



## Remembering Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo's Dynamic Intelligence

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Comparative Cognitive Processes and Systems  
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Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo

Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo was my teacher in my BA at the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, between 1985 and 1989.

I Googled his name recently only to see the very rich commemoration by Chukwuma Azuonye " ["This Was a Man!": A Memorial Tribute to Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo](#)", in which he discusses Okeke-Ezigbo as a poet, literary critic and war correspondent on the Biafran side in the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970.

What do I remember most clearly about Okeke-Ezigbo?

His physical presence and energy, in harmony with his distinctive sartorial identity.

His astonishing command of English.

His creativity and resilience in the face of economic challenges faced by Nigerian academics in the very difficult years of the 1980s from which they seem to have been rescued by the peaceful but relentless militancy of the Academic Staff Union of Universities ( ASUU).

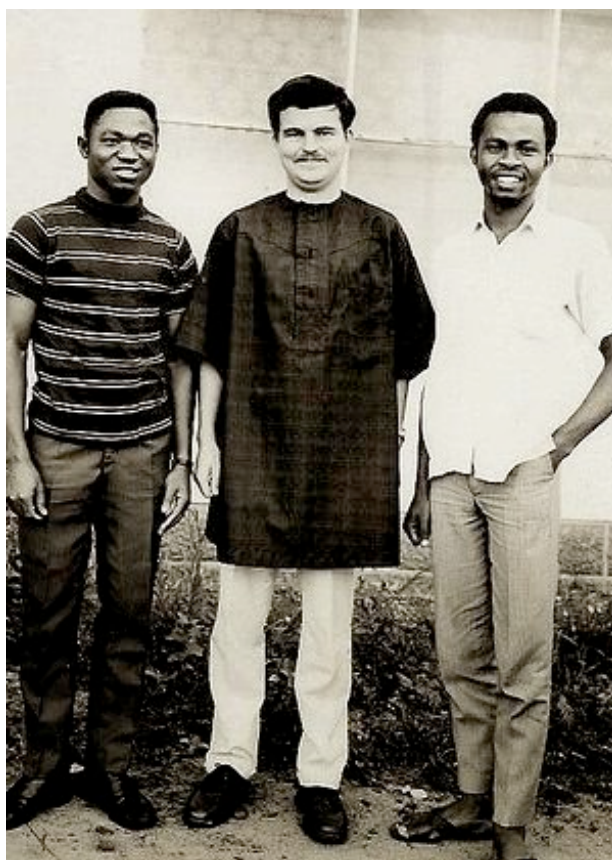
Okeke-Ezigbo in his customary white short sleeve shirt over his stocky physique, his face focused and animated with an inner fire, calm but potent, striding across the connection between the two sections of offices at the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, is the image the thought of him conjures to my mind.

That dynamic physicality embodied a man who dramatizes the various strategies through which Nigerian academics reinvented themselves in the challenging years of the 80s .

I knew him as owning and running a barber shop along with his work at the department where he was a PhD and a senior lecturer, later an associate professor, having got his PhD in the US and returned to Nigeria, most likely in the spirit of creating a base at home.

Other academics, in different departments, ran butcher shops, used their cars as taxis- I did that in later years after my BA- ran kiosks-general provisions stores, wrote books and sold to students- which I also did, among other coping strategies.

Okeke-Ezigbo eventually left that race behind and moved to the US, where, from what I learnt, he became the first Black professor at the University of Rhode Island, which still lists him as a [member of staff](#) on their website and which provided information for a [very moving memorial](#) to him, along with placing on their site [a brief essay on his career](#), attached to this mail, with a picture of the youthful Okeke-Ezigbo and Azuonye at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in the historic year 1967, when the Nigerian Civil War began.



(Left to right)  
Felix Okeke-Ezigbo, Stephen Vincent,  
Chukwuma Azuonye  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, June 1967  
from "[Christopher Okigbo Conference / Harvard / September 07](#)"  
Stephen Vincent : <http://www.stephenvincent.com/blog/2007/09/>

From his US base, Okeke-Ezigbo was able to build a magnificent house, palatial in its architectural ambition, if not fully so in size, for his family, near the University of Benin.

At the University of Rhode Island website he was once described as teaching a course in the Bible as literature, a teaching responsibility recollected in a [2012 commemorative essay](#) by Professor Ryan Trimm, then chair of the university's department of English.

How can a Nigerian and one whose academic publications are mainly in African and African-American literature, officially act as a teacher of the Bible as literature, the verbal and ideational core of Western civilization, in a Western university and a university that is not one with any particular affiliation with Africa such as the historically Black universities in the US?

That fact demonstrates, par excellence, Okeke-Ezigbo's intellectual dynamism, his range of knowledge and his capacity to adapt himself to situations, distilling opportunity from various circumstances, as evident from his days as a barbershop owner and manager even as a PhD senior lecturer in a university, metamorphoses following his graduate studies in the US after his role in the Nigerian Civil War.

What teaching moments, classroom experiences, for example, do I remember best about him?

One day, in our African-American literature class, the students demanded more hands on attention from our teacher Okeke-Ezigbo.

We wanted him to engage more intimately with the teaching process rather than insisting on so much independent work from us.

His response was that he expected us to use our "amalgamative intelligence".

A mark of powerful users of language is the creation of expressions which never leave you, perhaps all your life, because of their unique encapsulation of an idea.

This is one such example.

Do I have the energy right now to pry apart the various semantic and syntactic gears at work in creating the power of that expression?

The manner in which a particular selection of words is brought together to communicate a broad range of possibilities that are yet concentrated with a force that stamps itself on the mind?

Perhaps these brief statements of what such an analysis involves is the best that is convenient for me to do for now.

Otherwise, I would need to examine the distinctive significance of his choice of

words in comparison with others that could have been used and of the sentence structure in relation to others that could have been employed, demonstrating why these choices represent what the French novelist Gustave Flaubert describes as his ideal in his composition- the search for "le mot juste" - the perfect right word.