CAPTIVES OF EMPIRE: EARLY IBADAN POETS AND POETRY

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ABSTRACT   African universities have always been acknowledged as unrivalled centres of literary creation. However, literary historians engaged in the construction of contemporary African literary history have not paid adequate attention to the contribution by the writers’ communities in these institutions in the development of the African literary tradition.

This paper draws attention to the influential Ibadan literary tradition, as Ibadan has been the breeding ground for Nigerian poets, and the poets associated with the cultural awakening at the University of Ibadan in the fifties and sixties deserve being seen as constituting a literary movement.

Key Words: African literary history; Writers’ groups; Nigerian poetry; Colonial education.

Throughout the English speaking world, in settler territories... or colonial territories like the West indies and West Africa, writing in English ... started as a hesitant intrusion, developed into obsequious plagiarism before taking the final and vast stride into cultural independence and the literary expression of national personality.

Martin Banham (1961)

African literary historians rarely draw attention to university communities as an institutional base for African writers. A survey of the African literary experience will, however, reveal that the formation of writers’ groups in some universities facilitated the growth of modern African poetry. Writers’ groups of various inclinations sprang up at different times at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria), Chancellor College, University of Malawi (Malawi), Makerere University (Uganda) and the University of Nigeria (Nsukka, Nigeria). These groups were either organised or sustained by some expatriate staff of these institutions who wanted to midwife an African literary tradition.

David Cook and Betty Baker started the popular Makerere Travelling Theatre in 1964. David Kerr, James Gibbs, Adrian Roscoe and Lan White also formed the Writers’ Group at Chancellor College, Zomba, Malawi, in 1970. Their informal weekly meetings facilitated the maturation of Malawian poets such as Jack Mapanje. The Nsukka experiment that nurtured Po I Ndu, Okogbule Wonodi Bona Onyejeli, Uche Okeke, Sam Nwajioba and Romanus Egudu was the brainchild of Peter Thomas, an English teacher at the University of Nigeria whose residence doubled as a meeting place for budding poets and artists in the pre-war years. This paper focuses on the creation of the influential Ibadan literary tradition.

The agitation of Nigerians for socio-economic changes after the Second World War compelled the British colonial administration to inaugurate certain reforms (as part of the general movement towards independence) in the spheres of politics,
administration, and, of special interest here, education. In search of a new policy on higher education, the Colonial Office set up the Elliot and Asquith Commissions which recommended the creation of a university college at Ibadan. According to Omoniyi Adewoye (1973), the founding of the college in 1948 “represented the fulfilment of many years of aspiration by Nigerians for the establishment, locally of an institution of higher education.”

The British, however, entrenched their cultural hegemony in the new college by specifying that it should have British universities as its model in order to maintain a high academic standard. The college was affiliated with the University of London in what was termed a “special relationship.” This, in practice, forced the University College to adopt the curricula of the said university until 1962 when it became autonomous and came to be known as the University of Ibadan.

The residential nature of the college made it possible for it to create an intellectual elite in Nigeria. The college was the first institution of higher learning to bring such a large group of talented young men and women from various parts of the country together. Takena Tamuno wrote that the plan to make the college residential was fully thought-out:

The Asquith Commission favoured the principle of residential universities for a number of reasons: the unsuitability of off-campus accommodation and the necessity to supervise the health of students closely; the widely different backgrounds of the undergraduates and the need to promote unity; the opportunity offered for broadening their outlook through extra-curricula activities. (1973)

The social climate within the university easily created avenues for interaction and mutual edification among the students. This was evident in the growth of campus publications including The Bug, Beacon, The Eagle, The Sword, The Weekly, The University Herald, The Criterion, and The University Voice which served as the official organ of the students’ union. In the sphere of extra-curricula activities, the Arts Theatre was a major catalyst and it enjoyed the patronage of the small university community. Geoffrey Axworthy of the English department, who was responsible for creating the Drama Unit in the department, also directed plays at the theatre.

The experiences of the students in their new environment and the prospects of university education engendered in them an awareness of their status as privileged members of the society with unlimited opportunities in the emergent nation. They were not only fascinated by, but also celebrated their encounter with, the prevailing intellectual attitudes in Europe. Some of the students saw the university campus as a world on its own.

Most of the activities that enlivened campus life at Ibadan in those early years originated from students in the humanities. A major development in this regard was the establishment in 1957 of The Horn, a poetry magazine in the Department of English. Martin Banham, a young lecturer in the department who was also a fresh graduate of Leeds, suggested the creation of the magazine to John Pepper Clark, then an honours student in the department, who later started and first edited The Horn. Banham’s proposal was borne out of a desire to experiment with what was obtained at Leeds, where Poetry and Audience, a student-run magazine with the same orientation, was stimulating poetic creation. Interestingly, the official involve-
ment of the English department in this development was minimal. W.H. Stevenson, who was part of the department, described the publication and how it was started:

Clark gathered a committee of three Aigboje, Higo and John Ekwere and so in January 1957 the first issue of The Horn appeared. There were no funds available for such a venture. Martin himself provided enough cash to start it, the English Department provided paper also... But funds had to be raised, and so The Horn was sold at two-pence a copy (raised after the third issue to three pence, a price it maintained until the end. It could not afford to appear in any but the most modest from which was probably just as well if it were to remain a genuine student magazine. (1976)

The pioneering role of The Horn is often acknowledged but I state here that its survival within the few years in which it appeared was due largely to the effort of individuals who were interested in giving impetus to the literary renaissance that it initiated. After Clark’s editorship, it became a rule that only third-year students would edit it. But this never worked. Between January 1957 when its first issue was published and 1964 when it last appeared, The Horn only had five editors: J.P. Clark (1957-58), Abiola Irele (1958-60), Dapo Adelugba (1960-62), Omolara Ogundipe (1962-63) and Onyema Iheme (1963-64).

Despite its short lifespan, The Horn gave exposure to many student-poets and served as a forum for discussing issues related to Nigerian writing. Even though copies of the journal are no longer easily accessible, some poems published in its first three years have been collected in Nigerian Student Verse, an anthology edited by Marin Banham. Curiously enough, Clark objected to being represented in the anthology on the grounds that he was not writing “student verse.” The few contributions of Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo were also not included in the anthology. They had both left Ibadan and had contributed from Leeds and Fiditi respectively.

Of the thirteen student-poets (Mac Akpoyoware, Minji Karibo, Pius Oleghe, G.A. Adeyemo, Gordon Umukoro, Yetunde Esan, U. I. Ukwu, R. Opara, Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, B. Akobo, A. Higo, J.D. Ekwere and Abiola Irele) whose works constitute the twenty-seven poems that form Banham’s anthology, only Frank Aig-Imoukhuede has since published a personal collection - Pidgin Stew and Other Poems (1982).

If The Horn mainly served the Ibadan student community, Black Orpheus, another journal started at Ibadan in September 1957, was more ambitious: It was committed to promoting cultural activity in the entire black world. It was also a brainchild of expatriates - Ulli Beier, a German attached to the extramural department of the University, and Janheinz Jahn, his compatriot, who did not reside in Nigeria, showed much interest in black arts and culture. The special interest of the founders of Black Orpheus in poetry is reflected in its name and the journal made a stronger impact in the society than The Horn not only because it had a broader vision and wider circulation but because it also enjoyed the financial support of the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom and the government of the defunct Western Region.

The cultural currents stirred by the intellectual elite at Ibadan at this time came to
a climax in 1960 with the formation of the Mbari Writers’ and Artists’ Club, an organisation that soon charted a direction for African arts and letters. The Mbari complemented the role of the Black Orpheus in the sense that some of those who formed its nucleus were associated with the journal. In the words of Gene Ulansky, “(the) cosmopolitan character of the first Mbari Club is illustrated by some of its founders.” These included:

Achebe Ibo; Frances Ademola, Ghanaian; Mabel Aig-Imoukhuede (now Segun), Bini; Ulli Beier, German-born British citizen; J. P. Clark, Ijaw; Mercer Cook, Negro-American; the late Chief D.O. Fagunwa, well-known Yoruba writer; Begun Hendricks, South African Indian; Vincent Kofi, Ghanaian; Ezekiel Mphalele, South African; Demas Nwoko, Ibo; Wole Soyinka, Yoruba. (Ulansky, 1965)

The Ibo name Mbari, suggested by Achebe, has its roots in the Igbo religion where it refers to a house built for, and dedicated to, Ala, the earth goddess. It denoted “any act of creation in which the light of the gods is reflected in the work of man” (Ulansky, 1965). The name perhaps bestowed an African essence of the creative enterprise inaugurated at the Mbari centre which was located at the heart of Ibadan. Naturally, the activities of the group led to the formation of similar clubs at Oshogbo and Enugu.

Besides the creative ambience it provided for writers, the Mbari centre was also used for art exhibitions, dramatic performances and the training of promising writers. The club became a major cultural institution, strong enough to take over publication of Black Orpheus in partnership with Longman in 1962. Mbari’s success may be seen in the light of its popularization of African writers and their works. Because the club ran a small press, it performed on a large scale what the journal could attempt or only do on a small scale. The Mbari, for instance, published the first volumes of a number of African poets. Among these were Clark’s Poems (1962), and Okigbo’s Heavensgate (1962) and Limits (1964). The club promoted the emergent art of these writers through its encouraging exposure of their works. It is important to note that the writers and artists in the Mbari were not all based in Ibadan. Okigbo, one of the frequent contributors, for example, was teaching at Fiditi-about twenty miles away from Ibadan.

Early Ibadan poetry is conceived here as the totality of the output of the poets I have outlined, ranging from their juvenilia in student publications in the fifties, to their poems written just before the civil war, when with the maturation of some poetic voices and the assistance of the Mbari, individual collections had begun to appear. Works published during the period may be seen as unified by certain tendencies, such works being a product of the shared experiences of the writers. At the same time, the works of Clark, Soyinka and Okigbo represent, both in quantity and enduring merit, the best produced at this period.

There is a need to examine the manner in which the syllabus of the English department at Ibadan in its early days in particular influenced the creative expression of her products who, understandably, constitute the majority of our poets. Banham foregrounds this in his introduction to Nigerian Student Verse, seeing the influence as unwholesome for the growth of Nigerian literature:
Some of the verse presented here shows only too clearly how deep is the influence of the alien verse of English romanticism upon aspiring Nigerian writers. The more Nigerians can be encouraged to write as Nigerians, about Nigerian themes, for Nigerian audiences, the better for the development of a healthy literature. (1960)

Chinweizu and his colleagues clarified this observation in Toward the Decolonization of African Literature. They highlighted the “failure of craft” in the works of the Ibadan poets, tracing the problem to what they saw as “a divorce from African oral and poetic traditions” (1980). But the truth is that this imitative tendency was a betrayal of the deeper anguish of Nigerian writers at that historical moment. The writers, part of an emergent elite incapable of authentic self-expression, were caught in a crisis of identity. It was almost inevitable that they would borrow idioms rooted in European literary traditions to convey African experiences. Wole Soyinka has drawn attention to the fact that a purist outlook on the African imagination was unrealistic. He maintained that it was impossible to kill impulses generated by the contact of Africa with the non-African world, as “individual writers,” in reality, “make their creative emergence from the true and not the wistful untainted backcloth” (“from a common backcloth...” 1963). In the same vein, Clark wrote that their training affected both their understanding and practice of poetic craft in an essay entitled “Another Kind of Poetry” (1966).

Apart from the fact that the Ibadan poetry of this period is largely derivative, the medium employed by the poets, especially Okigbo and Soyinka, evinces what, for want of a better label, one may call arrogant complexity. Intended complex effects best confirm the elitist orientation of their art. It is safe to assume that their audience was, in the main, the few university-trained art enthusiasts at Ibadan at that moment who were already furnished with the skill and learning needed to penetrate their work. One is not surprised that Mabel Aig-Imoukhuede (later Segun), reflecting on the problem of leadership faced by these writers, concluded that an average West African writer could not reach the majority of his public” (1961). The estrangement of the writers from their public must have also prompted Obi Wali’s radical view which denied any work written in English the African identity. In his opinion, “African literature” should only refer to “any imaginative work of art written in an indigenous African language,” so long as “the language in which a literature is written automatically defines it” (1961).

Frank Aig-Imoukhuede took the bold step of experimenting with the use of Nigerian pidgin English in a bid to bridge the language gulf between writer and audience. He was most successful in his much anthologised “One man, One wife” (“One Wife for One Man” in Nigerian Student Verse). The poems is remarkable in a number of ways. Apart from demonstrating the possibility of poetry in this medium, it also promoted a subversive agendum: It questioned the intrusion of European values into the Nigerian cultural environment. The thesis of the poem is that such customs, represented by the European marital system, were odd and unreasonable. The exclusivist tendency which Aig-Imoukhuede tacitly rejected (through his recourse to an alternative medium) was epitomised in Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo declared at a writer’s conference held in Kampala in 1962 that his poetry was not meant for non-poets.

In addition to their preference for an esoteric medium, the poets demonstrated an
obsessive, near narcissistic preoccupation with “private griefs” and aspirations to the virtually total neglect of collective experiences. This initial indifference to social issues may be attributed to the stifling of nationalist passions that came in the guise of Negritude in the early days of The Horn. The Horn’s maiden editorial had declared that its launching was a way of “join (ing) those already fighting to preserve out heritage” in order to “arrest subtle colonialism.” But this vision was eclipsed by the attacks from John Ramsaran (of the English Department) and Wole Soyinka who felt it was harmful to the development of Nigerian writing. However, Clark’s “Ivbie,” which was a remarkable attempt at mature poetry, was written under the influence of Negritude. The unfavourable critical reception it was given bears testimony to colonial chauvinism and its anxiety to suppress critical reflection on the imperialist experience. Negritude’s swan song in The Horn was Aig-Imoukuede’s “The Poor Black Muse” (later entitled “Negritude”) in 1960. The poem reflected on the prevailing attitude to this philosophy, denouncing it as a constraint to the freedom of the imagination:

No!
I cannot continue in a strain that’s both forced and unnatural; The sounds, if you think they’re ‘negritude’, make the idiot of me. O Ne-gri-gri-thud! (does that sound well?) Tudes...I don’t care what people think of my verse for what I write is me negritude or not. (Aig-Imoukhuede, 1961)

The logical consequence of the concentration on personal experiences is that these poets privilege the autobiographical. Thomas Knipp explained that they “make poetry out of their lives and autobiography out of their poems” (1986).

Easy generalisations about the nature of Ibadan poetry are hard to make at this time: Early Clark, Soyinka and Okigbo, for instance, manifested peculiar traits which were best understood in relation to the preference and growth of each of the poets. J. P. Clark was actively involved with the creative activities inaugurated at Ibadan at this period. Early Clark was also representative of the poetry of this era in the sense that some of the best and the worst tendencies in early Ibadan poetry were present in his poems collected in Poems. He appeared to have been incapable of refining borrowed methods. His best poems, “Ibadan,” “Night Rain” and perhaps “Abiku,” were therefore those not stained by technical appropriations from Hopkins, Yeats and Eliot. Clark’s early poems were generally marked by a nostalgic strain which betrayed his alienation from his people and their culture. If “Ivbie” then made a case for his violated people, “Agbor Dancer” projected his own quest for reunion with the same people and their heritage. Thus the unnamed dancer merely provided him an occasion for personal reflection, especially in the last stanza. He compensated for his technical dependence by frequently adopting a familiar locale as the setting for his poems. Okpure Obuke has noted that “Clark’s poetry lacks the thematic unity of Okigbo’s and the obscurity of Soyinka’s” (1978). Robert Wren identified three recurrent features in his early poems: “structure based on occasion, imagery drawn from the river (or from mythology), and heightened fear” (1984).

Soyinka’s poems written at this period expressed concerns similar to Clark’s, but what is evident is that he possessed a more confident and personal idiom. It is cer-
tain that Soyinka did not write any serious poem until he got to Leeds. His apprentice poems at Ibadan in the early fifties had appeared in *The University Voice* and *The Eagle*. Bernth Lindfors suggests that his first published poem, “Thunder to Storm,” might be taken as “the most juvenile of his juvenalia” because it gave no signal of imaginative promise. It was written in “rather jerky iambic tetrameter couplets with occasional slant rhymes and awkward syntax” (1979). His first successful poems, “Telephone Conversation,” “The Immigrant” and “The Other immigrant,” were written at Leeds and gave voice to his personal agony by satirising the racial discrimination he encountered in the British society. These poems were excluded from his first collection, *Idanre and Other Poems* (1971), perhaps on grounds of thematic relevance rather than artistic maturity.

The poems in *Idanre* and *Other Poems* give some insight into his mature work, although Margaret Folarin wrote that “Idanre is not the work of a mature poet” (1987). While not denying the flaws in the work, one may assert that this first volume reflected ideas and methods which mark Soyinka’s writing. An adequate evaluation of the poems must recognize Soyinka’s leitmotifs: The preference for the tragic dimension of the human experience; the self-defeating revolutionary will; the deliberate extension of ordinary experiences with the sanctions of myths, and the dominance of an incurably dense verbal texture. The awkwardness which results is at once the strength and weakness of the entire collection.

Some of the poems in the section entitled “of the road” may not be seen as mere thematic anticipations of the title poem, “Idanre,” which is ambitious both in purpose and design, similar to Clark’s “Ivbie.” These shorter poems blend with “Idanre” in that they confirm Ogun’s presence and elicit awe on his account. This link is best seen in “Death in the Dawn,” a poem inspired by an Ogun event. The wide-ranging metaphysical exploration central to “Idanre” illustrates Soyinka’s overriding concern at this historical moment with the universal and the philosophical, as against pressing social challenges. This argument holds in spite of the fact that some incidental poems in “October ’66” focused on an ensuing national crisis. His effort at reconciling European civilization with the African world view in the person of Ogun shows his way of coming to terms with the inescapable incursion of Europe. This perhaps informed Robert July’s view that “Soyinka stresses the unique and complementary character of each world civilization” (1981).

Soyinka’s language in *Idanre* and *Other Poems*, in its awkwardness and sophistication, may be seen as a function, not only of his mythic imagination, but also of his cyclical view of experience. Stanley Macebuh argued that “Soyinka’s interest in myth has little to do with popularising the archaic” but that;

> his concern will be that of discovering in mythic history certain principles upon which contemporary behavior might be based and by which it might be legitimately judge.

(1975/76)

Nevertheless, Soyinka “tries very hard to link together many areas of experience in order to achieve a complex response to life” (Roderic Wilson, 158). This, to some extent is what he shared with Christopher Okigbo.

Certain factors immediately distinguish Okigbo and his work, the shortness of his life and career notwithstanding. He was able to master the poetic craft within the
ten years (1955-1966) that his writing career lasted. This was after he graduated from Ibadan with an honours degree in Classics. His desire to refine his work led him to revise his work several times, and this has made him quite easily Nigeria’s finest poet.

Okigbo is indebted to various people and traditions. Exposure to classical studies and his love for music served as the foundation for his creative aspiration. Clark also introduced him to modernist poetics, while his stay at Nsukka between 1960 and 1962 brought him into contact with Peter Thomas, an expatriate teacher of English who became his cherished companion and mentor. The encounter culminated in the completion of *Heavensgate*. The earliest versions of his poems appeared in *The Horn*, *The Black Orpheus* and *Transition* but it is appropriate to assess them in their “final” versions in his posthumously published volume, *Labyrinths* (1971). He stated that the poems were “organically related.” This is the sense in which Okigbo’s work is one long poem, one that traces his progression from isolation and confusion to integration and awareness.

With the obvious exception of *Path of Thunder* which must be seen as belonging to that phase of his poetic engagement marked by a high sense of social responsibility, Okigbo’s poetry is largely obsessed with self-celebration. It “transmutes all experience into ceremony” (Dathorne, 1976). The poet did not veil his thoughts. Poetry, for him, was the medium with which to reconstruct experience, publicise fears and expound desires. The opening of *Heavensgate* possibly shows Okigbo at his best. Here, the poet-persona as a penitent prodigal seeks reunion with Idoto, the revered stream-goddess of his village. His nakedness as he pays obeisance and pledges obedience to Idoto suggests the sincerity and submission of a true worshipper:

BEFORE YOU, mother Idoto, naked I stand;
before your watery presence, a prodigal
leaning on a oil bean
lost in your legend.

Under your power wait I on barefoot
Watchman for the heavensgate

Out of the depth my cry give ear and hearken. (Okigbo, 1971)

The distinguishing feature of Okigbo’s art is polyphonic complexity arising from the blending of values derived from various sources. Okigbo, more than any other Nigerian or even African poet, recognised the fraternity of poets:

Thematically...his work may be viewed as an attempt to reconcile...various traditions and above all, come to terms with the tension between residual Christian promptings and the claims of his indigenous Igbo theology. (Fraser, 1986)

His skill at transforming borrowed values and methods accounts for the enduring charm of his poetry. This is why one may also say that his work is at once derivative and original. Ali Mazrui has gone as far as saying that Okigbo’s poetry is abstract.
While admitting that the poet “has a mystical grasp of words from which he invokes a universe of images and thoughts,” he wrote that “the images (...) fall short of forming a coherence” (19).

If Mazrui’s claims are valid, later Okigbo, represented by *Path of Thunder*, marked a departure from this tendency. In *Path of Thunder*, the poet adopted an idiom which his public was familiar with in order to communicate a shared experience. It is remarkable that this shift itself was a product of the pervasive tension which came in the wake of a national crisis in the mid-sixties. Soyinka also devoted a few poems to the experience but it was Okigbo’s that a forceful public concern and a confident prophetic statement were articulated. Okigbo’s achievement in *Path of Thunder* represented a major development in Nigerian poetry. His outlook on the calling of a poet acknowledged the prophetic of *force*.

The difference between Okigbo’s early and later poetry was that between religious and secular art, between the private and the public. Purged of strange allusions and private meditation, the poet later assumed the role of the traditional town-crier, anxious to deliver a relevant and urgent message. He described the chaotic state of events in the Nigeria of the laye sixties in which he discerned the prospect of a greater catastrophe. Omolara (Ogundipe-) Leslie has noted that Okigbo’s growth as a poet may serve as a paradigm for the evolution of West African writing. She wrote:

> Okigbo is significant because he did what most of the West African writers in English were doing in the 60’s — a very personal poetry in a personal idiom and he brought this mode to a virtuoso point. He represents their initially “art for art’s sake” attitude which changed over time. His development therefore traces a West African evolution from private anguish to public commitment.

(“The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo...” 36)

Later Okigbo served as a link between early Nigerian poetry and post-civil war Nigerian poetry as his later work anticipated the tendencies which dominate the poetry produced at the end of the war.

REFERENCES


* I found the comments of Professor Dapo Adelungba, Dr. Harry Garuba, Nike Adesuyi and Kola Amodu useful in reworking an earlier version of this paper.


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