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Gabriel Okara in Conversation with Professor Azuonye

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Chinua Achebe Foundation Interviews #36: Gabriel Okara in conversation with Professor Azuonye

By Achebe Foundation
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It is people who have never been to the Riverian area to see things for themselves, who are up there making these decisions on our behalf. They have no desire to come down here to see how things really are. They merely sit high up there in their posh houses, and decide things for the people down here, from whose soil the wealth of this country is coming. For those of us who prefer to be non-partisan, who try to see themselves foremost, as Nigerians, this situation begins to make more and more of us feel less Nigerian first, and more, for example, as an Ijaw man, first.

Gabriel Okara in conversation with Professor Chukwuma Azuonye

GABRIEL IMOMOTIMI GBAINGBAIN OKARA, was born on April 21, 1921, in Bomandi in present day Bayelsa State. After his primary education in both his home state and in the Army School, Creek Road, Port Harcourt, he was admitted to the elite Government College, Umuahia, from where he went to the Yaba College, Lagos. Thereafter, he trained as a book binder at the Federal Government Printer, after what he calls "an adventure" in pig-trading. Armed with an exposure to art, at Umuahia, where he was a student of Ben Enwonwu, he set out for a career in fine art, in 1946, when, according to his account, he experienced a vision of the then recently deceased national political leader, Herbert Macaulay. As he sat down to paint, according to the dream, Macaulay suddenly appeared and plucked the brush from his hand and left three volumes of books marked, Down, Devil, Down. Thereafter, he was dramatically transformed from an artist into a poet.

One of his early poems won a prize in the Nigerian Festival of Arts and was later published in *Black Orpheus*.

By the mid-1950's he was turning out a steady stream of fine lyrics which appeared in the leading African literary journals of the day (*Black Orpheus*, *Presence Africaine*, *Transition*, *Nigeria Magazine*, etc) and avant-garde anthologies such as *Modern Poetry from Africa* (edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier). But it was not until 1978 that his first collection of poems, *The Fisherman's invocation*, was published, both in Nigeria and in Britain, by *Ethiophe* and *Heinemann* respectively.

Following his training as a bookbinder, Okara joined the Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Information at Enugu where he became the Chief Information Officer. During the Nigerian civil war, he remained in that position under the new Biafran regime, and went on a diplomatic mission on behalf of Biafra to Europe and North America, with Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi. Towards the end of the war, he was appointed Director of the Biafran Cultural Affairs Department, located in the woods of Ogwa, where he coordinated the artistic life of leading Biafran writers and artists to the end of the war.

After the war in 1970, Okara served as Director of the Rivers State Arts Council, Chairman of the State Newspaper, *The Tide*, and as a Commissioner in the State Government before his retirement in the late 1970's. Since then he has served as a member of the African Leadership Forum under Olusegun Obasanjo, and continues to take an active interest in public affairs as a public intellectual, environmentalist, and elder statesman. In quiet retirement in the outskirts of Port Harcourt, he has since published a satirical collection of poems, *The Dreamer, His Vision*, on contemporary Nigerian political decay. He has also completed another collection, *As I See It*, which is yet to be published.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE, poet and short story writer, is Professor of African Literature and former Chair of the Africana Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. A member of the Okike Arts Center and of the Board of the Achebe Foundation, he has previously taught in four Nigerian universities (Ibadan, Nsukka, Lagos and Abia State) and was Chair of the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages at the University of Nigeria, Nsuka. He has also held an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently on sabbatical leave at Harvard University on a Sheila Biddle Ford Foundation Fellowship. His books include *Nsukka Harvest*; *Dogon*; *Edo*; *The Hero in Igbo Life and Literature*; (ed. with Nwoga), and *Performance and Oral Literary Criticism*; and *Testaments of Thunder: Poems of War and Crisis*. His college anthology, co-edited with Steven Serafin, *The Columbia Anthology of African Literature*, and his annotated edition of the *Complete Works of Christopher Okigbo* are forthcoming in 2007.

THE INTERVIEW

AZUONYE: We were together during the war; I remember I was in your house when you were writing Suddenly the Air Cracks.

OKARA: O, yeah, you were.

AZUONYE: And as you were writing this poem, an air raid was going on. I would like us to have a conversation about your poetry, and then on your views on our contemporary situation in Nigeria. But first, your poetry; one of my students' favorites is The Mystic Drum, and I have also engaged them in reading Suddenly the Air Cracks, one of your "war poems." We've read Piano and Drums to study its tackling of cultural transition. But people are also interested in the philosophical ideas behind The Revolt of the Gods. Can you tell us a little more about that particular poem?

OKARA: Well, in my village, there's always some talk of OrumĚa, which means resuscitating a god. You do that when the god or goddess you are worshipping—the personal god or goddess you are worshipping—has gone moribund or is no longer active, because people are not been worshipping—have not been giving it sacrifices. So, in order to revive it, as if it was in a coma or something—they make certain sacrifices—with dance and music and so on, so that it comes alive again. The Revolt of the Gods is based on that. The Old God and the Young God are talking, and the Old God says to the Young God: "You don't know anything at all. We live by the whims and caprices of man." And as they talk, the Old God's voice drops lower and lower for lack of worshippers—for lack of sacrifices.

In the beer parlor where this argument about gods is taking place, there is this unbeliever, you know. And as an argument arises between the two individuals, one other person in the beer parlor is undecided; whatever point the other two argue, he says: "that's right." And this is because, he is not sure whether gods or goddesses exist or not. This is an idea I had as a child; the argument in the restaurant or somewhere...where people are drinking and debating whether there's only one god, and so on, or there is no other god. And this idea rose out of remembering what my father said to me about becoming a Christian. He was told that one can worship God without having to go through intermediaries; gods, and so forth. And if you don't worship these other gods, they perish; which means that they have gone out of the human mind that had created them. So, they perish. But in other parts of the world, they can be revived, and so, they die a million deaths; they die and are revived, forming a continuous cycle of dying and waking...

AZUONYE: I find this philosophy hugely interesting...I know you are also a fine artist. Did you study this in Yaba, or did the talent just come naturally?

OKARA: Not at Yaba...it was at Government College, Umuahia; and, one of the finest and greatest fine artists, Ben Enwonwu, was our tutor, for a while, in art, at the Government College...for a short period.

AZUONYE: It seems you were interested in the fine arts as a career, at some point. In your background, there are references to art; there is a reference to book binding...there is even a reference to trading in pigs...

OKARA: Yes (Laughter). That was quite an adventure. I did water color paintings and had an exhibition in Lagos. After that, I thought I was going to take on painting as a career. The story about that is very strange, though. It was during the period when Herbert Macaulay died (in 1946). Very strange, you know...like a dream... I was trying to paint, and in the dream, he (Herbert Macaulay) came and took away the pencil. He just came and took away the pencil from me. And then he left behind three volumes...titled, DOWN, DEVIL, DOWN. I had no idea what this meant. But I no longer wanted to paint again. It was then that I started writing. And since that incident, I began to write poetry. In those days, there used to be the Nigerian Festival of the Arts. I won the prize in literature in 1953.

AZUONYE: And the winning poem was published later?

OKARA: Yes, I think, it was read over the Radio, and later published in Black Orpheus or something.

AZUONYE: One of your early poems is The Call of the River Nun. Can you explain what you mean by “The Call of the River Nun”?

OKARA: The Call of the River Nun is—should I say— a nostalgic poem. I was thinking of childhood days at home. If there was no fish in the house for breakfast, you quickly went to the river and, within a few minutes, caught fish for breakfast...that sort of free and open life. As a child, I didn't encounter any situation where I was betrayed, or people told lies against me. Or an atmosphere of distrust, you know, which I later found in Enugu, in the wider society, where things were so unfortunately different.

AZUONYE: You seem to infer that deception, pretension, and hypocrisy were absent in childhood; you talk about an “ice-block smile” in your early poems as being different from the spontaneous, natural smile of the River Nun...

OKARA: Yes...

AZUONYE: So The Call of the River Nun is a celebration of lost innocence—if you like, a kind of paradise lost—to put it in an idealistic way.

OKARA: Yes, in an idealistic way...

AZUONYE: Does this have anything to do with the context of The Fisherman's Invocation—the title poem of your first verse collection? Or is there a contrast? In The Fisherman's Invocation, there is a sense of a struggle or frustration...at the beginning—:

Cast your net to the right side

Nothing

Nothing

Cast it to the left side

Nothing

Nothing

Then cast it to the back of the canoe

and draw gently and carefully

while I paddle the canoe forward—

Nothing?

OKARA: Yeah, yeah; the poem is about political struggle, yes...

AZUONYE: So it is an allegory—a parable—of the political situation?

OKARA: Yes, the situation—of the struggle we had...

AZUONYE: So, if I may diverge somewhat; what do you think about the present political situation in the country?

OKARA: Oh, if you've got the time, then I will show you the second book, which is satirical. It's all about this political situation, particularly, in the South-South that produces the wealth of this country. Without the South-South, there would be no Nigeria in existence now. There won't be any Nigeria; but because of the arrogance of the North—we are producing the wealth—but we've turned out to be beggars at the master's table. It is what they drop down to us from that table that we get. And that is very humiliating. I am not really a politician; but, as a human being, I find that disturbing and very humiliating.

Professor Azuonye with Okara at his home in Port Harcourt

AZUONYE: And the environment is gone.

OKARA: Yes, yes, the environment is gone.

AZUONYE: We were previously talking about Afam where it seems the night has disappeared.

OKARA: Yes, yes; there is no night, because of the gas...

AZUONYE: The gas flaring...the gas that is a by-product of crude oil, and is wasted by burning it away twenty-four hours a day....

OKARA: And if you go down the drilling areas, you will see the worst cases of this situation there. It is truly tragic, the pollution, and yes...the waste of a natural resource.

AZUONYE: What is the situation about the special compensation—that is, the federal government creating a special compensation in order to develop those areas that produce the nation's crude oil?

OKARA: It is said that the NNDC was formed as a development-oriented organization to develop infrastructure in the oil-producing areas—health care and so forth, roads, hospitals, schools. The Federal Government says it will take care of these aspects of development. And other ancillary organizations have said that they will take care of other aspects. But it is people who have never been to the Riverian area to see things for themselves, who are up there making these decisions on our behalf. They have no desire to come down here to see how things really are. They merely sit high up there in their posh houses, and decide things for the people down here, from whose soil the wealth of this country is coming. For those of us who prefer to be non-partisan, who try to see themselves foremost, as Nigerians, this situation begins to make more and more of us feel less Nigerians first, and more, for example, as an Ijaw man, first.

Apart from that, there are other aspects of this country, such as the staggering corruption, which is a shame. People talk of Nigeria as great, great, great. And they say the words, great, great, with all the flamboyance of agbadas flowing:

Nigeria is great, Nigeria is great, Nigeria is great... But how great are we? How great, with all this corruption? We have the potential to be great, of course. We have the population, we have the wealth. But think of Nigeria—the sixth or seventh largest producer of crude—and yet it is one of the poorest countries in the whole world...

AZUONYE: It's quite staggering...

OKARA: Long before Olusegun Obasanjo became president, he was the Chairman of the African Leadership Forum. I was a member of that Forum. We stood in trust with one another. It was mainly a gathering of like-minded people against corruption; bad government and that sort of thing. So that sort of thing we debated, both within and outside this country—before he became the president. But the fact is that it has become an attitude, an accepted norm—in this country—that nothing goes for nothing. Yes. Nothing goes for nothing. And to change an attitude, you know, is not a one day thing. It takes time. But even though it takes time, some drastic actions have to be taken. At least, approached like an emergency case in the hospital; some drastic measure has to be taken quickly.

When Obasanjo became president, many of us were very very glad, because we had debated and talked, with him, of ways of fighting this corruption endemic in the country. And one of the ways, we all agreed, was to start from the very top. Whoever one might be, if found to have engaged in any malpractice would be dealt with. While I do not propose witch-hunting, however high one may be in society, however high one may be in government, if you're found to have engaged in corruption, you would be dealt with.

AZUONYE: Well, the question people are asking is this: Ok, if you're found guilty, you would be dealt with. But who does the finding, and who imposes the sanctions?

OKARA: I was coming to that. Sometimes I feel so very sorry for Obasanjo. He means business, but he cannot do everything all by himself. He can only order, or issue a decree, or pass a law; but those who have to enforce that law may be themselves corrupt. That is the problem. I am not saying that everybody in Nigeria is corrupt. There are people who can still be said to be incorruptible. They are there. But, as I said, corruption, or acts which we now term as corruption, have become the norm; particularly during the military regime. It has become an accepted form of social behavior.

So, as I was saying before; it is difficult to wipe it away, just like the Biblical basic sin: Thou shalt sin no more...that sort of thing. But, that has been preached for so many centuries, and still sin remains in the world. Corruption is—should we say—an aspect of sin against society. And so, it will take a very long time to manage it. But, as I said before, in the interim, we are to decide to start from the top as is being done now, and it will trickle down to the grassroots—eventually the message will trickle down to the grassroots.

AZUONYE: The other big problem is...connected with this—has to do with the process of moving from one government to

another—the electoral system. Some people have suggested that the ballot system is the problem—that we cannot be successful with it having tried it in all sorts of ways. Can you see any alternative to the ballot? Some people have talked about the use of caucuses—as in Iowa—in the United States primaries, whereby ballot papers are not used; rather people who want to vote for one candidate go into one room and people who want to vote for another candidate go into a different room to be counted. That sort of thing. Would caucuses of this kind work better for us than the ballot since, in Nigeria, people tend invariably to rig ballots? Or can you think of any other alternative?

OKARA: Well, it has been the practice since military regimes...where people who wanted to vote line up for a body count...

AZUONYE: But has it worked?

OKARA: It hasn't worked. The thing is that the fight for money has become the motive. It has become the norm that when a candidate gets into office, he or she makes a lot of money. And so one spends a lot of money and does anything to get there. There is no longer the desire for service to the state; not what a candidate can give to the state. People go into political office; into any office merely for what they can get out the state. I think that's the problem.

AZUONYE: Is it possible to change that?

OKARA: Attitudinal change is what is needed; but it takes a lot of time....

AZUONYE: And will it ever happen? Are you optimistic?

OKARA: Progress is love. You can't stop being progressive. So, I believe it will happen eventually; it will take some time, certainly.

AZUONYE: Before we go back to your poetry, one other thing is worth looking at in the present political situation in Nigeria, and this is the political system we are running. We tried the Westminster style before the Nigerian civil war. We're now going the way of the American style. Is there an alternative that is more suitable to this country that we have not tried; for example, people have talked about the zero-party system...but is this option even workable? Or is there something basically wrong with our participation in systems that are imported from outside?

OKARA: First, I think it is important to point out that we are not practicing the American system of government, which is federalism. We are not, indeed, because although it is called the Federal Republic of Nigeria, you know, everything is controlled by the center.

AZUONYE: So we are in fact operating a unitary system.

OKARA: It is unitary. We are not practicing the American kind of federalism, in any way. If we were practicing true federalism, the American kind of federalism, we won't be having all these problems. We'd progress farther—faster. I've not studied politics, so I don't know how many political systems are available. But I think, what I see is that we need

AZUONYE: ...to give federalism a chance.

OKARA: That's right; true federalism. At the moment, we are not practicing true federalism,

AZUONYE: But, it all began with Ironsi's Unity Decree number 34, and it hasn't quite left us. Right now, even Obasanjo himself does not appear to be aware that we are in a civilian democratic system...

OKARA: Yes, indeed; this is why we should give true federalism a chance.

AZUONYE: And that means going down even to the local governments—devolving certain powers...

OKARA: Absolutely.

AZUONYE: I'd like to turn back to your poems, if I may... We are very fond of reading certain poems, either because of the magic of their lyricism or whatever else individual students find fascinating. One of the poems that my students and I have particularly enjoyed is Piano and Drums. I have often wondered whether you find this poem as fascinating as the rest of us, and if so, could you tell us why?

OKARA: Well, that particular poem is about change—change brought about by the West and its encounter with our indigenous civilizations. By that I mean, the impact of Western ways on our own indigenous ways. In the first part of the poem, I was listening to the drums and thinking old ways and so on, you know. And then in the second part, I am listening to the piano....

AZUONYE: The wailing piano music...

OKARA: And then the music stops at a dagger-point; by that, I mean the fights, the dissensions, the tension going on in the Western hemisphere—Western countries—the wars going on there:

When at the break of day at a riverside

I hear jungle drums telegraphing

the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw

like bleeding flesh, speaking of

primal youth and the beginning,

I see the panther ready to pounce,

the leopard snarling about to leap

and the hunters crouch with spears poised;

And my blood ripples, turns torrent,

topples the year and at once at once I'm

in my mother's lap a-suckling;

at once I'm walking simple

paths with no innovations,
rugged, fashioned with the naked
warmth of hurrying feet and groping hearts
in green leaves and wild flowers pulsing.

Then I hear a wailing piano
Solo speaking of complex ways
In tear-furrowed concerto,
of far-away land
and new horizons with
coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
of its complexities, it ends in the middle
of a phrase at a dagger-point.

And I lost in the morning mist
of an age at a riverside keep
wandering in the mystic rhythm
of jungle drums and the concerto

.

inside?

OKARA: The Mystic Drum. This is actually a love poem.

AZUONYE: But nothing to do with intuition, no?

OKARA: No, I think... I don't know whether there is any—an aspect of intuition in love. [Laughter] This was a lady I loved. And she coyly was not responding directly, but I adored her. Her demeanor seemed to mask her true feelings; at a distance, she seemed adoring, however, on coming closer, she was, after all, not what she seemed.

AZUONYE: That's fantastic; because one has probably been building a great deal of superstructure on the poem beyond its real meaning...

OKARA: But one can always interpret...

AZUONYE: In a different way?

OKARA: Yes, of course; the more I read the critics, the more I see how my works have gained meaning—how my poems have been variously interpreted.

AZUONYE: I see. There is something that recurs in your poems—the word, “inside.” What does it mean to you?

OKARA: Well, the inside is, should I say, about the soul—my soul. The very inside, you know. The very inside... There is nothing beyond it, in man. The whole body—the feelings, emotions and so on—are built around that inside—the deepest part of being.

AZUONYE: Is it a word you have taken from your native Ijaw?

OKARA: Yes, that's right.

AZUONYE: So it is a direct translation.

OKARA: Yes.

AZUONYE: Does the same go with words like "front" and "back" which occur frequently in your works?

OKARA: Yes, that's right.

AZUONYE: What meaning have you ascribed to these words?

OKARA: The front, physically—is something in front of you and the back. So the front is also the future and the back is also the past—past events, past situations, past things that brought about some emotions....

AZUONYE: Adhiambo is one other poem that has fascinated me. What is the meaning of "Adhiambo," and what is the poem about?

OKARA: This poem is about a lady—an African lady who I eventually married. Adhiambo is a Kenyan word; actually, the name of this lady....who became my wife. Unfortunately, as the poem shows:

I raised my hand—

my trembling hand, gripping

my heart as handkerchief

and waved and waved—and waved—

but she turned her eyes away

AZUONYE: So then, it appears to have been a disappointing liaison...but there is a deep spirituality in your poems—a deep sense of the “inside,” which you’ve explained, and I wonder whether this spirituality is colored by any particular religion—one of the conventional religious institutions—or is it mystical in the sense that you have a direct communication with God—are you, for instance, a Christian?

OKARA: Yes, I am a Christian. I think that there is much more to what we see with our physical eyes. As I see you, you are not just what you are. There is something beyond you that makes you; what we see with the ordinary eye. For instance, this shape—the bookshelf—like the design of this ceiling, there is something that goes beyond that order. There is discipline in order....so, what you see—the trees and so on—what you see around; flowers and so on, there is something that not only orders them into existence, but decides their function and fate. We do not merely see flowers or trees or the palm trees... There is something beyond that gives them shape, that orders their beautiful symmetrical shape; for example, the palm trees and how they spread out. Even when women plait their hair, the mere shapes are not only what we see. There is more to how the shapes came into existence, and all that...

AZUONYE: So, there’s an intelligent designer...

OKARA: Of course.....

AZUONYE: And you play upon that concept...

OKARA: Yes.

AZUONYE: OK. The poems about the war are different, though, because here, we are no longer dealing with the inside but the physical flesh—the outside as it were—even though the inside sometimes comes into play. How would you sum up the war experience along with the poetry of the war you have written? In other words, how have your recollections, your experiences, shaped your writings during the war between 1967 and the end of the war in 1970?

OKARA: Well, you know, during the war there were tensions plaguing the mind; conflicts, emotional conflicts, that were sometimes quite irrational, and other times rational. Plus, there was a lot of fear and so forth. One frequently thought of survival, and what one would do after the war—if one survived. That frame of thinking, I believe, influenced some of the poems I wrote. And, at times, I simply wanted to record what was immediately happening around me, and in that period. An example of that can be seen in *Suddenly the Air Cracks*.

AZUONYE: I remember that...

OKARA: So, you just wrote about what was immediately happening, and in the best way you could, as best as you could—bombs dropping and people shouting and dying, and so forth. And then, you compared that with after the bombers had gone and people went strolling about as if nothing had happened, you see. The way people went on strolls, just went about their lives after the bombing and firing, the rocketing... Children at play; only the smoke from the bombing, a reminder of what had happened...

AZUONYE: Can you read sections of *Suddenly the Air Cracks* for the record?

OKARA: Yes (Reads the first half of *Suddenly the Air Cracks*):

Suddenly the air cracks

with striking cracking rockets

guffaw of bofors stuttering LMGs

jets diving shooting glasses dropping

breaking from lips people diving

under beds nothing bullets flashing fire

striking writhing bodies and walls—

suddenly there's silence—

And a thick black smoke

rises sadly into the sky as the jets

fly away in gruesome glee—

Then a Babel of emotions, voices

mothers fathers calling children

and others joking shouting 'where's your bunker?'

laughing teasing across streets

and then they gaze in groups without sadness

at the sad smoke curling skywards—

Again suddenly, the air cracks

above rooftops, cracking striking

rockets guffawing bofors stuttering LMGs

ack ack flacks diving jets

seeking shelter not there breathless

hugging gutters walls houses

crumbing rumbling thunder

bombs hearts thumping beads low

under beds moving wordless lips—

Then suddenly there's silence—

and the town heaves a deep sigh

as the jets again fly away and the guns

one by one fall silent and the gunners

dazed gaze at the empty sky, helpless—

AZUONYE: Have we learnt anything from the war experience, do you think?

OKARA: Well, from what is happening now—like the Movement for the Actualization of Biafra, for example. I don't think people have learnt anything. And I'm surprised that even Ojukwu is supporting this. You see, things are no longer the same.

AZUONYE: There was provocation...

OKARA: But not any more. It is different now...

AZUONYE: We have a different kind of provocation...

OKARA: A different kind, yeah. But if there is provocation, it is not the kind to make a group decide to break away from Nigeria. And I think that if any group has that sort of provocation, it is the South-South...

AZUONYE: And yet does not justify secession...

OKARA: No. I don't see that it does...

AZUONYE: But has Nigerian as a federation learnt anything?

OKARA: That's another question, an aspect of the whole problem. As I said before—in certain parts of this country...say the North; you've heard what a prominent Northerner said: that they were meant to rule...that kind of arrogance... That is why I am in support of the Middle Belt—the movement that's going on now; for the middle belt to be aligned to the East, the South-East and South-South. If the Middle Belt is carved out of the so-called North, the remaining five states—who are, say, the core North—the Hausa-Fulani—would be in the minority. And all this arrogance and talk of this—what we say must happen—attitude will stop. So, I encourage what is going on. This is not to say that I'm trying to exclude them. But they should exist like all other minorities, and then we shall build this country to the stage at which we can call it great.

AZUONYE: Do you endorse a larger effort, like the Africa Union? Is it a feasible dream? Because what you are telling me now is that if we can marginalize—let me use the word minimize—the power of the big ethnic groups—reduce or cut them to size; we can have better equity in Nigeria. Wouldn't that equity be even better if we had a larger union, like a Federal Republic of West Africa? Is this a possibility? Is it an option that we can or should pursue?

OKARA: No. But the major groups in this country should be made to stop thinking of themselves as the only people who matter in this country, as in the case of the North. What I am saying, as I said before, is that we should have a true federalism. That doesn't mean curbing the power or influence of the majority tribes; but it means allowing the minority tribes to have equal rights with the majority.

AZUONYE: But to give the minorities more power you must reduce the influence—the overwhelming dominance of the majority groups on the political scene.

OKARA: I talked of the Middle Belt and the South-South. If the Middle Belt is aligned with the South-South, then they will have, perhaps, equal influence as the other majority groups. Because whatever influence the majority groups enjoy is due to their numbers, and, as a result, they are only exercising a power that does not truly belong to them. That's a group sort of power that rightly is, should I say, an abuse of power or something; much like the North saying that they are born to rule. So, that's what I mean. Some years ago, there was some talk about a lingua franca. Now, which language are you going to choose to become our official language?

AZUONYE: Swahili ?

OKARA: Swahili. You mention Swahili. Ok; how many years will it take for us to read, speak and write Swahili as an official language? We are proposing Swahili, but our indigenous groups will come out and say, NO. I remember that there was some talk like this in 1960. Now, when it comes to the practical, it is difficult. I think it is the same thing with the larger question of federalism. What powers are we to sacrifice for the center? It comes down to the freedom of the individual. Now, we are going to join other states in order to form a majority. But will the individual groups still have the freedom to do what they want? So such an argument will always feature in this kind of situation. And it's not easy; it won't be easy to give up individual autonomies in order to form a larger politically influential unit.

AZUONYE: One final mention of your poems—what about the most recent work, which you mentioned earlier; can you give us a general view of what to expect of the new Okara?

OKARA: Well, the title *The Dreamer, His Vision*, was inspired by Moshood Abiola...In a campaign speech, he said: "You the people of this country have made me what I am today; when I become the president, I'll give it back to you." ...

AZUONYE: You think he would have made a good president?

OKARA: Yes. So, that's the leading poem...

AZUONYE: Are you still collecting folktales?

OKARA: Stories that are told in the evening. Some of them are now forgotten.

AZUONYE: Apart from the loss of the oral tradition that I feel worked to nourish the conscience and provided a basis for one's moral upbringing, what else can we do for younger generations to build a foundation of the kind of moral basis for performance that seems to be lacking in contemporary times? Do we need a certain type of system, such as the boarding school, to inculcate moral values—in the absence of the traditional system?

OKARA: I think that it all depends on the educational system which the country is adopting. But the immediate responsibility of inculcating the right moral values to children should, in fact, be left to the family. The need for a firm grounding for young ones in our country needs talking about. That would mean a revolution in the educational system in this country, and it is very important for Nigeria's survival and self-worth. That's why I've felt that we must stop the new trend of children's books coming in from China. This is happening, because we have few children's books grounded in our own cultures, and so, this is why I've begun writing children's books, as well.

AZUONYE: Thank you very, Mr. Okara. I hope that sometime when we have more time, we can explore the wider dimensions of your work; especially with the publication of your new poems.

OKARA: Thank you.