

# Achebe, Soyinka and the Nigerian Mess

Monday, 24 September 2007

*By Okey Ndibe*

Last weekend, I drove from Trinity College, Connecticut to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts to participate in events marking the 40th anniversary of the death of Christopher Okigbo, widely acknowledged as the most verbally exciting and deeply prophetic poet Nigeria has ever produced. Those two aspects of Okigbo's art—its compelling lyrical power and prophetic insight—were stressed by many a speaker at the series of talks, readings, reminiscences and speeches that marked the festschrift.

It was an international celebration, with participants coming from different parts of the world. There was Gerald Moore, one of the great early champions and promoters of African literature. There was Dennis Brutus, the indomitable South African poet who lived through the horrors of apartheid, including decades of exile and surviving a bullet that barely missed his heart. Steven Vincent, who taught many of the best and brightest at the University of Nigeria, graced the event. There was the ever-controversial Ali Mazrui, the Kenyan-born political scientist whose views on major issues, including those on Okigbo's decision to don military fatigues and resist the genocide on Biafrans, inevitably inflame passions. There was Henry Louis Gates, Jr., one of America's most visible public intellectuals who served his intellectual tutelage under Wole Soyinka's

supervision at Cambridge University in the 1970s.

Much as the international roll call was impressive, it was the Nigerian contingent that, in my view, lent the occasion its energy and power. It was a gathering of Nigeria's established intellectual and moral luminaries as well as up-and-coming writers. Convener Chukwuma Azuonye of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, managed to assemble a cast of writers who knew Okigbo as well as those who continue to draw inspiration from his poetry.

There was Sefi Judith Attah, Okigbo's widow, a woman of quiet grace and regal bearing. There was Obiageli Okigbo, the late poet's only child who was shy of three years at the time of her father's death. An architect who makes her home in Belgium, Obiageli has the kind of zestful, intense eyes that remind you of the late poet's piercing gaze. There was Chike Momah, Okigbo's schoolmate at the University of Ibadan who regaled the audience with moving stories about the late poet. Other participants included Michael J.C. Echeruo, Abiola Irele, Ifi Amadiume, Biodun Jeyifo, Demas Nwoko, Obiora Udechukwu, Jacob Olupona, Ifeanyi Menkiti, J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, Chimamanda Adichie, Catherine Acholonu, Chimalum Nwankwo, Obi Nwakanma, Dubem Okafor, Folu Agoi, Esiaba Irobi, Helen

Chukwuma, Isidore Diala, Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, Olu Oguibe, and Obi Iwuanyanwu. Branwen Kiemute Okpako, a Nigerian filmmaker based in Belgium, screened a documentary on Okigbo dually entitled “The Pilot and the Passenger” and “Who Killed Christopher Okigbo”.

For me, and I suspect for many other participants, the highpoint of the celebrations was when Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, indisputably the two giants of Nigerian letters, shared the platform. Achebe and his wife shared moving anecdotes about Christopher Okigbo. For a moment, their intimate stories about Okigbo brought the late poet back to life. Listening to their stories—about the day Okigbo slipped into their house and finished the goat meat Achebe’s then pregnant wife was counting on eating, or the morning he sneaked into their Lagos residence, woke up the Achebes’ cook and got the man to prepare him breakfast while Achebe and his wife were still in bed, or the guile with which he deflected Achebe’s attention to enable him to enlist in the Biafran Army without the novelist dissuading him—the appreciative audience seemed enraptured. Achebe remembered Okigbo as a man who was “greedy for experience,” and the stories he and his wife told brought that point to sharp relief.

Achebe spoke in that accustomed quiet tone that often masks the power and eloquence of his stories and insight. There was an emotionally charged moment when he paused for a full minute, perhaps even two. I don’t recall ever witnessing a more potent, powerfully charged silence. Was Achebe out to make the point that silence is a powerful

rhetorical device? That silence can, on occasion, stand as its own kind of speech? At any rate, it was as if an external force—perhaps the spirit of Okigbo—had swooped down to compel the silence. Everybody in the hall sat hushed, at once mystified and moved. Later, Mr. Momah, Achebe’s classmate both at Government College, Umuahia as well as the University of Ibadan, pointedly asked if the novelist had been overcome by emotion. Achebe did not answer that question; he let the mystery stand.

It was sheer enchantment to behold Achebe and Soyinka exchanging good-natured banter. Achebe had told of the Igbo rite of restitution that must be carried out in the event that a living man is presumed dead, and his funeral is performed. A sacrifice would be required to undo the abomination of burying a man who was still alive, Achebe explained. Soyinka then asked Achebe to recall stories that made the rounds during the Biafran War to the effect that the then imprisoned dramatist had died. As soon as Achebe told that story, Soyinka declared: “I want my goat.” As the audience guffawed, Soyinka, ever the consummate actor, feigned seriousness. “I want my goat,” he repeated in mock-seriousness, eliciting more laughter.

But the atmosphere in the hall was not always in the lighthearted vein. When Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asked Achebe and Soyinka how they view Nigeria’s survival as a nation, it was a signal that a solemn air was about to return to the proceedings. What struck me was how the two writers’ responses intersected in important ways. Speaking first, Achebe noted that Nigeria’s viability would depend on its restructuring to achieve a truly federal character. Without this, he

suggested, the founding of the Nigerian nation would remain problematic. While expressing a personal interest in Nigeria's survival as a corporate entity, Soyinka insisted that the country could not thrive unless its people, acting freely, are able to discuss the terms of their coexistence. He drew attention to the anomaly of a country governed by a constitution that was handed down by a military cabal. He described Nigeria as less a nation than a nation-space whose instruments of state are stolen at will by a tiny few. If Nigeria is to hold up as a viable nation, then—according to Soyinka—Nigerians must, at minimum, reclaim the power to design their own constitution.

It was not the first time Achebe and Soyinka were making this point. More than twenty years ago, Achebe told me in an interview that the Nigerian nation was yet to be founded. Last July, he firmly restated the point in another interview. That argument is a recurrent theme in his slim political treatise, "The Trouble With Nigeria". Soyinka has mined the same territory in his many interventions in Nigeria's political debates. Readers of his memoirs, especially "Ibadan: The Penkelemesi Years," "You Must Set Forth at Dawn," and "The Open Sore of a Continent" would recognize that the question of how to recuperate a humanistic collectivity out of the mutant mess that is Nigeria is a consuming passion of his.

The symbolism of the two writers meeting in Cambridge at this particular pass in Nigeria's history could not have been lost on many who listened to them. Their meeting took place in the shadow of a scandal in the expanding gallery of Nigerian scandals: April polls that gave Nigeria the hardly disputed title of world

champions in rigged elections. As Nigeria's two big writers reflected on their nation's missed opportunities and misadventures, ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo, alias father and founder of modern Nigeria, was getting stuck on the "modern" roads he bequeathed to Nigerians, a tragic figure who finds little love anywhere in the country he misgoverned for eight years, not even in Abeokuta or Ibadan. Yes, the self-conceited one bragged that his leadership was so superior that Nigerians must change their constitution to permit him to stay in office onto death is now so friendless and despised he may soon have to rent guests if he wants any to visit.

While Achebe and Soyinka agonized over their nation's foundering, guess what was happening in Abuja? A self-aggrandizing hairdresser, wangled by mischievous forces into the exalted chair of Speaker of the House of Representatives, was busy staging a farcical drama, part comedy and part tragedy. Etteh, like the ghastly state of Nigerian roads, is in every sense a legacy of Obasanjo the godfather and founder of Nigeria!

Now imagine all the comic fodder Speaker Etteh has been providing to members of the diplomatic corps in Abuja who must send mocking reports to their home nations about the way Nigerian officials misconduct themselves. Then imagine the shame and pain she brings to Soyinka and Achebe and to the generality of Nigerians whose sad lot it is to watch one woman insist that her ego must override the interests of her nation.

## Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

#### Speaking Engagements

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