

Burnished Through Fire

BY NINA MBA



THE author clearly states her objective, her intention and her motivation in the preface: "The book is about Chief Emeke Anyaoku, the man and his work. It combines a biographical profile, (italics added) with current themes and statements, professional and personal achievements and challenges of the approaching millennium...My intention was always to produce an accessible publication, not a scholarly work; and to widen understanding of the person, the institutions and the continent of Africa."

The book is well produced and exhibits an excellent cover design; surprisingly there is no index which, given the amount of data involved, would certainly have made the book more "accessible". An index does not make a publication scholarly.

The author is a Canadian expert on Southern Africa and the Commonwealth, resident in Harare where she is director of the Southern African Research and Documentation Centre.

The foreword is written by Anyaoku's icon and mentor, Nelson Mandela, who describes Anyaoku as "the profoundly humane man ... (who) has made this search for a common humanity his life's mission."

Despite the saying in Western Samoa, "from the direction of the wind" (To tell a story from the beginning) on the page before the text, the book, in fact, does not begin with the birth of Anyaoku, but with his election as the third Commonwealth Secretary-General in Kuala Lumpur in October 1989. This indicates clearly the emphasis of the book: on the work, rather than the person.

The first chapter, "The Changing Times", begins with the meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1989 and ends with Harare 1991, when the first Heads of Government summit managed by an African Secretary-General took place. The "Changing Times" refers to the end of the cold war and the release of Mandela.

The second chapter is on South Africa: it begins with the June 1999 installation of Thabo Mbeki as president, then flashes back initially to the 1970s and 80's before moving farther back to the 1960's when Anyaoku was an active member of the U.K Committee Against Apartheid. The narrative shuttles to 1991 and 1987, 1991-1993, the CODESA period, and the elections of 1994 which returned South Africa to the Commonwealth in the June of the same year. I have detailed these liberties taken with chronology to demonstrate the author's novel approach to

the presentation of history. The objective of this approach is not clear to this reader. Interspersed within this fractured structure are excerpts from Anyaoku's various speeches on/at events marking each transitory point of narrative. Just one particularly powerful example: in 1998, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of South Africa's return to the Commonwealth (p108), 'Frantz Fanon once said that the period of Foreign rule in Africa was the time when Africans were the great absentees of universal history... (this is) no longer the case... (Africa) is shaping world history. But if Africa is not to lose its place in world affairs in the coming millennium, it will have to set its house in order.'

It is not until chapter 5 that the author's focus returns to Anyaoku's life history. Even then, in a 30-page chapter which summarizes clearly and concisely the origins, pre-colonial and colonial history of Obosi interwoven with the history of Anyaoku's family, it is only on the last page that we reach the birth of Eleazar Chukwuemeka Anyaoku on the 18th of January, 1935.

Chapter 6, "Towards a Common Humanity", describes the evolution of Anyaoku into an international civil servant who believes passionately in 'a common humanity.' Detailed is his education, at Merchants of Light Secondary School, Oba, (Cambridge S.C. Grade), the University of Ibadan (B.A. Classics, 1959), his first job with the Commonwealth Development Corporation and training at the Royal Institute for Public Administration, London. Anyaoku explains that it was Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa who persuaded him to join Nigeria's fledgling foreign service in April 1962. He (Anyaoku) claims to have admired Balewa because "he brought a transparent integrity to bear in public service; and in keeping with his own character he stood for a gentle, tolerant and humane Nigeria ... (and) sought to uphold ...the pluralistic Nigeria which we inherited at independence ... and build on it" (P206). Anyaoku shares the same outlook and identifies himself and members of the independence generation as 'midnight's children' (Salman Rushdie's famous description of those born on the eve of independence in India), "Those of us whose own arrival at maturity coincided with national independence have been accorded

Phyllis Johnson,
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2000.

the rare gift of growing up with our country and of dedicating ourselves to its service" (p.204).

Acting on his belief in Nigerian unity, Anyaoku married a Yoruba woman, Egunola Olubunmi Solanke in 1962. The author's assessment of the cultural implications of this marriage is rather sexist. She is surprised that an aunt could give away the bride, but fails to mention that the bride's father died some years earlier. She also failed to mention that the bride's father had been educated in England (as a lawyer), only that her mother and grandmother had! It is also an ethnocentric assessment: "The Yoruba belief that the woman makes the home, so the woman is the home, is different... (from) the Igbo belief that it is the man's home."

The highlights of the career of the young foreign service officer were his meeting with Mandela in Accra in 1962, just before his

Anyaoku's role in the war merits only two pages. The Nigerian government had pushed for Anyaoku's recall, but the Commonwealth upheld the principle that once a country's nominee is accepted, then the whole ethic of international service would be destroyed if the officer concerned "constantly (has) to look over his shoulder" (p.242). The Canadian Secretary-General then, Arnold Smith, not only labored to bring the Nigerian and Biafran leaders together to "reason with each other" (p.239), he also sent his Assistant Director of International Affairs on "home leave" in the middle of the war, to try to persuade Ojukwu to agree to Commonwealth brokered negotiations in London. Despite the hospitalization of his third child and the hazards of flying on a Red Cross plane, Anyaoku did go to Biafra, did what he could to help his family who were displaced from Obosi, and met with Ojukwu — to no avail.

The book is even briefer when it comes to Anyaoku's two month period as Nigeria's Foreign Minister, between October and December 1983. The question pertaining to why Anyaoku accepted the appointment offered by an already discredited government is not asked. However, Anyaoku answers it indirectly and naively when he is quoted by the author (date and occasion not cited) "... when... (Shagari) invited me to join the government, he had told me ... he was determined to do better than in his first administration" (p.248). After the coup, Anyaoku was immediately re-accepted into the Commonwealth Secretariat. He is surprised that initially the coup (of December 1983) was so popular and quibbles, defensively: "People had reacted to the record of the government, not to the new Shagari administration of which I was a member, but the record of the earlier administration" (p.248). Johnson does not provide any information or analysis of the second republic as a way of putting Anyaoku's position in context.

Anyaoku's involvement in the attempt by the Commonwealth to call Abacha to order, Nigeria's suspension at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Auckland in November 1995, and his dramatic visit to Nigeria after Abacha's death are narrated in great detail (25 pages) and are well illustrated with photographs of the extraordinary embrace between Anyaoku and Obasanjo, after his (Obasanjo's) release from prison, and the last photograph of Moshood Abiola with Anyaoku and Nigeria's former Chief of General Staff, Mike Akhigbe. Regrettably, the credits of the photographs are not cited.

There are excessive quotations from

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Emeka Anyaoku

(Mandela's) trial, and his attachment to the team of Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, when he visited Nigeria in September 1962. Anyaoku had profound respect for Nehru and his philosophy of non-alignment, which influenced his own thinking. In 1963, Anyaoku was posted to Nigeria's Permanent Mission to the U.N, where he played an important role in various U.N. activities against apartheid in South Africa.

Chapter 7, "The Question of Nigeria," focuses on Anyaoku's involvement with his country: first, in the Civil War; then, as Foreign Minister in Shehu Shagari's short-lived second civilian administration; and, in the greatest detail, as the Commonwealth Secretary-General dealing with the suspension of Nigeria from the organization in 1995 and attempting to bring about democracy to the country.

<< British journals, magazines and newspapers while relatively few are from Nigerian, Canadian and Australian sources. The book is generally well written in lucid and flowing prose, which is illuminated by flashes of rhetorical brilliance. My favorite excerpt of this is in p.280: "This is not to say that everything he touches turned to gold but if it turned out to be tin then he didn't throw it away, he retooled it."

It is interesting to learn that Anyaoku, the classicist, coined a new word, *intermestic*, to define issues that are essentially domestic but have international repercussions (p292).

Most readers, outside Commonwealth diplomatic and academic circles, will not be looking for "a comparative study of the degree of impact on each Commonwealth country since (1992)" which Johnson regrets not doing. However most readers would like to see "critical analysis... that dig (s) out the contents of his closets and reveal(s) his warts", which the author agrees she has not done (p280). Johnson preempts criticisms that the book is not a critical or academic analysis, that it is too positive a presentation, by asserting, defiantly, idealistically and naively that, "the trouble with his closets is that they are open to scrutiny, and contain no

skeletons, no dirty laundry, no drugs, mistresses, political skullduggery or whiff of corruption. If that (an honest person, happily married and devoted to his family) is considered odd in the human condition at the beginning of a new millennium, then perhaps we should take a good look at our judgement responses."

The way Johnson has thus staked out the moral high ground for herself and her subject is more reminiscent of 18th century English biographers than those of the 21st century when most readers do not appreciate moral didacticism. While one may sympathize with Johnson's implied aversion for some contemporary 'kiss and tell' biographies (nick named *scullioographies*), she seems to be over defensive about her work and over-protective of her subject.

There is no need: *Eye of Fire* is a comprehensive study of Anyaoku's diplomatic career and of the Commonwealth which he served, although the approach is more anecdotal than analytic. There is more than enough material for the reader to recognize Anyaoku's achievements and strength of character without the author's intrusive presence. **GBS**

Re-Imagining *Genesis*

BY WOLE OGUNDELE

W

H. AUDEN once said that his response would be lukewarm to a young man who came to him for advice on how to be a poet because he had something to say. But if the young man wanted to be a poet because he loved words, he (Auden) would give him all the encouragement he was capable of. Poetry, in this Audenesque formulation, is first and last about words. Somewhere in-between comes the 'subject', which stands or falls not on its own merit but on that of the words embodying it. 'Embody', because certain cultures held — and still hold, even in this age of universal literacy and cyberspace — that words are not just the sounds our vocal chords produce, but are autonomous, concrete objects that we human beings borrow for invoking reality and its objects, for communicating our thoughts, and for expressing our emotions.

Certainly, this combination of the primacy and concreteness of words has been at the heart of Niyi Osundare's poetry from the beginning of his writing career. He has always been primarily a lover of words, be they in his native Yoruba or English. And

though one would not ordinarily link Osundare with the English Romantic poets, the combination reminds us of his earlier definition of poetry as "man meaning to man" which is a reformulation of Wordsworth's wonderfully simple and valid definition of the poet as "a man speaking to all men." The emphasis here is on *speaking* because, though a literary poet, Osundare belongs to a predominantly oral culture where the poet still literally sings or chants, and where the conditions of orality have strengthened the aural imagination. Thus, he has been able to transfer much of that aural imagination into his literary poetry, which is written in a language long shaped by the literary process and imagination. He has also been able to transform the idioms, tropes and techniques of his Yoruba oral poetic background creatively, and also to adapt successfully its mythology and metaphysics as the informing vision of his own poetry. *The Word is an Egg*, his latest volume under review, might be considered an extended and

Niyi Osundare,
THE WORLD IS AN
EGG: POEMS, Ibadan,
Krafbooks Limited,
1999, 92 pp.