



# the Relevance of a Vision

**Christopher Okigbo, a major voice in the second generation of Nigerian poets, wrote for just a period of ten years within which he made a significant contribution to African poetry in English expression. A casualty of the Nigerian Civil War, he left only one book of poetry entitled *Labyrinths*, an important historical testament, for the world to remember him by.**

**T**he volume, a poeticization of his personal experience, of the chaotic history of Nigeria from the attainment of political independence in 1960 to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), and of the collective experience of Africans in and out of colonialism, is conceived as 'a fable of man's perennial quest for fulfilment.' The quest is multidimensional. It is at once artistic, cultural, economic, religio-metaphysical, romantic, and socio-political. The poetic idiom for its expression is primarily mythical and secondarily paradoxical. The poet's preoccupation, the central theme of all literature, is the vegetation myth which dovetails with the myth of eternal return.

Cyclic in design, the journey motif projects the poet-protagonist, an Everyman figure, as a seeker after elusive truth. Every soul is a pilgrim in the world and suffers the anguish of existence which issues out of the three-pronged alienation from the godhead, from society and from oneself. Metaphor for the solitude of being litter the pages of *Labyrinths*. Okigbo explores both external and internal dimensions of separation, which in-

variably results in loss of personal integrity and cultural unity. The confusion being experienced in Africa is only of degree, not of kind, different from the burden of separation with which all humanity is afflicted. For a split personality for whom all things have fallen apart on all fronts and who consequently suffers the disease of unease, the only possible choice is the quest for oneness, the integration of self and essence. The return of the prodigal to mother Idoto is a necessity. Okigbo images existential unease in *The Passage* as standing on one leg, telling 'the tangled-wood-tale' (p.4). The passage itself is an apt metaphor for the life-death continuum, a bewildering journey through the besetting wood of an incomprehensible world. It is, for the poet, neither cyclic nor linear, neither Occidental nor Oriental, but essentially labyrinthine. The labyrinth metaphor captures the complexity and disorder of contemporary experience not only in Africa but in the whole world. Okigbo gives expression to an all-embracing vision of fallen humanity striving perpetually to gather up its dismembered parts and recover its lost essence.

Poetry is conceived by Okigbo as ritual, or, as a sacred duty that demands total commitment. It speaks a cultic language that can be understood only by the initiate. This conception of poetry partly accounts for the arcane

nature of his poetry. Even the poetry of life is comprehended by only a tiny percentage of humanity! The poems themselves are conceived as sacrificial offerings to the poet's goddess or Muse in more or less the same manner that man is presented in Christianity as a living sacrifice to God. Okigbo disclosed that the 'new laid egg' and the 'white hen at midterm' in 'Lustra' were actually new poems that he had just written in his official capacity as the priest of Idoto. He is truly a visionary poet: a poet-prophet. Enhancing the ritual character of his poetry is the use of repetition and variation. One recurrent image or personage takes on diverse identities. Mother Idoto, for example, appears variously as a 'water-maid', as a 'white goddess', as a 'lioness', and as a 'white queen'. Negritudinites should note that, as used by the poet, 'white' means 'light'. In constructing his monument of words, the poet plays excessively with forms, especially geometric forms. His *Labyrinths* leaves traces of a movement in the direction of archi-writing.

Okigbo overcomes the anxiety of influence that hampers the art of many African pastoralists and freely echoes other writers - Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, W. R. Greg, Ezra Pound.... The list is endless. He is a Modernist poet through and through.

His *Limits*, he declared, 'was influenced by everything and everybody.... It is surprising how many lines of the *Limits* I am not sure are mine and yet do not know whose lines they were originally. But does it matter?'<sup>1</sup> It would matter only to narcissists and hypocritical purists. The extensive borrowings no doubt detract enormously from the quality of the poet's originality, but they reinforce Eliot's stated position that literary creativity is an operation that involves both tradition and the individual talent. Literary echoes strengthen Okigbo's rhetorical power and show that he feeds from the same fountain that nourishes masters of the art. His *Labyrinths* can claim its own wherever poetry is discussed.

Conceived as 'logistics', poetry for Okigbo is a serious business which requires a lot of discipline, careful planning, mathematical precision, rigorous training, constant self-criticism, and hard imaginative thinking. A person who cannot perceive similarities where there are none or put riotous entities in good order cannot be a competent poet. The subject of *Labyrinths* is the making of poetry. A record of the growth of Okigbo's poetic sensibility from the inchoate stage of a neophyte ('the young bird at the passage') (p.4) through that of 'a shrub among the poplars' (p.24), the talkative 'weaverbird' of *Siren Limits*, to the mature stage of the 'town-crier' with an 'iron bell' (p.67), it enumerates the different phases of the journey into creativity, the inevitable accidents or failures had ('the errors of the rendering', pp. 8-9), the atonements or sacrifices made, and the brief ecstasy-laden epiphany of fulfilment, which is the true reward for every creative artist.

A poets' poet, Okigbo presses *Labyrinths* into the service of defining the nature of poetry and of teaching the techniques and the process of verse-making. It is no surprise, therefore, that he influences tremendously the imagination and craft of many a third-generation Nigerian poet, yet one searches in vain for a first book of poetry among the works of the generation that is comparable in beauty of expression, tightness of structure and largeness of vision to Okigbo's *Labyrinths*. His is the lyrical type of poetry that perpetually strains to appropriate music, which perhaps explains its preponderance of auditory images and musical terms. Truly, poets are failed musicians! Okigbo's poetry reads like a convoluted and enthralling musical score composed not for analysts who would destroy its beauty but for good listeners with supersensitive ears. It is replete with images of colour, light, smell, and touch which combine with those of sound to send

the mind into a trance-like state where the poet-persona loses a sense of self and becomes simply an unconscious medium pouring forth imperishable truths. Beguiled and bewitched, the hearer forgets his controls, falls into a love swoon and is tenderly raped.

The critical reception of Okigbo's poetry has been paradoxical: a mixture of condemnation and praise. The technical strategies that are most celebrated in the poetry, for example, the sacrifice of limpidity of meaning and style in an attempt to perfect form and achieve a rare lyricism, are ironically the most vilified. However recondite the poetry may appear to detractors, it is not bereft of human interest or meaning. In *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* Sunday O. Anozie remarks the sustained tension between aesthetic and human concerns in *Labyrinths*.

The authors of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* are rather too hasty in inveighing against the Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry to which Okigbo belongs. Their criticism of African poetry exhibits a lot of misprision. Contrary to their interpretation,<sup>2</sup> the thundering of cannons in palm groves does not constitute an act of desecration, for it functions like music to spur on the spirits of the dead and elevate those of their celebrating descendants to the point of possession for the desired re-union. Okigbo's satirical parody of Catholic rituals and Christian proselytization in Africa is likewise misunderstood. The critics even war against 'the heavy use of alliterations and assonances within a line'. As Wole Soyinka rightly observes, their prescription is bound to effect the death of poetry.<sup>3</sup> Okot p'Bitek's complaint that generally critics do not understand *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, an important work for which Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike have nothing but praise, debunks the argument of the troika that 'Poetry is not a puzzle.' The danger inherent in a poem that puts on the mask of simplicity is that its surface transparency can hinder a literalist imagination from discerning the profundities that lie buried in it. The language of poetry is metaphorical and thus cannot but be difficult. Linguistic abstruseness in poetry is a matter of degree. On the whole, Chinweizu and Company seem to be farther removed than Okigbo and other members of the Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry from the African oral poetic traditions. To resurrect poetry in English in Nigeria and prevent it from further sliding into prose, there is no better model to follow than the best of the school. Fortunately, Niyi Osundare, another leading voice in Nigeria for a new poetics that is grounded in clarity of expression and

thought, has realised the danger in unmasking verse and making it transparent and is gradually moving towards an increased subtlety of tone. He now not only sates the pleasure of paradox, he explores in depth the seeming of art, revels in ambiguity, and contorts his syntax. His wordplay and other rhetorical devices get more intricate and more demanding. One can only hope that his ardent followers will recognise the change in the revolutionary process of returning words to their poetic and rhetorical sources and borrow a leaf from his fine example.

In *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*,<sup>4</sup> Ali A. Mazrui tries and convicts the poet for supporting Biafra and for privileging ethnic politics over his primary commitment to art and all humanity. Ironically, it is precisely in the Postscript, *Path of Thunder*, where the poet opts for revolutionary violence that he truly comes home, both stylistically and thematically. He casts off his plastic universalist mask and speaks in a personal voice that is readily accessible to the Nigerian reading public. The section is rid of all obtrusive classical and foreign allusions and is suffused instead with local imagery. Some of the lines are local apophthegms, indigenous idiomatic expressions and proverbs rephrased. Okigbo, who started his writing career denouncing 'platform poetry' and racially determined art in favour of aesthetic criteria and universal literary standards, becomes a war propagandist and uses poetry as a popular medium for expressing pressing socio-political issues. The same Okigbo who said 'I don't read my poetry to non-poets'<sup>5</sup> becomes a 'town-crier'. Finding poetry inadequate in resolving the national question, he dropped his pen, picked up his gun, and died fighting what he believed was a just cause. He prefigures his own death and pleads in a trenchant tone:

O mother mother Earth, unbind me;  
let this be  
my last testament; let this be  
The ram's hidden wish to the sword's  
secret prayer to the scabbard - (p.71)

Ali Mazrui's conclusion that 'Africa cannot afford too many Okigbos' whose poems are 'untranslatable' - as though some poems were translatable - and who make more music than meaning<sup>6</sup> evinces a thorough misunderstanding of the essence and proper function of verse. The myth made of the turgidity of his poetry probably trips Okigbo into making the following retort which tends to lend credence to the fallacy that much of *Labyrinths* is pleasurable bunkum: 'I don't think I have ever set out to communicate a



meaning. It is enough that I try to communicate experience which I consider significant.' The simple axiom is that there is no form without content.

It is in delineating the economic, political and social character of the new African nations that Okigbo's vision is perhaps most relevant. It is possible to read the whole of *Labyrinths* as one long threnody on the African tragedy. The mourners with 'SILENT FACES at crossroads' (p.5) can be assimilated to Africans, especially Black Africans, who lament the destruction of their land by foreigners and the resultant psychic disorientation and socio-cultural fragmentation. The dispossessed and powerless people who are portrayed as a 'long black/column of ants' mourn the death of their mother: their world (p.5). The threnody is resumed by the Silent Sisters in their 'swan song' of diverse melodies: 'We carry in our worlds that flourish/Our worlds that have failed....' (p.41).

Some anthropologists and ethnologists argue that the destruction of African culture is not complete. Okigbo seems to agree with Janheinz Jann who posits in *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*<sup>8</sup> that what is going on in Africa is not the wholesale abandonment of the indigenous way of life for the foreign but a process of cultural integration, for

The Sunbird sings again

Where the caress does not reach,  
of Guernica,

On whose canvas of blood,  
The slits of his tongue  
cling to glue... (p.35)

If the Sunbird, like the mythical phoenix, resurrects and sings again, then, the cancelling out of the indigenous world view is not complete.

'Fragments out of the Deluge' laments the European imperialist exploitation of the human and material resources of Africa and the colonial conquest. The colonisation of the continent is imaged as a deluge that erodes the very foundation of African societies, for the 'gods lie in state', abandoned and unsung (p.34). The poet represents the possessors of power who rape Africa and violate her gods and goddesses as predatory eagles in whose talons young birds wobble and utter the cry of death. The use of animal images to express the poet's vision of Social Darwinism signifies that Western civilization or industrial capitalism is cannibalistic and its purveyors are savages.

The attainment of Independence by African countries does not change their dependency status. The suffering of the people continues unabated. The dream of Independence fades: another 'big white elephant...' (p.26) 'Lament of the Drums', a song of exile, depicts the parlous state into which Nigeria has fallen. It thematizes the rape of democracy by the military and their opportunistic civilian collaborators, the perversion of justice, the underdevelopment of the country through the wanton waste of her human and material resources, and the

overall degeneration of the land. The elegy ends with:

The wailing is for the Great River:

Her pot-bellied watchers  
Despoil her... (p.50)

The river, of course, is the Niger from which the country derives its name. The ellipsis indicates that the destruction of the land shall be a continuous process. As aptly predicted by the poet, the Nigerian Armed Forces that are supposed to protect the land lay siege to it, fall upon its fat like robbers, and strip the people of their laughter. Okigbo brings back the image of the predatory eagles in 'Elegy for Alto' to express the idea of a second conquest, but this time around the usurpation comes from within:

THE EAGLES have come again,

The eagles rain down on us -

POLITICIANS are back in giant hidden steps of  
howitzers, of detonators. (p. 71).

The neo-colonial African politician - civilian or military - continues with the structures of exploitation and privilege erected by the white conquerors in the colonial period. Although Okigbo hailed and praised the architects of the first military putsch in Nigeria, the Majors' coup of January 15, 1966, he recognised the danger in the Armed Forces perceiving themselves as politicians and warned the self-acclaimed saviours against the temptation to loot the nation's treasury and thereby commit the mistakes of civilian politicians. He intones:

Alas! the elephant has fallen -

Hurrah for thunder -

But already the hunters are talking about pumpkins:  
If they share the meat let them remember thunder.

The eye that looks down will surely see the nose;

The finger that fits should be used to pick the nose.

Today - for tomorrow, today becomes yesterday:

How many million promises can ever fill a basket...  
(p.67)

It is fruitless counting the number of military coups - botched or successful - that have been reported in Nigeria. The same facile explanation of saving the people from themselves and from evils of maladministration and economic mismanagement and returning the country onto the path of true democracy is proffered by the coup plotters. It is sad to note that the promise has so far remained unfulfilled. The intervention of the military in the politics of the nation is a total disaster. The most urgent task that confronts the Nigerian people is how to deliver their country from the death-clutch of its greedy Armed Forces.

The joy that attends the poet's homecoming, like the ephemeral euphoria at Independence, is deceptive and ironic. Correctly apprehended, it is the joy of freedom



Scene from Nigerian Civil War front at Owaza on Ozuakwu Road, July, 1969.

from being. The poet's homecoming is celebrated in terms that suggest the Worship of Death:

Death herself,  
the chief celebrant,  
in a cloud of incense,  
paring her finger nails...

At her feet rolled their heads like cut fruits;  
She bathed her knees in the blood of attendants;  
her smock in entrails of ministrants... (p.55)

The images remind us of the pogrom in which thousands of Igbo people lost their lives in the Northern part of the country and the waste of lives during the Civil War. Nigeria is portrayed as mother-earth that consumes her own children but, unlike earth-mother, the country continually fails to profit from the promise of procreation and regeneration and, therefore, remains a waste land. The picture of a hecatomb and horror is relatively the same for most post-Independence states of Africa. Carnage, a regular feature in modern African history, continues to rage in Algeria, Liberia, Rwanda and Somalia. The continent bleeds and bleeds again from self-inflicted wounds, as if to prove the veracity of Yambo Ouologuem's thesis that she is bound to violence. Her poetry is an unbroken paean to Moloch. The poet's homecoming reminds us of Thomas Carlyle's *Worship of Sorrow*. The current political debacle in Nigeria is a re-enactment in its horrendous detail of the tragic events that led the country to the path of war in the

late sixties. The detention of M. K. O. Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the June 12 1993 presidential election, is analogous to the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo on treasonable felony charges: 'Both parts of *Silences*', Okigbo wrote in the Introduction to *Labyrinths*, 'were inspired by the events of the day. Lament of the Silent Sister, by the Western Nigeria Crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba; Lament of the Drums by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his eldest son.' (p. xii)

It is not an exaggeration to assert that Nigeria's season of anomy started barely two years after her attainment of political Independence. Despite the long period of doom, there is still not even a shadow in the horizon of the possibility of relief for the suffering of the people. The flowers of the nation, the minorities, and the multitudes of pariahs - all aliens in their own land, like 'the drums' (the ancestors) - 'sense/ With dog-nose a Babylonian capture' (p.46) and shriek in the agony of despair as they lament daily their predicament and watch their supposed protectors usurp their being, make a mockery of their sacrifice, and stifle their seeds to death. They either embrace revolutionary violence, as Okigbo did, or continue to moan in despair, or go into exile. It is thus clear that the dream of freedom is still a tantalising mirage as Nigeria persists in treading the path of thunder:

BEYOND the iron path careering along the same  
beaten track -

THE GLIMPSE of a dream lies smouldering in a cave,

together with the mortally wounded birds.  
Earth, unbind me; let me the prodigal; (p.72)

The poet-pilgrim's journey, like the trajectory of the ouroboros (the tail-chewing creation snake), ends where it began. Homecoming is represented as another perilous journey into exile. Its orgasmic twitch is indistinguishable from anguish, for its pleasure is painful. *Labyrinths* ends with this vision of cyclic paradox, or the myth of the eternal return:

AN OLD STAR departs, leaves us here on the shore  
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;  
The new star appears, foreshadows its going  
Before a going and coming that goes on forever...  
(p.72)

An *abiku*<sup>8</sup> country, Nigeria yearns for release from the tragic cycle of fate. Thematically, therefore, Okigbo's *Labyrinths* shall continue to be of immediate cultural, economic and political relevance to posterity for as long as the paradox of existence symbolised by mother Idoto, the principle of birth and death and growth and decay, proves insoluble for mankind in general and for Africans, especially Nigerians, in particular. Structurally and stylistically, the work shall stand as a monumental challenge to fledgling poets and serve as a reminder of

the character of Modernist poetics and of the nature and process of verse production to the present and coming ages. GR

#### ENDNOTES

1 'Transition Conference Questionnaire', *Transition*, 11, 5 (July-August 1962), 12.

2 Chinweizu, et al. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Vol. 1 (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), 192.

3 Wole Soyinka, 'Aesthetic Illusions: Prescriptions for the Suicide of Poetry,' *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), pp. 86-109.

4 Ali Mazrui, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 176.

5 Bloke Modisane, 'The Literary Scramble for Africa', *West Africa* (30 June 1962), p. 176.

6 Ali Mazrui, 'Meaning Versus Imagery in African Poetry,' *Presence Africaine*, no. 66 (2nd quarterly 1968), p. 57.

7 Cited by Annemarie Heywood, 'The Ritual and the Plot: The Critic and Okigbo's *Labyrinths*', *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 9, no. 1, (Spring 1978), 51-52.

8 Janheinz Jahn, Muntu: *An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, trans. Majorie Grene (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

9 A wanderer child that dies early in life and returns several times to plague its mother. It is a metaphor for cyclic progression. All national corporations and institutions in Nigeria, including the government itself, behave like *abiku*.

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Mrs. Obi Okigbo - Dati with daughter Sophia Dati