

ENTRY

He arrived in 1932 wearing a bullet scar on his throat; his grandfather had died of a bullet wound in a war on behalf of his town, Ojoto. The legend of Christopher was that he was a reincarnation of his grandfather, Ikejiofor; and well he might be for he was small and wiry like his grandfather, had a shrill voice like him, was as stubborn and obstinate and almost as invariably right as he and as undaunted by challenges. His parents named him *Ifekandu* - meaning 'greater than life'; they baptised him Christopher, the name he wore to his grave.

He showed his gut early by learning to cry unremittingly even without provocation, to cry (or better still to shriek) even more so when provoked, to master the alphabet on his own before he was taught to read and write, to drive five ton school lorry (of course, without permission) before he had any driving lesson and for which, of course, he was appropriately punished by the school Headmaster; to play the trumpet, to play the piano without being able to read a word of music, to read for a University degree in the Classics without any previous foundation whatever at school in Latin or Greek, to write verses better in Greek than in English, to be engaged in a University as Assistant librarian without any training in librarianship. These and more marked Christopher out as a boy of many gifts and talents and someone to be watched and guided to greater heights to find his mettle in the appropriate calling.

INITIATION

After graduating from University, he did all manner of jobs as occasion demanded and as his temperament changed: sometime cigarette salesman for the Nigerian Tobacco Company, sometime tutor in English and Latin in a secondary school at Fiditi (in Oyo State), political activist on the near anarchist side of the divide, civil servant, failed businessman, resident representative of a major publishing house (for which this very building was hired as his official residence), librarian, publisher in his own right, and soldier. In his free time, he was a chess enthusiast, an outstanding cricketer, a prolific and recondite raconteur, a part

time jazz musician and, most uniquely of all, a poet. No job was beneath him, no task too daunting, no challenge too intimidating for a soul that was free of cant and humbug and for a mind that could only be described as humble almost to the point of acute intellectual arrogance.

More at home in Latin and Greek than in English literature, he read all that came his way, rejected much of what he read and built his own aesthetics and poetic grammar by his own effort. He was immersed in the current philosophic rave of the time: he devoured the existentialism of Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Satre but rejected its nihilism and inaction. He was fascinated by the Dadaist movement of the twenties but rejected as infantile its manifesto as presented by Crosby except for the precept that the artist should strive for what the movement

called pure poetry, namely,

A Toast of Christopher Okigbo

PIUS OKIGBO

that he should write not necessarily to communicate but to express himself. The reading aloud of the poetry of Allen Ginsburg, Fellingetti, Duncan, Brother Antoninus and the crowd of the Beat Generation was just coming unto the scene in America. For Christopher, the poet's task was to present his thoughts in significant form, to address reason through sense. He therefore wrote a poetry that read better accompanied by the music of either DeBussy or Duke Ellington as the mood dictated. Yet, he demanded of himself and his peers the highest rigour of thought and language. A purist, he would refine and refine and refine his poems until the final product showed the highest economy of words and phrase often embedded in a private vocabulary of his own and almost unintelligible to the reader. It did not matter that the reader would mistake his local idiom for some abstruse mythological reference taken from his vast arsenal of Greek or Latin literature.

ANNOINTMENT

Christopher plunged into the creative page of his life of only ten or so years and wrote as if he knew he had no tomorrow; in that time, he created a work marked not by volume but only by the high-

est rank and quality for outstanding excellence. Almost prophetic, his vision and his sounds were certainly rooted in the social culture of the time; and since the malaise of which he wrote and against which he warned has now come home full blown to roost, his poems ring today with astonishing freshness.

Although he had abounding zest of life, Christopher could, at any time, withdraw from life to concentrate his mind and thought singularly on the work before him. He could, and often did, as occasion demanded, retreat into himself for two three days with little food but armed only with a pen and paper to scribble all day and all night long until the last drop of verse in him had oozed out onto the pages of the note paper.

He had the most abiding respect for two of his contemporaries with whom he thought he formed a trinity: Chinua Achebe in novel and Wole Soyinka in drama with himself in poetry. Their galaxy had also very distinguished satellites close by: John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara in the literary and Demas Nwoko etc. in the visual arts. He had, however, placed himself above the pale of competition in his chosen field. How else can one explain his refusal to be nominated for the competition for the Langston Hughes award for African poetry in which, in spite of himself, he won the first prize, or his paradoxical behaviour in agreeing to travel to Kampala, Uganda, for a conference of writers at the expense of the organisers only to mount the rostrum and refuse to read his poetry to non poets.

Chris rejected the label of African writer; he was not a Nigerian or an African poet; he was simply a poet, whose tastes and sensibilities would make him a poet in any colour or climate or vegetation. That twenty-seven years after his death, with no new work coming or likely to come from him, he is still read avidly more abroad than at home and revered everywhere is, perhaps, the greatest tribute that can be paid any artist of note this side of eternity. It is this permanent lustre that makes Christopher Okigbo the poet's poet.

Chris was in his life time and in his death the greatest friend I ever had; it was not because Chris was my brother for he had other brothers and I too had them, but because between us there was a total communion of souls and of mind. We both shared the same joys and laughter in reading and re-reading the Greek and Latin classics in the original: Vergil, Tacitus, Cicero, Homer etc., or the English



Okigbo's last residence, Cambridge House, Ibadan, as it is today

masters - Mallarme, Joyce, Elliot, Pound, small letter Cummings, Rimbaud, not to talk of the standard University English classroom classics of the middle and later period. For I, too, had read Latin and Greek in my own earlier training, adventured towards a degree in English literature only to give it up two thirds of the way to finally take a degree in modern history. Is it any wonder then that I should have the rare privilege to have introduced him to the literature of the American exiles: Hemmingway, Dos Passos, Elliot, Pound, Crosby, Cowley, among the more well known.

ABLUTION

Endowed with a curious charm built on frail physique and penetrating wit and intellect which often transfixed his friends, Christopher soon learnt that to get on with his work he had to forget their faces and their names soon after the momentary pleasure or thrill was over. He could therefore, at once, in simultaneous cycles as his moods took him, be both exceedingly warm and exceedingly cold. His friends stood by him to the last; his foes denounced him as emotionally a grasshopper.

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. For Sefi was perhaps the only girl he met and knew who understood his quixotic personality. And in return, he showered her with the most pas-

sionate and enduring love.

DEPARTURE

Christopher has been tried (by Ali Mazrui) for exhibiting and revealing a personal commitment to the eradication of the social evils of his times. So be it. Some of us are nothing if not snobs writing for snobs; some of us are merely aesthetes who would step over the muck around us and live as if nothing was wrong. Chris lived intensely, felt intensely and expressed himself intensely. Only someone with the most abstruse form of taxidermy could have lived through the Eastern Nigeria of 1966-70 and pretend that the psychopathology and trauma of the society could not touch him and that his life would ever remain the same again or that he could just go about writing inanities while the life experience around him betrayed the most desperate craving. Let no one dare to condemn him for we, the members of his immediate family, know what it is to lose a revered one having in the same war lost one favourite uncle, two adorable undergraduate nephews and a favourite brother in Chris. Chris was immersed in the life of his time - for more than any other artist of his generation he communed with the so called common man of his time - the market trader, the street hawker, the buka restaurateur, the foot soldier, the taxi driver. He did not look down on them and he did not treat them as his inferiors. They were men like him. For he was as easily at home with the nobles and the governors as he was with the taxi drivers with whom he could go to eat and

drink as coequals without condescension.

The battered Nigerian psyche of today, the anomie and the catalepsy we see, hear and smell all around us, the lingering living death that casts its pall over us, the anguish and the torment of body and soul that cry out all the time from the wizened faces of infants - these are today's sources of Christopher Okigbo's poetic vision of thirty years ago. Of such stuff was this extraordinary genius made that his fame far outshone that of any one of the members of his vastly distinguished family that had at one and the same time a world class forest pathologist, an economist, a lawyer, an agronomist as well as the poet laureate himself. He was indeed a meteor, and like a meteor he flashed through the sky for a short speck of

thirty-five years, which is indeed merely a dot in infinite time, and dug a hole in the ground for himself.

PASSAGE

He was born wearing the mark of war; he died of bullet wounds sustained at a war he fought on behalf of his new country, Biafra. He died at the hands of his so-called countrymen, at Opi junction, at the outskirts of the University he had helped to build and nurture; he died at the tender age of thirty-five, in the defence of his most cherished values: honour, valour, truth, justice, equity, integrity and, most of all, freedom. We have a duty, in his honour, to keep these values alive in our younger ones for that is the true testament to his greatness. Towards this goal, I am authorised to announce that the OKIGBO family is creating a Trust to establish and administer, with effect from the coming anniversary of his death, in October, scholarships and prizes in Classics and Poetry in the two Universities that gave Christopher Okigbo his foundation and his freedom: the University of Ibadan and the University of Nigeria. Even in this we have been anticipated first by Wole Soyinka, one of the most loyal of his friends, and now by Chief Berkhout. To both of them I offer my salutations.

I now give you the toast of CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO the poet, born 1932, died 1967, lived at Cambridge House, UAC Crescent, Onireke, Ibadan. GR 8 JULY 1994