

OKIGBO, FIDITI AND I

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Fiditi Grammar School, to which I, as principal had invited Christopher Okigbo provided the turning point in his life and was the launching pad from which his poetic soul leapt, liberated and unbound into the freedom of the muse's and the prolific productivity of the *avant garde* he became.

Christopher and myself had met and become friends in March, 1955 when I took temporary residence in Mellanby Hall, University College, Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) while I was doing some post-graduate research work on Keats and Tennyson in the Africana section of the University Library. Our friendship flourished everlastingly and may be that is why I have not yet been able to gather myself together to write on him. Christopher left the Federal Civil Service in 1958 because of the hypocrisy of the colonial system of those times. He had worked as a Marketing Manager in the Nigerian Tobacco Company in charge of vast areas of the then Western Region before joining the administrative service of the Federal Government. As a staff in the private sector he had incorporated a company, Kitson and Co. ever before joining the government. On joining the Federal Government, however, the company had not been dissolved and some finicky colleagues made mountains out of this and he had to leave the civil service:

This was the most depressed and I would say the only depressed period of his life. In the '50s, government were the all-powerful employers, the private sector was still very diminished, a reversal of the present day dispensation. I had been invited from Ijebu-Ode Grammar School at Christmas 1956 to Fiditi Grammar School to be Principal by Chief A. O. Adeyi who had just been appointed a Minister of Local Government by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Christopher had visited me at Ijebu-Ode on several occasions and once with his wife, Princess Judith Sefi

Attah.

As soon as news reached me of his plight and knowing the likely opprobrium this will generate in the limited circle of elites in colonial Lagos, I drove to his residence at Igboere (Lagos) and stayed for a week with him and convinced him to come with me to Fiditi Grammar School at Fiditi near Oyo. He agreed and I got the Board of Governors of the school to appoint him as my Vice-Principal. I put him in charge of Arts Department and he taught Latin and Greek. The one student presented in 1959 WASC had an 'A'. An indigence of Fiditi on the staff protested in Greek the status I accorded him but I stood my grounds and the gentleman and I let go.

The highest class at Fiditi Grammar School when he joined in 1958 was form five and the first set of students for the WASCE were yet to be presented in December 1959. He therefore had two years of a new lease of life.

Using the advantage that the school was a community institution, we provided more that he would have earned in government and other emoluments as inducement. I put him in charge of sports and football, got him to celebrated Taslim Balogun to coach our school football team.

I had been writing poems since 1955 and I continued more in 1958 and I showed him my own poems at which he expressed great pleasure. We used to read these and other

poems together. T. S. Elliot's *Ash Wednesday* was the greatest source of inspiration and he used to point out the magical imageries such as 'the smoke from the chimneys rubbing its muscles on the wall' or such idiomatic phraseology as 'one night cheap sawdust restaurant'. He would then burst into peals of infectious and electric laughter.

Such was his popularity with students and staff and the success of all endeavours on which he put his hand that this succeeded in bringing him from the depths of despair to the brilliant daylight of creativity. I invited in turns academic members of Classics Department of University College, Ibadan to give lectures to the boys of Fiditi Grammar School on classical times and literature including Professor Ferguson, Head of Department, Dr. Classen, Professor Esan, Dr. Thompson, Mr H. F. Guite, etc. I made him play host to them all.

His football team included the elder Odegbami, a.k.a. 'Key to Soccer', who was mentor to Nigeria's Segun Odegbami. His team beat all schools around including the 1959 winners of Thermogene Cup, Ahmadiya College, Agege. This was an all-Nigeria cup competition for full-fledged grammar schools which Fiditi was yet to be. To crown it all, that self same team beat the University College, Ibadan first eleven twelve (12) goals to nil (0). The UCI team included Professor David Oke (a senator during the Second Republic in Nigeria), Dr. Edozien, former Economic Adviser to President Shagari, the Second Republic civilian president.

With his versatility, he was able to participate at the highest level in sporting, poetic, intellectual and social activities fully at Fiditi without the pretensions or inhibitions of civil

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service or marketing distractions or boisterous Lagos.

Christopher Okigbo after six months stay and returning to an academic career soon found his life to begin again. he and myself would go to join his brother, the world renowned economist, Dr. Pius Okigbo who had just returned from teaching and research in Oxford. Whenever we came to Ibadan, Dr. Okigbo would read passages from modern American poets to us till the little hours of the morning while we drank strong coffee and whiskey.

In those years, I invited young academics from the University College, Ibadan to teach the boys of Fiditi. Such academics included Professor Alex Boyo who taught Biology, Dr. Patrick Amenechi who had just obtained a first class degree in Chemistry and was working on his Masters. All the boys who offered Chemistry scored distinction. We had invited Emmanuel Ifeajuna to the staff, but he later joined the army.

This constant flow of intellectuals through Fiditi provided a most desirable and profit-

able interaction for an intellectual companionship for Christopher.

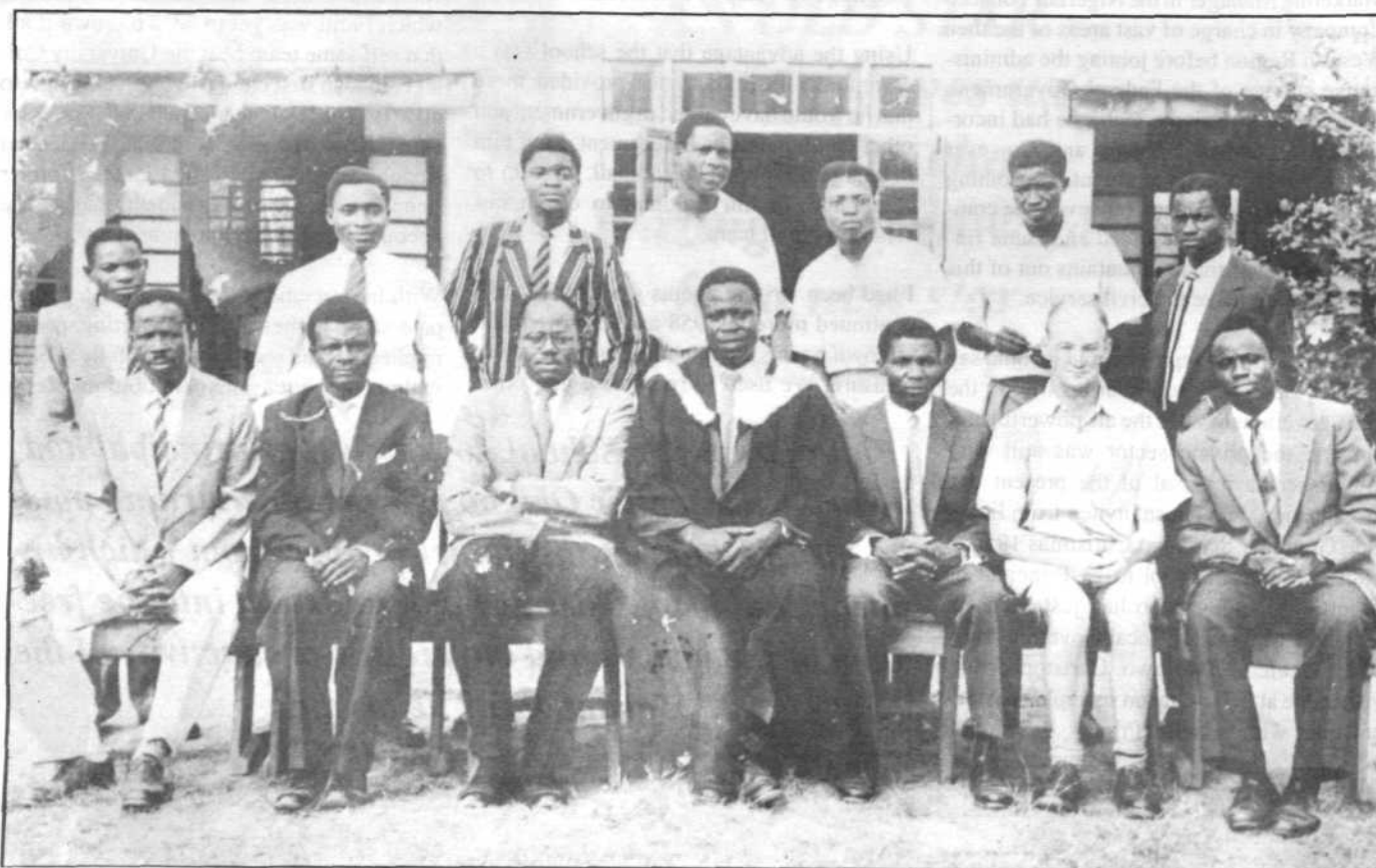
J. P. Clark used to spend nights with us and we would read aloud some attempts at budding *Black Orpheus*. It was indeed a great transport of delight to watch Christopher evolve out of the turbulent past into the spiritual refreshment which he received from the auspicious circumstances and sylvan tranquillity of Fiditi. His faculties were fully satisfied, his interest well supplied in all facets. His return to academia at Fiditi had served its inimitable purpose and provided the required leverage for his genius.

Little wonder therefore that at Fiditi, Christopher had burst into numbers and into poesy. Little wonder that he began writing his poem, *Debtor's Lane* at Fiditi. Little wonder that he dedicated his first efforts in poetry to the boys at Fiditi Grammar School to whom it would have been a permanent injury if I had allowed Obi Nwakamma's left-handed compliment to pass uncorrected both for rime and eternity and indeed the immortal soul of Christopher Okigbo.

During the Easter holidays of 1959, I requested Okigbo to accompany me on a grand tour of Eastern Nigeria to enable me know my country more and to meet Chinua Achebe, who was then at the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, Enugu, writing his second novel, *No Longer at Ease* the draft of which he showed us. I was at the time doing a write-up on the **Beginning of Novel Writing in West Africa** for the University of Durham, with the guidance of Professor M. Mahood, then Head of English Department, University College, Ibadan.

This tour was a follow-up to a previous visit I had made with Okigbo to George Laming the West Indian novelist who had just published his novel *Of Age and Innocence*. That meeting had been arranged for me by Professor Alex Boyo of University College, Ibadan where Laming was giving a series of lectures. The journey to the East afforded Okigbo the opportunity to meet many of his friends and relations at Onitsha, Ojoto, Ogidi, Enugu, Orlu, Mgbidi, Owerri, Aba and Port-Harcourt where we anchored for days. The trip buoyed up his spirit and gave his friends and relations renewed confidence in his future. GR

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The Fiditi Grammar School staff with the principal, Chief Alex Olu Ajayi in the middle front row and Christopher Okigbo to his left.