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

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#### Recommended Citation

Azuonye, Chukwuma, "Joshua, This is Your Story: Tribute to Joshua Uzoigwe, 1946-2005 (with Three Poems by the Deceased from Nsukka Harvest, 1972)" (2005). *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series*. 22.

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# AFRICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

# ALA BULLETIN

A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

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Volume 30, No.4 Spring 2005/ Vol 31, No.1 Summer 2005

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## JOSHUA'S STORY (JOSHUA UZOIGWE, 1946-2005)

Renowned Musicologist and poet, Professor Joshua Uzoigwe, former head of the Music Department at the University of Uyo, joined the ancestors last month. Described as “a music educator, composer, performer and musicologist [and as someone who] directed several musical concerts in which he featured his own works and works by other modern Nigerian composers.” It was also said that “his intention was to create an awareness of this music in an intellectual environment such as Obafemi Awolowo University and in Nigeria at large.” (<http://people.africadatabase.org/en/profile/16551.html>)

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

### JOSHUA, THIS IS YOUR STORY!

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

Soaring beyond the staid penchant of many others in the field for passing off tit-bits of afro-musicological ethnographica as scholarship, you probed the roots of indigenous musical aesthetics, measured the pulse of homegrown



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

**Chukwuma Azuonye**  
**University of Massachusetts**  
**Boston, Massachusetts, USA**

(From *Nsukka Harvest: Poetry from Nsukka, 1966-72*, ed. Chukwuma Azuonye, Nsukka: Odunke Publications, 1972, pp. 13-15)

## **ON THE FADING SHADOWS**

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

So, all nights I sleep amongst you,  
My sleeping ones, amongst  
The Flowered heap in the mud—  
Ivory bones, jewel eyes, singed hair—

What hands, what eyes have caressed  
In dream in wake  
Your mangled faces?

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

The dead within you  
Passing cold over your living soul;

The sacred green stones  
Spouting red pain.

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

## TRANSITION

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

And food was in shadowing abundance  
Reflecting light in a dry basin  
On a wash-stand on the dry sands;  
And the land was filled with milk  
And honey that turned to stones  
In peoples' stomachs; and the ponds,  
Streams, rivers, except the salty seas,  
All went up in steams into the grumbling sky  
And formed heavy dark clouds...

And rain never came.  
And our epitaph read:  
'We died of hunger, never of the will.  
And we journeyed laboriously  
To found another God  
— A terrible God  
— The God of hunger  
And this God said,  
*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness:*  
And let them have dome-shaped heads  
Standing on hollowed spindles;  
Let them have balloon-shaped bellies  
Balanced on stilts;  
Let them have dominion over  
The pebbles of the sea,  
And over the vacuity of the air;  
*And finally, let them be sacrificed unto me,*  
The Very God!  
and so: through the midnight mist we walked

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

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

We were once dead,  
And dying, we now live in a roost

Perching with the sustaining gaze  
Of a new-born babe  
On a troubled world.

### **DRYING LAKE, RISING SPRING**

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

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

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

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

From NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

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

**JOSHUA UZOIGWE, 1946-2005)**