Joshua, This is Your Story: Tribute to Joshua Uzoigwe, 1946-2005 (with Three Poems by the Deceased from Nsukka Harvest, 1972)

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Renowned Musicologist and poet, Professor Joshua Uzoigwe, former head of the Music Department at the University of Uyo, joined the ancestors last month. Described as “a music educator, composer, performer and musicologist [and as someone who] directed several musical concerts in which he featured his own works and works by other modern Nigerian composers.” It was also said that “his intention was to create an awareness of this music in an intellectual environment such as Obafemi Awolowo University and in Nigeria at large.”

Reprinted below are a tribute to Professor Uzoigwe by our ALA colleague and friend, Professor Chukwuma Azuonye and three of Dr. Uzoigwe’s own poems; FIRST, a tribute by Dr. Azuonye:

**JOSHUA, THIS IS YOUR STORY!**

JOSHUA, you have been my soul brother and friend for thirty-eight years, and, over these years, your gentle walk, smile and demeanor have told the same love story—the story of passionate devotion to the pursuit of excellence in your musical calling. And, sure enough, you have—over these years—sped light years ahead of all your peers in artistic virtuosity. You and I shared a house in Pimlico, Westminster, south-west London, in the mid-1970’s. You had just graduated from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, College of Music where you charmed the university community and beyond with your sophisticated piano recreations of Igbo folk lyrics with Ori Enyi and Chinyerem Ohia, and for the performances of the Odunke Community of Artists. But it was in London that my wife, Chioma, and I, were able to observe your passion and zeal at close range. Then a licentiate student at the Guildhall School of Music, you truly overwhelmed us by the many hours you devoted, night and day, working through—to the point of quintessential perfection—what appeared to our uninitiated ears as simple and even boring and annoying tunes. But you were indeed responding to the radical aesthetics of Okigbo’s Upandru, for “except by rooting,/who could pluck yam tubers from their base?”

Soaring beyond the staid penchant of many others in the field for passing off tit-bits of afro-musicological ethnographica as scholarship, you probed the roots of indigenous musical aesthetics, measured the pulse of homegrown
musicians, studied at the feet of the masters of such indigenous forms as ese and ukom, learnt by immersion into depths of traditional practice, and proved through your own original compositions that you have grown into a consummate master of what you had learned. Sharpened by your doctoral research in Ireland, inspired by your engagingly poignant study of the example of Akin Euba, and tested by your tender husbandry of a new breed of students infected by your spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling at Ife, Nsukka and Uyo, you have forged a powerful and inimitable legacy of musicological art and scholarship, further enriched by your yet unharvested cycle of lyrical and philosophical poetry, Moments, which began flowing from your pen in the late 1960’s, shortly after we met for the first time. Joshua, you were always anxious to know from us—your inner circle of friends—who else has heard your “story”. This is your “story”!

Chukwuma Azuonye
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ON THE FADING SHADOWS

On the fading shadows of
This dark hour hang
Your heart of pumpkin
Bearing no stem no stilt
These frozen tears
Beads of primy offshoot yet
Must festoon the lurking
Spirit...where
Mourning dew is decoyed
In the still lungs.

So, all nights I sleep amongst you,
My sleeping ones, amongst
The Flowered heap in the mud—
Ivory bones, jewel eyes, singed hair—
What hands, what eyes have caressed
In dream in wake
Your mangled faces?

Stand up, now, o my soul,
Before the passing flood
From the broken stone rushing,
For the dead within you, within you;

The dead within you
Passing cold over your living soul;

The sacred green stones
Spouting red pain.

The punctured apple-heart
Gushing pus...........pus
Forever
Burning light, smothering
Lights grey ash in fertile places.

TRANSITION

We were once dead,
And feared no more of another hunger;

And food was in shadowing abundance
Reflecting light in a dry basin
On a wash-stand on the dry sands;
And the land was filled with milk
And honey that turned to stones
In peoples’ stomachs; and the ponds,
Streams, rivers, except the salty seas,
All went up in steams into the grumbling sky
And formed heavy dark clouds...
And rain never came.
And our epitaph read:
‘We died of hunger, never of the will.
And we journeyed laboriously
To found another God
— A terrible God
— The God of hunger
And this God said,
Let us make man in our image, after our likeness:
And let them have dome-shaped heads
Standing on hollowed spindles;
Let them have balloon-shaped bellies
Balanced on stilts;
Let them have dominion over
The pebbles of the sea,
And over the vacuity of the air;
And finally, let them be sacrificed unto me,
The Very God!
and so: through the midnight mist we walked

In the misty vein...aghast
As with cat-eye simmering
In the shuttled shrine cast off
From the sight of our brothers
We crawled on the mangrove mud,
Hing’d with the juggernaut of years:

Liquid ash drunk from common calabash
Curse stilt to drown;
Forked knife goggle-eye-slits
The apple’s throat: Osondu’s
Sockets telescoping
Onyije’s bones—vulture-beaked...
The head without a body.
And we cried out aloud
Returning to our first God
— Alfa
— Omega
And we were heard.

We were once dead,
And dying, we now live in a roost
Perching with the sustaining gaze
Of a new-born babe
On a troubled world.

**DRYING LAKE, RISING SPRING**

We mount the precipice of life
And come down with a bang! or a boon!
The resurrection is ended
And we begin life anew.

The senses come to a staggering pause
The nerves jab, jerk ...vibrate once;
The body is dead;
The soul has risen.

We shall rise and stare heavenwards
Clamber up the narrow three-rung ladder;
Regeneration shall continue
And new stocks from there issue.

Let the three candles reverse their dark ends
We grope sheepishly down the abyss of fire
To be exhumed or consumed
To pay the debt of our forefathers.

From NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

JOSHUA UZOIGWE: A member of Odunke, he has completed a verse triplet ‘Onyije’, ‘Osondu’ and ‘Ndubueze’, in which he looks at the war-experience from familiar Igbo name-symbols. He is a student of music at Nsukka and arranges folk music for the piano. He was born at Umuagu.

**JOSHUA UZOIGWE, 1946-2005**

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