

<<

bers of women folk are elected into leadership positions where they can effectively participate in decision making processes'.

Joy Ogbu in her presentation argues that the issue of gender oppression must be looked at from the view of a synergy of an economic and political points of view. According to her, the most significant obstacle for the woman is basically economic. Women's limited participation in politics, she contends is an expression of their being economically underprivileged.

The impact of government sponsored women's organisations forms the kernel of Abiodun Idowu's contribution in the third chapter.

Margaret Vogt examines the military and women in politics and concludes that the military in Nigeria by its culture and orientation is not used to operating on equal terms with women hence the difficulty of accommodating them in government.

The military probably without deliberately doing so, has entrenched a system bias against the extensive involvement of women in government, because they themselves have evolved through a strictly sex-segregated world.'

Omowunmi Oguniola and Adesina Sambo examine in the succeeding two chapters the related issue of women in *Intra party politics* and *Women and the struggle for elective office during the transition period*. Both address the difficulty of the woman politician in making a breakthrough in intra party politics having to run against a structural operation dominated by men which is not too sympathetic to the cause of women.

Sambo concludes: 'the lesson from the experience of women's struggle for political power in the aborted third republic is clearly that the chance of success in elections are contin-

gent upon the effective control of the structures of political parties.'

This, she added, must be aided by the adoption of affirmative action, which is supposed to be a government-initiated advocacy for the special rights of women. Mary Kanu signs off the section with an examination of the role of the media in the campaign for women empowerment. She blames the media for under-reporting women politicians, but also enjoins the women to invest in publicity like their male counterparts.

In the second part, the reader encounters some of the key players in the struggle for women participation in the politics of the Nigerian Third Republic. Quite a revealing profile except that these were silent on the less than complimentary role some of them played even against some of their own. Often times, oppression is made possible only by the complicity of some members of the oppressed class. It is interesting to note that in spite of the many odds against them quite a number of women made significant contribution to the political process.

Some of these women no doubt will serve as an inspiration to others wishing to follow in their steps. But the reader might want to know if Glory Kilanko of Women in Nigeria (WIN) is a politician or pro-democracy activist. She did not belong to either of the two government sponsored parties. She probably would have been more useful in the book as a resource person on the role of women-focussed NGOs. This is a piece of work that goes beyond the usual sloganeering, a well contrived document that should ginger the desired response from both the 'oppressed' and those who serve as their oppressors.

• Adeniji is a literary arts reporter with the Guardian of Lagos.

Write Me From Iowa

James Gibbs

ADMINISTRATOR, novelist, literary stylist, Chukwuemeka Ike's latest offering purports to be transcriptions of twenty-six tapes sent by Ify, a Nigerian writer participating in an international programme for writers in Iowa, to her family in Nigeria. An 'author's Note' indicates that 'The story reflects the actual experience of a Nigerian writer who partici-

**Chukwuemeka Ike,
TO MY HUSBAND
FROM IOWA.
Malthouse press,
Lagos, 1995.**

pated in the International Writing Programme (sic) of the University of Iowa' and points out that 'Ify, who tells the story, is, however, imaginary, as are the other characters.'

The major interest is in the writer's response to America, to chat shows, women priests, party politics, the treatment of American Indians and of writers, to library facilities, super markets, and so on and so forth. Other considerations, for example the persona's Nigerian citizenship and Anglicanism, contribute to individuality. Given the 'Author's Note' and the tenor of the chapters, the

>>

author's decision to adopt a female persona represents the major act of disguise, the most creative element in the fictionalisation. The mask never covers all of the face and is lightly worn: comments on clothes and accounts of relationships with men and women on the writing programme are presented as elements in the characterisation of the feminine voice.

Ike's decision to cross the gender barrier does not surprise. *Anthills of the Savannah* has already shown one established Nigerian writer responding to the comments of women readers and critics. For what its worth, I find the use of a female persona brave and intriguing. Ify is curious, intelligent, anxious to understand what she sees in the United States and keen to organise her responses. Only very occasionally (see below) does she endow her husband with unexpected wisdom that is surprising and worrying.

From what has been said, it will be apparent that this is a travelogue: a Nigerian visits the US, and writes about experiences. The most immediate comparison is with *America, their America* by Ike's near age-mate J.P. Clark, now Bekederemo Clark. But the 'student' involved is far more mature, far more anxious to get down and communicate information and make the most of a 'learning experience.'

The attraction of the book is in the elegance with which it is written. Ike's sentences are easy and graceful that spare us almost completely the hesitations and repetitions we might have expected in a transcript of a recording. Indeed, the pretence that the work is a transcription is quickly forgotten as, in a measured, finely chiselled style, Ify records reactions. One gets the impression of a

conscientious, perhaps somewhat isolated participant on a writing programme, with no creative project in hand, 'she' turns with all the self-discipline of a model student to the task of recording reactions to events around 'her'. Like a compulsive diarist, 'she' is for ever recording dates, addresses, telephone numbers, percentages, names....

As a responsible national representative on a writing programme, Ify interviews fellow participants about their positions as writers, the conditions under which they work and the incomes they command. 'She' also investigates - without positive results - the possibility of using US publishers, and notes with particular care American attitudes to authors. On learning about the appointment of Poet Laureates in US states, 'she' warns her shadowy but presumably knowledgeable husband, 'I'll need your advice when I get home, on what strategy to adopt to persuade our governments and the private sector to do something tangible to nurture creative writing in Nigeria.' (250) Ify is responsive to ideas and prone to make statements of self-dedication - for example, she likes the idea of poetry readings, and after a visit to Tom Sawyer territory (Hannibal, Missouri), 'she' resolves: 'I'll write on any theme in which I feel competent and knowledgeable. I'll give more consideration to the problems of child development, on which little good fiction has so far

been written in Nigeria, drawing heavily on my own experience as a developing child, and on a mother and teacher. So help me God.' (259).

The presentation of the writer picking up ideas and becoming aware of new responsibilities are the most interesting of the book. But even they are pursued in a somewhat dilettante way so that even the undertaking to interview fellow participants is never pursued rigorously. All in all the book remains on the level of a well-written travelogue to be read with pleasure, and with admiration for the careful way in which facts and experiences have been shared. One can enjoy the asides, the notes that are jotted down for the attention of those in Nigerian universities and governments. One can be surprised by figures and learn some history. There is a 'gentlemanly' understanding that these factual elements will never amount to anything as substantial as a programme or as intellectually challenging as a thesis.

While there is, despite the decision to speak through a female persona, nothing earth shattering in Ike's new book, there should be admiration for a job well done, and thanks for insights into life in the United States and on a Writers' Program.

•Gibbs is a professor of English at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

Metaphors of Womanhood

Bose Shaba

Yvonne Vera, UNDER THE TONGUE, Baobab Books, Harare, 1996, 114pp.

The River will become a tongue. Under the tongue are hidden voices. Under the tongue is a healing silence. I see the river. I see Grandmother.

>>