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**Christopher Okigbo at Work: Towards a Pilot Study and Critical
Edition of His Previously Unpublished Poems, 1957-1967**

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“Composition, in the strictest sense of that word, was the essence of [Okigbo’s] method....We can observe some features of this method in ‘Lament of the Drums’ written in mid-1965. Unfortunately the drafts of this poem have not become available as Okigbo’s papers are still to be sorted out” (Ben Obumselu, 1996, in 2006).

“The availability of ‘LINDFORSMS’ is...an important event that allows us see *Christopher Okigbo at work* on a particular poem’. When Okigbo’s papers (such as survived the Biafran war) become available, we will certainly be better able to understand and document the makings of this poetic genius of our times”(Michael Echeruo, 2004)

1. Introduction

The objectives of the present paper are two-fold. The first is to produce a critical edition of the complete corpus of the previously unpublished papers of Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967), who is today widely acknowledged as by far the most outstanding postcolonial, Anglophone, African, modernist poet of the 20th century. The second is to offer a pilot critical interpretation of the previously unknown poems in the corpus and to ascertain their place in the Okigbo canon. In 2007 these papers became the first corpus of unpublished works to be nominated and accepted into the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. The project is closely-linked to other ongoing or recently completed work on Okigbo’s works, among them an annotated critical edition of Okigbo’s complete poetry and an international conference, scheduled for September 20-23, 2007, and co-hosted by four greater Boston area colleges, under the theme, “Postcolonial African literature and the Ideals of the Open Society/Teaching and Learning from the Poetry and Life of Christopher Okigbo.”¹

2. Background

Born on August 16, 1930,² Christopher Ifekandu Nixon Okigbo³ was killed in action at the age of 37, in August, 1967. He died fighting as a field-commissioned Major for the independence of the secessionist Republic of Biafra (Eastern Nigeria) during the Nigerian civil war. All told, his artistic career spanned a brief period of only ten years (1957-1967). But within that period, he cultivated an intercultural poetics that enabled him to compose a string of complex, organically related sequences of poems notable for their intriguing bricolage of sources and influences from a wide diversity of human cultures all through the ages. Described by Echeruo (2004) as “this poetic genius of our times,” Okigbo’s preeminence in modern African and world literature has been well-established in several studies (notably Anozie, 1972; Nwoga, 1984; Wieland, 1988; Okafor, 1994, Esonwanne, 2000; Echeruo, 2004; Richards, 2005; and Obumselu, 2006). In a chapter devoted to his works in the British Open University textbook, *Aestheticism and*

Modernism: Debating Twentieth Century Literature (ed. Gupta Danson Brown and Suman Gupta, 2005), David Richards (2005) goes much farther than earlier assessments by placing him side by side with T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Bertolt Brecht, and Virginia Woolf, among the pillars of twentieth-century modernism—not just Euromodernism but the wider global modernism that is increasingly taking over the aesthetic space still claimed with exclusivist arrogance by Euromodernism.

This recognition is in accord with Okigbo's own conception of himself as a poet. In his introduction to *Labyrinths* (1965, in 1971) and in the interviews he recorded during his lifetime (Nkosi, 1962; Duerden, 1963; Serumaga, 1965; Whitelaw, 1965; and Van Sertima, 1965, in Azuonye, 2006e), he has been remarkably consistent and insistent in depicting himself, not as an "African poet" but simply as a poet. In 1965, this globalist conception of his creative self led to his sensational rejection of the first prize in poetry which was awarded to him at the first Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966, a competition in which Nobel Prize Winner, Derek Walcott, took the second position (see *The Guardian*, London, April 4, 1966)

Born to a prominent Catholic family in the autonomous Igbo community of Ojoto in the present day State of Anambra in Nigeria, Okigbo was, like Chinua Achebe and many other southeastern Nigerian writers of his generation, educated at the Government College, Umuahia, following which he attended the University College, Ibadan, from where he graduated in 1956 with a BA in classics (Greek and Latin literature and culture). A genius by all standards, who distinguished himself in cricket, hockey, soccer and other sports and taught himself how to play the piano and jazz clarinet, he grew up as a restless young man with a voracious and insatiable love for reading, fun and a wide range of other interests, including what he calls "the armpit fragrance" of beautiful women. Between 1956 and 1960, he worked in rapid succession as a Trade Representative for the Nigerian Tobacco Company, Private Secretary to the Nigerian Federal Minister of Information and Research, and proprietor of a failed business venture (Kitson and Partners). He then joined the faculty of a small, rural high school near Lagos, Fiditi Grammar School, as Vice-Principal and Latin Master. It was the solace provided by this "new haven" (as he calls it one of his early poems, "Debtor's Lane") that enabled him to switch from music (his first choice of vocation) to poetry composition. While at Fiditi, he began writing poetry seriously, beginning with parts of his first sequence, *Four Canzones* (1957-1961) which he created under the influence of translation exercises from Latin verse into English and *vice versa*, and intense reading of Euro-American modernist poets (Eliot, Pound and Yeats) and Beat Generation postmodernists (especially Allen Ginsberg).

In 1960, Okigbo left Fiditi to join the Nnamdi Azikiwe Library at the newly-established University of Nigeria, Nsukka, as an assistant Librarian. The genius that he was, he had no training or experience in librarianship when he applied for the job. He is said to have read up everything he could find on library science while traveling for the interview from Lagos to Nsukka (a distance of about 300 miles). But so impressed were the interviewers with his vision of a library for a university in a new postcolonial African state that he was given the job over and above professionally trained librarians.⁴ At Nsukka, he met a friendly coterie of literati (especially the poets, Peter Thomas, Michael Echeruo, Okogbule Wonodi, and Pol Ndu, and the critics, Sunday Anozie and Donatus

Nwoga) whose fellowship helped him to discover his poetic muse (the water goddess of his hometown, Idoto, and other idealized feminine figures in his native Igbo mythology). Under the spell of these influences, and immersion into world mythology, he composed his mid-career sequences—*Heavensgate* (1962) and *Limits* (comprising “Siren Limits” and “Fragments out of the Deluge,” 1962-1964)⁵ and began work on the third, *Silences* (1962-63).

Okigbo made his debut on the pan-African and international literary scene through his participation in the first conference of African and transatlantic black writers organized at Kampala, Uganda, by the newly founded Mbari Writers and Artists Club, Ibadan.⁶ At Kampala, he attracted much attention to himself by the acerbity of his ripostes against the Negritude movement,⁷ his philosophical responses to the *Transition* magazine questionnaire distributed among selected African, Caribbean and African-American writers with a view to eliciting a precise definition of African literature,⁸ and his widely reported and arrogant (albeit self-confident) statement to an interviewer: “I don’t read my poems to non-poets.” Thereafter he became a favorite subject of critical discourse and interviews, and was selected by the founding-editor, Rajat Neogy, as the West African Editor of *Transition* magazine, a rapidly growing and influential pan-African magazine of the day (see Benson, 1986). That same year, he left Nsukka to become the West African Representative of Cambridge University Press at Ibadan, in the heat of the Western Nigeria crisis which ultimately flared up into the general triumph of disorder that brought down Nigeria’s first republic through the *coup d’état* of January 15, 1966.

Paradoxically, these years of crisis (1962-1966) turned out to be the period of Okigbo’s coming of age as “a poet of destiny” (Obiechina, 1980, 1990), in other words, an intensely socially-committed poet with a vision of reality that represents a compelling expression of the conscience of his people. In addition to completing and publishing his *Silences*, a super-sequence comprising two poems (“Lament of the Silent Sisters” and “Lament of the Drums”) on the post-independence anarchy in Congo (1960-62) and the Western Nigeria Crisis (1962-65);⁹ he composed three commemorative poems for specific anniversaries or festivals—“Lament of the Deer” (a song within the chantefable, *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, as retold by Chinua Achebe and John Iroaganachi, 1964);¹⁰ “Lament of the Masks” (a tribute to the Irish nationalist poet, W. B. Yeats for a *festschrift*, edited by S. Bushrui and D. E. S. Maxwell, 1965), and “Dance of the Painted Maidens” (a poem celebrating the poet’s the birth of his daughter, Obiageli, who he believed to be a reincarnation of his mother). Above all, he composed his final sequence of accurately prophetic chants, entitled *Path of Thunder*, in response to the events culminating in the military takeover of January 15, 1966, and its bloody aftermaths, including in the horrendous massacre of thousands of Igbo citizens in northern Nigeria, the secession of Eastern Nigeria as the short-lived Republic of Biafra, and the civil war of 1967-70 in which he lost his life.

Before his flight from Ibadan, as the crisis darkened into the alarums of war, he prepared a collection of the poems of his mid-career, from *Heavensgate* to *Distances* under the title, *Labyrinths*, prefaced with an introduction that leads the reader through the vicarious sources of his art in world mythologies, classics and philosophies. He also began work on a major prose work, *Pointed Arches*, which he describes in a letter to his close literary friend and critic, Sunday Anozie (1972), as “an attempt to describe the growth of the creative impulse in me, an account of certain significant facts in my

experience of life and letters that conspired to sharpen my imagination. It throws some light on certain apparently irreconcilable features of my work and life and places them in a new perspective. I am hoping for publication in 1970.” At the same time he put together another collection, *Elegies of Thunder*, comprising his late occasional poems (“Lament of the Deer”, “Lament of the Masks” and “Dance of the Painted Maidens”) and his final sequence of prophetic lyrics, *Path of Thunder*. Although this volume was announced in the *Mbari Newsletter* (No. 1, August 1966),¹¹ it was never published. But in 1971, a year after the civil war, the collection *Labyrinths* (as prepared by Okigbo in 1965) was published by Heinemann together with *Path of Thunder*. Later Heinemann issued his *Collected Poems*, edited by Adewale Maja-Pearce (1986). Although this landmark collection contains all previously published poems in the Okigbo canon, with the exception of “Lament of the Deer,” it lacks a good critical introduction as well as a much needed annotation to initiate readers into the labyrinths of Okigbo’s complex poetic universe. An attempt has been made to fill these gaps in my forthcoming annotated critical edition of the complete works (Azuonye, ed., 2007a, forthcoming, July), which will include the previously unpublished poems, as well as *Labyrinths* and *Elegies of Thunder* as designed by Okigbo himself

By and large, Okigbo’s status in African and world literature is founded on five main factors, which I have elsewhere outlined as “his all-inclusive multicultural sensibility; his mythopoeic imagination; his infusion of ritual seriousness into the praxis of his poetry; his masterly fusion of a wide diversity of poetic modes from traditions across the world; and, above all, his all-encompassing vision of reality—the phenomenal and the imaginative—in the fortunes of a poet-protagonist, the Prodigal, through whose ‘burden’ and ‘journey’ of ‘several centuries’ he has constructed a complex ‘fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfillment’ in cycles of poems which ‘though written and published separately, are organically related.’ Running through, and unifying, all these dimensions of his poetry is his overriding concern with the ideals of the open society—decolonization of the mind, cultural freedom, human rights and civil liberties, security of life and property guaranteed by the rule of law—ideals which are clearly manifest in his consistent recreations of, and references to “the events of the day” (abuse of power, political crises, failure of leadership, etc) culminating in the direct, active involvement which cost him his life in 1967” (Azuonye, 2005). Founded on an aesthetic which sees poetic art by analogy to military tactics and strategy as “logistics”¹² (or the art of deploying the expressive resources of language in such a way as to elicit the widest possible frame of responses from the reader), Okigbo’s art epitomizes, as has been noted, the emergent global modernist bricolage which entails the embroidery of seamless poetic fabrics from a perplexing diversity of materials garnered from all human mythologies, religions and systems of thought all through the ages.

Part of the rationale for the present project is the vortex of controversies—resulting in both blindness and insight—that have become ingrained in the critical study of Okigbo’s poetry. From various comprehensive surveys of Okigbo criticism (Anozie, 1972; Nwoga, 1984; Wieland, 1988; Okafor, 1994; Esonwanne, 2000; and Azuonye, 2007c, forthcoming), it is evident that responses to his poetry encompass the entire spectrum of the history of the theory and practice of criticism, from their oral traditional roots through classical antiquity, across the ages, to the present day. The names that populate various lists of works cited in the existing Okigbo criticism include Plato, Aristotle, Horace,

Longinus, Ancient Mesopotamian, Hebraic, Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic philosophers, Plotinus and other Neo-Platonists, Dante, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. Okigbo's own list, in his introduction to *Labyrinths*, includes Hopkins, Debussy, Melville, Hawthorne, Malcolm Cowley, Raja Ratnam, Stephane Mallarme, Rabindranath Tagore, Garcia Lorca, and Peter Thomas, the epic of Gilgamesh, Virgil's *Aeneas*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Eliot's *Waste Land*.

But it is in contemporary critical trends that the interpretation of his works is firmly anchored. Vigorously at play are various facets of psychological criticism, New Criticism, formalism, structuralism and semiotics, poststructuralism, notably deconstruction, reader-response criticism, feminist poetics, and the major critical debates, be it on the canon or authorial intention vs. objective criticism (W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley). Some works have also been dissected on the basis of philosophical models referencing phenomenology, existentialism, and cultural nihilism. Additional sidelights in the explorations of the poems have been provided from the perspectives of comparative literature, literary history, biographical criticism and comparative mythology. The more insightful of these critical approaches have recognized Okigbo's poetry as a quintessential expression of the new global modernism, but the blind sights have vilified him for allegedly turning his back to his African cultural and aesthetic roots and espousing Euromodernist obscurantism (Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, 1980). It seems to me that there is much in the previously unpublished papers at hand which can help lay the ghost of these charges,.

Perhaps the most obvious rationale for the present study is the current availability of the unpublished papers and the doors they bid fair to open to objective criticism via archival research and textual criticism. As a matter of fact, the title of my project, , as hinted in one of the epigraphs, is taken from Echeruo's (2004) comments on such doors as promised by a surviving manuscript of Okigbo's painstaking revision of his *Lament of the Silent Sisters*. Code-named LINDFORSMS (with reference to Bernth Lindfors from whom the MS was obtained), the manuscript was revised for an abortive attempt to break into print on the pages of the Chicago-based avant-garde magazine, *Poetry*. As Echeruo (2004) notes, in conclusion,

The availability of 'LINDFORSMS' is...an important event that allows us see *Christopher Okigbo at work* on a particular poem¹³ (emphasis added) When Okigbo's papers (such as survived the Biafran war) become available, we will certainly be better able to understand and document the makings of this poetic genius of our times.

Writing in the same vein, Obumselu (2006), observes that

Composition, in the strictest sense of that word, was the essence of his [Okigbo's] method....we can observe some features of this method in 'Lament of the Drums' written in mid-1965. Unfortunately the drafts of this poem have not become available as Okigbo's papers are still to be sorted out.

Luckily, the Okigbo papers have now been sorted out and my ongoing project is the first attempt to assess their significance.

Following my introduction in 2005 to the custodian of the papers, Okigbo's daughter, Obiageli, and her courtesy visit to my home in Milton, Massachusetts, that same year

(Azuonye 2006a), I traveled to Brussels, in January 2006, where I first examined and prepared a comprehensive catalogue of the papers (Azuonye, 2006a). Less than two months later (on March 31, 2006), this catalogue became the basis for the nomination of the papers for the UNESCO Memory of the World collection, a process in which I served as a principal consultant. In January 2007, the Okigbo papers were finally accepted as the only African collection of personal papers in the UNESCO collection (Ref N° 2006-50, http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/21875/1164985859150_Africa_Okigbo_papers.doc/50+Africa+Okigbo+papers.doc) Needless to say, this international stamp of recognition greatly enhances their value as archival research tools worthy of serious critical attention. As more and more members of Okigbo's generation of postcolonial African writers age and die, and their papers—like those of Okigbo—become available to the public, African literary critics will be in a position to engage in more and more empirical critical scholarship, developing and applying the techniques of archival research, textual criticism and the currently evolving principles of literary computing in their business.

3. The Corpus

3.1. An Overview of the Preliminary Catalog (2006)

During my first visit research visit to Brussels in January 2006, I catalogued the Okigbo papers pragmatically under eleven main categories, as follows:

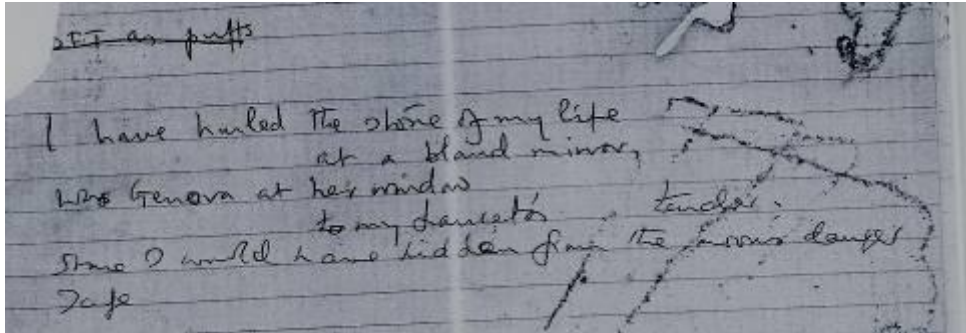
- A: Previously unpublished poems in English;
- B: Poems written in Igbo;
- C: Earlier or alternative versions of previously published poems in English;
- D: Templates or schemes for poetry collections;
- E: A previously unpublished Interview with Ivan with Van Sertima;
- F: Lists of miscellaneous literary 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

Group A comprises manuscripts or typescripts of poetical texts in English, the medium of Okigbo's mainstream *oeuvre*. Some of these are of complete poetical texts. Others are of incomplete drafts or fragments of poetical lines. As will be demonstrated presently, some of these drafts reveal a lot about "the road not taken" in the evolution of Okigbo's art. One such road is the lure of using characters and motifs from European medieval romances—especially the English Arthurian cycle—as a framework for his explorations of the tenuous relationship between his poet-protagonist and the presiding lady of his poetry, his muse, manifested in conflations of various idealized female figures in cross-cultural mythology with Okigbo's own experience of the *anima*, i.e. the simultaneously destructive as well as creative female presence that energized his artistic imagination (the earth-goddess, *Ani*; the water-goddess, *Idoto*; the watermaid or *mami-wota* of postcolonial urban legend; his own mother, Anna Okigbo; and his wife, Judith Sefi Attah).

One example will suffice for the purposes of the present paper. In a draft entitled "Stone of My Life" (Text I), the poet gives some hints of veering towards the love affair

between Genova (his offbeat spelling of Guinevere), the queen consort of King Arthur and the brave and handsome but unreliable Knight of the Round Table, Lancelot, as a model for the relationship between his poet-protagonist and his muse:

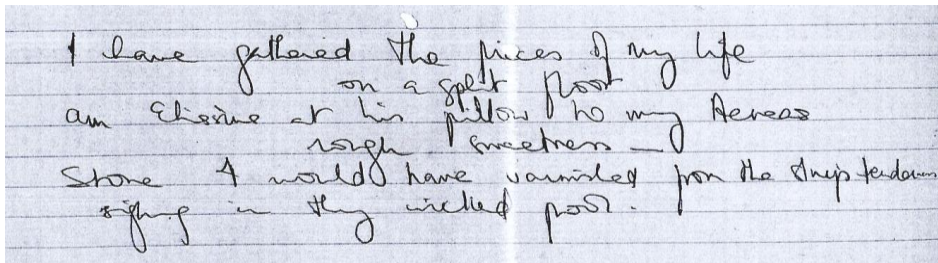
Text 1: Stone of My Life



I HAVE HURLED the stone of my life
at a blind mirror,
am Genova at her window to my Lancelot's
[coldness]¹⁴ tender—

There is nothing comparable in the original English, French, German or other European romances to the lady's blind rage against her pleasant albeit adulterous lover in the present miniature drama unfolding under Okigbo's pen. But in a related draft ("Pieces of My Life," Text 2), Okigbo can be seen turning away from the Arthurian romance cycle in favor of a comparable love-relationship taken from Virgil's *The Aeneid*.

Text 2: Pieces of My Life II

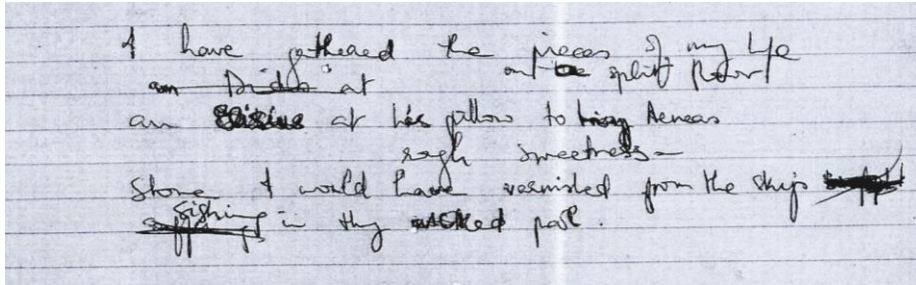


I HAVE GATHERED the pieces of my life
on a split floor
am Elissus at his pillow to my Aeneas's?
rough sweetness—

In an earlier manuscript draft of the same poem (Text 3, below), the name, Dido, is crossed out and replaced with Elissius, Okigbo's erratic rendering of Elissa (another name for the Carthaginian queen, Dido), who after Aeneas and his fleet were forced by a fierce storm hatched by Juno to make a landfall at Carthage, is said to have fallen so madly in love with the hero that she proposes that the Trojans settle in her land and that he and Aeneas reign jointly over her people. But, sent by Jupiter and Venus, Aeneas is prompted by the messenger god Mercury to continue his journey whereupon Dido orders

a funeral pyre to be built for herself, upon which she is burnt after stabbing herself in the chest and pronouncing a curse that would pit Carthage against Troy for ever.

Text 3: Pieces of My Life I



There is a comparable incident in the Arthurian romance cycle. Upon King Arthur's discovery of her adultery with Lancelot, Queen Guinevere is sentenced to be burnt to death at the stake. But she is rescued by her lover after a fierce battle, following which, according to tradition, she spent the rest of her life in a convent after hiding for a while in the Tower of London.

Why did Okigbo replace Guinevere with Dido in the manuscript? One reason may be a cultural nationalist preference for an African Queen over the medieval English Guinevere. But there is also little doubt that Okigbo's sensibilities may have been riled by the overt sensuality and even lascivious immorality of the European courtly love scenario, as exemplified, for example, by the scandalous and disastrous adulteries of Eleanor de Aquitaine in the French romance cycle and of Queen Guinevere herself in the English Arthurian cycle. As a matter of fact, the courtly love tradition of the medieval European romances is known to have been founded on an arcane fetishization of adultery. Okigbo may have himself been a womanizing prodigal in real life, but in poetry he courted a moral probity that may have repelled him from an immoral love scenario with a clear potential for undermining the high and excellent seriousness of the poetic muse of his vision,¹⁵ an image for which he gained better insights from his reading in 1960-61, at Nsukka, of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. Although Robert Graves acknowledges the influence of the ideals of Medieval European courtly love, the primary center of his theory of poetry, by which Okigbo was influenced, is the figure of *Anna Perenina* or the perennial Anna (the simultaneously destructive and creative *anima* of cross-cultural mythology), which seems to have helped Okigbo to develop the paradoxical image of his "white queen," in *Heavensgate*, *Limits*, and *Distances*, as "the supreme spirit that is both destructive and creative" (introduction to *Labyrinths*, 1965, in 1971).

Group B comprises seven handwritten drafts of poems in the Igbo language which will no doubt confound those pundits who have accused Okigbo of abandoning his indigenous poetic heritage in pursuit of the phantom of Euromodernism (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, 1980). However, the key question that arises from the critical edition and interpretation of these Igbo texts is the extent to which they may be considered to be original compositions rather than transcriptions of Igbo song-texts. This will concern us in Section 4.2. below.

Group C comprises several earlier and alternative versions of previously published poems while Group D comprises templates for or schemes for the arrangement of new

and (in some cases) for rearranging earlier collections of poetry. A full account of the significance of these materials, which offer enormous insights into Okigbo intended meanings as well as other “roads not taken,” will be found in a forthcoming paper on the subject (Azuonye, 2007d). It would therefore seem sufficient at this stage to cite one example in this group, namely a draft of “Lament of the Lavender Mist” (Typescript; Quarto), entitled “Elegy for Wood-Wind by Christopher Okigbo,” and inscribed “For SYLVIA: to defeat one of many separations.” This draft also exists in another version, which presents itself as the original draft of the first section of Lament of the Lavender Mist. In this draft, the poet can be observed hesitating between two titles—“Lady of the Lavender Mist” and the more prosaic but telling alternative, “SOPHISTICATED LADY.” Significantly, both of these alternatives hint strongly at the possibility that the deceptive lady of the piece is in all probability one of the numerous “fraudulent misses” whom Okigbo the socialite and prodigal womanizer may have encountered in real life, a possibility strengthened by Obumsele’s (2006) biographical reading of the piece as the outcome of one of Okigbo’s failed love affairs..

Group E comprises a previously unpublished text of an Interview with Ivan Van Sertima. This remarkable interview, set in the debate over the relationship between authorial intention and objective criticism (initiated by Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954), is one of the jewels of the corpus and is of enormous interest both from its contributions to that debate and for the light it casts on the poetry, as will be demonstrated at some length in Section 4.3., with reference to *Dance of the Painted Maidens* (1965).

In Group F, we have miscellaneous lists of literary projects which reveal Okigbo’s broad and diverse interests in the development of postcolonial African literature. One of these projects is a scheme for a study of “Ibo Oral Traditions” (Typescript, Quarto, I p., 1965) with the following abstract:

My purpose is to investigate certain spoken arts of Ibos, their epigrams, funeral dirges, oracular responses, panegyrics, lyrics, masquerade songs, and various other chants connected with divine worship and with vegetation and fertility rites. Both inner and outer characteristics will be studied historically and critically. The aim throughout will be to ascertain whether these art-forms attain a condition of poetry, and to establish their status and significance within their culture context.

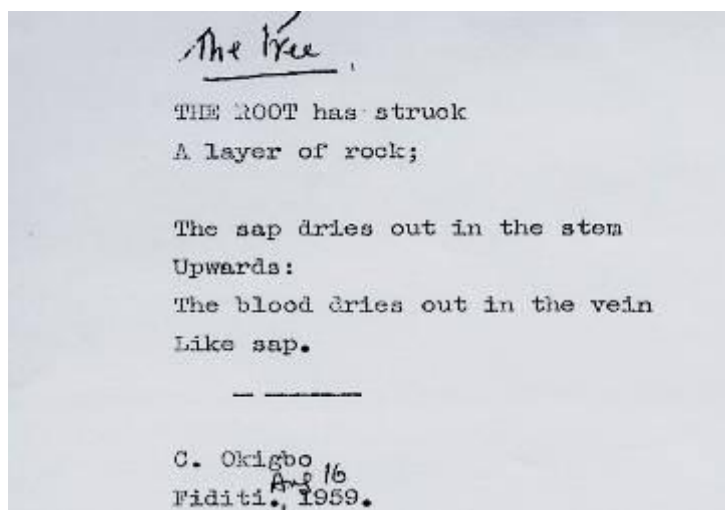
Two others are proposals for the study of modern African poetry under the titles, “Literature and Nationalism in Africa” and “Myth, Image and Symbol in Modern African Poetry.” The later includes a list of proposed contents, namely: “Negritude; Individual studies—Fiction (Achebe, Camara Laye, Peter Abrahams); Poetry (Senghor, Césaire, U’Tamsi, Okara, Okigbo, Awonoor-Williams); Drama (Soyinka).” There is also a scheme for a journal, proposed to be called *Studies in African Literature* or *New African Writing*, and to be edited by Professor Maxwell and Ben Obumsele (Manuscript; Foolscap).

in a list that runs from Homer to himself: “Homer, Virgil, Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Whitman, Gongora, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, U’Tamsi, Okigbo.” In another fantasy, he indulges in self-canonization through a series of whimsical signatures (“**Saint Christopher**”/“**Saint Christopher Okigbo**”/, or “**Okigbo St. Christopher**”) in the typescript of “Bird’s Lament” (Text 4). Reading these jottings, one cannot but wonder if what we have here are just romantic dreams of grandeur or manifestations of the species of self-apotheosizing *furor poeticus* or poetic madness which the Igbo attribute to “the *ogbanje* phenomenon” (Achebe, Chinwe, 1980, 1989)¹⁶ or “spirit arrest” (as it is called in the transatlantic Diaspora) by the Igbo god of creativity and madness, *Agwu*.

The remaining items in the corpus (Groups H, I, J, K) comprise correspondence, both personal and official (H); documents, personal photographs and other memorabilia (I); reprints and other printed materials (J); and manuscripts from other authors (H). All these items, especially Groups H and I are of enormous bio-critical significance, illuminating several aspects of the Okigbo’s experience of life and letters as well as various crosscurrents and interfaces of both domains.

3.2. Processing the Texts: The Challenges of Textual Criticism and Emendation

In many respects, the survival of the Okigbo papers is a miracle. The papers were at first retrieved from the wreckage of the hilltop home at Enugu which the poet shared with Achebe after its bombardment by the Nigerian Air Force, in July 1967, an incident recalled with wry humor by Achebe himself (1978). After this brush with obliteration, Okigbo’s elder brother, Dr Pius Okigbo—a very learned man of letters and connoisseur—took the extreme measure of insuring their security by hiding them under the mattress of his bed wherever he lived during and after the civil war, including during his term as Nigerian Ambassador to the European Community in Brussels (personal communication, Obiageli Okigbo, June 2005). But shortly after his death in 2001, the papers were absent-mindedly dumped in a garage where several of them were either completely or partially destroyed by termites (personal communication, Obiageli Okigbo, June 2005). In the surviving corpus, while a few of the papers have survived completely intact and in excellent condition (e.g. Text 5),



Text 5: Typescript of “The Tree” (Completely Intact)

a few others have been damaged wholly or partially by fire, termites, ink blots and other forms of environmental wear and tear. Some of this damage seems retrievable (as in Texts 6, 7, and 8), where the key to textual emendation seems to lie in observable intratextual or intertextual patterns of repetition, parallelism or formulaic diction in Okigbo's poetry. The former is exemplified by Text 6 ("Land of our Birth") and Text 8 ("Goddess of Love with Christopher Okigbo"), while the latter is exemplified by Text 7 (You Will Return To Us, O Presence). Thus, in Text 6 ("Land of our Birth"), the lacunae at the end of the last couplet (**The drum says: homeward across the.../The mother of drum says: let us arr.....**) can be reconstructed, to some degree, with reference to parallel or repeated lines (printed in bold below) in the earlier stanzas:

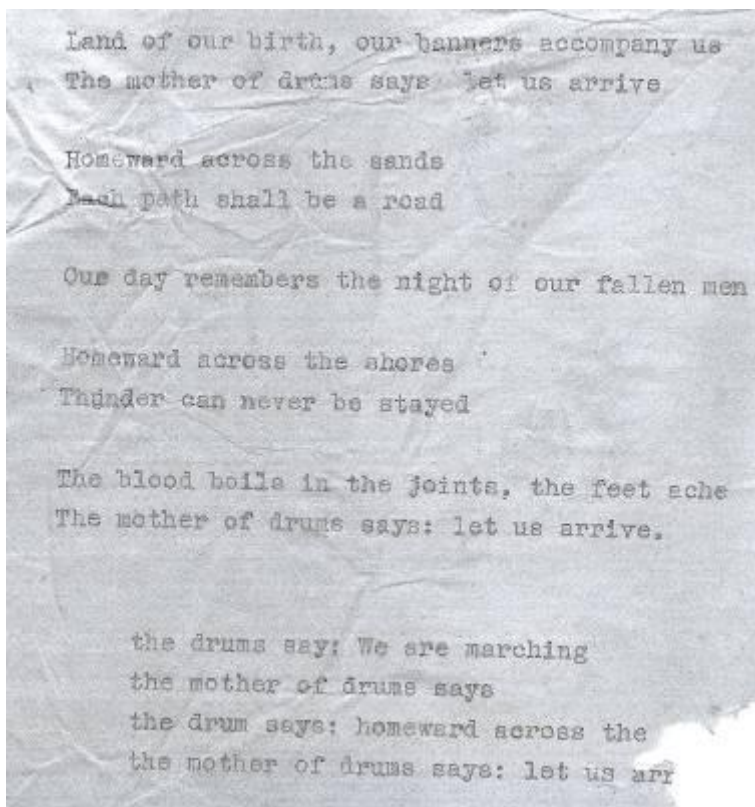
LAND OF OUR BIRTH, our banners accompany us
The mother of drums says: let us arrive

Homeward across the sands
 Each path shall be a road

Our day remembers the night of our fallen men

Homeward across the shores
 Thunder can never be stayed

The blood boils in the joints, the feet ache
The mother of drums says: let us arrive.



Text 6 ("Land of our Birth," One of Surviving Drafts of Okigbo's "Anthem for Biafra")

The caveat, however, is that while we may be able to reconstruct the missing words with a fair amount of certainty for the phrase, “**let us arrive**” (a clear case of exact stylistic repetition), we cannot do so with equal certainty for the phrase, “homeward across the...” (a case of parallelism with variant end phrases—“the sands,” in line 3, and “the shores,” in line 6—suggesting a third variant in the penultimate line where the lacunae exist. But, unfortunately, we have no immediate intratextual or intertextual clue for the reconstruction of the missing words in this particular lacuna. In a case like this, textual emendation becomes, at worst, a matter of conjecture, and, at best, of recreative emendation, rather than an exercise in objective or empirical textual criticism.

In the editing of Text 7 (You Will Return To Us, O Presence) and Text 8 (“Goddess of Love with Christopher Okigbo”), on the other hand, objective textual emendation is facilitated by the presence of permutations of words which, despite some lacunae within them, are easily recognizable as obvious cases of cross-textual formulaic repetition or echo. Thus, in the line (“The....of the rose”), in Text 4, which is partially obliterated by termite activity, we can hear a distinct echo of a well-known clause (“the cruelty of the rose”) from line 4 of Section IV of Okigbo’s mid-career sequence, *Siren Limits*:

An image insists
From flag pole of the heart;
Her image distracts
With **the cruelty of the rose...**



Text 7 (“You Will Return to Us, O Presence”) (badly damaged by termites)

Unfortunately, the preceding two lines in this text and the initial portions of other lines in the text are completely obliterated by termite activity, leaving neither an intratextual nor intertextual clue for their retrieval.

Text 8 (“Goddess of Love with Christopher Okigbo”) is a fascinating early lyric that is clearly related in theme and style to *Heavensgate* and *Limits*. The text is largely intact and offers a better prospect of complete and assured restoration through the processes of textual emendation. Though the poet’s last name is here indecipherably blotted by ink, we, of course, have no difficulty in recognizing it, since we already know what it is. This limits the problematic of the text to figuring out the last digit of the date of composition, which has been consumed by termites. But, happily, there is faint trace of the third digit, “6,” in the surviving text. This helps to place the date of composition squarely in the 1960’s. At this stage, the date can be fairly objectively determined through pertinent contextual-thematic cross-bearings. One such cross-bearing is the inescapable reading of the text as an initial exploration of the tenuous relationship between the poet-hero and his muse, which leads him—at the end of the fourth of section of *Siren Limits*—to allow his errant prodigal self to be devoured by the muse-goddess in her ferociously destructive manifestation as an “oblong-headed lioness”:

Oblong-headed lioness—
No shield is proof against her—
Wound me, O sea-weed
Face, blinded like a strong-room—

Distances of her armpit-fragrance
Turn chloroform enough for my patience—

When you have finished
& done up my stitches,
Wake me near the altar,
& this poem will be finished...

We can see a parallel scenario in the draft in the making (Text 8):

Keen-breasted goddess
See where I lie
Wounded by two swords

Bury me there
Where the song trembles
Then never let me wake...

These lines are clearly an initial, less precise, exploration of the scenario which comes through with greater poignancy in *Siren Limits*, a poem composed in 1960 and first published in 1961. Given this contextual-thematic cross-bearing, the composition of “Goddess of Love with Christopher Okigbo,” can be placed with a fair degree of certainly sometime between October 1960 (when Okigbo arrived at Nsukka) and December of that year (when he wedded the obvious real-life model for the goddess, his wife, Judith Sefi Attah).

Goddess of Love to the Christopher Okigbo.

O smoother, than ^{silk} ~~soft~~
Or velvet-tamarind -
Oh, who smothered me with
Tender kisses in my sleep?

Long hair and soft,
Keen-breasted ^{goddess} ~~feature~~,
See where I lie
Wounded by ~~two~~ two swords.

Bury me there
Where the song trembles:
If it were ~~true~~
Then never let me wake.

But if I should wake
And never find you near,
Then never let me wake
From the fever of the dream

Christopher

1960

Text 8: Typescript of "Goddess of Love with Christopher Okigbo"
(slightly but retrievably damaged by termites and an inkblot)

A few other papers are presumably lost and irrecoverable. Of these, by far the most notable is the manuscript or typescript of the “large” prose work, *Pointed Arches*, earlier mentioned, whose apparent loss “forever” is lamented in Sunday Anozie’s *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (1972: 183):

With the destruction during the war of Okigbo’s home and library at Enugu in 1967, it is unlikely that we shall ever recover for future generations what now appears to have been Christopher’s *magnum opus* and last creative testament.

The bombardment of Okigbo’s hilltop residence at Enugu, which he shared with novelist, Chinua Achebe, was indeed one of the greatest acts of vandalism of the three-year civil war.

The last category of papers in the Okigbo corpus are currently missing but are believed to be recoverable under certain conditions, being probably misplaced or stolen to be sold at a later date for profit. The former includes a cache of letters around which Lindfors (e-mail, 2006), in the abstract of his proposed paper for the 2007 Okigbo conference, builds a case for what he calls “epistolary archaeology”:

What I would prefer to do in the panel is to speak about some letters that Okigbo exchanged with Dennis Duerden when Duerden was running the Transcription Centre in London. The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin acquired the entire Transcription Centre archive some years ago, and I have been told that there are about ten or a dozen letters by Okigbo among those documents....Not enough has been done to collect and publish the letters of African writers (the single Okigbo letter reproduced in Sunday Anozie's study is the only one by him that I have seen in print), so by exhuming these few at the HRC, it may be possible to make a case for overdue epistolary archaeology

We see the beginnings of such “epistolary archeology” in an article by Gerald Moore who preceded me in examining the Okigbo’s papers in the Transcription Center Archives at Austin, Texas. As he notes with reference to the General Correspondence File,

New light is...cast here on the last few months of Okigbo's life. Like most Nigerian intellectuals, he had welcomed the "January Boys" military coup of 1966, greeted in his case with a telegram to Duerden:

HURRAH FOR REVOLUTION LET THE CANNONS SHOOT!

But he was one of the first to scent the smell of blood floating in "the lavender mist of the afternoon" ("Come Thunder," *Labyrinths* 66). He realized far sooner than most that this coup was only the harbinger of a long season of agony. Yet, as a letter to the Centre written in April 1967 shows, he did not move eastwards to Enugu with the immediate intention of enlisting in the Biafran army. He is full of enthusiasm for a publishing house he plans to set up with a couple of colleagues, already listing several of their proposed titles (Moore, 2002: 167-181))

But, unfortunately, no trace of the letter or telegram mentioned by Moore or the dozen or so letters mentioned by Lindfors was found when I visited the center in July-August 2006.¹⁷ The papers had simply disappeared from the folders in which they were supposed to be located. A similar loss has been reported for a cache of personal letters known to have been recovered from the garage after Dr. Pius Okigbo’s death. There are fears that these letters may have been purloined by a member of the Okigbo extended family

(personal communication, Obiageli Okigbo, July 2005). One can only hope that these valuable missing papers will eventually be recovered.

As has been shown in the foregoing paragraphs, my first task, after cataloguing the papers in Brussels (in January 2006), was to attempt to produce careful transcriptions of every significant surviving literary text in the corpus. In cases of retrievably damaged texts, resort to good old techniques of textual criticism and emendation has been found inescapable. Happily, as we have seen, Okigbo's verse lends itself to textual emendation based on recognizable and at times predictable patterns of intratextual and intertextual repetition, parallelism and the formulaic diction, including some that run across the entire poetic *oeuvre*. Deconstructive principles, in its fundamental sense of reading an infinite range of meanings into the constituent signifiers in the autonomous text, have sometimes been applied in order to make better sense of some texts. Okigbo himself did subscribe to a theory of aesthetics which panders to the extremes in this poststructuralist agenda, thus empowering critics (beginning with Anozie, 1970, 1972, 1981, and 1984) to boldly employ deconstructive methods in the interpretation of his texts. Deconstruction leads us to reconstruction on the basis of applied readings of the modernist bricolage and postcolonial syncretism in Okigbo's *oeuvre*. The application of these principles have proved valuable in revealing some facts about Okigbo's compositional methods, as will be demonstrated, through the illustrative close readings of sample materials from the corpus in the following final section.

4. Insights from Selected Manuscripts and Drafts in the Corpus

Three sets of materials from the Okigbo papers will be subjected to close reading in this section: fragments of Okigbo's unfinished "Anthem for Biafra," from the point of view what they reveal to us about Okigbo's technique of composition (4.1); the seven poems written in Igbo, from the point of view of what we can learn from them about hitherto unknown, indigenous African language roots of Okigbo's modernist aesthetic (4.2); and *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, in the light of Okigbo's confessions of his authorial intention in pertinent letters and an interview in the corpus. In general, the insights derived from these close readings seem valuable for the light they cast on that aspect of Okigbo's global modernist bricolage which has been repeatedly described by critics as "the mythical projection of a personal experience," a process whereby personal and private experiences are transmuted into global and public visions of reality and *vice versa*.

5.1. Anthem to Biafra and Okigbo's Technique of Composition.

There are nineteen surviving fragments or drafts (all incomplete and at their early stages), in the corpus, of what was obviously contemplated as an Anthem for the fledgling secessionist Republic of Biafra (formerly Eastern Nigeria) for which Okigbo laid down his life in battle in August 1967. In two of these drafts (XVII and XVIII, in Charts I-V), "the exciting new nation" (to borrow a phrase from Chinua Achebe's Biafran short story, "Girls at War"), is hailed as "Land of our birth." In four others (VI-IX), it is specifically invoked by name through the phrase, "waters of Biafra." Another draft (XIV) offers a heroic snapshot of the bearded and intimidating Biafran leader, General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, as "Man of lion-head, our helmsman," who is apparently idealized through the remnants of some obliterated words (in an unfortunate

lacuna at this point) as holding the “secrets” of “space.” But beyond these, there is hardly any hint of the kind of ethnocentric chauvinism for which Okigbo has been vilified for prodigal self-sacrifice in works like Ali Mazrui’s novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971). That Okigbo was strongly committed to Biafra is, of course, evident in the very fact of his willingness to sacrifice his life for its cause. As attested by his friend, Obumselu (2006), himself also an officer in the Biafran army:

He was certainly a devoted Biafran. But he went to the Nsukka warfront without due process in July 1967 with many undergraduates just as European students had flocked to the Balkans in 1912 and to Spain in 1936. Quite apart from his commitment to Biafra, he considered war itself as a supreme test. He had to prove himself, like Tolstoy at Sevastopol or Xenophon during the Persian invasion. Col. Ben Gbulie of the Biafran Army says of Okigbo’s conduct at the warfront that it was characterized by “poetic license.” “I had cause to talk to him seriously against the habit of clambering up the bonnet of our lone land rover and mounting himself, rifle at the ready, whenever we were set to embark on a military offensive.”

There is a further attestation to the strength of his commitment by Achebe (1978). But, it is also easy to see from the recurrence of words and phrases such as “misty dawn,” “our eunuch steps of twilight,” and “our errant wings,” in the drafts, that, despite the strength of these commitments, Okigbo’s attitudes to Biafra were mostly guarded, informed by a keen awareness that the Biafran struggle was happening “before this azure and blue of the universe assembled.” The tone of the drafts is thus saturated with an implied fear that the Biafran leadership lacked both the will to carry “the burden of several centuries” and the vision to optimize the opportunity he saw as provided by the revolution to “break the myth of my race,” a phrase that carries an unmistakable, albeit implied allusion, to Edward Wilmot Blyden’s famous pan-African liberation and empowerment manifesto, *The Vindication of the Negro Race* (1857). Alarmed that “Already our errant wings tempt the milky way,” he prophetically warns the romantic Biafran revolutionaries not to be tempted, like Icarus in classical Greek mythology, to abuse their new-found freedom by soaring far into the sky, close to the sun, on artificial wings stuck to their bodies with mere wax. The Anthem is thus, for the most part, both a hortatory song and a prayer for divine providence to “take, hold, bless, guide” the new nation “to arrive” safely “across the sands” of the desert to the fertile “shores” of a destined greatness where the creative potentials of its people would be released to enable them to “break” the “iron gate the burden of several centuries/Into twin tremulous cotyledons” (in other word to blossom and bear fruits like all well-founded nations in human history).

But the promises of these themes as intriguing and tantalizing pointers to new directions in Okigbo’s commitments to the ideals of the open society in the postcolonial world are far too fragmentary to offer the reader any fully coherent picture. Far more coherent and complete are the vivid glimpses offered by the drafts into what Echeruo (2004) has described as “Christopher Okigbo at work on a particular poem.” Even from a cursory glance at the texts quoted in full below (Charts I-V), it is easy to see that the lines are modeled on those of an older poem, “Elegy of the Wind” (the second lyric in *Path of Thunder*), which Obumselu (2006) has perceptively described as “a last testament by which,” as he believes, “Okigbo would like to be remembered.” With this fine example *par excellence* of Okigbo’s poetic artistry as a template—much like a huge chunk of verbal wood—Okigbo proceeds in the manner of a sculptor, in the drafts on hand, chipping out pieces here and there and introducing new images elsewhere, but retaining

the cadences, volume and tempo of the model lyric, as can be observed from the comparative, schematic layout of variant lines of the emergent Anthem with parallel lines from the “Elegy” in Charts I-V below:

CHART I
DRAFTS OF ANTHEM FOR BIAFRA MODELLED ON “ELEGY OF THE WIND” (II 1-3)

WHITE LIGHT, receive me your sojourner; O milky way,
let me clasp you to my waist;
And may my muted tones of twilight
Break your iron gate, the burden of several centuries,
into twin tremulous cotyledons...

VERSION I: WHITE NIGHT

WHITE night—for I am your sojourner, O milky way –
hold me in your weltering bosom;
bless me, clasp me to your breast;
And may my myriad eyes of dreamlight
Break your iron gate the burden of several centuries
Into twin tremulous cotyledons....

VERSION II-V: PATH OF THUNDER CLOUDS

Version II: Path of Thunder Clouds #1

PATH OF THUNDER CLOUDS, guide us [to our destiny]¹⁸
receive us in your [azure laps]¹⁹
And may our eunuch steps of twilight
Break under your archway our burden of [several]²⁰
centuries into tremulous cotyledons....

Version III: Path of Thunder Clouds #2

PATH OF THUNDER CLOUDS, guide us to our destiny
O misty dawn, take bless hold
Already our errant wings tempt the milky way;
For our burden of centuries breaks
Into the sorrows of a giant, decadent.....of...²¹.

Version IV: Path of Thunder Clouds #3

PATH OF THUNDER CLOUDS, guide us to our citadel
receive us in your azure laps²²
May our eunuch steps of twilight²³
...²⁴ under your archway our burden of several
centuries break into tremulous cotyledons²⁵

Version V: Path of Thunder Clouds #4

PATH OF THUNDER CLOUDS, receive us the fugitives,
guide our errant steps in our citadel;
For lo, before this azure and blue
Before the universe assembled, our burden of several
centuries breaks into twin tremulous cotyledons

VERSION VI-IX: WATERS OF BIAFRA

Version VI: Waters of Biafra #1

Waters of Biafra, for you are our destiny
receive us in your sheltering bosom
And may our eunuch steps
Break under your archway our burden of several
centuries into tremulous cotyledons

Version VII: Waters of Biafra #2

WATERS of Biafra, receive us the fugitives;
O milky way, take, bless, guide;²⁶
For lo, before this azure and blue
of the universe as witness, our burden of several
centuries, breaks into twin tremulous cotyledons...

Version VIII: Waters of Biafra #3

Waters of Biafra
For lo, before this azure and blue, before the universe
...assembled, our burden of several
centuries breaks into twin tremulous cotyledons...

Version IX: Waters of Biafra #4

Waters of Biafra, take bless, hold
o milky way, guide us to our citadel
for lo, before this azure and blue
before the universe assembled
our burden of several centuries
breaks into tremulous cotyledons.²⁷

CHART II

DRAFTS OF ANTHEM FOR BIAFRA MODELLED ON “ELEGY OF THE WIND” (4-6)

Man of iron throat—for I will make broadcast with
eunuch-horn of seven valves—
I will follow the wind to the clearing,
And with muffled steps seemingly out of breath break
the silence the myth of her gate.

5

VERSIONS X-XIV: MAN OF IRON THROAT/ MAN OF LION-HEAD

Version X: Man of Iron-Throat, #1

Man of iron throat—for I will make broadcast with
eunuch-horn of seven tongues,
And follow the winds to the clearing –
Lo my muted steps seemingly out of breath break the
silence the myth of her gate.

Version XI: Man of Iron-Throat, #2

Man of iron throat, I will enter the clearing
With/like winds of even tone—
I am he that accompanies –
And in muted notes seemingly out of breath,
break the myth of my race

Version XII: Man of Iron-Throat, #3

Man of iron throat I am he who accompanies
Like sudden breeze of even tone
Man of iron throat, I am he who accompanies,
Breeze of even tone, I will enter the clearing
and in eunuch steps that may seem out of breath
break the silence the myth of my race...²⁸

Version XIII: Man of Iron-Throat, #4

MAN OF IRON THROAT you become me—tongue to
my eloquent flesh—
And against this fire of myriad eyes of the universe
assembled
The burden seven centuries breaks into twin pendulous
cotyledons...

But the sound of mourning reaches me from a distance
Trumpets (of ivory) lamenting in the orange grove...²⁹

So like twilight showers, sudden, and like women in
labour,³⁰
These little stars of hailstones; and my escort is
Conversant
With cult secrets; the egret accompanies my ceremonial
Entry

The path becomes a road
The road bec[omes a throne].³¹

Version XIV: Man of Lion-Head, #4

Man of lion-head our helmsman's.....space
...secrets
The light gods of the sky man our magic ..r
The four winds of the globe bless our chosen path

The path is now a way, the lion is now uncaged.
The tin god of the cult has cut the sacred knot

CHART III

DRAFTS OF ANTHEM FOR BIAFRA MODELLED ON “ELEGY OF THE WIND” (16-25)

The man embodies the child
The child embodies the man; the man remembers
The song of the innocent,

Of the uncircumcised at the sight of the flaming razor—

The chief priest of the sanctuary has uttered the enchanted words; 20
The bleeding phallus,
Dripping fresh from the carnage cries out for the medicinal leaf....

O wind, swell my sails; and may my banner run the course of wider waters:

The child in me trembles before the high shelf
on the wall,
The man in me shrinks before the narrow neck
of a calabash; 25

VERSION XV: The Small Hand of the Child

THE SMALL HAND of the child cannot reach the
high shelf in the roof
The long hand of a sage cannot enter the narrow
neck of a calabash

CHART IV

A DRAFT OF ANTHEM FOR BIAFRA MODELLED ON *DISTANCES*—III

In the scattered line of pilgrims
from Dan to Beersheeba
camphor iodine chloroform
either sting me in the bum 65

On the stone steps on the marble
beyond the balcony
prophets martyrs lunatics
like the long stride of the evening

And the clearing dantini 70
in the garden dilettanti;
vendors princes negritude
politicians in the tall wood...

**VERSION XVI:
IN THE SCATTERED LINE OF PILGRIMS**

IN THE SCATTERED LINE of pilgrims
That were bound for Cable Point
The watchword wasForward
Enki, Enki, came the call/cry
From Dan to Beersheba
Whispered a trembling voice

In the scattered line of pilgrims
From Dan to Beersheba
Enki drew his long leg out
In the long stride of the morning
In the brown waste of the desert
Where the hedges were cactus

CHART V
DRAFTS OF ANTHEM FOR BIAFRAMODELLED ON NO KNOWN EMPLATES

VERSION XVII-XVIII:
LAND OF OUR BIRTH

VERSION XVII

LAND OF OUR BIRTH, our banners accompany us;
The drum says: let us arrive...

Homeward across the sands
Day shall follow our night,
Homeward across the streams
This leopard is now unchained;

Land of our birth, blood of our fallen men,
The drum says: let us arrive....

VERSION XVIII

LAND OF OUR BIRTH, our banners accompany us
The mother of drums says: let us arrive

Homeward across the sands
Each path shall be a road

Our day remembers the night of our fallen men

Homeward across the shores
Thunder can never be stayed

The blood boils in the joints, the feet ache
The mother of drums says: let us arrive.

the drum says: We are marching
the mother of drums says
the drum says: homeward across the sands
the mother of drums says: let us arrive

VERSION XIX:
DOORS OPEN ON EXILES

DOORS OPEN in the sands; doors open on exiles.
The sea with its lighthouse keepers,
And sun beaten out on the threshold sands.

Leave me, dear host, your house of glass
on the sands.
The season, all gypsum, wets its lance head
in our wounds—

I have chosen a place glaring as null
as the bone-heaps of the seasons,

And on all shores of the world

The ghost of God in smoke
Abandons its bed of asbestos

The process seen in these drafts, in which the poet has chosen to use selected lines from a preexistent poem (“Elegy of the Wind”) as rhythmic or musical templates in the composition of a new poem (“Anthem for Biafra”), is well-known in the Igbo art of traditional oral song-making and presumably in other African oral song-making traditions as well. Traditionally described in Igbo by the ceramic art term, *irò-egwu* (molding a song), the process bears a close analogy to the art of the sculptor. Like the notion of the *gestalt* in psychology, the musical or rhythmic template in this process is a form without content—a musical phrase or tune-pattern, which is at first hummed or filled with gibberish and thereafter gradually populated with vocal sounds and ultimately with actual words and formulaic verbal tropes in the form of proverbs, praise names or epithets, heroic or satiric as the case may be. Closely examined, the process of populating the musical-rhythmic *gestalt* with words is very much in accord with the notion of poetic art as “logistics” (or the tactical deployment of words towards a larger affective strategy), offered by Okigbo’s village explainer” (Upandru) in *Heavensgatee* II. In this sense, *irò-egwu* is a mode of idiomatic logistics whereby the right words are tactically deployed in the right places, following which they may be altered, edited, changed, modified, nuanced and meticulously polished until a pattern of words, most satisfying to the composer or folk group, is arrived at. This final form is then memorized for exact reproduction or improvisation in various contexts of situation. We can see the same process at work in the fragments out of the deluge of poetical lines which point to an emergent “Anthem for Biafra” from Okigbo’s hand. This leads us to Okigbo’s Igbo poems.

5.2. The Igbo Poems and the African Roots of Okigbo’s Modernist Aesthetic.

As mentioned earlier, there are seven poems written in Igbo in the Okigbo corpus. These poems offer the surprising prospect that Okigbo may have composed poetry in his mother-tongue, Igbo, a decade before Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1975) initiated his campaign for the use of African languages in postcolonial African writing as the most effective strategy for decolonizing the mind, and about the time Obi Wali (1963) first raised the same argument, provoking the first major debate in postcolonial African letters by his declaration that African writing in European languages was nothing but “a dead end.” A careful and detailed study of Okigbo’s Igbo poems offers one of the most powerful counters against charges, especially by the Africa’s most vocal apostles of the poetics of decolonization (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, 1980) that his poetry panders to Euromodernism at the expense of an authentic African aesthetic base. Obumselu (2006) is clearly in error here when he notes, in passing, that Okigbo “knew next to nothing about the traditional poetry of the Igbo”. On the contrary, both his Igbo poems and his projected study of Igbo oral traditions, already mentioned in this paper, clearly indicate that he knew quite a lot about Igbo oral poetry and was passionate about what he knew. His Igbo poems bear witness to a sensitive immersion into the poetics and social praxis of Igbo oral verse-making, and there is evidence in these poems that he was set on a path to transforming himself into an Igbo language minstrel of the written tradition. But two key questions arise from the discovery of these Igbo texts: Are they original compositions in Igbo by Okigbo, or are they merely transcriptions of recorded Igbo oral poetry or song-texts recalled from memory? How best can the texts be rendered.

To answer these questions, both objectively and in a circumspect manner, I exchanged e-mails with nine writers and critics who I knew to be familiar with Okigbo's poetry or engaged in discourse on modernist poetics or the challenges of African language writing. The list includes Chinua Achebe (novelist and critic; Bard College), Michael Echeruo (poet and scholar; Syracuse University), Emmanuel Obiechina (critic and scholar; Maryland), Abiola Irele (critic and scholar; Harvard), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (novelist and scholar; University of California at Irvine), Obiora Udechukwu (artist, poet and art historian; St Lawrence University), Anita Patterson (critic and scholar; Boston University), Robert Fraser (critic and scholar; Open University, UK); and Columbus Ihekaibeya (independent scholar, UK; with whom—as a fellow war correspondent in the Biafran War Information Bureau—I first met Okigbo in his final days as an officer in the Biafran Army, at the Nsukka warfront, in July 1967).

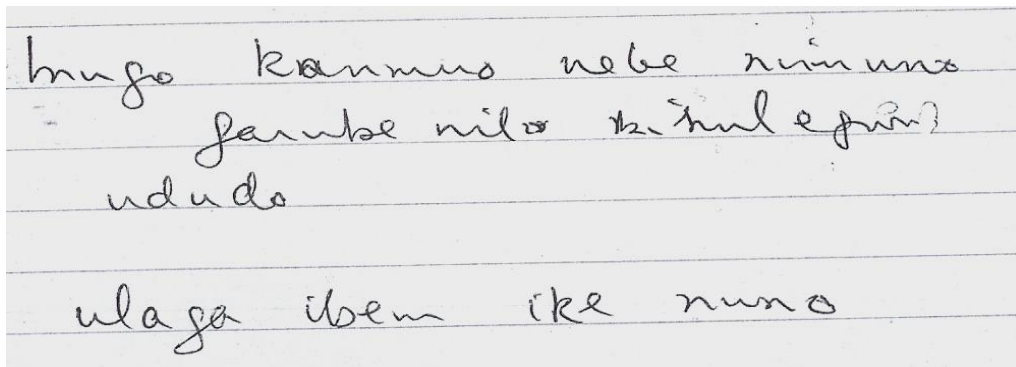
All but one of these respondents appeared persuaded that the Igbo texts presented to them were indeed original compositions by Okigbo. One guarded voice of dissent was that of Michael Echeruo, a distinguished Okigbo scholar and William Safire Professor of Modern Letters at Syracuse University. In his e-mail (Monday, 3/20/06), he writes with a penetrating perspicacity that says a lot about the musical framework of Okigbo's verse-making:

I thought, as a preliminary matter, to ask if you had considered the "poems" you are studying as attempt at transcriptions of performed Igbo song/texts as remembered, or else as actually attempts to transcribe from an audio tape of such texts. Do not rule out this possibility out of hand. Okigbo works from the musical phrase to the scribal page; he works the text on the page (whoever's it may be) to return an audacious version consonant with the original musical echo. In the process, he may sometimes confound meaning/sense in the interest of musical harmony; or at other times, preserve a meaning while dis-organizing the scribal page and re-arranging the composition typographically through lineation and left-tabbing.

Needless to say, there is a good deal in Echeruo's comments that undercut any *a priori* consideration of the Igbo texts in the Okigbo corpus as original compositions. But the case for original poetic creativity in Igbo can also be easily made by an appeal to the same arguments. To begin with, his argument that "Okigbo works from the musical phrase to the scribal page," seems to support our contention, demonstrated with reference to the drafts of Anthem for Biafra, that he uses pre-existent poetic lines, verses and whole poems as musical or rhythmic templates for his poetic compositions. Secondly, his comments are a the reminder of Okigbo's well-known interest in the performance of Igbo minstrels who he saw as the "real poets": "we are all wasting our time," he is quoted to have declared, after watching a performance by a minstrel called "Area Scatter" at Enugu early in 1967. Thirdly, Echeruo's reference to "performed Igbo song/texts as remembered" recalls Okigbo's re-memories of the songs of his childhood nurse, Eunice (in *Limits* X) and his well-known weaving of oral poetry into the fabric of his English language poetry, a process described in Raji (2002) as "aesthetic transfer" from oral tradition. We know that in the final, mature phase of his artistic career (1964-1967), Okigbo not only exploits the language, form and structure of Igbo oral poetry for this purpose but those of the Yoruba praise poetry (*oriki*) and the Akan funeral drum poetry. Finally, the comments remind us of Okigbo's scheme, earlier discussed, to write a book on Igbo oral literature. But there is a dilemma here. For some observers, these arguments can encourage a rush to judgment that the Igbo texts in the Okigbo corpus are either

fragments of musical phrases designed to be used as templates for composition in English or simply as transcriptions of oral poetic texts for his proposed study on Igbo oral traditions. However closer examination will reveal significant deviations, in the texts, from the oral-aural quality of the traditional song to the visual-graphological texture of the written poem. There is also evidence in some of the texts of significant thematic links with the English language poems. Closely examined, these links will be seen to have the effect of lifting them from the oral traditional pool squarely into the scribal page. Finally, there is also clear evidence of a “canceling out” process in some of the texts which cannot be explained away purely as corrections of transcriptional errors. These arguments have been marshaled and illustrated at length in two earlier papers (Azuonye 2006a and b). For the purposes of the present paper, it seems sufficient to examine two typical and contrasting texts—Text 6 (“*Uлага*”) and Text 8 (“*Sisters, Ekene*”), in addition to Text 7 (*Egwu Obi/Qja/Torch*) with reference to the “canceling out” process:

Text 6: Manuscript of “*Uлага*”



UЛАGA

**I nugo ka mmuo na-ebe n'ime unu
Garube n'ilo ka i fulu egwu
Ududo**

**Can you hear the spirit wailing in the house
Go to the clearing and see a spectacular dance
Ududo**

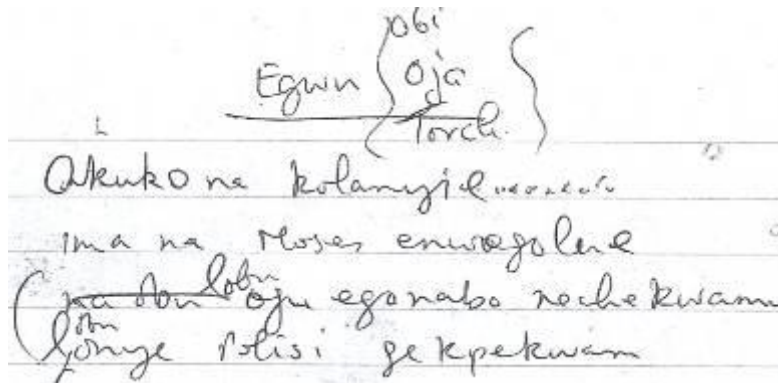
Uлага ibe m, ike n'unu

My fellow *Uлага*, strength of the home

As can be seen from the above transcription and parallel English translation, *Uлага*, is a compact dramatic monologue of four lines with a visual-graphological format that places it squarely within the domain of the scribal page. The oral traditional song is generally more symmetrical in structure than the above text. Such symmetry is dictated by such features as repetition, parallelism, antiphony or the call-and-answer pattern. In the traditional Igbo song, for example, the symmetry of poetic lines (which are usually groups of words uttered in one breath) is conditioned by the syllabic equality of congruent, parallel or alternating units. This is a kind of quantitative meter that is yet to be studied and fully understood. Any unit within the pattern that falls short of the established syllabic quantity must be forced by reduplication or melisma to fit into the pattern. There is no such pattern in the above text of *Uлага*, even though, in terms of theme and imagery, it is clearly rooted in the Igbo cultural tradition. The speaker is a masker (*mmonwu*), impersonating the spirit of the popular eagle-headed mask, known as

ulaga, In the first two-line stanza, we can hear the voice of this mask from the mask house (*ekwuru*). In the language of self-praise characteristic of Igbo mask chants, the voice announces a spectacular performance in the arena of public ceremonies—“the clearing” (*ilo*), the favorite setting of Okigbo’s English language poems. The voice calls on the audience to rush to the *ilo* for what promises to be a spectacular dance. The third line is a one-word line—*ududo*—which depends for its effect on the loaded connotations of the word (which refers to the spider web membrane used to disguise the voice of maskers, and is also used as a synecdoche for the mask or mask speech). Single one-word lines of this kind are atypical in Igbo oral prosody. As a rule, whenever one-word occurs as a complete breath-group or a single line of oral verse, it must be drawn out by means of melisma or reduplication so as to conform with the already established pattern of repetition, parallelism, call-and-answer antiphony or cadence. In the final one-line stanza, the *Ududo* is welcoming other *ulaga*, in words that clearly suggest that there is a large flock of *ulaga* masks at the performance. To sum up, despite its traditional theme and imagery, the form and structure of *Ulagas* seems to be characterized by an economy of phrasing and suggestiveness which seems closer to those of Okigbo’s modernist, English-language lyrics than to Igbo oral poetry or song..

Text 7: Manuscript of “Egwu (Obi/Qja/Torch)”



EGWU (OBI/QJA/TORCH)/SONG OF (THE HEART/THE FLUTE/THE TORCH)

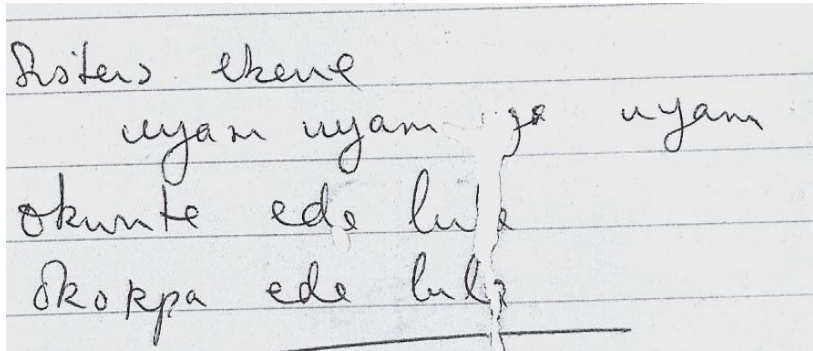
Akukọ na-akọlu anyi eeee!	A story is telling us eeee!
I ma na Moses enwegolu ye?	Do you know that Moses has got it?
Na ọ bụlụ/Q bụ ọgụ ego naabọ na-echekwa m.	If it is/It is two twenty shillings waiting for me.
Onye poliisi/Q bụ onye poliisi ga-ekpekwa m	A policeman will report me/It is the policeman that will report me

[Note: the underlined words are delete and in favor of the those following immediately]

In this second Igbo poem (Text 7, above), Okigbo is caught hesitating between three alternative titles—“Song of the Heart” (*Egwu Obi*), “Song of the Flute” (*Egwu Qja*), and “Song of the Torch”/“Torch Song” (*Egwu Torch*). Although these titles may indicate a transfer of generic names from Igbo minstrelsy, the poet does not seem to be bound to the fixed meaning or context of any particular “song-text remembered.” Rather he appears to be considering which of the three titles could be best adopted and adapted for his modernist purpose in the song in the making. Furthermore, the canceling out and change

of the words in lines 3 and 4 of the text suggests compositional rhetorical (or modal) shifts rather than corrections of transcriptional errors. We can observe a similar canceling out process in several other texts quoted earlier.

Text 8: Manuscript of “Sisters, Ekene”



SISTERS, EKENE/SISTERS, GREETINGS

Sisters, ekene	Sisters, greetings to you
<i>Uyam uyam ya uyam</i>	<i>Uyam uyam ya uyam</i>
Okwute edelu uli	Rocks decorated with indigo
<i>Uyam uyam ya uyam</i>	<i>Uyam uyam ya uyam</i>
Okokpa edelu uli	Cocks decorated with indigo
<i>Uyam uyam ya uyam</i>	<i>Uyam uyam ya uyam</i>

Finally in the third Igbo text, “Sisters, Greetings” we have a poem with the staid call-and-answer form and symmetry, of the traditional song; but unlike the traditional song, is characterized by the ambiguity of the modernist lyric. Essentially a mock-heroic song with a satiric refrain of the kind found in women’s song of abuse, *egwu-ikpe*, sung for young girls who become pregnant before marriage, it has, by dint of what Ramazani describes as *translocalism* in modernist bricolage (i.e. taking an event or situation from one historical, social, cultural or literary context and locating it in another context as a way of amplifying, universalizing, or globalizing its significance) been purloined as a medium for an urbane diatribe against postcolonial Catholic nuns, “sisters”, here derided as “rocks” or “stones” (*okwute*) painted with *uli* (indigo body decorations) and as cocks or male fowls (*oke okpa*), painted with *uli*. We can see in these descriptions other features of the modernist bricolage, including a hint of apocalypticism in the strong thematic links between the poem and Okigbo’s *Lament of the Silent Sisters* and *Distances*, two poems set in the crisis in Nigeria and the doomsday which the events forebode. The metaphor, *okwute*, recalls the description of Catholic priests as “wandering rocks/with the burden of the pawn” in *Distances V*, a reference which ultimately links the clergy to the putative first Pope, St Peter, elected by Christ himself as “the rock” on which “I will build my Church”(Matthew 16: 18). This poem was probably composed at the same time as the “Lament of the Silent Sisters,” a period of intense concentration on nuns, convents, and the martyrdom of the silent sisters of Gerald Manley Hopkins “Wreck of the Deutschland”. But the representation of the sisters here as painted maidens “painted with

uli” carries powerful satiric implications which undercut their image as brides of Christ whose vocation enjoins the denial of worldly things like cosmetics.

It is perhaps by no means atypical that such modernist tendencies seem clearly evident in poems composed in an African language. But this only brings us back to the origins of modernism, an aesthetic which though claimed as an exclusive European artistic tendency, could not have taken the shape in which we know it today without the influence of African art. It is perhaps not surprising that in an imperial age of crass racist bigotry, European art historians and critics should turn round to label the forces of Africanism that modernized European art forms as “primitivism” (a term that harks back to 19th century racist anthropology and Social Darwinism). It is indeed a shame that many presumably enlightened and sane contemporary art historians, literary critics or scholars have continued to use this obnoxious and inaccurate label in their trade. As globalism becomes our only reality, it has become necessary to reassess without any form of bias the enormous impact of Africanisms in modernist art with a view to understanding the fact that several of the tendencies which we see as modernist are in fact derived from, and are germane, to the indigenous arts of Africa including the poems in Igbo with which Okigbo was experimenting. Even the notion of “signification” around which twentieth-century structuralist and poststructuralist theorists, beginning with Roman Jakobson, have built such complex superstructures, have been part of black aesthetic tradition for centuries, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr (1984b) has rightly observed. A proper understanding of the participation in, or of, indigenous African systems of thought and aesthetics in the forces that have shaped contemporary global poetics will put paid to misguided notions that African artists like Okigbo are trespassers in the domains of Euromodernism. With the better understanding that what we imagine to be Euromodernism is in fact a global modernist aesthetic with vital contributions from African and many other cultures across the world, has been long overdue. This leads us directly to our third illustrative close-reading—Okigbo’s *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, a poem about the birth of the poet’s daughter, which he contributed to a festival of global culture, the 1965 Commonwealth Festival of the Arts and on which we have his unequivocal statement of his authorial intention.

4.3. Authorial Intention & Globalist Aesthetic in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*:

The first confession of Okigbo’s authorial intention on *Dance of the Painted Maidens* is contained in his letter (dated February 15, 1965) to the organizers of the poetry performance events at the Commonwealth Festival of the Arts held in London from September 16 to October 2, 1965). In this letter, Okigbo is responding to an invitation from Mr Eric W. White, on behalf of Douglas Cleverdon, Director of Poetry Productions, to contribute a specially commissioned poem of about 75 lines for performance at the festival:

I am in fact just finishing (or abandoning) a poem which ought to be suitable for your purposes from the point of view of its length etc. It is a fertility dance by a Chorus of Painted Maidens, the occasion of which is the return of a dead ancestor, the birth of a baby who is a re-incarnation of her grandmother (Commonwealth Arts Festival Archive, Box 4, Folder 32, HRC, University of Texas at Austin, TX).

Later, on May 7, 1965, Okigbo writes to Douglas Cleverdon himself, basically restating the same authorial intention:



Plate I: A Painting of 'Dance of the Painted Maidens,' entitled "The Rebirth of Venus," by Okigbo's Daughter, Obiageli Okigbo (Oil on Canvass, 260cm x 140 cm, Brussels, 2003)

Under separate cover and by registered airmail I am sending you the commissioned poem, DANCE OF THE PAINTED MAIDENS, a fertility dance by a chorus of maidens on the occasion of the return of a dead ancestor. The poem is dedicated to my daughter, Annabelle, who is a reincarnation of her paternal grandmother, Anna. I hope you will like it (Commonwealth Arts Festival Archive, Box 4, Folder 32, HRC, University of Texas at Austin, TX).

But in an interview which he recorded with Ivan van Sertima on, Friday, September 26, 1965—a day before the dramatized performance of the poem at the Royal Court Theater in London—Okigbo amplifies the mythos of the Dance by syncretising the traditional Igbo belief in “reincarnation” (*ilo-uwa*, the eternal cycle of returning to the human world from the spirit world) with the return of Eurydice from the dead in the Grecian Orphic myth:

In *Dance of the Painted Maidens* the return of innocence is presented in more concrete terms, as the return of a personage like Eurydice through a process of reincarnation—the birth of a baby girl (This part of the work I wrote on the birth of my daughter who is a reincarnation of her paternal grandmother) (Gr. E, Christopher Okigbo Foundation Collection, 83 Chaussée de Boondael, 1050 Brussels, Belgium)

The overriding context then is the larger cross-cultural “myth of the eternal return” as described, for example, in Eliade (1955). Thus, in his statement of the provenance of *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, this global myth dovetails into Okigbo’s well-articulated philosophy which seeks to reconcile the “universal opposites of life—the phenomenal and the imaginative,” in a totalizing synthesis in which “one is the other and either is both.” Against this background, *Dance of the Painted Maidens* presents itself as an elaborate, modernist transformation of the Igbo *egwu nwa* (lit. dance/song for the celebration of the birth of child). In this transformation, we are beholden to a lyric, which though grounded in the particularities of an immediate nativity event in Okigbo’s personal life and of the conventions of a traditional song genre, has been amplified through the magic of Okigbo’s mythopoeic imagination, into an expression a global network of wider and perennial human experiences.

But, given the specificity of Okigbo’s confessions of authorial intention, any analysis of the poem must begin with the immediate nativity event—the rebirth of the poet’s own mother as his only child—his daughter, Obiageli Okigbo. At this phenomenological level, the poem can be fruitfully read as a dramatic reenactment of a celebration of the birth of the newborn by a chorus of maidens whose bodies are painted with the red or ochre pigment of the camwood (*uhie*), as indeed alluded to in the text: “Several seasons ago/We brought you camwood/Votaries of an idol/Without age or name” (Section IV). The bodies of the painted maidens are also presumably also covered the elaborate and symbolic indigo dye body decorations known as *uli*, a staple of celebrative occasions in Igbo culture (Willis, 1987, 1989, 1997; and Adams, 2002). As they perform their colorful and symbolic dance routines, they intone lyrical, rhapsodic, dialogic and eulogistic songs celebrating the birth of the child, which is what the words of the poem before us are supposed to be. Thus, in close reading, we can discern various features of the Igbo *egwu nwa* in the poem.

First of all, we have traces of the mannered, and at times explicit, sexual or phallic imagery that is characteristic of the Igbo *egwu nwa*. As a matter of fact, the very first section, despite its global mythological resonances (through such words and phrases as

“the mother-of-the-earth,” “the earth-mother on her homeward journey,” “the fires of the end,” “the flaming rainbow,” and “the waters of the beginning”) is in fact an elaborate and hyperbolic image of the birthing process:

AFTER SHE had set sail after she had set sail
After the mother-of-the-earth had set sail

After the earth-mother on her homeward journey,

The fires at the rear of her the fires of the end
The flaming rainbow behind her like a wolf she devours;

Like a manatee strikes down the waters of the beginning

The going the gone-waters the back-swirling eddies
The waves in battle ahead of her in the attacking storm...

What we see here, in “concrete terms” (to use Okigbo’s own phrase), is the new baby, informed by the spirit of her reincarnating paternal grandmother (who, as an ancestral figure and the poet’s muse merges her the earth-mother herself) battling through the profuse flow of blood that marks “the end” of her nine-month prenatal sojourn in the womb.” This natal blood flow is hyperbolically described as “the fires at the rear of her the fires of the end.” With this florid flow of natal blood behind her, she must also battle with the amniotic fluid,³² or the fluid which surrounds the baby in the womb, which is also known as “the bag of waters.”



Plate II: Close-Up of the Lower Frame of Obiageli Okigbo’s Painting of ‘Dance of the Painted Maidens,’ entitled “The Rebirth of Venus,” (see Plate I)

In the poem, the amniotic fluid, as “the bag of waters” is aptly described as “the waters of the beginning”: Indeed, every birth, as Okigbo envisions it in this opening stanza, is a traumatic experience. To be born, the baby coming into the world, through the vaginal vestibule or passageway into the *labia majora*, must strike down the ‘waters of

the beginning” with the ferocity we see here in the case of Okigbo’s reincarnating mother. The underlying phallicism of this imagery (with all its implied allusion to the anatomy and physiology of the female genitalia during the birthing process) is aptly and vividly recaptured in a large 260 x 140 cm oil on canvass painting of the Dance of the Painted Maidens entitled “The Rebirth of Venus,” (2003), by the poet’s daughter, Obiageli Okigbo, whose birth is here described (see Plates I). We can see in this painting a fusion of photographic realism (faces, hands and feet) with phallic symbolism through montage ovoid shapes and floral flaps that evoke images of the womb and the *labia majora*—the vaginal gateway into and out of the womb. The *labia majora* (framed in receptacle with the shape of a blooming flower in hot red and yellow colors) is clearly visible in the close-up of the lower frame of the painting (in Plate II).

Seen through the lens of Obiageli’s painting, Okigbo’s magnificent hyperbole of the female genitalia during the birthing process seems reminiscent of the bold mythic phallicism of a Yoruba Okitipupa hymn apotheosizing the sextuple vagina of the great mother, Aiyelala, in a recording by Akeremale (1980: 43-44):

Great mother
 Possessor of a mighty vagina
 Possessor of six vaginas
 She gave two to the Ilaje
 She gave two to the Ijo
 She keeps the remaining two to herself
 With these two she promised to let loose her wrath
 With these two she impregnates a man
 With these two she impregnates a woman
 That there may be neither jealousy nor envy
 She makes equal distribution
 (Akeremale, 1980: 43-44)

Okpewho’s (1990: 263) comment on this image seems to apply very well to the wider implications of the parallel image in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*: “The apotheosis of Aiyelala raises her above the level of ordinary femininity and thus encourages the sublime imagery of a superwoman with sextuple vagina. This sexual symbol is useful not only for portraying the supreme motherly munificence and fairness with which the goddess brings the two communities together under her fold, but indeed for rousing the sensations of worshippers into the appropriate level of ecstasy at the celebration.” In *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, we can also observe a similar veneration of the “supreme motherly munificence” of Okigbo’s reincarnating mother in Section IV where her divine status is explicitly acknowledged: “Votaries of an idol/Without age or name//We fed like prayers/Into your memory/Vegetable offerings/Eggs of white hens.”

Against this background, it is difficult to read this poem at the level of the immediate nativity event alone without regard to its all-pervasive apocalyptic imagery and intercultural mythical syncretism. Here again, we see an adroit realization of Okigbo’s synthetic ontology in which “one is the other and either is both.” While, at the specific level, what we see here is a picture of a baby with the florid flow of natal blood (‘the fires of the end’ of her sojourn in the womb behind her) as she enters the world, we cannot help witnessing the intrusion of the paraphernalia of the troubled years of Nigerian history, 1964, when this birth occurred. The reincarnating mother’s battle with “the fire

of the end” and “the waters of the beginning” blossoms into a metaphor for a regenerative strike by the great mother to put the “fires of the end” of time (the apocalypse) behind her while beating back the raging flood of the stormy politics depicted in *Lament of the Silent Sisters*, in which the ship of state of the postcolonial state is pictured as a sinking ship caught, with little or no hope of salvation, in a raging storm at sea:

How does one say NO in thunder...

For in breakers in sea-fever compass or cross
makes a difference: certainly makes
makes an escape ladder...

Where is there for us an anchorage;
A shank for a sheet, a double arch—

In the alternative, what the flood signifies is the feared return of the great flood that once destroyed all creation, to preempt which the “flaming rainbow” appears in the scenario as a reminder to divine providence of his promise never again to destroy the world by a flood. At this stage, Okigbo’s verbal logistics forges a link between a purely personal and private event and a wider public situation that blossoms into a global network of perennial human experiences. These wider global dimensions of the poem have been dealt with at length elsewhere (Azuonye, 2007c). Thus, for example, the “return” of the mother through reincarnation is set at a cosmic mythological level, in the hyperbolic image of her swimming back home across the centuries and across the intergalactic sea of the world womb:

FOR IT IS for you, shower of rain after drought,
that we have waited
Menses after menses, without antimony without
bracelets, while you swam
Divers of centuries, your longest journey, the sea
of ten thousand leagues...

And in your honor, Princess-out-of-exile, the tamarinds
spread their velvet coverlets,
And our cymbals our calabashes comb the night for the
alligator hidden in the rushes.

In my recent telephone interview with Okigbo’s wife, Sefi Judith Attah (former Nigerian Ambassador to Italy and Nigeria’s first Federal Minister of Women’s Affairs (Boston-Brussels, February 7, 2007), she agrees with the personal and biographical implications of the first two lines: “It was indeed a shower of rain after a drought.” Okigbo first met Sefi in 1954, when she was teaching at St. Teresa’s College, Ibadan. He himself was then an undergraduate at the University College. His brother, Dr Pius Okigbo (1994) recalls how he “successfully wooed and, after a whirlwind courtship that would have racked the nerves of any young woman, married Sefi Judith Attah, the devoted mother of our adorable daughter, Obiageli.” But, as Obumsele (2006) recalls, Okigbo’s marriage to this “most charming girl” was “unable to settle down,” and this was part of the reason why he sought solace in the composition of poetry in the late 1950’s. The couple (Plate III below) however sealed their marriage at a court registry wedding in Enugu, in December 1960. But, from

Okigbo's cryptic allusion to "a journey of several centuries" from Nsukka (where he was living at the time) to Yola (where Judith had been posted as a Government Education Officer), we get the impression that the marriage remained "a drought" until the couple's first baby arrived as a "shower of rain," after they had "waited/menses after menses" for four years with nothing to show for their marriage.



Plate III: An early 1960's photograph of Christopher Okigbo and his wife, Sefi Judith Attah [set against the background of a commemorative painting by their Daughter, Obiageli, in an exhibition of her paintings, honoring her father's legacy, at the Brunei Gallery (SOAS) London, UK (12 April - 23 June 2007).

In the same telephone interview (Boston-Brussels, February 7, 2007), Sefi Judith Attah also recognizes herself in the phase, "Princess-out-of-exile" in the second stanza. The daughter of the Attah of Igbirra, one of the highest-ranking traditional rulers in Nigeria, she was born a princess in the Igbirra royal family at Okene in present-day Kogi State of Central Nigeria. Educated in Dublin and Reading on scholarship which bonded her to serve the Federal Government after her studies abroad, she was posted, upon her return from England, to far away Yola in the Cameroon frontiers of Northeastern Nigeria, a remote part of the country which Okigbo considered to be as good as an exile. But her distance was also a painful exile from Okigbo's heart. As earlier noted, his long courtship with Sefi, which began at Ibadan in 1954 and blossomed into a wedding at Enugu in 1960, remained "menses after menses" unconsummated. In our interview, Sefi repeatedly

held back on this rather touchy personal issue, stating with inscrutable humor that the situation was “a matter between me and him.”

At a deeper metaphysical and mythological level, the phrase, “Diver of centuries, your longest journey, the sea of ten thousand leagues,” continues the hyperbolic image of the great mother’s swim back home across the centuries and across the intergalactic sea of a world womb, reminiscent of the “egg of the world” in Dogon mythology. Acknowledged in this image is the agelessness of the poet’s mother’s reincarnating soul and its ultimate coalescence with the supreme spirit that nurtures all creation, the earth-mother itself. There seems to be some link here between Okigbo recreation of Igbo metaphysics and the notion of *forms* or *ideas* in Platonic philosophy. Implicit in the Igbo (indeed pan-African) veneration of motherhood is the belief that all mothers are ultimately copies or shadows of the eternal and ideal great mother of all, which in Igbo thought is symbolized by *Ani*, the earth-goddess—“the earth mother” or “mother-of-the-earth” in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*. This leads us to a mother-child circularity from the traditional Igbo belief in reincarnation which is recreated in the poem, as in the Igbo *egwu nwa*, by means of imagery that recaptures the basic tenets of an ontological circularity which harks back to “Elegy of the Wind”: “The man embodies the child./The child embodies the man; /the man remembers/The song of the innocent.” By the same token, in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, “the woman embodies the child” and “the child embodies the woman,” in an Okigboesque synthesis in which “one is the other and either is both.” Interestingly, there an attempt at recapturing this circularity, albeit impressionistically, in the fusion of youth, age and divinity (defined by the all-encompassing halo) in the face that peeps out of an uterine/cosmic ovoid in the close-up of the upper frame of Obiageli Okigbo’s painting of the Dance (Plate IV below):



Plate III: Close-Up of the Upper Frame of Obiageli Okigbo’s Painting of ‘Dance of the Painted Maidens,’ entitled “The Rebirth of Venus,” (see Plate I)

Section III ends with another aesthetic transfer from the Igbo *egwu nwa*—praise of the new born baby in an exaggerated tone of adulation and idealization. The voice we hear here is the chorus of the painted maidens: The girls tremble with reverence as they look into the eyes of the child-mother-goddess:

In reverence to your shores, O abyss of wonders,
our fingers
Tremble above the altar, and the incense smokes
in the censer;
And eyes of us that have looked on oceans tremble
before your lagoon..

Another aesthetic carryover from the Igbo *egwu nwa* is the celebration of the manhood of the father whose potency is appreciated as ultimately responsible for the birth of the child. Section II is thus preoccupied with processing the news of the birth of the child, in the extended hyperbole of “the secret of Man of Giant Testicles coded”. This is a fine piece of regenerative phallicism. Regenerative phallicism is a recurrent feature of Igbo fertility dances and rituals, and Okigbo exploits the motif with great delicacy and decorum in the composition of the *Dance of the Painted Maidens*. Thus, in the stanza under consideration, the news of the birth of the child is reported at a personal macho level as a whisper among the gatekeepers and servants in the Cambridge House quarters at Eleyele, Ibadan, where Okigbo lived that, at last, the man whom everyone considered to be a fruitless, womanizing “prodigal” had in fact proved his virility. The newborn babe is “the secret of Man-of-Giant-Testicles coded,” in the spirit world, for it comes “From the seven quarters of the globe/Past the seven seas past the seven/Distant desert” (an Igbo formula for all journeys from the world of spirits to the human world):

And they came bringing to us the secret on
broken clay tablet coded...

From the seven quarters of the globe,
Past the seven seas past the seven

Distant deserts, bearing beads of coral and
kolanuts fit for a queen,
They came bringing to us the secret of Man-
Of-Giant-Testicles coded...

But by dint of Okigbo’s global modernist bricolage, hints are planted in the imagery which lift the news of the birth above a prodigal’s celebration of his own virility to a pantheistic celebration of all birth as a procreative act of divine providence, God, in postcolonial Igbo anthropomorphism, being here invoked as “Man of Giant Testicles”, the universal procreator. Other complications arise from the allusion to “the broken clay tablet coded,” which invokes the idea of the broken tablet on which the ten commandments were written by God which fell from the hands of Moses and broke to pieces as a result of his rage over his people’s relapse into idolatry following his long absence at Mount Sinai.

But Okigbo, lost in the complexities of the joyous occasion, does digress from time to time into personal statements as the father of the baby, statements which ignore the

framework of a chorus of painted maidens. Thus, seven lines of Section IV are unmistakably the voice of a proud father holding his new born daughter in his hands and seeing her reincarnated mother in her:

We did not know you
Who were whom we hold
For to know you was
To know the infinite

Today on your homecoming
Patient mother
With you in our palm

It would be superfluous to illustrate in the present paper all aspects of the global dynamics of Okigbo's modernist aesthetics in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, as revealed to us by his confessions of his authorial intentions in his letters to the organizers of the 1965 Commonwealth Festival of the Arts and in his interview with Ivan Van Sertima. This has been done exhaustively and with reference to practically every line of the poem elsewhere (Azuonye 2007a and 2007b). To sum up, Okigbo's comments enable us to read *A Dance of the Painted Maidens* on at least two separate but interlocking levels—a specific, private and purely personal level, pertaining to the particularities of the immediate nativity event, and a more general, public and global level with wider symbolic significations. But, given Okigbo's phenomenology in which “man's outer and inner worlds” are “projected—the phenomenal and the imaginative, not in terms of their separateness but of their relationship—an attempt to reconcile the universal opposites of life and death in a live-die proposition” and in which “one is the other and either is both,” it is difficult to discuss any of the two levels in isolation from the other.

As we have been reminded by Joseph Nye, Former Dean, John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (2002):

Globalism, at its core, seeks to describe and explain nothing more than a world which is characterized by networks of connections that span multi-continental distances. It attempts to understand all the inter-connections of the modern world—and to highlight patterns that underlie (and explain) them. In contrast, globalization refers to the increase or decline in the degree of globalism. It focuses on the forces, the dynamism or speed of these changes. In short, consider globalism as the underlying basic network, while globalization refers to the dynamic shrinking of distance on a large scale. Globalism is a phenomenon with ancient roots. Thus, the issue is not how old globalism is, but rather how “thin” or “thick” it is at any given time.

In literature and other fields of cultural studies, modernism (as the tendency rooted in the idea that the ‘traditional’ forms of art, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life had become outdated and should be swept aside) is widely recognized as an important agency for the network of connections that span multi-continental distances in the artistic representations of reality. Today, there is a tendency to associate the globalist dimensions of modernism almost exclusively with the efforts of the masters of twentieth-century Euromodernism (Eliot, Pound, Yeats, etc). But, as the performance of Okigbo and other modern writers with his kind of globalist vision across the world reminds us, modernist writing everywhere evince more or less the same set of characteristics that are still narrowly viewed by Eurocentric pundits solely as Euromodernist bricolage, on the

assumption that modernism (though vastly influenced by traditional African art through Pablo Picasso and others) is an exclusively Euro-American movement. Thus, over the years, African writers like Okigbo have been chastised for abandoning their indigenous African esthetic in pursuit of crippling Euromodernism or towards an Afromodernism that is viewed with disfavor as nothing more than poor imitations (indeed as embarrassing and obscurantist aping) of the European model (Chinweizu et al, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, 1980). But as Afrocentricism and other cultural forces around the globe stake their claims on the center currently claimed exclusively by the bigotry of Eurocentricism, the need seems to have arisen to replace the exclusivist notion of Euromodernist bricolage with a broader, cross-cultural notion of global modernist bricolage..

Against this background, Ramazani's (2006) four-pronged paradigm for modernist bricolage and postcolonial hybridity can be used to illustrate the key elements of Okigbo's global modernist bricolage. First and foremost, in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, we can observe him taking an event or situation from one historical, social, cultural or literary context and locating it in another context as a way of amplifying, universalizing, or globalizing its significance (Translocalism). Secondly, we can observe, in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, the fusion of a wide diversity of mythologies into a unified statement that underscores the sameness or relatedness of their significance (Mythical syncretism). Thirdly, there is, in *Dance of the Painted Maidens*, an overwhelming sense of the immediacy of an ever-present doomsday (Apocalypticism). Thus, overall, the poem begins with statements about personal and purely private experience (the birth of the poet's daughter) which inheres through the logistical deployment of his signifiers (words and images) into a vision with universal or global implications.

6. Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, it seems worthy of reiteration that the present paper is an overview of a larger project, *Christopher Okigbo at Work: Resources, Aesthetics and the Creative Process*. The resources examined are previously unpublished papers, which include poetic texts, finished and unfinished, and other materials (correspondence, jottings, doodles, photographs, memorabilia, etc) which have survived a fire from the bombing of Okigbo's home during the civil war in which he lost his life as well as damage by termites owing to careless handling at the end of the war. The condition of the papers poses intriguing challenges of textual emendation; but, overall, the papers offer biographical materials and texts-in-progress which have opened up interesting dimensions of the fundamental principles of Okigbo's aesthetics and various aspects of the creative process itself. Our close-reading of three sets of illustrative materials have pin-pointed some salient features of the kind of objective practical criticism made possible by the availability of these materials. Overall, these close-readings have opened up hitherto unknown nuances and dimensions of Okigbo's artistry and their multicultural philosophical and mythological underpinnings. There is also much to learn from his unpublished papers about Okigbo's philosophy, which because of the avidity with which he is known to have devoured the philosophies of Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Nietzsche, among others (Okigbo, Pius, 1994), seems to merit comparison and contrast with post-empirical twentieth-century systems such as phenomenology, existentialism

and cultural nihilism. In his introduction to *Labyrinths* (1965, in 1971), he sums up the central tenet of this personal philosophy as “man's outer and inner worlds projected—the phenomenal and the imaginative, not in terms of their separateness but of their relationship—an attempt to reconcile the universal opposites of life and death in a live-die proposition one is the other and either is both.” We have seen that this totalizing synthesis not only underlies, but is of the essence of the global modernism epitomized by Okigbo's art and aspects of which his previously unpublished papers helps us to understand.

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Notes

¹ The conference is closely linked with an exhibition of paintings and drawings inspired by Okigbo's poetry, musical performances and films based on his life and works, and a teaching workshop, in which Okigbo's reputedly "difficult poetry" will be introduced to selected high school teachers in the greater Boston area on the horseback of Chinua Achebe's more easily accessible classic novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and the equally easily readable new novel by the rapidly rising woman writer, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. These works have been chosen, because they share the same Igbo cultural background and wider postcolonial historical and political contexts as those of Okigbo's poetry, including the clash between Christianity and indigenous African cultures (*Things Fall Apart*) and the experience of the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70 in which Okigbo was killed in action while fighting as a field-commissioned Major on the Biafran side (*Half of a Yellow Sun*). Organized and curated by Cynthia Becker, Assistant Professor of Art History at Boston University, the art exhibition is scheduled to open at the Sherman Gallery of the university on August 16, 2007 (the 75th anniversary of the birth of the poet and 40th anniversary of his death, the exhibition will feature paintings and drawings by Uche Okeke (pioneer postcolonial Nigerian artist of the Nsukka *Uli* school; currently Emeritus Professor of Fine Art, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Director, Asele Arts Center, Nimo, Anambra State, Nigeria), Obiora Udechukwu (Leading modern African artist of the Nsukka *Uli* school; currently Dana Distinguished Professor and Chair, Art Department, St Lawrence University, Canton, NY), Obiageli Okigbo, the poet's daughter, whose sole exhibition of art honoring the legacy of his father opens in London at the Gallery from April, 2007), and Pelagie, a Beninois artist living in Brussels, who has produced more than 400 drawings inspired by Okigbo's poetry.. Obiora Udechukwu, who is scheduled to deliver a lecture on Okigbo and the Visual Arts at the opening ceremony of the exhibition, previously staged a sole exhibition, *Homage to Christopher Okigbo*, at the Nigerian National Museum Gallery, Onikan, Lagos, in 1975. The musical performances include *Lustra Variations* (a piano essay based on Okigbo's *Heavensgate III: Lustra*, by Joshua Uzoigwe, by Japanese pianist, Aya Kato), solo arrangements of Igbo folksongs by Nigerian soprano, Joyce Adewumi, and *Predominantly White*, a chamber music composition by Belgian Jazz composer, Erwin Vann. The films include *Who Killed Christopher Okigbo?* by the award-winning German-Nigerian filmmaker, Branwen Kiemute Okpako, and *Meditations on Labyrinths*, an impressionistic film by Toyin Adepoku of the University College, London, UK

² See Note 2 above.

³ The source of this full set of names is from Obumelu (2006). Ben Obumelu, a lecturer in English at the University of Ibadan, when Okigbo was at Ibadan as the West African Representative of Cambridge University Press (1962-1966), is one of Okigbo's personal friends. Okigbo frequently acknowledge him for "for criticism which led to improvements in phrase and structure," in most of his compositions of this period as well as in *Labyrinths* (1965, in 1971).

⁴ See Okigbo, Pius, 1994, for a litany of other extraordinary feats of genius which the author describes as "the legend of Christopher."

⁵ The early versions were published under the title, *The Limits*, rather than *Limits*.

⁶ In retrospect, the Mbari Club presents itself as an essential grounding for the mix of creative fidelity to their traditional African roots and a broad, cosmopolitan, global outlook in Okigbo and his generation of African artists and writers. Named for an Owerri Igbo annual fertility rite (*Mbari*, from the verb, *ba*, spread, increase, proliferate) during which the community creates vast tableaux of images representing every single communal experience in the preceding year as a means of maintaining the fecundity and creative potentials of their world, its founding members did indeed represent a microcosm of the global village. Among them were: (see).

⁷ Later, in his interview with Duerden (1963), he pinpoints his grouse against *Negritude* with reference to the editorial policy of the newly-founded avant-garde journal of black arts and literature, *Black Orpheus*, then edited by Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn, and in contradistinction to *Transition*, of which he was the West African Editor: "*Black Orpheus*, with its insistence on blackness rather tends to picture a black mystique, what I call the black mystique—blackness for its own sake. *Transition* publishes anybody who cares to write for *Transition*, black or white. We do not discriminate. Our aim was to make it a first-class journal produced in Africa and we don't restrict ourselves to African contributors....but [*Black Orpheus*] is in fact sub-titled a 'journal of African and Afro-American and any American who is dark can get published

in *Black Orpheus* and I would still want to be convinced that there is the sort of strong cultural link, which Ulli Beier imagines exists between Africa and Afro-America...I don't know whether it is negritude, what I call the black mystique, this emphasis on blackness. It means anybody who is black now can write for *Black Orpheus* even though there might not in fact any cultural meeting points between the various black peoples of the world, and this is what I think is basically wrong with *Black Orpheus*."

⁸ To the question, "Are you convinced after the deliberations and doubts of the Conference that there is such a thing that might be termed African Literature?" he replied, philosophically: "If and when the literature emerges, it will have to divine its own laws for its unity; its own form. Until this happens it appears rather premature to talk of African Literature in terms other than geographical" (Transition. 1962).

⁹ These poems are concerned with what Okigbo calls "the events of the day", i.e., the chaotic politics of the post-independence era, specifically the anarchy in the Republic of Congo which erupted in 1960 and culminated in the death of Patrice Lumumba; and the Western Nigeria crisis of 1962, complicated by the imprisonment of the nationalist leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the tragic death of his eldest son. Okigbo's enormous admiration of the leadership style and ideological leanings of Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987), Leader of the Yoruba-dominated Action Group of Nigeria, first Premier of Western Nigeria and first Leader of Opposition in the Nigeria's Federal House of Representatives, is writ large in the glowing tributes he pays him as a martyred messianic leader in the second part of his *Silences*, "Lament of the Drums."

¹⁰ The oblique, and at times transparent, allusion to the crisis of the day in this fable and the appropriateness of Okigbo's "Lament of the Deer" as a lyrical lament within the narrative, have been ably underscored by Ohaeto (1999:) and Emenyonu ().

¹¹ According to the announcement, "Nigerian poet and MBARI Committee Member Christopher Okigbo has recently completed the latest sequence in his continuous output of poetry. This successor to HEAVENSGATE, LIMITS, and LABYRINTHS, is called ELEGIES OF THUNDER, and marks in part a sharp turning point in the work of this important writer./ Okigbo's poetry is a remarkable musical continuum in which the qualities of narrative are usually sacrificed for qualities of symbolic language, but in his new poem there are moments where both forms merge with exciting results./ The manuscript of ELEGIES OF THUNDER is now ready for the publishers and will appear within the next three months."

¹² See *Heavensgate II*, iii, where this statement is put in the mouth of "village explainer" (actually an aesthetic philosopher), Upandru, a persona modeled on the next-door neighbor of the Okigbo family at Ojooto, Andrew Okoye, whose first name the villagers Igbonized as "Kpanduru" (see interview with Okigbo's sister, Iyom Victoria Azuka Okuzu, in Azuonye, 2006d)

¹³ The title of the present paper and of the larger project on Okigbo's unpublished papers has been taken from this phrase in Echeruo.

¹⁴ The word "coldness" in the lacuna found at this point in the manuscript has been taken from another more complete draft.

¹⁵ We are here reminded of Jacobi's (1942:23) observation, quoted Azuonye (1981, 2000) that "Often one and the same artist is an extrovert in his life and an introvert in his work, or the other way round. In this they follow the law of psychic complementarity which seems particularly applicable to those artists who represent in their works what they themselves are not. In order words, their complement."

¹⁶ The term, *ogbanje* (from the verbs, *gba*, "rush" and *je*, go), refers to a category of spirits in Igbo folk belief who rush into reincarnation only to go back as quickly as they are reborn into the spirit world where they are said to have strong links with spirit age-mates who would not let them stay happily on earth. Humans incarnated by such spirits usually prodigious geniuses who die in childhood or at most in early manhood. Okigbo has been described by some writers as an *Ogbanje* (Achebe, 1978 and Acholonu, 1988, 1989).

¹⁷ On Folder 14 of Box 8 in the Transcription Center Archive, the original mark "Chris Okigbo," is cancelled and overwritten with "Ginwala & A-A." I could find no explanation from the Reading Room staff for the absence of the Okigbo papers which earlier researchers like Gerald Moore have cited.

¹⁸ Reconstructed with reference to a phrase in the same slot in line I of Version I (Path of Thunder, #2).

¹⁹ Reconstructed with reference to a phrase in the same slot in line I of Version II (Path of Thunder, #3)

²⁰ Reconstructed with reference to a phrase in the same slot in line I of Version 1 (White Night).

²¹ There is no immediately available textual or extratextual point of reference for the reconstruction of this lacuna.

²² The clause (“...receive our errant wings of twilight”) is scribed under this line in the typescript as an alternative under consideration..

²³ The clause (“...receive our eunuch steps of twilight”) is scribed under this line in the typescript as an alternative under consideration.

²⁴ There is no immediately available textual or extratextual point of reference for the reconstruction of this lacuna

²⁵ Two alternatives clause (“...two twin tremulous cotyledons” and “multiple tremulous cotyledons” are scribed on the typescript as alternatives, under consideration for the unqualified “tremulous cotyledons”.

²⁶ A couplet (For lo, our errant steps of twilight/Break under your archway our burden of several...) between lines 2 and 3 is deleted editorial as in all probability deemed repetitious and therefore abandoned.)

²⁷ Following at this point are the following lines, apparently under consideration: ” lo, before this azure and blue of the universe assembled/our burden of several, centuries breaks into twin tremulous...multiple.” The word “multiple” suggests the obliteration by fire of the same clauses as those identified as scribed on the typescript in Note 26 above.

²⁸ The subsequent lines are fragmentary and difficult to reconcile with the earlier lines: breeze and of even tone, for it is my destiny/...my eunuch steps seemingly out of breath/...the silence.” Nevertheless, we can still observe in them the recurrence of the key phases already used in earlier drafts.

²⁹ This and the next line are unique to the available drafts of the Anthem and may indicate a significant point of departure from the “Elegy of the Wind” template.

³⁰ In this and the next two lines Okigbo resorts to “Bird’s Lament” (See Fig X, in Section 3) for his musical template.

³¹ For the closing couplet in this draft, Okigbo resorts to “Elegy of Slit-Drums” (the fifth lyric in Path of Thunder) for his musical template: “a roadmaker makes a road/the road becomes a throne/can we cane him for felling a tree—condolences.”

³² Also referred to as the “bag of waters”, the amniotic fluid is the clear, slightly yellowish fluid that surrounds the baby in the uterus in what is called an amniotic sac. The baby grows in this amniotic sac, surrounded by the amniotic fluid. The fluid consists mostly of fetal urine that bathes the developing fetus. The fetus floats in this fluid, which is warmed to the mother’s body temperature. The mean amniotic fluid temperature during the second trimester is 36-6°C.

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