertima

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Introduction: Text and Context

The following interview with Christopher Okigbo was conducted in the mid-1960s by Ivan van Sertima, the distinguished Caribbean-American anthropologist, linguist, literary critic, Afrocentric historiographer, and founding-editor of *The Journal of African Civilizations* (New Brunswick, NJ), who passed away on May 29, 2009, at the age of 74. It was discovered in January 2006 among Okigbo's unpublished papers, which I catalogued at the invitation of the Christopher Okigbo Foundation, in Brussels, Belgium, where they are now in the custody of the poet's daughter, Annabelle Obiageli (Ibrahimat) Okigbo. In March 2006, I collaborated with the Foundation in recommending the Okigbo papers for inclusion in the UNESCO Memory of the World Registry. Exactly one year later, the papers, including the present Ivan Van Sertima interview, became the first collection from Africa to be accepted in the UNESCO Registry.¹

Ivan van Sertima's endnote on the interview indicates that it was recorded at the Transcription Centre in London on a Friday. But the actual date has been indecipherably obscured by an inkblot on the only available typescript. Efforts to locate a better transcript—either from Ivan van Sertima himself or from the Transcription Centre Archive at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin—proved abortive up till the death of van Sertima.² However, textual and other evidence in the only available script suggest that the interview was recorded during the Commonwealth Festival of Arts, which was held in London between September 16 and October 2, 1965.³ This would place the recording at any of the three Fridays between these dates: September 17, 24, or October 1. Of these, October 1 seems most likely, being a free day on which Okigbo is known to have been in London, preparing for two programs scheduled for the following day: "Poets Debating,"⁴ with three other Commonwealth poets, Earle Birney, Peter Porter, and John Figueroa, and John Wain as chairman; and "Across the World,"⁵ at which Okigbo performed his "Lament of the Drums" and "Dance of the Painted Maidens" to the accompaniment of music and dance (Cleverdon, 1965; 39).

Background: Okigbo's Life and Career

For a proper understanding of significance of Okigbo's statements of his personal artistic intentions in response to Ivan Van Sertima's questions, it seems necessary to begin by reviewing the key facts of the poet's life and career which underlie these statements.

Christopher Ifekandu Nixton Okigbo—West Africa Editor of *Transition* magazine from 1962 to 1967—was born on August 16, 1930 to a well-to-do Igbo Catholic family at Ojooto, in the present day Anambra State of Nigeria. In 1945, a sworn declaration of age by his father, Primary School Headmaster James Okoyeolu Okigbo, changed the year of his birth to 1932 (a

date that persists till today in most biographical notes on the poet, including Van Sertima's prefatory note to the present interview). According to Okigbo's immediate younger sister, Iyom Victoria Okuzu, who herself was actually born in 1932, the change of Okigbo's year of birth was made in order to enable him qualify for admission into the elite Government College, Umuahia, which at that time set the maximum age of admission at thirteen years (Azuonye, 2006c). At Umuahia, Okigbo was a classmate of the novelists, Chinua Achebe and Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike. But unlike Achebe and Ike, he showed no inclination towards literary creativity at school. He instead carved out a reputation for himself as a maverick that read voraciously and inquisitively and formed unique personal positions in wide diversity of subjects that excited his imagination. He particularly distinguished himself in sporting activities and music, teaching himself how to play the piano and jazz clarinet. From Umuahia, he enrolled for a BA degree in classics at the University College Ibadan, obtaining the prerequisite University of London General Certificate in Education pass in Latin by personal tuition. Continuing his penchant for sporting at Ibadan, Okigbo cut out for himself a path to professionalism in music by giving public performances in piano and clarinet at Ibadan and Lagos and experimenting in music composition. Music remained his first choice of artistic career until after his graduation in 1956. After successively working as a trade representative for Nigerian Tobacco Company, personal secretary to the Federal Minister of Information and Research, and a joint owner of an unsuccessful business enterprise, Kitson and Partners, he found solace as a Latin and English Master at Fiditi Grammar School, in a rural hideout near Lagos, where he discovered his poetic calling through exercises in translating poetry from Latin into English and *vice versa*.

His first sequence of poems, *Four Canzones* (1957-1961), and related fragments ("On the New Year," 1959, and "Moonmist," 1961) were written under the combined influences of the great Latin lyrical poets (notably Virgil), the *avant-garde* twentieth century Euro-modernists (Eliot, Pound and Yeats), and the American Beat Generation postmodernist (Allen Ginsberg). An eclectic reader with an extraordinary receptivity to novel ideas, he left Fiditi in 1960 to join the newly established University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, as a Librarian but without any qualification in Librarianship. From there he was transferred, in 1961, to the Nnamdi Azikiwe Library at the university's main campus at Nsukka, where he met a coterie of exciting literary friends, among them the Welsh poet and critic Peter Thomas (his next-door neighbor in the university residential quarters). Others include several first generation postcolonial Nigerian poets of the Nsukka school (Michael Echeruo, Pol Ndu, Okogbule Wonodi, Edward Okwu, Romanus Egudu, and Bona Onyejeli), and the critics (Donatus Nwoga, Obi Wali, and Sunday Anozie). It was in this fertile environment of artistic and intellectual debate that he created the complex poetic universe of his mid-career sequences under the influence of his wide-ranging reading in classical Greek and Roman literatures, African folklore and oral literatures (especially Igbo, Yoruba and Akan traditions), ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian and other world mythologies, and philosophical writings ranging from Plato and Aristotle through leading Neo-Platonists like Plotinus to existentialist and phenomenological thinkers of the twentieth century (notably Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger). His mid-career sequences include *Heavensgate* (1962) which launched him into the center of the African literary scene, and *Limits* (comprising "Siren Limits" and "Fragments out of the Deluge," 1964), by which his transnational modernist aesthetic earned global recognition.

One of the catalysts of this wider global recognition was his dramatic debut on the pan-African and international literary scene through his participation, in 1962, in the first

conference of African and transatlantic black writers organized at Kampala, Uganda, by the newly founded Mbari Writers and Artists Club, Ibadan. At Kampala, he attracted much attention to himself by the acerbity of his ripostes against the Negritude movement, his philosophical responses to the *Transition* magazine questionnaire (1962) distributed among selected African, Caribbean and African-American writers with a view to eliciting a precise definition of African literature, and his widely reported and arrogant (albeit self-confident) statement to an interviewer: "I don't read my poems to non-poets." Thereafter he became a favorite subject of critical discourse and interviews. It was at this time that he was selected by the founding-editor, Rajat Neogy, as the West Africa Editor of *Transition* magazine, a rapidly growing and influential pan-African magazine of the day. That same year, he left Nsukka to become the West Africa Representative of Cambridge University Press at Ibadan, in the heat of the Western Nigeria crisis which ultimately flared up into the general triumph of disorder that brought down Nigeria's first republic through the *coup d'état* of January 15, 1966.

Paradoxically, those years of crisis (1962-1966) turned out to be the period of Okigbo's coming of age as "a poet of destiny"—an intensely socially-committed poet with a vision of reality that represents a compelling expression of the conscience of his people. On this conception of Okigbo as a poet, see Obiechina (1980 and 1990) and Nwoga (1984). In addition to completing and publishing his *Silences*, a super-sequence comprising two poems ("Lament of the Silent Sisters" and "Lament of the Drums") on the post-independence anarchy in Congo (1960-62) and the Western Nigeria Crisis (1962-65); he composed three commemorative poems for specific anniversaries or festivals—"Lament of the Deer" (a specially commissioned song insert in the *chantefable*, *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, as retold by Chinua Achebe and John Iroaganachi (1965, in 1972); "Lament of the Masks" (a tribute to the Irish nationalist poet, W. B. Yeats for a *festschrift*, edited by S. Bushrui and D. E. S. Maxwell, 1965), and "Dance of the Painted Maidens" (a poem celebrating the birth of his daughter, Obiageli, who he believed to be a reincarnation of his mother, Mrs Anna Okigbo, first published in Cleverdon, 1965). Above all, he composed his final sequence of accurately prophetic chants, entitled *Path of Thunder*, in response to the events culminating in the military takeover of January 15, 1966, and its bloody aftermaths, including in the horrendous massacre of over thirty thousand of Igbo citizen in northern Nigeria and the secession of Eastern Nigeria as the short-lived Republic of Biafra (May 30, 1967 to January 12, 1970).

Returning to Eastern Nigeria in 1966 in the wake of the massacres that led to the Biafran secession, Okigbo founded a short-lived publishing company (Citadel Books), at Enugu, with Chinua Achebe. As the crisis of 1966 darkened through more sporadic Igbo massacres in Northern Nigeria, to the declaration of the independence of Eastern Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967, he began a new sequence of poems—an Anthem for Biafra—fragments of which I located among the unpublished papers from which the present interview with Ivan Van Sertima and several other previously unpublished works, including seven poems in Igbo were recovered (see Azuonye, 2006a-c and 2007b). As the surviving drafts of the unfinished Anthem for Biafra show (Azuonye, 2007b), Okigbo's commitment to Biafra was by no means romantic or idealistic; but it was sufficiently passionate to make him join the Biafran army at the Nsukka sector, where he earned a field commission as a major in July 1967 and where he fought gallantly but was killed in action less than two months later..

All told, Okigbo's artistic career spanned a period of only ten years (1957-1967). But within that period, he cultivated an intercultural and transnational poetics that enabled him to compose a string of complex, organically related sequences of poems notable for their intriguing collage of tropes and allusions from a wide diversity of human cultures all through the ages. Composed

mostly under the combined influence of western classical music (especially Ravel and Debussy) and traditional African music—the Igbo *ubo, ogene* (“iron bells”), or *ekwe* (“slit-drums”), and the Akan talking drums—Okigbo’s poetry represents a movement from an obscurant rococo style of his early ultra-modernist phase to a more open phase of direct socio-political statements in the mode of oral literature which finds its clearest realization in his prophetic swan song, *Path of Thunder*, in which he bids farewell to “the horn” (poetry of social commitment)⁶ and to life.

AND THE HORN may now paw the air howling goodbye...
For the Eagles are now in sight:
Shadows in the horizon—

THE ROBBERS are now in black sudden steps of showers,
of caterpillars—

....
Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let this be
the ram’s ultimate prayer to the tether...

AN OLD STAR departs, leaves us here on the shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new star appears, foreshadows its going
Before a going and coming that goes on forever....

Okigbo’s preeminence in modern African and world literature has been well-established in several studies (notably Anozie, 1972; Nwoga, 1984; Wieland, 1988; Okafor, 1994, Esonwanne, 2000; Echeruo, 2004; Richards, 2005; Obumsele, 2006); and the first book-length critical biography of the poet, *Thirsting for Sunlight*, Nwakanma, forthcoming, 2010). Described by Michael Echeruo (2004) as “this poetic genius of our times,” the British Open University textbook, *Aestheticism and Modernism: Debating Twentieth Century Literature* (ed. Gupta Danson Brown and Suman Gupta, 2005), goes much farther than earlier assessments by placing him side by side (through a chapter by David Richards), with T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Bertolt Brecht, and Virginia Woolf, among the pillars of twentieth-century modernism—not just Euromodernism but the wider global or transnational modernism that is increasingly taking over the aesthetic space still claimed with exclusivist arrogance by Euromodernism. This recognition is in accord with Okigbo’s own conception of himself as a poet. In his introduction to *Labyrinths* (1965, in 1971) and in the interviews he recorded during his lifetime (Nkosi, 1962; Duerden, 1963; Serumaga, 1965; and Whitelaw, 1965), he has been remarkably consistent and insistent in depicting himself, not as an “African poet” but simply as a poet. In 1965, this globalist conception of his creative self led to his sensational rejection of the first prize in poetry which was awarded to him at the first Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966, a competition in which 1992 Nobel Prize Winner, Derek Walcott, took the second position (see *The Guardian*, London, April 4, 1966). It is the same transnational vision that frames his expression of his poetic intentions in the present interview with Ivan Van Sertima.

Okigbo’s Intentions as Revealed in the Van Sertima Interview

Like other interviews with African and Caribbean authors recorded during the same period at the Transcription Centre (Nkosi, 1962; Duerden, 1963; Serumaga, 1965), the present

interview would have been distributed for broadcast to various radio stations in Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean. But, as Sertima remarks in his post-interview note, the interview was deemed unsuitable for broadcast, and Okigbo himself “did not want it used for this purpose,” though he “insisted on recording under bad conditions.” It is, therefore, not surprising that no trace of the interview is to be found in any of the four extant repositories of the Transcription Centre interviews: the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin; the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University, Bloomington; the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern University, Evanston; and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. Be that as it may, despite the long space of time since it was recorded, the interview still holds interest because it helps to illuminate the organic unity of Okigbo’s poetry. Moreover, as indicated in the notes, much of it seems to represent Okigbo’s first thoughts toward the design of his compendious introduction to *Labyrinths*, his authorized collection of his mid-career poetry, from *Heavensgate* to *Distances*.

Dated December 1965, Okigbo’s introduction was written shortly after the recording of the present interview. The points of congruence and the differences between the statements in the Ivan Van Sertima interview and those in the introduction, as unveiled in the comparative quotes presented in the notes, are significant indicators of the dynamics of stability and change in what Okigbo calls “the canceling out” process (*Limits*, 12) in the praxis of his art. These comparisons also indicate how fastidiously Okigbo worked as his own first and best critic in explicating and clarifying his aesthetic and intentions.

With reference to the organic unity of the poems, the interview treats each of the following: *Heavensgate*; *Silences*; *Distances*; “*Lament of the Quiet Chamber*”; “*Dance of the Painted Maidens*”; and *Labyrinth* (which Okigbo describes as constituting “the whole work,” thus anticipating the use of the plural form of the same word—*Labyrinths*—as the title of his first collection of poems). Among the surprises in Okigbo’s discussion of the organic relationships that exist between these works, four are especially striking.

The first is the inclusion of the two parts of *Silences* in the mainstream of his poet-hero’s mythological journey without reference to any connection between them and the realities of the post-independence politics of Nigeria and the Congo. In stark contrast, Okigbo takes pains in the introduction to the final versions of the poems in *Labyrinths* to locate the events within two of the most devastating of Africa’s immediate post-independence crises:

Both parts of *Silences* were inspired by the events of the day: *Lament of the Silent Sisters*, by the Western Nigeria Crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba; *Lament of the Drums*, by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his eldest son.

The second surprise is the suggestion that *Distances* was originally conceived of as a supersequence in two parts, with “*Lament of the Quiet Chamber*” as Part I and “*Dance of the Painted Maidens*” as Part II. The title “*Lament of the Quiet Chamber*,” which is featured neither in *Labyrinths* nor in any other interview recorded by Okigbo, is itself pregnant with implications. Above all, it strongly resonates with some of the key phrases of *Distances*, parts I and II (“fluorescence of the white/chamber,” “the chamber descanted, the birthday of earth,” “freezing tuberoses of the white/chamber,” etc), thus suggesting that, before it evolved into the independent six-part sequence that takes the poet-hero through the resplendent and mesmeric but labyrinthine and misleading landscapes of Christian civilization—which he rejects before finding his way to an aesthetic and psychic “homecoming”—the poem was a simpler and more straightforward journey into the serene quiescence of the spirit world.

Related to the second, the third surprise is the inclusion of “*The Dance of the Painted Maidens*” in the mythos of *Labyrinths* and the revelation of the occasion of its composition as

the birth of Okigbo's daughter (Obiageli), a confession of intention which the poet first states in a letter to the Secretary of the Poetry Book Society, in response to a commission to contribute a poem to the 1965 Commonwealth Festival of the Arts:

I am in fact just finishing (or abandoning) a poem which ought to be suitable for your purposes from the point of view of its length, etc. It is a fertility dance by a Chorus of Painted Maiden, the occasion of which is the return of a dead ancestor, the birth of a baby who is a reincarnation of her grandmother (Christopher Okigbo, Cambridge University Press Representative in Nigeria, to Douglas Cleverdon, 27, Barnsbury Square, London, N.1, May 7, 1965. Commonwealth Arts Festival Archive, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Box 3, Folder 28, Poets Debating, Correspondence).

Subsequently, in a letter to Douglas Cleverdon, Director of the Poetry Reading Events at the Festival and editor of the souvenir festival brochure, *Verse and Voice*, in which the poem was first published, Okigbo writes:

Under separate cover and by registered airmail I am sending you the commissioned poem, "Dance of the Painted Maidens," a fertility dance by a chorus of maidens on the occasion of the return of a dead ancestor. The poem is dedicated to my daughter, Annabelle, who is a reincarnation of her paternal grandmother, Anna. I hope you will like it. I read it to Professor Maxwell, Dr. Bushrui, and Ben Obumelu, all of Ibadan University English Department. They all thought it represented my best effort so far, although I do not myself share this view (Christopher Okigbo to Mr. Eric W. White, Secretary, The Poetry Book Society, 27, Barnsbury Square, London, N.1, February 15, 1965, Box 4, Folder 32, Transcription Center Archive, HRC-UTexas)

The fourth surprise is the implicit acknowledgement in some of the keywords of Ivan van Sertima's questions and Okigbo's responses of the structure of Joseph Campbell's heroic monomyth as set out in the *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Significantly, the congruence between Campbell's heroic monomyth and the organic structure of *Labyrinths* is independently explored, without the benefit of reading the Van Sertima interview, by Peter Thomas in his 1973 review of the collection:

The pattern traced by that story is the circle followed by Joseph Campbell's hero with a thousand faces, crossing the threshold between outward appearances and inward reality on a night-sea journey to a sacred marriage with a mother goddess (the Watermaid), and thence to a kind of homecoming, transfigured and restored, where in the light of common day the poet-hero offers his gift of insight and inspiration (his "boon," or "Elixir of Life") to all who are willing and able to receive it (Thomas, 1973, in Esonwanne, 2000: 72).

Of further interest is that, in his responses to Van Sertima's questions on *Heavensgate*, Okigbo confirms what is now the canonical reading of the text as involving "the shedding of an old skin,...of an old mask," offering a "gateway to a new conception of the self" and representing "the search for identity." But Okigbo also emphatically maintains his modernist aesthetic distance from any "conscious intention," although Sertima specifies that he does not mean "the conscious imposition of an idea on the poem" By admitting the existence of what Van Sertima describes as a "central thread that illuminates the work," Okigbo places the discourse within the philosophical context of the debate on the relationship between authorial intention and objective criticism, initiated by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their landmark 1946 essay, "The Intentional Fallacy" (in Richter, 1989).

Against the background of this debate, Okigbo appears repeatedly to contradict his allegedly anti-intentional stance by consistently and insistently suggesting various rational schemata for the interpretation of the meaning of the experience of his poet-hero. At issue in Okigbo's denial of the prerogative of authorial intentionality in interpretation would seem to be the oxymoron of "intentionless meaning," the existence of which is flatly denied by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in their 1982 critique of "the premises of anti-intentionalist accounts of meaning" (in Richter, 1989). With criticism of this kind in mind, one cannot read Okigbo's interview by Ivan van Sertima without leaning toward an endorsement of John Searle's contention that "there is no getting away from intentionality," or E. D. Hirsch's insistence that "meaning" in all literature is necessarily "intended meaning" (in Richter, 1989)

Can the logic of experience be communicated, even in the most inspired poetry, entirely without conscious intention? To this question, Okigbo's closest personal friend and literary confidante, Ben Obumselu, who he frequently acknowledges for comments that "led to the improvement of phrase and structure" in his poetry, provides an answer which also raises new questions about his intentions:

Okigbo discouraged his readers from looking for meanings in his poems. He saw himself with unabashed snobbery, as the poets' poet, whose practice had no appeal to common readers who took no interest in professional techniques. When he was asked in 1962 what influences shaped his writing, he mentioned only musical composers: 'I wrote several parts (of *Heaven's Gate*)...under the spell of Debussy, Cesar Frank and Ravel" (Okigbo 1963, p 12). *Heaven's Gate* and *Limits*, he told another interviewer, "do not attempt to carry any message whatsoever...the poems have nothing to do with me" (Okigbo 1963. p. 17), His intention was clearly to distance himself from all brands of opinion no matter how high-minded, all literary fashions and bourgeois value systems. What interested him were certain types of rhythms and verbal melodies. He thus created the unusual situation in which the study of his work must begin with the question as to whether he was writing about anything at all: whether, in other words, he was a serious artist (Obumselu, 2007)

Because Okigbo repeatedly denies setting out to communicate a meaning in practically all his interviews and at the same time goes to great lengths as in the present interview to explicate his intentions, the question of intentionality and meaning will continue to frame debate in Okigbo criticism.

Reconstructing the Lacunae in the Interview Text

In concluding, it seems necessary to explain to the reader some editorial judgments that have been necessitated by the condition in which the text of the interview was found in its present Brussels repository.

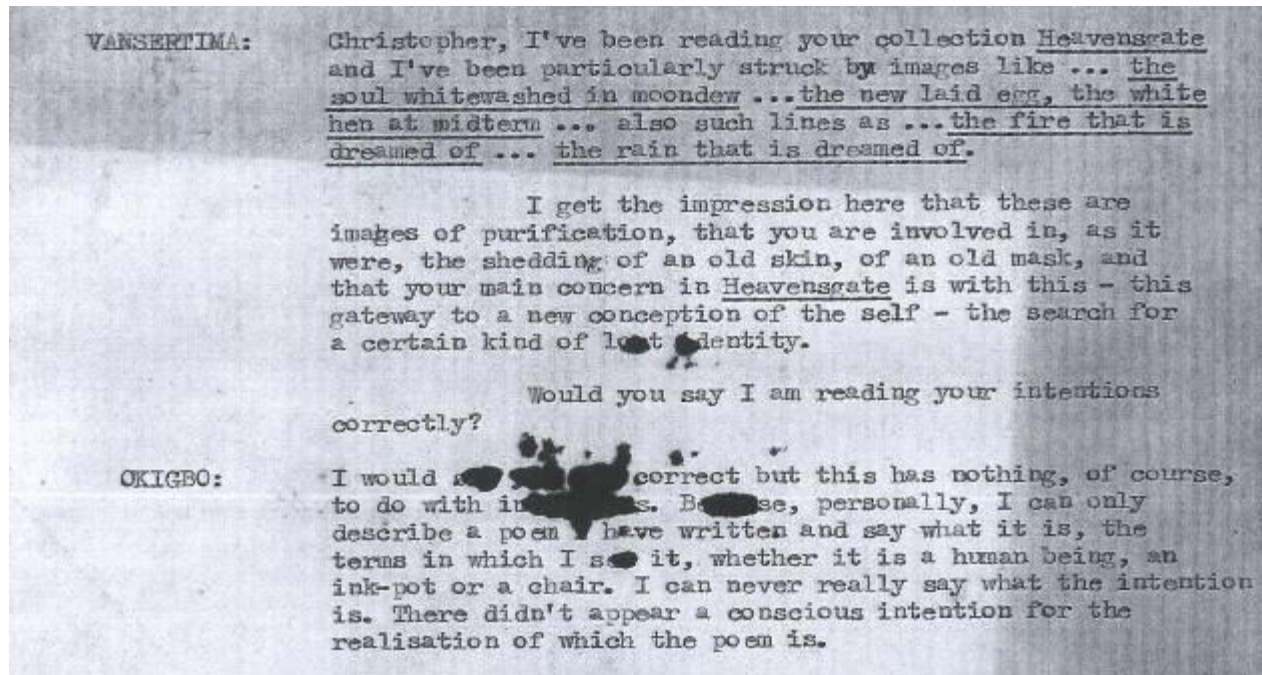
By and large, several of the Okigbo unpublished papers which I examined and catalogued in Brussels in 2006 are in need of emendation on account of lacunae arising from three kinds of damage. The first comprises lacunae from fire damage following the destruction by a Nigerian Air Force B2 bomber of a house shared by Okigbo and Achebe at Hilltop, Enugu, in July 1967. The second type of lacunae comes from termite activity on the papers in a garage at the Enugu home of Okigbo's elder brother, the Late Dr Pius Okigbo, where they were carelessly dumped after the former's death by someone who obviously did not appreciate their value (personal communication, Obiageli Okigbo, 2005). Before then, Dr. Okigbo, a learned connoisseur, had guarded the papers like a hawk, hiding them under the mattress of his bed even when he served as Nigeria's Ambassador to Brussels. The third (and by far the most minor) type of lacunae is in the form of indelible inkblots, as earlier mentioned.

Happily, the surviving text of the Ivan Van Sertima interview has neither been damaged by fire nor termite activity (although one can notice traces of such damage at the edges of some pages). For the most part, it has only suffered relatively minor damage by inkblots. But again, happily, the words, thus blotted out, seem to be mostly amenable to reconstructions of the kind which have been placed in square brackets throughout the text on the basis of the following principles.

The first principle comprises direct echoes or follow-up repetitions of words used by the interviewer or the interviewee. Thus, for example, in Plate 1 below, Van Sertima's question (**Would you say I am reading your intentions correctly?**) elicits a response from Okigbo which contains two inkblot lacunae—A and B (**I would [...A...] correct, but this has nothing, of course, to do with [...B...]**). But here it is easy to see that the words blotted out by ink [A and

B] are a logical follow-up repetitions of Van Sertima's words or phrases. Thus, it is easy to arrive at the reconstruction: **I would [say that you are] correct, but this has nothing, of course, to do with [intentions].** Other words in the plate are similarly easily recognizable as **lost identity, because, and I see it**), despite the minor blots, and thus require no special effort at reconstruction.

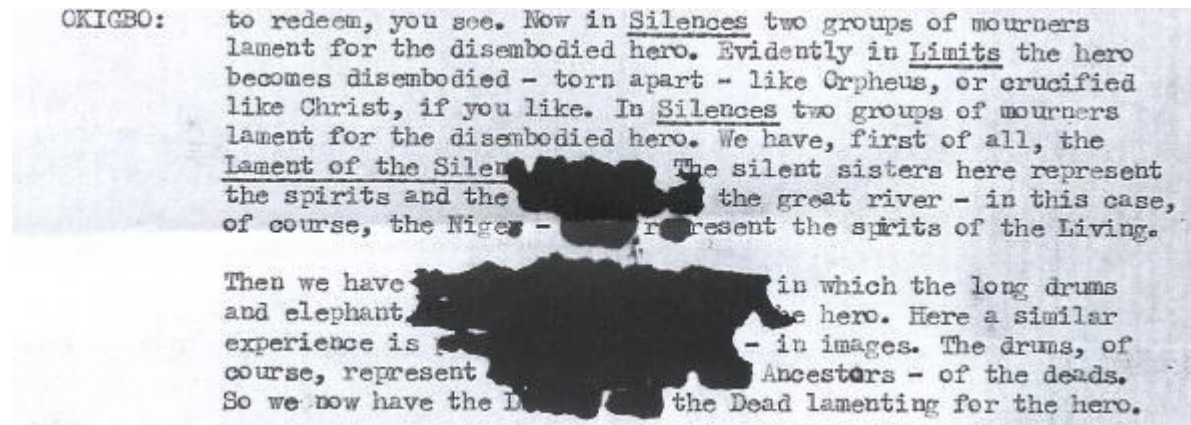
Plate I (Page 1 of the Brussels Typescript)



The second principle, applied in reconstructing the words blotted out in Plate 2 below, is logical semantic consistency. In paragraph 1 of Okigbo's response, referencing the two-part super-sequences, *Silences*, we have no difficulty in recognizing—by dint of the principle of intertextual resonance (to which I will return more fully presently)—the partially blotted out title of the second part of the cycle, *Lament of the Silent Sisters*. But we have no such recourse in the last three explicatory lines where the first lacuna (A) is practically intractable: **The sisters here represent the spirits and the [...A...] the great river—in this case, of course, the Niger— [...B...] represent the spirits of the Living.** By simple recourse to the syntactic and semantic logic of English idiom, we have no difficulty in recognizing the word in Lacuna B as the plural form of the personal pronoun, **they**; but for Lacuna A, we have a bewildering range of possibilities, among them **life, power, flow, movement**, etc. Needless to say, what is needed in a case such as this is logical semantic consistency. Is Okigbo saying that **the sisters here represent the spirits and the life of the great river**, or is he saying that they represent **the spirits and the power [flow, movement, dynamism, vitality, significance, etc] of the great river**, or some other possibility? But a phonemic count of the words above the inkblot reveals that the missing word or words cannot be less than eight letters long, assuming of course that the word under the definite article [**the**] referencing “silent sisters” is the genitival [**of**] referencing “the great river.” This rules out attractive possibilities as **life** and **power** (which are too short) as well as **significance** (which is too long) to fit into the 8-9 letter slot, leaving us with the eight-letter perfect fits, **movement, dynamism, and vitality**. But which of these is the likely meaning of Okigbo's meaning? It is extremely difficult to say, but—barring other more serious

competitors, **vitality** seems acceptable as a word with a semantic range that encompasses the ideas of life, power, flow, movement, dynamism, and even significance, hence the suggested reconstruction in the edited text (on the basis of logical semantic and syntactical consistency): “The sisters here represent the spirits and the [vitality of] the great river—in this case, of course, the Niger—[they] .represent the spirits of the Living.”

Plate 2 (Page 2 of the Brussels Typescript)



Thrusting itself forcefully on us as from the very large blot, hence extensive lacunae, in paragraph 2 of the above plate, is the third principle—intratextual or intertextual resonance (referring to a word or phrase that echoes another in a similar semantic environment either within the same text or across two or more text). In Lacunae A and B in the transcription below, we have two clear cases of intertextual resonance while in Lacunae C and D, we have clear cases of intratextual resonance.

Then we have.....A.....in which the long drums and elephant [.....B.....] the hero. Here a similar experience is [.....C.....] - in images. The drums, of course, represent [.....D.....] Ancestors—of the deads [sic]. So we now have the D[.....E...] the Dead lamenting for the hero.

Lacuna A, like the first principle, is a logical follow-up from Okigbo's description of the content and structure of the super-sequence, *Silences*. Having mentioned the first part of the super-sequence, *Lament of the Silent Sisters*, it follows that the second part blotted out in Lacuna A cannot be any other than *Lament of the Drums*. This, we can surmise from the established intertextual evidence. Both are well-known titles in the Okigbo corpus. Besides, the number of letters in the title is a perfect fit for the lacuna and the phrase that follows (“in which the long drums...”) has the effect of confirming the reconstruction. For Lacuna B, immediate help comes from the resonance of Okigbo's description of the role of “the horns of elephant tusks” in his commentary on “Lament of the Drums” in his introduction to *Labyrinths*. It is thus evident that we can reconstruct the phrase, **in which the long drums and elephant [.....B.....] the hero** as in **which the long drums and elephant [tusks/horns lament for] the hero**, taking the verbal [lament for] by dint of intratextual resonance from the very last words of the paragraph. Also clear cases of intratextual resonance, the word or phrases blotted out in Lacunae C, D and E present themselves as echoes of other words or phrases in a similar semantic environment within the same text, thus in the reconstruction of Lacuna D (“**The drums, of course, represent [the spirits of the] Ancestors—of the dead.**”) the reconstructed phrase, “spirits of...” is not only idiomatic, it also echoes or repeats a phrase used earlier in the same semantic environment to describe the ancestors. Similarly, in the reconstruction of Lacuna E (**So we now have the D[.....E...] the**

Dead lamenting for the hero.), the survival of the initial letter /D/ and the earlier description of “The drums” as representing “the spirits of the Ancestors—of the dead” succinctly suggests that the missing word beginning with the capital letter /D/ must be the Dead—with a strong dash leading to the repetition of the same word in “the Dead lamenting for the hero.” Once all these have been sorted out, the remaining Lacuna (C) yields itself by dint of logical semantic consistency, conventional literary idiom, and number of letters in the word as **represented**, hence the reconstruction [**Here a similar experience is [represented] – in images.**]

The final reconstruction—This interview was recorded by Okigbo at the, Transcription Centre, London, On Friday, October 1, 1965, at noon—referencing Plate 3 below, relies on the principle of historical contextual and calendric evidence which has been amply discussed in the first paragraph of section x above and further amplified in the associated notes.

Plate 3 (Page 3 of the Brussels Typescript)

NOTE: This interview [redacted] Transcription Centre, London, on Friday, [redacted].

It is useful, perhaps, for magazine publication or for reference material. It is not for broadcast. Christopher did not want it used for this purpose and insisted on recording under bad conditions. His voice, as a consequence, is at times inaudible, being far removed from the mike. A heavy scree of music from the adjoining room is superimposed upon the whole track.

No claim to finality is being made in the present editorial presentation for any of the reconstructions of the lacunae. The aim throughout is to present a readable and intelligible text that offers Okigbo's self-critical expressions of his artistic intentions in a coherent manner.. Needless to say, there is room for better reconstructions in the future, pending the discovery sometime in the future, of a lacunae-free transcript.

The Interview [By Ivan Van Sertima]

Note on Okigbo: Born 1932 at Ojoto near Onitsha in the Ibo country of Eastern Nigeria. The imagery of his poetry is often rooted in the groves, shrines, and sacred streams of his birthplace. Educated at Government College, Umuahia, and University College, Ibadan, where he read Classics. From 1956 to 1958 he was Private Secretary to the Federal Minister of Research and Information, then taught for two years at Fiditi near Ibadan before joining the Library staff at the University of Nigeria. He is now West African representative of the Cambridge University Press. He is also West African Editor of *Transition*. Has published *Heavensgate* poems (*Mbari*, Ibadan, 1962), *Limits and Other Poems* (*Mbari*, 1962).

Van Sertima: Christopher, I've been reading your collection *Heavensgate* and I've been particularly struck by images like

the soul whitewashed in moondew...
the new laid egg, the white hen at midterm ...

also such lines as

the fire that is dreamed of...
the rain that is dreamed of.

I get the impression that you are involved in, as it were, the shedding of an old skin, of an old mask, and that your main concern in *Heavensgate* is with this—this gateway to a new conception of the self, the search for a certain kind of identity. Would you say I am reading your intentions correctly?

Okigbo: I would [say that you are] correct, but this has nothing, of course, to do with [intentions]. Because, personally, I can only describe a poem I have written and say what it is, the terms in which I see it, whether it is a human being, an inkpot, or a chair. I can never really say what the intention is. There didn't appear a conscious intention for the realization of which the poem is.

Van Sertima: May I put it another way, then. When I speak of "intentions," I don't really mean the conscious imposition of an idea on the poem. I mean here the *central thread that illuminates the work*.

Okigbo: Yes. I think you are correct, because I think that *Heavensgate* is concerned with, in fact, the shedding of an old mask, because it involves a central figure who is a personage very much like Orpheus or Christ at the beginning of a quest, perhaps for self-knowledge, perhaps for lost innocence, and, in this sense, I would say that your own interpretation of the work is correct. But you know that the process of rededication to a goddess or creative spirit—in this case to Idoto, the village stream in which I washed, of which I drank as a child—is a process of cleansing. If you are going to wash now, if you are going to bathe in a stream, you have to strip yourself completely naked, you see, so that the process of self-rededication to any cast or head is one of total nakedness.⁷ This is why it opens with the lines:

Before you, mother Idoto
Naked I stand...

Because, in fact, the personage with which the work is involved is, at the beginning of the work, cleansing himself before...his quest.

Van Sertima: I understand that this quest with which *Heavensgate* opens leads into four or five series of poems.

Okigbo: Yes, *Heavensgate* is in fact the head of the main work, *Labyrinth*. *Heavensgate* is the first section in which the hero rededicates himself to the water spirit, Idoto, and the central figure is a personage like Christ, a personage like Orpheus,⁸ and the different sections present this personage at various stations of his cross. Because *Heavensgate* is something like a *Mass*—an offering for this water goddess.⁹

In *Limits*, which is divided into two, the quest takes the form of a pilgrimage to a sacred rock, because of which the hero suffers dismemberment, maybe pain of self-knowledge.¹⁰ The six "Deluge" fragments follow, and they are entitled "Fragments out of the Deluge." These fragments present certain details: flashbacks of the hero and of his milieu, the universe in which he operates. We now have images, you see, which suggest that there has been a collective rape of innocence—a collective profanation of the mysteries¹¹—and it is for this sort of thing, you see, that the hero's blood is demanded to...to...

Van Sertima: ...to redeem?

Okigbo: (pause) ...to redeem, you see. Now, in *Silences*, two groups of mourners lament for the disembodied hero. Evidently, in *Limits*, the hero becomes disembodied—torn apart like Orpheus, or crucified like Christ, if you like. In *Silences*, two groups of mourners lament the disembodied hero. We have, first of all, the "Lament of the Silent Sisters." The sisters here

represent the spirits and the [vitality of] the great river—in this case, of course, the Niger.¹² [They] represent the spirits of the Living.

Then we have “Lament of the Drums,” in which the long drums and elephant [horns lament for] the hero. Here, a similar experience is [represented] in images. The drums, of course, represent [the spirits of the] Ancestors—of the [dead]. So we now have the [Living and] the Dead lamenting for the hero.¹³ In *Distances*, we have two poems of return, “Lament of the Quiet Chamber,”¹⁴ which deals with the personal homecoming of the hero himself. The return to innocence here is achieved through a total liberation of the self from all psychic, physical, and emotional tensions, and this is done, this is achieved through a form of sensual anesthesia...¹⁵ Then, in “Dance of the Painted Maidens,” the return of innocence is presented in the form...is presented in more concrete terms, you see, as the return of a personage like Eurydice through a process of reincarnation—the birth of a baby girl. This part of the work I wrote on the birth of my daughter, who is a reincarnation of her paternal grandmother.¹⁶

Van Sertima: I see. And, therefore, the whole series really—one could sum it up by saying that—here one is involved in...preparatory rites to a...rebirth of the self.

Okigbo: That's what it is. One thing which is worth noting in *Labyrinth*¹⁷ (which the whole work is)—is the fact that, although it is concerned with an inward exploration, the inward exploration is realized at a personal level. Now, although it is realized at a personal level, it is capable, of course, of interpretations at various levels, because some people are told that *Labyrinth* is, in fact, concerned with, if you like, the quest for self-fulfillment by a nation, that the hero might not, in fact, be just a personage, no, might be Africa. I don't know whether this is so. But I see it—I see it—I conceived of it first at a personal level, and whatever other interpretation it is capable of having—that doesn't concern me.

Van Sertima: By that I gather you mean you do not set out to create a hero...specifically African, or representative of...

Okigbo: Oh, certainly not. No, no, no.

Van Sertima: In other words, the figure throws many shadows.

Okigbo: Yes.

Van Sertima: One is involved in an intensely personal search here...which is, yet, not personal. It's personal in the sense that it sprang from an exploration of one's own private arena of experience, but, at the same time, it is a plumbing of depths which can open it out into—may we use the word, though it may sound cliché—*universal significance*.

Okigbo: Certainly. Because, you know, if we look at the universe... Although Mount Everest is different from another mountain, when we start digging, at the bottom, we just have one unifying substance that holds the universe together. So I think, in fact, the richness of the work of art depends on the depth of the interpretation—depends on the depth of the treatment—or rather, the depth of the execution. Personally, I'm happy that I have created...I have given birth to *Labyrinth*, because it has been hanging on me for a long time, and, having given birth to it, I am no longer concerned with it. Because it must now have its own independence—its own individual life.

*This interview was [recorded at] the Transcription Center, London on Friday, [October 2,] 1965, at noon.*¹⁸ *It is useful, perhaps, for magazine publication or for reference material. It is not for broadcast. Christopher did not want it used for this purpose and insisted on recording under bad conditions. His voice, as a consequence, is at times inaudible, being far removed from the mike. A heavy [screech] of music from the adjoining room is superimposed upon the whole track.*

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Notes

¹ Listed as "Documentary heritage submitted by Africa and recommended for inclusion in the Memory of the World Register in 2007" (see <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en>, or search with "Christopher Okigbo Collection: UNESCO-CI," as keywords).

² The entire archive of the London Transcription Center, founded in the early 1960's, and directed through the late 1970's, by art historian, Dennis Duerden, was purchased in the 1990's by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, alongside the archive of the 1965 Commonwealth Festival of the Arts and the papers and memorabilia of Amos Tutuola. A one-month Andrew Mellon Fellowship enabled me to search for Okigbo unpublished papers in these archives in July-August, 2005.

³ Okigbo seems to have breezed in and of London in a hurry, without attending some of the events which he was billed to attend. Thus, in a letter, dated October 7, 1965, to Dennis Duerden (Director of the London Transcription Center) Bill Harpe (Director of the Cardiff Commonwealth Arts Festival), writes: "I have written to the Director of the National Museum asking him for payment of transport costs for Usif Grillo.//I have not written to Heinemanns asking them to cover Christopher Okigbo's trip to London, since he departed without participating at the Conference" (Box 20, Cardiff Exhibition File, Transcription Center Archive, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, hereinafter HRC-UT). From other files in the Transcription Center Archive, we know that Okigbo did not come to London anytime in 1965 before the Commonwealth Arts Festival and there is no evidence of any special circumstances. A program of "poems and songs by contemporary poets of the Far East, India, Pakistan and East and West Africa," immediately after "Poets Debating," from 8:00 pm. before 1964 in which he could have been interviewed by Ivan van Sertima interview.

⁴ Described as a discussion of "the problems of being a poet in a Commonwealth country" at which "poets and others in the audience are invited to join," at 6:00-7:00 pm (Cleverdon, 1965: 39)

⁵ A program of "poems and songs by contemporary poets of the Far East, India, Pakistan and East and West Africa," immediately after "Poets Debating," from 8:00 pm.

⁶ Interestingly, Okigbo first broke into print in 1959 in a University College Ibadan student magazine called *The Horn*, then edited by Abiola Irele *et al* (see Stevenson, 1976).

⁷ The key statements in this opening response by Okigbo are woven into the opening paragraph of his Introduction to *Labyrinths* (1965, in 1971): "the celebrant, a personage like Orpheus, is about to begin a journey"; "an offering to Idoto, the village stream of which I drank, in which I washed, as a child"; and "cleansing involves total nakedness, a complete self-surrender to the water spirit that nurtures all creation."

⁸ In the Introduction to *Labyrinths*, this hint is amplified as a broad statement of overall thematic intention: "a poet-protagonist is assumed throughout; a personage, however, much larger than Orpheus; one with a load of destiny on his head, rather like Gilgamesh, like Aeneas, like the hero of Melville's *Moby Dick*, like the Fisher King of Eliot's *Waste Land*."

⁹ Cp. Okigbo's two related commentaries in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*: (a) "*Heavensgate* was originally conceived as an Easter sequence. it later grew into a ceremony of innocence, something like a mass, an offering to Idoto" and (b) "The various sections of the poem, therefore, present this celebrant at various stations of his cross."

¹⁰ Cp. Okigbo's commentary in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*: "'Siren Limits' presents a protagonist in pursuit of the white elephant. In his progression to a sacred waterfront he falls victim to his own demonic obsession, becomes disembodied or loses his second self."

¹¹ Cp. Okigbo's commentary in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*: "Fragments out of the deluge' renders in retrospect certain details of the protagonist and of his milieu—the collective rape of innocence and profanation of the mysteries, in atonement for which he has had to suffer immolation. (*Limits* was written at the end of a journey of several centuries from Nsukka to Yola in pursuit of what turned out to be an illusion.)"

¹² This specific reference to the River Niger is modified in Okigbo commentary in his Introduction to *Labyrinths* by the contextualization of the events in *Silences* in the postcolonial political crises of the day: "Between *Limits and Distances* an interval, *Silences*, is provided, in which two groups of mourners explore the possibilities of poetic metaphor in an attempt to elicit the music to which all imperishable cries must aspire. Both parts of *Silences* were inspired by the events of the day: *Lament of the Silent Sisters*, by the Western Nigeria Crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba; *Lament of the Drums*, by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his eldest son." The idea of the "silent sisters" is then amplified with a modernist collage of transnational echoes in Okigbo's confession of his intensions: "The 'Silent Sisters' are...sometimes like the drowning Franciscan nuns of Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, sometimes like the 'Sirenes' of Debussy's *Nocturne*—two dissonant dreams associated in the dominant motif 'NO in thunder' (from one of Melville's letters to Hawthorne). This motif is developed by a series of related airs from sources as diverse as Malcolm Cowley, Raja Ratnam, Stephane Mallarme', Rabindranath Tagore, Garcia Lorca and the yet unpublished Peter Thomas—airs which enable the 'Silent Sisters' to evoke, quite often by calling wolf, consonant tunes in life and letters," including, as Echeruo (2004; 15) notes, a possible echo "from Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday,' which not only constantly names a 'sister' but makes her the 'silent sister veiled in white and blue'." Needless to say, a tremendous amount of rethinking and artistic reconfiguration of the supersequence took place between the interview with Ivan Sertima and the completion of *Labyrinths*.

¹³ Cp. Okigbo's commentary in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*: "The long-drums are, on the other hand, the spirits of the ancestors, the dead. They begin their lament by invoking the elements which make them up, and imploring evil forces to stay away from the rostrum. in Section U, the drums enter their theme song. They are coming out of their place of confinement, 'soot chamber' cinerary tower' (1st strophe), not to rejoice but to lament (2nd strophe)."

¹⁴ "Lament of the Quiet Chamber" is not mentioned in Okigbo's Introduction to *Labyrinths*. See my comments on p. x above.

¹⁵ Cp. Okigbo's commentary in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*: "*Distances* is, on the other hand, a poem of homecoming, but of homecoming in its spiritual and psychic aspect. The quest broken off after 'Siren Limits' is resumed, this time in the unconscious. The self that suffers, that experiences, ultimately finds fulfillment in a form of psychic union with the supreme spirit that is both destructive and creative. The process is one of sensual anesthesia, of total liberation from all physical and emotional tension; the end result, a state of aesthetic grace. (*Distances* was written after my first experience of surgery under general anesthesia)."

¹⁶ See Okigbo's commentary in his letters to Douglass Cleverdon and Eric White, both of the London Poetry Book Society, quoted on p. 6, above.

¹⁷ Pluralized as *Labyrinths* in the title of the final December 1965 collection published in 1971 by Heinemann.

¹⁸ See Note 3 above.

