

career street youths. While a good number of these actors work in the informal sector (street hawkers, bus conductors, car washers, porters, car guards, beggars) others are involved in illegal activities (pickpockets, shoplifters, area boys, touts, rapists, drug dealers, etc).

While the African participants reasoned that the major cause of the phenomenon is the widespread poverty occasioned by the wrongheaded foisting of Structural Adjustment Programmes on weak African economies, the French participants argued that the main causal factor should be located in the break up of the family and the progressive erosion of traditional control systems. This disagreement notwithstanding, the symposium noted that the overall effect of street deviance in Africa lies in the generation

of stress, chaos and, ultimately, violence. One of the participants, Stephane Tessier, addressed the issue of violence at length. Rather than view violence as a phenomenon generated by asocial street actors as is often the case in social science practice, he preferred to construct street actors as victims of the psycho-social, symbolic and economic violence produced by the larger adult society in the public space.

Consequently, Tessier argued that the forms of violence which street children inflict on society should be seen as a response, a sort of counter-violence to the violence they undergo. Examining efforts made in various African countries at stemming the tide of the ugly phenomenon, the symposium observed that African governments, apart from erroneously seeing all street actors as public enemies, often tend to perceive private initiative (by

NGOs) as 'affront'. Thus, rather than complement each other, governments and NGOs see themselves as competitors. The symposium also noted that government effort is largely ineffective because the African state has collapsed and can no longer meet its social obligations. The action of NGOs were also criticised as being 'sympathy-driven.' At the end of the three-day symposium, wide-ranging suggestions and recommendations were made to the appropriate authorities but Jinmi Adisa insisted that 'there can be no solution to all the problems we have discussed in the last three days so long as our society does not learn to invest in its own people.'

•Adesanmi, was the rapporteur at the Abidjan symposium

## A Rhyming Diary

Sanya Osha

Uche Nduka *CHIAROSCURO*, published by Yeti Press, Bremen, 1997, 200pp.

**E**XILE isn't always a pleasant experience for many artists. And this is probably truer in the case of literary artists who have to make greater effort in capturing the native smells, colours and textures of their homelands. The fact of exile usually disrupts or severs these nostalgic sensations. But fortunately, Uche Nduka's latest offering of poetry, *Chiaroscuro* passes through the crucible of exile and emerges on the side of poetic maturity. Nduka has certainly grown in stature since the publication of *Flower child* (1985). In that collection,

Nduka had already laid the map of his future preoccupations: life, joy, art and, need one add, individualism. The last characteristic propels him invariably towards a sometimes strident cosmopolitanism. In other words, he becomes the ultimate post-colonial/post modernist figure amalgamating and dismembering geographical realities and often divergent cultural codes with random, even if productive, glee.

But exile is surely far from the foreground in *Chiaroscuro* as Nigeria in all its awesome diversity seems to mark out the collection's tra-

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Uche Nduka

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jectory. Lagos is especially prominent. It isn't a lousy Lagos that is usually portrayed, instead, we glimpse a city of subtle poetic contrasts and possibilities. Oftentimes Nduka's Lagos is too beautiful to be true, what with all the internal rubbish dumps and the ceaseless violence that all but disembowels that city. Not even these lines 'at Lagos the sea/at Lagos the bridge/at the crowds' portray the city's inglorious plight.

Nonetheless, Nduka is free to see what he desires and what he conveys is usually very appealing even when not completely accurate.

Another point worth noting is his adherence to the strictures of discipline he imposes upon himself. The collection consists of two hundred twelve-line stanzas that of course vary in terms of intensity, mood and style. But surely all of them possess the various and sometimes irreconcilable strains that have influenced him all these years. With maturity, Nduka has come to understand some of the mysteries of history:

*And Lord Lugard named the Virgin land.  
This babel of a virgin. Oh what knowledge,  
what imagination from his sweetheart's let  
ter  
roused his heart and bade him blend  
the streams, the roads and forests into one.  
A feat. A marvellous feat.*

And Abaji is the poet-persona who traverses this land filled with histories with all the customary prodigality. To do this he knows he has to maintain his health and sanity:

*I won't have you outdrink the fish  
and outsmoke the chimney.  
I will pull you to where poems  
snarl at sloth, where poems  
quell the rage of booze and smoke  
as the campus eavedrops,  
humming above the band of pontificating  
poets.*

Here, Nduka is obviously referring to one or two gatherings of poets in Nigerian university campuses who in the name of poetry end up neglecting the art. Nduka's art is a fervent rejection of this alarming tendency. Indeed, he fine tunes his rituals for life and art:

*He prepares his speech,  
he arranges his house  
where guests shall loaf  
around the painted walls  
and caw and croak as such occasions de  
mand.*

And to fellow poets who share his creed he writes:

*May heaven help the poets  
nurtured by poetry alone. Nurtured by love.  
By life in-between them.*

Those who are familiar with the poet's life are constantly provided with notable signposts. For instance:

*'Pleasure ruined him,' Biaks noted  
outside the Arts Theatre. We were chums.  
Biaks shook his hand,  
shook the poet of twilights  
and ruffled a life, ruffled a style  
as the sly threat became naked  
in the label of a drizzling morning.*

Nduka is probably referring to another gifted poet of his generation who is a product of the University of Ibadan and who was an almost legendary purveyor of pleasure.

There are other references to poets and artists of his generation ranging from Ogaga Ifowodo, Ike Okonta, Izzia Ahmad, Godwin Ede and Carlos Udofia to Greg Odo and Olu Oguibe. They all spice his verses with the follies and triumphs of their lives. In this way, Nduka makes himself perhaps the most generous spokesman of his artistic generation with the possible exception of Obi Nwakanma. In cataloguing aspects of the lives of those various personalities, his own inner life is also more than abundantly reflected and this makes him an eloquent and rather interesting diarist. Nduka had probably finished the bulk of the work that needed to be done on *Chiaroscuro* before settling in Germany in 1994. That is, the material had been gathered and anointed by the initial flash of inspiration and what remained was the gift and elevation of craft which the German experience has amply supplied.

Those poems are unique when viewed within the context of Nigerian literary archive. Unique because Nduka is a poet of numerous sensitivities. In one breath, Africa, Europe and America are merged just as folk rock and acid rock are coupled with Lagos brewed music and it is these colourful divergences that produce a blend quite uncommon to the whole of Nigerian literature. The only grouse is that the collection is rather too bulky, some of the poems uneven and quite a number of the lines a bit too startling.

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