

University of Massachusetts Boston

ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

---

Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series

Africana Studies

---

5-2011

## The Muse of Nigerian Poetry and the Coming of Age of Nigerian Literature

Chukwuma Azuonye

University of Massachusetts Boston, [chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu](mailto:chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs)



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Azuonye, Chukwuma, "The Muse of Nigerian Poetry and the Coming of Age of Nigerian Literature" (2011). *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series*. 11.

[https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs/11](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/11)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Africana Studies at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

# The Muse of Nigerian Poetry and the Coming of Age of Nigerian Literatures

Chukwuma Azuonye

[In Responses to Ezechi Onyerionwu's Interview Questions]<sup>1</sup>

**Onyerionwu:** Your generation of writers and literary scholars fully emerged after the Nigerian Civil War. This is a generation that comprised the likes of Ossie Enekwe, Jaz Amankulor, Dubem Okafor, Obiora Udechukwu, Kalu Ogbaa, etc. To what extent would you agree that the civil war single-handedly informed the intellectual and creative tenor of this prodigious group, beginning from the early 1970s?

**Azuonye:** The war was indeed crucial in the making of my generation. In the wake of the bloody crises in Northern and Western Nigeria in 1966, we all converged at Nsukka. In spite of the bloodbaths that followed the counter-coup of July 29 and the assassination of Aguiyi-Ironsi, I was determined to brave the fires of the burning West and claim my admission to read English and Drama at the University of Ibadan. But it soon became clear to me that it was unrealistic to do so. The air was suffused with the smell of blood and death. So I rushed down to Nsukka to enroll there like everyone else. My father—a severe disciplinarian who insisted on absolute self-reliance on the part of all his children—saw the quandary in which I found myself, and decided, most uncharacteristically, to accompany me. As fate would have it, we met Dr. Michael Echeruo who made me welcome on a campus I had devoted so much effort trying to avoid because of the stereotypical feeling at the time that the University of Nigeria was academically inferior to Ibadan. It was like the story of Jonah. The whale of the crisis had swallowed and vomited me just where I needed to be. Walking through the corridors of the English department was like a journey of several centuries through the burgeoning literary history of Nigeria. The name-plates on the doors of the offices of the professors said it all: Michael Echeruo, Donatus Nwoga, Obiajunwa Wali, Okogbule Wonodi, Pol Ndu, Edward Okwu, Peter Ogbang, Romanus Egudu, and Ben Obumselu (just transferred from Ibadan)—men, who, with Christopher Okigbo and Peter Thomas, and had greatly excited my imagination during my high school days, and whose writings in *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, *Ibadan*, *Nigeria Magazine* and various anthologies and poetry collections of the day I had devoured endlessly and with passionate intensity. Now I was face to face with them all in one little place. I was soon in their midst, rubbing shoulders with them at poetry readings which it fell to my lot to organize when, as fate would have it, I was elected secretary of the Writers' Club, based in the English department. I made the poetry reading a weekly event at the Continuing Education Center (CEC), each reading featuring a guest poet supported by several poets, established and new, student and faculty, old and young. Saro Wiwa was one of the Easterners on flight from Ibadan. Stephen Vincent, a young San Francisco poet and American Peace Corps volunteer, was ever present, and poetry readings and parties were occasionally held in his apartment. And, from Enugu, Gabriel Okara came along from time to time to give his usually eloquent performances. I did everything in my power to get Christopher Okigbo down to join us, but he was nowhere to be seen. I was told of his attempt to set up a new publishing company called Citadel, on Station Road, Enugu, with Chinua Achebe, but I was never able to track him down there. In retrospect, this was the period when he appears to have been involved in the now well-known gun-running travels in Europe that have been connected to the wreckage of a November 1966 plane crash in Cameroon from

---

<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming (2011) in *Nigerian Literature: The 21st Century Conversation*, ed. Ezechi Onyerionwu. Aba, Nigeria

which his personal belongings were retrieved.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the zero hour drew nigh. Between classes and our poetry-reading events, we were on the streets demonstrating for the declaration of our wounded region as the Republic of Biafra. In one such demonstration I was among the students that carried Odumegwu-Ojukwu shoulder high when he descended at our demonstration in the University stadium on a helicopter. Yes, the excitement was indeed as infectious as the intellectual and literary ferment that bred our endless writings as recounted in my introduction to *Nsukka Harvest* (1972)<sup>3</sup> and later in my “Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artists” (1990).<sup>4</sup> Soon came the declaration of Biafran independence on May 30, 1967, and the rest is history.

**Onyerionwu:** In the period immediately following the war, especially up until the very early 1990s, Nsukka provided something like a melting pot of intellectual conversations on Nigerian and African literature, like Ibadan had done in the Western parts of Nigeria. We could attribute this to the abundance of super-scholars on the Nsukka campus at the time—the likes of the Donatus Nwoga, Michael Echeruo, Emmanuel Obiechina, Chinua Achebe himself and several others. What else do you think contributed to the shaping of that famed Nsukka accomplishment in literary scholarship?

**Azuonye:** There is only one name for the shaping spirit of the imagination and intellect that drove the great Nsukka renaissance of the 1960’s and beyond—passionate commitment. It was with utmost passionate intensity that we were all committed to the adoration of the newly discovered muse or presiding lady of an authentically indigenous poesy. The idea of the *muse* is often invoked in the scholarship on modern Nigerian literature; but it is often shrouded with a mystique that tends to reduce it to something abstract or far-fetched, or, at best, a kind of African imitation of the classical muses of Graeco-Roman antiquity. But our renascent muse was not only concrete and manifest in our postcolonial practical engagement with our indigenous cultures; she was also an embodiment of the highest cultural ideals of our ancestral traditions as we perceived them. She appeared to each and every one of us in multifarious guises. But whatever her emanation was, she was unmistakably a personification of the earth of our ancestors—the earth goddess, *Ala*, the supreme light (*chi*) that nurtures all creation, an embodiment of the eternal bond that unites the living and the dead. When our early devotional poems to this great spirit and those of our predecessors and successors are collected and published, readers will be better able to understand the ramifications of the power of this great goddess who appeared to us as to our predecessors in the early 1960’s (Okigbo, Wonodi, Ndu, Egudu, Onyejeli, Nwaojigba, Okafor, Okwu, etc) as a dancer, spirit maiden, water maid, and other exciting feminine figures—in all cases as embodiments of our communal and individual apperception of the superiority of our indigenous cultural heritage to every single superimposition of the postcolonial order.<sup>5</sup> We wrote in English, but we might all have written in Igbo or other Nigerian languages. My first poem at the first poetry reading session in 1966 was an Igbo poem, “Adamma,” celebrating the beauty of womanhood and by extension of the supremacy of the earth mother. We read English because it was the only avenue for experiencing the structures of the human imagination in the postcolonial academy. But *Beowulf* did not lead me to any interest in a further exploration of Anglo-Saxon geography, history, social life or culture; it rather led me to a search for parallel heroic narratives in our own oral traditions. It ultimately led me to the rediscovery of the Epic of

<sup>2</sup>See Lloyd, Garrison, “Arms-to-Nigeria Fiasco Is Stirring New Friction: US Is Accused of a Role in a Conspiracy That Failed” (Photo: Christopher Okigbo, an Ibo poet, was one of the intermediaries in a plot to fly arms cargo into Nigeria) *New York Times*, Monday, November 14, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Azuonye, Chukwuma, ed. 1972. *Nsukka Harvest: New Poetry from Nsukka, 1966-1972*. Enugu: Odunke Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Azuonye, Chukwuma. 1990. “Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artists,” *African Literature Association Bulletin*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Winter: pp. 20-26

<sup>5</sup> See Peter Thomas. 1968. “The Water Maid and the Dancer: Figures of the Nigerian Muse,” *Literature East and West*, 12 March 1968, pp. 85-93.

Elibe Aja (a hunting hero, who like Beowulf, is killed by an affine of the human-eating monster he slays) and many other epics among the Ohafia and other warlike Abam and Ada peoples among the Cross River Igbo. In art, similar apperceptions led to the rediscovery of *uri* (more popularly known as *uli*) as a powerful system of traditional signs at the core of a new Afromodernism in drawing and painting.<sup>6</sup> Passionate commitment was indeed the name of the power behind the processes of rediscovery that constituted the Nsukka renaissance. The trajectory was in place before the spectral aberrations occasioned by the triumph of disorder under the stranglehold of the successive visionless military dictatorships of the post-civil war era.

**Onyerionwu:** You have contributed significantly to the promotion of both the culture of literary creativity and that of literary scholarship at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. How fulfilled are you to have worked so tirelessly to establish and promote an intellectual culture in the way you have done, and how do you wish to be effectively remembered in Nsukka literary circles?

**Azuonye:** Shortly after receiving the present questionnaire, my dear friend, Obiora Udechukwu—one of the pillars of the Nsukka renaissance, currently Dana Professor of Art at St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York—informed me of the passing of Ulli Beier, one of the Titans of the overarching Mbari renaissance of the late 1950's through the early 1970's. In the course of our reflections on the achievement of Ulli Beier, I was surprised to learn from him that a contemporary of ours at Nsukka in the early 1970's had given me the nickname "Ulli Beier"! I considered this to be the ultimate tribute in recognition of our little but intensely passionate offerings to the muse, in those days, in the form of literary production, editing, publication and dissemination on the campus and beyond. As far as I was concerned, the stimulation and organization of literary and other artistic events on campus was more important than attending class, and I was often behind in meeting deadlines for essays. In addition to writing poetry and fiction regularly at the time, I edited various little magazines, such as *The Muse*, *Omabe* and *The Gentleman*. But I have always been a perfectionist and the output in print has never been a true reflection of the volume of my actual writings. As Echeruo recalls in his 1974 interview with Lindfors,<sup>7</sup> we spent the war writing, when not busy servicing the machinery of the Biafran propaganda directorate. We continued our poetry reading events wherever we went. Some of our poetry was published and broadcast in Germany and the United States as a showcase of the vitality of Biafran creativity in spite of the ravages of war. I believe my perfectionism resulted in the working to death of many an intriguing vision. Several finished and unfinished works were lost in the confusion of the final putsh that led to the end of the war on January 12, 1970. Thus, by the end of the war, only little of my poetry and fiction had broken into print; but they managed to attract good critical notices in *Who's Who in African Literature* (Jahn, Janheinz, Ulla Schild and Almut Nordman, eds. 1972), *Books Abroad* (forerunner of *World Literature Today*, *West Africa*, *Anstoss* (a German magazine), *Times Literary Supplement*, among other sources.<sup>8</sup> Yes, the early 1970's were the best years in my experience of life and letters, and I would like to be remembered as one of those who tilled the ground for what is today

---

<sup>6</sup> See Ottenberg, Simon. 1997. *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press; and Ottenberg, Simon. 2002. "Sources and Themes in the Art of Obiora Udechukwu," *African Arts*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Summer), pp. 30-43+91-92

<sup>7</sup> Lindfors, Bernth, ed. 1974. *Dem-Say: Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers*, Austin, Texas: African and Afro-American Studies and Research.

<sup>8</sup> For personal recollections of my intimate involvement with the major events in the Nsukka movement in contemporary Nigerian arts, see my "Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artists, 1966-1990" (*African Lit. Association Bulletin*, 17 (1), Winter, 1991, pp. 20-26); "The First Three Annual Seminars on Igbo Life and Culture: A Report" (*Ikoru: Bulletin of the Institute of African Studies*, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 7, 1 & 2, June, 1991, pp. 1-24); and "Empowering the Third Force in Contemporary Nigerian Politics" (*African Literature Association Bulletin*, 21 (3), Summer, 1995, pp. 9-14), "

undeniably one of the most active centers of literary activity in Nigeria, indeed in Africa and—I dare say—in the world at large.

**Onyerionwu:** Your work on the African epic and oral literatures in general, especially the very important essay on Kalu Igirigiri, the singer of tales from Ohafia, has become quite seminal. What do you think you have achieved by devoting a good part of your intellectual life to the investigation of the oral forms of your people, with almost the same commitment and energy as the likes of Isidore Okpewho?

**Azuonye:** Isidore Okpewho is one of my closest personal friends. He is also a valued mentor and collaborator in the central labor of my life—the collection, study and interpretation of the oral literary heritage of the Igbo. As a theorist and comparatist, he has no equal among us, his contemporaries, in the commitment and energy he has brought to bear on the elucidation of the aesthetics of the oral performance in Africa to the world of humane letters. I feel greatly flattered to be compared to him. My work has been limited to the Igbo oral tradition and to the primary task of collecting and producing carefully-transcribed and edited texts of various forms and genres of oral performance I have encountered in my explorations of Igbo culture. I think I have done a good deal of what I set out to do in opening up discourse on the contexts, content and features of style of these texts. In the elucidation of these texts, I have appropriated the close reading methods of practical criticism which I value over and above the increasingly iconoclastic trend, in the Nigerian critical industry, of water boarding and drowning the meaning and aesthetic significance of texts in the name of theory. By remaining faithful to the practical critical doctrine that the text is supreme—that what matters in the critical evaluation of literature is the word or the page (or in the case of oral performance, the vocal sound captured on tape), I have not only introduced and established a whole new tradition of African oral literature (namely the oral epic traditions of the Igbo and other aspects of Igbo oral literature) as part of world literature but that through the rigorous investigation and application to scholarly criticism of indigenous canons of aesthetics as elicited in oral literary criticism, I believe that I have contributed to the development of a major new trend in literary theory, aesthetics, and comparative literary criticism.

In the mid-1970's, Okpewho challenged and successfully demolished (with incontestable textual and comparative evidence in his book, doctoral dissertation at Denver, later published as *The Epic in Africa* in 1979) the foundations of Eurocentrist assumptions, championed by Ruth Finnegan in her *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) that “the epic, in its true sense, does not exist in Africa.” It was in the poisoned atmosphere of this debate that I began working on my doctoral dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, the last stronghold of ex-colonial administrators and racist anthropologists who had barricaded themselves in snug holes of various Africanist disciplines on which they imagined themselves to be the unerring and ultimate authorities. Despite the vast corpus of oral epic poetry I had brought to the program from my field research at Ohafia, my supervisors (little men with iron masks over their faces) vehemently ruled the idea of an Igbo epic out of existence. In their minds, it was bad enough to imagine an African epic; to swallow the fantasy of an epic tradition among the so-called acephalous or non-centralized, non-monarchical Igbo people of Nigeria was like stretching the blasphemy too far. The supervision of my doctoral thesis turned into a grim battle of survival against entrenched and unyielding Eurocentrist bigotry and prejudice as we argued month after month whether the texts on hand should be called “epics” (which I preferred) or “narrative war songs” (which their Lagadoan academy insisted on). It was the intervention of Professor Adiele Afigbo (of blessed memory) that saved the day. During a visit to London in the heat of this argument, he quietly admonished me to call the texts whatever I was told to call them, knowing that, after getting my doctorate, I would be empowered to rewrite everything on my own terms. This was precisely what I did, and, under the supervision of J. Carnochan, I was awarded the doctorate for the thesis (“The Narrative War Songs of the Ohafia Igbo: A Critical Analysis of their Characteristic Features in Relation to Their Social Functions”) which I subsequently rewrote into several articles published in various scholarly journals and books between 1981 and 2002

These articles have now been collected into three volumes—(a) *Footprints on Rock: Essays on Igbo Oral Narrative*; (b) *Performance and Oral Literary Criticism: Aesthetic Principles of an Igbo Epic Tradition*; and (c) *The Sweet Voice of Tradition: Oral Epic Poetry from the Performances of an Ohafia Igbo Bard*. It is hoped that these collections will break into print later this year (2011) and early in 2012. The collection, *The Sweet Voice of Tradition: Oral Epic Poetry from the Performances of an Ohafia Igbo Bard*, presents the oral epic compositions-in-performance of the Ohafia Igbo singer of tales, Kaalu Igirigiri (c. 1920-1980), in a format that reveals both his originality as a verbal artist and as “the sweet voice of tradition,” epitomizing the traditional aesthetic principles by which his audience judge performances, the focus of my second work, *Performance and Oral Literary Criticism*. At the core of all these works is the essay you have rightly described as seminal—“The Performances of Kaalu Igirigiri, an Ohafia Igbo Singer of Tales.” Originally published in 1990, in both *Research in African Literatures* and *The Oral Performance in Africa*, ed. Isidore Okpewho,<sup>9</sup> it will reappear in its final version in *Performance and Oral Literary Criticism*.

**Onyerionwu:** The heartwarming thing about your work is that despite your impeccable training in the English language and English literature, you have shown an outstanding commitment to Igbo language literature. You have not only produced creative pieces in Igbo, you have translated existing Igbo literature into Igbo and vice-versa. How would you explain the motivation for this inclination?

**Azuonye:** As I stated earlier, I read English because it was the only access route to modern letters in the postcolonial academy. The passionate intensity with which my generation adored the muse of indigenous poesy was so strong that it paid no heed to prejudices attending the study of Igbo and the ridicule to which those who dared to do so were subjected. In the postcolonial Igbo world, under the grip of colonial mentality, the phrase “Igbo-Igbo-RK” was a pejorative expression for mediocrity and even outright stupidity. But we—the nascent Africans—were proud to be associated with our language and culture and sought nothing more in the academy than an opportunity to serve the muse through the development of Igbo as a medium of literature and intellectual discourse. I have on numerous occasions turned the foolish ridicule of the cultural bastards against their own faces by exposing their colonial mentality. Their skewed up mentality is the subject of the satiric irony of some of my earliest Igbo poems such as “Bekee Wụ Agbara”:

A sị m nwanne m, “Biko bja ka anyị ruo ụzọ ubi.”

Q sị m chere ka ya juo nwa Bekee!

M sịkwa nwanne m, “Biko bja ka anyị ruo ebe obibi.”

Q sị m chere ka ya juo nwa Bekee!

M wee sị nwanne, “Gịndị bu nwa Bekee?”

Q sị m chere ka ya juo nwa Bekee!

(In *Aka Weta*, ed. Chinua Achebe & Obiora Udechukwu, 1982)

“Bekee Wụ Agbara” is actually the title first poem of a much longer sequence of satires against the almost invariable conflation of Igbo modernity with colonial mentality, a malaise often glorified by anthropologists as “Igbo receptivity to change.” In the third strophe of this sequence, I have spared no effort in my determination to subject these white men’s dogs to the kind of merciless walloping they deserve for their most disgraceful betrayal of the pride and dignity of their cultural tradition. I am currently preparing for publication my major sequence of poetry in Igbo so far, entitled *Ekè Òma* (The Good Life Plan), a seven-part poetic celebration of my resurrection from the dead on September 18, 2004, through a successful kidney transplant surgery in Boston that gave me a new lease of life after six years of

<sup>9</sup> See *Research in African Literatures* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington), 1990. 21, (3): 17-50, and *The Oral Performance in Africa*, ed. Isidore Okpewho. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1990. Ch.2.

kidney disease and a thrice-a-week dialysis regimen that cut me off from the stream of modern African letters. I plan to find a publisher in Nigeria soon for my collected poems in Igbo, comprising invocations, initiation rites, dreams, visions, psychic and spiritual journeys, most set in the period of my confinement with kidney disease. The tentative title is *Okwa Okooko Osisi* (A Platter of Flowers). It includes some retrospectives, such as “Adamma”—my first poem at the Nsukka Writers’ Club poetry reading meetings in 1966, thankfully preserved by Obiora Udechukwu. Thereafter I hope to translate (I mean, re-create) my *Testament of Thunder* and other poetry in English into Igbo. In the meantime, I am continuing my translation of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* into Igbo.

Translation is another dimension of my current interest in written Igbo literature. Completed as far back as 2003 is my translation into English of the first modern, postcolonial novel in Igbo, *Omenuko*, written by Pita Nwana, an Uzuakoli Methodist missionary carpenter from my mother’s hometown (Arondizuogu), first published in 1933 by Longman, Green and Company. The translation, yet to be published, is accompanied by critical notes and commentary. The winner of the first prize in Igbo in an all-Africa competition for supplementary readers in African languages organized by the forerunner of the International African Institute, London, *Omenuko* has been widely read in schools, colleges, universities, and Igbo homes, ever since it was first published and is virtually another name for literature in Igbo. My translation retains the rhythms of the original Igbo and Nwana’s adroit weaving of Igbo proverbs, idioms, parables, and mini-narratives into the narrative in a way that helps, I hope, to underscore the novel’s influence on the themes, style and cultural nationalist tenor of the writings of Igbo Anglophone writers ranging from Mbonu Ojike and Nwafor Orizu to Chinua Achebe and his literary offspring. After *Omenuko* is published, I plan to translate the romances of D. N. Achara (*Ala Bingo* and *Elelia na Ihe O Mere*) and Bell-Gam’s fictional travelogue, *Ije Odumodu Jere*). I have since begun work on translating the woks of Ubesie, hopefully to be published under one cover, *The Novels of T. Uchenna Ubesie*.

While I appreciate, and have myself contributed to, African writing in European languages, I see the study of African language texts—oral and written—and the development of appropriate critical tools for their proper development and appreciation (and this includes the principles of translation and interpretation) as one of the primary challenges before students of African literature today.

**Onyerionwu:** You are among the scholars who have worked tirelessly to keep legendary African poet, Christopher Okigbo, ‘alive.’ You have in fact transcended the accomplishments of many others by convening a world-class conference on Okigbo, preparing an anthology on him, gathering his ‘papers’ etc. what do you think is the real significance of Christopher Okigbo to African literature, especially in the 21st century.

**Azuonye:** Christopher Okigbo—by far the most outstanding postcolonial, Anglophone transnational African modernist poet of the twentieth century—is indeed alive and well. He is also undoubtedly one of the greatest lyrical poets that ever lived. His presence at Nsukka between 1960 and 1962, where he composed *Heavensgate* and *Limits* and parts of *Silences*, left a powerful and inspirational aura behind. The magic of his art has continued to hold the younger generations of Africa poets under its spell. Echoes of Okigbo’s words, imagery, lines and cadences will be heard in the performances of the very best among these younger generations of poets. As reported in my “Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artists” (mentioned earlier), I met him briefly on the Nsukka war front when I was dispatched with Columbus Ihekaibeya to cover the war there on behalf of the war report committee of the Biafran Propaganda Directorate in August 1967. But I had before that been drawn to him since the publication of *Heavensgate* by Mbari in 1962. Ever since then, I have been absorbed in the reading and re-reading of his poetry and the exploration of the wonderful world of the imagination in which the actions and experiences of his poet-protagonist, the Prodigal, are set. The Okigbo conference of September 19-23 was the culmination of several decades of effort on my part to engage a wider community of enthusiasts in a comprehensive exploration of the world of Okigbo’s poetry. The conference turned out to be a greater

success than I had dared to imagine when I began planning it shortly after meeting the poet's daughter, Obiageli, through Obiora Udechukwu in 2005. In our first telephone conversation, she revealed that she had taken possession of the previously unpublished papers of Okigbo that had survived the war and was anxious for advice on what to do with them. In the summer of that year, she visited and spent three days in my home in Milton, Massachusetts, and revealed more about the Okigbo papers. I lost no time in accepting her invitation to go Brussels to examine the papers. The opportunity came in January 2006. Scanty though the cache turned out to be, the papers proved themselves to be a veritable quarry of "gold crop"! Over two sleepless nights, I catalogued the papers pragmatically under eleven main categories, as follows:

- A: Previously unpublished poems in English;
- B: Poems written in Igbo;
- C: Earlier or alternative versions of previously published poems in English;
- D: Templates or schemes for poetry collections;
- E: A previously unpublished Interview with Ivan with Van Sertima;
- F: Lists of miscellaneous literary projects;
- G: Miscellaneous jottings and doodles;
- H: Correspondence, personal and official;
- I: Documents, photographs and other memorabilia;
- J: Reference materials: reprints and other printed materials
- K: Manuscripts from other authors

In March that year, my catalog became the basis of the nomination of the Okigbo papers for the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. On Tuesday, June 19, 2007, the Okigbo's papers became part of the 38 items of documentary heritage of exceptional value" that were added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. Established in 1997, the Okigbo papers were the 158<sup>th</sup> collection to be added to the register. Meanwhile I received two fellowships—a Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship (tenable the Harry Ransome Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin (in the Summer of 2006) and a Sheila Biddle Ford Foundation Fellowship at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University (in the 2006-2007 academic year)—for the study of the Okigbo papers. My findings are summed up in my Du Bois Fellows lecture of April 4, 2007.<sup>10</sup>

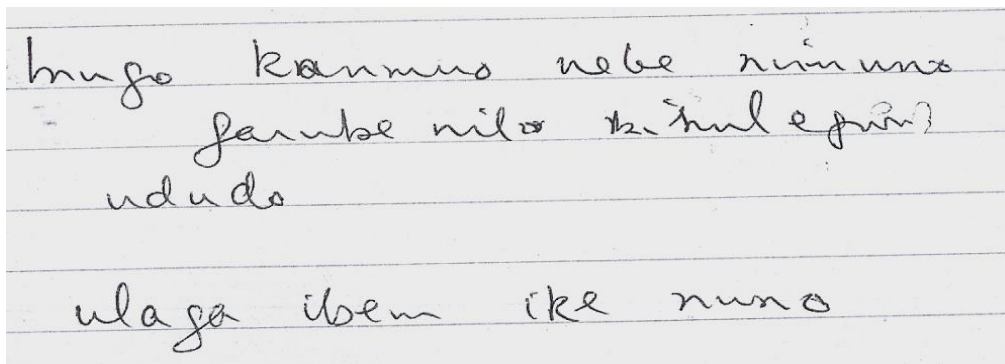
Four major works (accepted for publication by Africa World Press), have arisen from my study of the Okigbo papers and from the 2007 Okigbo conference. The first, *Christopher Okigbo: Complete Poetry*, edited with a critical introduction, commentary and notes, includes previously unpublished poems, among them seven early poems in Igbo and fragments of an unfinished Anthem for Biafra. In the collection, *Labyrinths* is presented as originally prepared for publication by Okigbo himself side by side with *Elegies for Thunder* (including *Path of Thunder*) as conceived by the poet. The second, *The Burden of Several Centuries: Papers from the 2007 Christopher Okigbo Conference* brings together 50 poignant papers that chart new road maps to Okigbo scholarship in the twenty-first century, opening several new vistas on Okigbo's world view, themes, aesthetic, and transnational modernism. The "burden" of the title, taken from "Elegy of the Wind" (*Path of Thunder*), is what the poet calls in his introduction to *Labyrinths* (1965, in 1971), "a load of destiny" which every committed poet must bear for the betterment of humankind, even at the risk of martyrdom. The third, *Christopher Okigbo: The Critical Groundwork, 1962-2007*, is a collection of major essays and reviews (edited with a critical introduction) that covers the entire spectrum of Okigbo criticism from the earliest reviews of *Heavensgate* and the celebrated interviews of 1962-65 to criticism anticipating the 2007 Okigbo conference. The fourth, *The Quest for Fulfillment: The Organic Unity of Christopher Okigbo's Poetry*—a comprehensive and systematic close-reading of Okigbo's poetry from *Four Canzones* and other early poems to *Path of Thunder* and the

---

<sup>10</sup> Azuonye, Chukwuma. 2007. "Christopher Okigbo at Work: Towards a Pilot Study and Critical Edition of His Previously Unpublished Poems, 1957-1967," presented at the Fellows Colloquium, Thompson on April 4.



unfinished “Anthem for Biafra”—unveils the narrative and dramatic continuity underlying Okigbo’s claim, in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*, that “although these poems were written and published separately, they are in fact organically related.” I see this work therefore as an *open sesame* to the complex and wonderful world of Okigbo’s poetry, and its completion has been made possible by the limitless access I was given by Okigbo’s daughter, Obiageli, to the early manuscripts of Okigbo’s canonical works and to his previously unpublished works, doodles, jottings and sketches and even of works only dreamt of. One of the remarkable features of this quarry of unpublished works is the substantial evidence they contain of Okigbo’s interest in, and imitation of, the lyrics of traditionally Igbo minstrels who, as witnessed by Obumelu and Achebe, he considered to be better poets than himself and his contemporaries. Related to this, in the cache of unpublished materials, is his experimental poetry in Igbo, in the style of the songs of the minstrels and the masquerade chants which he also admired. Here is an excerpt, “Ulaga” (Text 6, Azuonye, 2007) from the manuscripts of Igbo poems in the Okigbo repertoire:



Ị nugo ka mmuo na-ebe n’ime unu  
Garube n’ilo ka ị fulu egwu

Ududo

Ulaga ibe m, ike n’uno

This can be roughly translated as follows into English:

Have you heard spirits crying inside the house  
Go to the street and behold a dance

*Ududo*

My fellow *Ulaga*, power in the house.

*Ududo* (the spider-web membrane used to disguise the voice of the masker into a spirit voice), in line 3, is here invoked as a metonymy for the particular type of mask, *Ulaga* (the dancing bird mask), here invoked. There is substantial evidence in the Okigbo manuscripts which I examined in Brussels in January 2006 that this lyric was composed in the early sixties, sometime between 1961 and 1963. Okigbo seems to have quietly responded to, or even anticipated, the argument of Obi Wali’s famous essay, “The Dead End of African Literature?” (*Transition*, No. 10, Sep., 1963, pp. 13-16), that “until (African) writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African

languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration.” The awesome verity of this argument is still very much with us.

**Onyerionwu:** A lot has been said about Christopher Okigbo lately, unfortunately in the negative dimension. Would you want to respond to Chimalum Nwankwo’s charge of plagiarism against Okigbo?

**Azuonye:** I beg to strongly disagree. I have commented at some length on a paper<sup>11</sup> in which Chimalum Nwankwo repeats his claims in my introduction to *The Burden of Several Centuries* (forthcoming, Africa World Press). The charge of plagiarism against Okigbo stems from a gross misreading of Okigbo’s texts and an even deeper misunderstanding of the nature of essence of modernist aesthetics—*collage* (lit. an image created by sticking cut-out objects onto a surface) or (to use a parallel term), *bricolage* (lit. something created from materials ready at hand). In his very insightful article, on Okigbo’s African Modernism,<sup>12</sup> David Richards of Stirling University, Scotland, describes *collage* (as manifested in Okigbo’s poetry, as “one part of a general modernist exploration of the technique of fragmentation, juxtaposition and defamiliarization which goes beyond simply the pasting of paper cut-outs.” These aesthetic strategies link Okigbo with his Euromodernist models, including T. S. Eliot. But Euro modernism, as we all know, is an aesthetic that did not grow adventitiously out of the European literary soil. Its roots have been traced to African aesthetics through Picasso’s encounter with traditional African art from the Fang and other western and central African peoples. The process of cultural exchange, interchange, imitation, adaptation, theft, call it what you will is a matter of detailed public record; and everyone who knows anything about the rise of Euromodernism knows that it was in response to the departures in African art from photographic realism that the principles of fragmentation, juxtaposition and defamiliarization which are of the essence of Euromodernism came into being. All the basic modes of Euromodernism can be traced back to the Masks and the so-called primitivistic temperament of traditional African art. Part of the untold story of Euromodernism is that these influences inhere from lesson learnt by African sculptors from indigenous African oral narrative and poetry. Anyone who has taken the trouble to study the art of African oral performance will know one of its central aesthetic principles is collage (core images created by means of motifs or formulae composed of pre-existent verbal materials) or bricolage in the form of images created out of words, formulae and verbal materials ready at hand. The process of *iro-egwu* (learning a song)—discussed at some length with reference to Okigbo’s art in my DuBois Fellows Lecture at Harvard in 2007 (cited earlier)—is more about the creation and mastery of new tunes to be populated with words—old, new, borrowed, archaic, symbolic, slang, high, low, obscure, etc. Once created, words pass into common currency and are at the disposal of every singer for selection, adaptation and assimilation into their tonal schemes. The truth is that oral performers are more jealous of their tunes than their words. Words once created can be freely adopted and adapted into new tunes in new contexts of performance by other artists. We can see processes of this kind even in today’s popular church music and other popular music. The words of Agatha Moses’ blockbuster has been stolen, absorbed and assimilated into numerous new tunes and for different purposes by other contemporary Igbo hymnodists in keeping with age-old habits of collage or bricolage in Igbo song-making. My study of Okigbo’s unpublished papers reveals that his collage does not come from his Euromodernist influences alone. He was attentive to the Igbo minstrels and seems to have worked hard to become a neo-Igbo minstrel of the English expression. Nor is his kidnapping of texts from other artists and their domestication and total assimilation into the fabric of his distinctively Okigboeque medium a

<sup>11</sup> Nwankwo, Chimalum. Forthcoming. “Christopher Okigbo, African Writers, and the Diffident Detour into Western Myths: A Contemplation of Limits and Parameters,” Chapter 39, *The Burden of Several Centuries: Papers from the 2007 Okigbo Conference*, ed. Chukwuma Azuonye. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

<sup>12</sup> Richards, David. 2000. “‘Canvass of Blood’: Okigbo’s African Modernism,” *The Edinburgh Magazine and Review*, 1773-1776. Rpt in: *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations*, ed. Ashok Berry and Patricia Murray, with a conclusion by Wilson Harris. Basingstoke, England; New York, NY: Macmillan; St. Martin’s, 2005, pp. 229-39.

peculiarity of his art. In his famous essay on Massinger, Eliot (1920)<sup>13</sup> articulates the aesthetic justification of creative theft of the kind we find in his own and other Euro-American modernist art as in traditional Igbo and other African oral performance:

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.

Like his Igbo oral and Euromodernist mentor, Okigbo's kidnapping of texts from a wide diversity of sources at hand is in this sense not an artistic perversity but a hallmark of artistic maturity. It is a process in which Igbo oral artists take enormous pride. Thus, in one of my interviews with the great Ohafia Igbo singer of heroic tales, Kaalu Igirigiri,<sup>14</sup> he declares, with reference to the modalities and output of the traditional artistic use of, and transmutation, of materials at hand from other sources:

You have just told me that you are a native of Isuikwuato. Well, then, let us say that before leaving my house now you tell me all about the way of life of your own people. When I come to sing about it, sometime in the future, I will do it in such a way that even you yourself will have to learn it all over again. That is why I say I am a better singer of tales than all my rivals.

Again the emphasis is not on what the artist has taken from other sources but on what use he has made of it or transformation he has wrought on it. In his Igbo poem in memory Okigbo, "Uno Onwu Okigbo,"<sup>15</sup> Achebe kidnaps a traditional Igbo funeral song, which (set side by side with the oral traditional original), appears at first sight to be plagiarized.

Listen to Achebe's Poem:

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

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

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

---

<sup>13</sup> Eliot, T.S. 1920. "Philip Massinger". In: *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969 edn.

<sup>14</sup> See Azuonye, Chukwuma. Forthcoming. *Performance and Oral Literary Criticism*, Chapter 7, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press. See also Azuonye, Chukwuma. 1990a. "The Performances of Kaalu Igirigiri, an Ohafia Igbo Singer of Tales," *Research in African Literatures* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington), 21, (3): 17-50, and *The Oral Performance in Africa*, ed. Isidore Okpewho. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1990. Ch.2.

<sup>15</sup> See my forthcoming essay, "Achebe's Igbo Poems: Oral Traditional Resources and the Process of 'Deschooling' in Modern African Poetics," specially invited for *Nigerian Literature Today*, #3 (Special Edition Dedicated to Chinua Achebe's 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday)

Now, listen to the oral traditional analogue:

O bu onye k'anyị na-achọ?  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 O bu onye k'anyị na-achọ?  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 E Nweke k'anyị na-achọ?  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 O chube iyi  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 Ya lata o  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 O jebe ọlụ o  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 Ya lata o  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 O jebe ahịa o  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 Ya lata o  
*Zọmalizọ*  
 O bu onye?  
*Zọmalizọ*

But, as revealed by my practical critical analysis of the text, in addition to the changes manifest in the surface structure of the text just quoted, there are several other deep structure transmutations of the materials kidnapped by Achebe from the oral tradition:

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 version) to "elinia" (1982 version) 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.

I posit that it is the same process of adaptation, absorption and assimilation of materials at hand (by dint of collage or bricolage) that we find in Okigbo's handling of his verbal kidnappings from other sources such as—to take but a few well-known examples—"catactonic pingpong" in *Distances*, IV.86 and "pilgrimage to a cross in the void" in "One the New Year (line 13) and *Limits*, VII.52 (from Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*)<sup>16</sup>; "Anna of the knobs of the panel oblongs" in *Heavensgate*, I.iii and V.i, from Carl Sanburg's *Harvest Poems* (I will discuss this presently); "So, one dips one's tongue in ocean, and

<sup>16</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. 2006. *Collected Poems, 1947-1997* New York: HarperCollins Publishers. See especially "Howl, Before and After San Francisco Bay Area (1955-1956)," pp. 131-170.

begins/To cry to the mushroom of the sky” in *Lament of the Silent Sisters*, II.28-29 (from “At Eight-Fifteen in the Morning” by T. K. Raja Ratnam<sup>17</sup> a poem named for the exact time of the explosion of the first atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima in Japan at the end of World War II, on August 6, 1945; and “DUMB-BELLS outside the gates/In hollow seascapes without memory, we carry/Each of us an urn native/Earth, a double handful anciently gathered,” in *Lament of the Silent Sisters*, III.30-34 (from Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return*, 1951). I have provided extensive notes and commentary on the sources and the modalities of their translocalism, adaptation and assimilation into the fabric of Okigbo’s texts in *Christopher Okigbo: Complete Poetry* (Africa World Press, Forthcoming).

Let us now take a close look at the particular poem on which Chimalum Nwankwo bases his charge of plagiarism against Okigbo. This is Okigbo apostrophe to his late mother, Mrs Anna Onugwaluobi Okigbo, in the third strophe of *Heavensgate*. Listen:

O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong,  
hear us at crossroads at the great hinges

where the players of loft pipe organs  
rehearse old lovely fragments, alone—

strains of pressed orange leaves on pages,  
bleach of the light of years held in leather:

For we are listening in cornfields  
among the windplayers,  
listening to the wind leaning over  
its loveliest fragment ...

Placed side by side with Carl Sandburg’s poem, “For You” (*Harvest Poems*, 1960: 65-66), there can be no doubt of Okigbo’s indebtedness to Sandburg in terms of phraseology (the underlined phrases and whole lines):

The peace of great doors be for you.  
Wait at the knobs, at the panel oblongs.  
Wait for the great hinges.  
The peace of great churches be for you,  
Where the players of loft pipe organs  
Practice old lovely fragments, alone.  
The peace of great books be for you,  
Stains of pressed clover leaves on pages,  
Bleach of the light of years held in leather.  
The peace of great prairies be for you.  
Listen among windplayers in cornfields.  
The wind learning over its oldest music.

Indeed the indebtedness is sufficiently substantial to be suggestive—on superficial reading—of blatant plagiarism on the part of Okigbo. But, closer reading will show that what is at play is modernist collage or bricolage and the associated logistics of translocalism and assimilation. To be with, in line 9 (“O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong”), Okigbo creates a melodic transmutation of the more prosaic cast of Sandburg’s line 2 (“Wait at the knobs, at the panel oblongs”) in terms of the cadences of Ezra Pound’s invocations of pagan deities and spirits in his *Cantos*: “O Margaret of the seven griefs” (*Cantos* LXXVII,

<sup>17</sup> From *United Asia: International Magazine of Afro-Asian Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1961, pp. 181-183, and 187 (Note), under the rubric, “Hiroshima: An Anthology of Poems by Four Indians,” with an introduction by Jag Mohan.

Pound, 1950, in 1970: 491). The new context in which Okigbo translocalizes his kidnappings from Sandburg —St Odilia’s Church in Okigbo’s hometown, Ojoto—is by no means one on which he would pray for blessings as Sandburg does in his Harvest Poem: “The peace of great churches be for you.” A prodigal come home from cultural exile, the church is now for me a metaphor for his spiritual thralldom and exile, and his mother, Mrs Anna Onugwuoluobi Okigbo (though named for the Catholic St. Anne), is here invoked, died in 1937, not in the terms of the Christian idea of the guardian angel or patron saint, as is commonly assumed, but in terms of the parallel and superior idea (from the returned exile’s point of view) of the dead mother as an ancestral figure with the power to protect and guide his living offspring. See also Okafor (1998: 169-170). The later invocation of the poet’s mother, in *Heavengate* V.i, uses more or less the same words but in totally different semantic environment in which Anna is specifically apostrophized as an ancestral protectress:

*Anna of the panel oblongs,  
protect me  
from them fucking angels;  
protect me  
my sandhouse and bones (Heavensgate, V, i: 10-14).*

In 1988, I invited Chimalum Nwankwo to edit a recording of a performance by Achufusi Anejekwu by a student of the Department of English, Chinwe Ezenwabachili for publication in *Uwa Ndi Igbo*; Journal of Igbo Life and Culture, No. 2 (June 1989), under my editorship. Nwankwo later confessed to me that the exercise was radically transformational to his own personal aesthetic. I am therefore very surprised about his charge of plagiarism against Okigbo. Beyond the directness of phrasing that he saw in the performance of Achufusi Anejekwu, he should have recognized patterns of collage, bricolage, and translocalism which are no different from what he calls plagiarism in Okigbo. I will give further considerations to this matter in my keynote address at a celebrative event scheduled for September 2011 in Brussels, Belgium, by the Christopher Okigbo Foundation.

**Onyerionwu:** You left the shores of Nigeria about two decades ago on search of better fortune for your career as an intellectual, just as so many Nigerians and Africans. What would you say is the future of the African intellectual conversation in the light of what Biodun Jeyifo calls the effective relocation of the African intellectual “centre of gravity” from Africa to the West and the Americas?

**Azuonye:** The emigration of African intellectual and artistic culture—or the relocation of the “centre of gravity” of African intelligentsia—to Western Europe and North America is a sad commentary on the triumph of disorder in Nigeria and other failed postcolonial African state. I know that there are many who will dispute the description of Nigeria as a failed postcolonial state. But what is a failed state if not one in which the ruling class is unable to provide basic economic necessities, utilities, and infrastructures—water supply, electricity, communication, all-weather roads, health services, etc? What is a failed state if not one in which salaries are frequently unpaid and normal routines of everyday life are constantly disrupted, making citizens to seek such services in neighboring states or overseas? What is a failed state if not one in which federal, state, and local executives and legislators do nothing but loot public treasuries and enact laws to create lifestyles of fatuous ease for themselves and their families? Needless to say, the triumph of disorder in Nigeria has had a heavy toll on every aspect of Nigerian life and one of the most drastic pertains to the Nigerian intellectual community. But there is hope that a rebuilding of the connections once created by journals such as *Black Orpheus*, *Nigeria Magazine*, *Okyeame* and many others, will become possible through the Internet and associated social media. I see that more and more literary events featuring exiles from the United States and elsewhere are taking place in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa and elsewhere on the continent with greater frequency. Abuja may yet blossom into a new meeting point, coordinating activities at Nsukka, Ibadan, Owerri, Kaduna, Jos and elsewhere. By the same

token we in exile will continue to stage events such as the 2007 Okigbo Conference in addition to the key annual meetings of the African Literature Association and the African Studies Association and the major ethnic associations such as the Igbo Studies Association as opportunities for the gathering of the grand literary clan. I do not share the sense of finality implicit in Jeyifo's statement about the shift in the center of gravity of Nigerian literature to the Western world. It is my considered view that the emigration of Nigerian culture is a temporary aberration. Following the lead of *The Guardian* Newspapers, Nigerian newspapers and associated magazines have continued to provide some exciting outlets for Nigerian literary discourse. It is my hope that the present series of conversations on Nigerian literature will herald an annual convention on Nigeria literature, beginning at Abuja and rotating from city to city and from state to another in the years to come.

But there is an old athletics saying that what you lose in the corner, you gain in the track. Here in exile, some of us have become intimately involved in the exploration of the African transatlantic experience especially from the perspective of the patterns of innovation and creatively associated with the African presence in the Black Atlantic world. Okpewho has organized a series of conferences on this new realm of discovery in which the participation of Africans with native-speaker competence in African cultures and languages has begun to produce fruitful insights hitherto unknown in this field of research. My current interest in this field is in the exploration of Igbo presence, especially through Igbo names and I have at hand a vast corpus of onomastic data placing pertaining to Igbo clan organizations (among the *cabildo carabalis*) in Cuba, including one—*Cabildo Carabali Sicutato*—named for my own clan, Isuikwuato. But the major *cabildo carabalis* with high visibility in the annual Cuban festivals are the Cabildo Carabali Isuama, the Cabildo Carabali Elogo (Elugu), and the Cabildo Carabali Abaya (Agbaja) in Santiago, Cuba. I am currently working on my Spanish to be able to be better engaged in the exploration of the linguistic and literary aspects of this intriguing realm of Igbo Diaspora studies.

**Onyerionwu:** You have established the Nsibidi Poetry series, which has published such 'Nsukka' poets as Chimalum Nwankwo, Dubem Okafor, Esiaba Irobi and yourself. Does the objective of this venture have anything to do with reinventing the famed Nsukka literary atmosphere?

**Azuonye:** The Nsibidi African Publishers is a part-time publishing venture which I established in 2002 in memory of my 19-year old second son, Nnamdi Obioha Azuonye, who was killed in an automobile accident on July 4, 2001. After Nnamdi's death, I discovered that he has been writing more poetry than I was aware of. Hundreds of poems written by him were discovered among his papers and in the hard drives of his personal computer. Between July 2001 and January 2002, enough poems had been retrieved from these sources to fill four volumes, the titles determined by lead poems summing up the themes of each of the four groups of poems—*Paradigm City and Other Poems*; *Life with So Short a Memory*; *Iridescent Glow and Other Poems*; and *Rhymes Upon the Clock: Rap Lyrics*. Between January and July 2002, the poems were edited and published in time to be launched at the first anniversary of his passing, with keynote addresses by Obiora Udechukwu, Emmanuel Obiechina, Chimalum Nwankwo, Chinyere Okafor, and many others. We plan to set up an Nnamdi Azuonye Prize for Younger Writers shortly. I see the *Nsibidi Library of Nsukka Poets* as an opportunity to continue the work we all were engaged in, from the mid-1960's to the early 1970's, of further developing the Nsukka school as a major force in the growth of modern Nigerian literature. Unfortunately, three major collaborators—Ossie Onuora Enekwe, Esiaba Irobi, and Dubem Okafor—all died within six months of one another, in 2010. But four titles are already in print, namely *Testaments of Thunder* (Chukwuma Azuonye, 2002), *Letter to God & Other Poems* (Nnorom Azuonye, 2003), *Tsunami, Katrina & Other Poems* (Dubem Okafor, 2005), and *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin & Other Poems* (Esiaba Irobi, 2004), and there are plans to publish four to five new titles in the near future. Yes, the project is still very much alive and will be resumed in earnest as soon as possible.

**Onyerionwu:** How would you assess Nigerian literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly after the first decade of the new directions both in creativity and criticism? Do you see young vibrant people who are sufficiently motivated to consolidate on the achievements of people like you?

**Azuonye:** Let me begin with some pertinent digressions towards the larger picture before us. I think that we have now arrived at a point in our literary history at which we can speak of the coming of age of modern Nigerian literatures. But this stage in our aesthetic rites of passage is as uncertain as the vicarious fortunes of the our postcolonial nationhood. In the chaotic state of our body-politic, the battle for the satisfaction of the most elementary physiological needs (hunger, thirst, and sex drives) often overshadows and relegates to the background the higher drives for the actualization of our artistic best selves—the need to fulfill our unique potentials as a community of artists. I am here adapting Abraham Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs to our situation; and I think that this adaptation is by no means far-fetched. In the 1960’s, self-actualization needs, through dedicated service to the muse of African cultural nationalism, was primary. Perhaps, the annual convention of Nigerian literature, proposed in my earlier statements may be useful in creating a permanent forum for the kind of conversation on the current state and future growth of Nigerian literature represented by the present collection. We have also spoken of the emigration of Nigerian culture to North America and Europe and the movement of the center of gravity of Nigerian arts from Ibadan and Nsukka to various stations of exile. This is very troubling. Again, in addition to remedies from the Internet and the social media, an annual convention of Nigerian literature will serve as a good rallying force. Far too much is unknown about the history, diversity and strength of Nigerian literature. There is a formidable iron curtain of mutual ignorance separating the North and the South. Let me illustrate with reference to our ignorance in the South of the ancient and vibrant northern literatures in Hausa, Fula, Kanuri, Arabic and Ajami (Sudanic or African languages written in the Arabic script) . Many of us in the south are unaware of (and do not admit as part of the canon) this large body of writings in our indigenous language which have been in existence from as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century and possibly earlier. Because of the fragmentation of our literary self-knowledge and consciousness, our literary history is foreshortened, excluding the grandeur of more than six centuries of indigenous African genius before the invasion and dispossession of the Niger Area of the Western and Central Sudan (West Africa) by European colonialist predators. The earliest known tradition of Arabic Islamic literacy and literature in this area flourished in and around the Gazargamu courts of the *mai* (kings) of the state of Kanem, a state whose territorial boundaries encompass the present-day province of Bornu (northeastern Nigeria) and surrounding districts west of Lake Chad. Dominated by Kanuri-speaking peoples, this region occupies an important crossroads frequented by trans-Saharan trade caravans, and after the entrenchment of Islam. The pioneering genius of the literature of this zone was El-Kanemi, or more fully Ibrāhīm b. Ya’qūb al-Dhakwānī al-Kanemī (d. 1212-13), surviving fragments of whose poetry are presented be found in *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa* by Albert S. Gérard (Longman, 1981.) and *Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys*, ed. B. W. Andrzejewski, S. Pilaszewicz, W. Tyloch (Cambridge, 2010).

Beyond El-Kanemi, as John O. Hunwick and R. S. O’Fahey note in their *Arabic Literature of Africa, vol. 2, The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa* (Leiden: E.J.Brill 1995)—from which I have derived several of the pieces of literary historical data presented in the present response (as part of my ongoing co-editorship, with Steven Serafin of *The Columbia Anthology of African Literature*)—the most notable Gazargamu (Kanem-Bornu) writers after El-Kanemi include the prolific Ahmad b. Fortūwa a.k.a. Ibn Ṣafiya and, in Kanuri, Ahmad Fortuwami of Bornu (fl. 1576) and Abū Bakr al-Bākūm, a.k.a Ibn Aj-rūm of Bornu (fl. Mid-17<sup>th</sup> cent.) and several other names that would sound like magical abracadabra to us in the south because we have not hint of even the possibility of contemporary Kanuri literacy to imagine an one located so far back in time. The iron curtain dividing the literatures of the North and the South must be smashed before Nigerian literature can truly come of age.



Even the literatures of Hausaland, where many southerners live in domestic diaspora, is unknown to us in the south. The emirate of Kano was not only Islamized but had cultivated a strong and vibrant Arabic culture and literacy for several centuries before the Islamic revolution of Shaykh ‘Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not surprisingly, Kano literary historians tend to look back to the centuries before 1800 for the golden age of the Arabic Islamic literature of Kano than to the subsequent centuries. The starting point of this golden age seems to be located in the closing years of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when under the reign of Rumfa, a Moroccan jurist, poet and anti-Semitic polemicist, al-Maghīlī (or more fully Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī al-Tilimsānī, d. 1504-5) sojourned and influenced a coterie of early literati in Kano. Apart from his other contributions to the development of Arabic Islamic letters in the city, al-Maghīlī wrote the celebrated book of instruction in wisdom, *The Obligation of Princes*, for the Kano royal family.

While al-Maghīlī was an expatriate catalyst, who nonetheless occupies a place of honor in the history of the Arabic Islamic literature of Kano, we know from surviving and well-preserved manuscripts of at least two other extremely important and seminal writers whose works have attained the status of classics over the centuries. But while Zaria, Bauchi and Lokoja boast a similar coterie of notable authors and canonical texts, there is nothing comparable in these literary enclaves, to the prolixity, intensity, and religious fervor of the tradition of Arabic and *Ajami* Islamic literature, in a wide diversity of traditional and novel genres, in the Sokoto caliphate established at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the great Islamic reformer and jihadist, Shaykh ‘Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye b. ‘Uthmān b. Sālih al-Fallātī al-Ash’arī al-Mālikī, a.k.a. Ibn Fūdī (Arabic), best known in the south as Usmanu bi Fodiye (Fulfude), and Usmanu dan Fodio (Hausa) (15 December 1754-20 April 1917). Because of the centrality of the Shaykh, his family and descendants in the cultivation and progress of letters in the Sokoto caliphate and its colonies, the literature of this great hegemony has come to be categorized by literary historians under three diachronic headings: Pre-Fodiawa, The Fodiawa, and Post-Fodiawa, *Fodiawa* being the collective plural form of the family name, *Fodiye* (more popularly known in its Hausa form, Fodio).

Chief among the Pre-Fodiawa writers of Sokoto is a coterie of little known men of letters, among whom popular tradition includes the grandmother and father of the Shaykh. Thus, while an anonymous 18<sup>th</sup> century poem of 29 verses has been attributed to the Shaykh’s grandmother, Ruqayya al-Fallātiyya, another anonymous 18<sup>th</sup> century poem of 14 lines has been attributed to his father, Muhammad Fodiye. The pioneering and central genius of the extraordinarily gifted Fodiawa family of writers is the Shaykh, ‘Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye b. ‘Uthmān b. Sālih al-Fallātī al-Ash’arī al-Mālikī, a.k.a. Ibn Fūdī (Arabic), Usmanu bi Fodiye (Fulfude), and Usmanu dan Fodio (Hausa) (15 December 1754-20 April 1917). A distinguished jurist and Sufi philosopher, he was also a polemicist, poet and historian, who wrote in Arabic, his native Fulfude, and in Hausa. Well over 131 works in a wide diversity of genres have been attributed to him. Of these, 104 have been firmly authenticated while 27 others have not been authenticated. In addition, there are 14 other works which claiming to contain his teachings but not his direct authorship. No less prolific, albeit not as celebrated as his elder brother, is ‘Abd Allāh Fodiye b. ‘Uthmān b. Sālih, a.k.a. Abdullahi dan Fodio (Hausa) and al-Ustādh (Fulfulde) (1766/7-8 July 1829). Writing mainly in Arabic and in a wide diversity of genres and themes, well over 111 works have been attributed to ‘Abd Allāh Fodiye. Of these, 88 have been firmly authenticated, while 23 have not been authenticated. Additionally he is the highly esteemed author of four favorite works of poetry in Hausa.

But perhaps by far the most versatile and prolific of the Fodiawa triumvirate of authors is Shaykh ‘Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye’s eldest son and successor, Muhammad Bello b. ‘Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye, a.k.a. Sultān Bello (1781-25 October 1837). Of the 162 works attributed to Muhammad Bello, 109 have been fully authenticated while 53 are yet to be authenticated. Other Fodiawa writers of the Sokoto caliphate traditionally fall into two main groups, namely (a) members of the extended family of Shaykh ‘Uthmān Fodiye and (b) the Shaykh’s Wazirs. Prominent among the first group are first, the Shaykh’s cousins, sons (other than Muhammad Bello), daughters, and their descendants. The best-known of the Shaykh’s cousins are the poet, al-Mustafa b. al-Hajj ‘Uthman Gaya b. Muhammad Degel b.

Muhammad, a.k.a. Gaga (n.d.), author of a verse dated 1793-4, and the commentator, Zad b. Muhammad sa'd, a.k.a. Zayd (d. December 1804), whose sole output is dated 1794-5. Among his sons, daughters, and their descendants are some distinguished poets, jurists, commentators, polemicist, philosophers, and historians who wrote in both Arabic and the local languages (Fulfude and Hausa). The Shaykh's twenty-second and twenty-third children—his son, al-Hasan b. 'Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye (1793/4-11 November/10 December 1817) and his twin sister, Asmā bt. 'Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye, a.k.a. Nana Asmā'u (1793/4-1864), distinguished themselves as poets. Al-Hasan, who died young, produced three collections of *qasā'id* verses, including a verse list of Islamic caliphs. Asmā, on the other hand, lived long enough to establish herself, not only as a versatile poet and translator but as one of the most distinguished female poets in the history of African letters. Writing mainly in Arabic but also in her mother tongue, Fulfude, and in Hausa, she is the author of eight *Qasā'id* in Arabic, three other prose works in Arabic, 42 long poems in Fulfude (including poems criticizing the style of the government of Sarkin Kebbi Muhammad b. Muhammad Moyijo, on the punishment of Hell and the bliss of paradise, on the threat to Sokoto by Gobir and Taureg forces, on the main events of her father's *jihād*, on the character of Mohammed Bello, etc). She also wrote 21 poems in Hausa. Several of her works have recently been translated into English. Resonances of the influence of the Fodiawa have been traced to other parts of present day Nigeria, hence the notion of Post-Fodiawa writers of Bornu (in North-eastern Nigeria), Wadai (in Niger), Adamawa (in East Central Nigeria, in the Plateau region), as well as Ilorin and Nupe (in West Central Nigeria, around the Upper Niger).

Many of us in the south know very little of the historical depth and diversity of early Nigerian literature and we often pride ourselves in our ignorance that we are the makers of the “new literatures of Nigeria. Nothing can be further from the truth. The literature of Nigeria in Nigerian languages and Arabic is centuries older than the naming of the Niger area currently known as “Nigeria” at the suggestion of Flora Shaw (later Lady Lugard) in her letter to *The Times of London*. I was so overwhelmed by what I read about the literary productions, political activism and feminism of Nana Asma'u, daughter of the leader of the 19<sup>th</sup> century jihad that swept Hausa kings out of their thrones and established the Sokoto Caliphate whose shadows extend over the Nigerian political scene till today, that I was impelled to research her life and career, as set out in my 2006 paper on her works.<sup>18</sup> The paper was a great eye-opener to me. As stated in my introduction, “Nana Asma'u, a remarkable West African Islamic woman poet, intellectual, and social activist who flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century, offers an alternative to the popular stereotype that the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad have historically sanctioned the abuse and low social status of women throughout the Islamic world.” An annual conference of Nigerian literatures will help us get to know the historical depth and diversity our literatures better than we currently do and this kind of literary self-knowledge bid fair to open up traffic of ideas in a way that can lead to the fusion of a common culture and better intersectional relationships.

I hope I have not strayed too far away from your question. Your question is: Do you see young vibrant people who are sufficiently motivated to consolidate on the achievements of people like you. The answer is an emphatic yes. But they need a challenging forum that will excite and broaden their imagination as well as strength their knowledge of their collective best self as members of an organically integrated literary community. This forum, I believe, will be provided by an annual conference on Nigerian literatures.

---

<sup>18</sup> Azuonye, Chukwuma. 2005. Feminist or Simply Feminine? Reflections on the Works of Nana Asma'u, A 19th Century West African Woman Poet, Intellectual & Social Activist.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 54–77 (Indiana University Press for Smith College).