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“This Was a Man!”

A Memorial Tribute to Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo (October 14, 1944-June 25, 2012)

By

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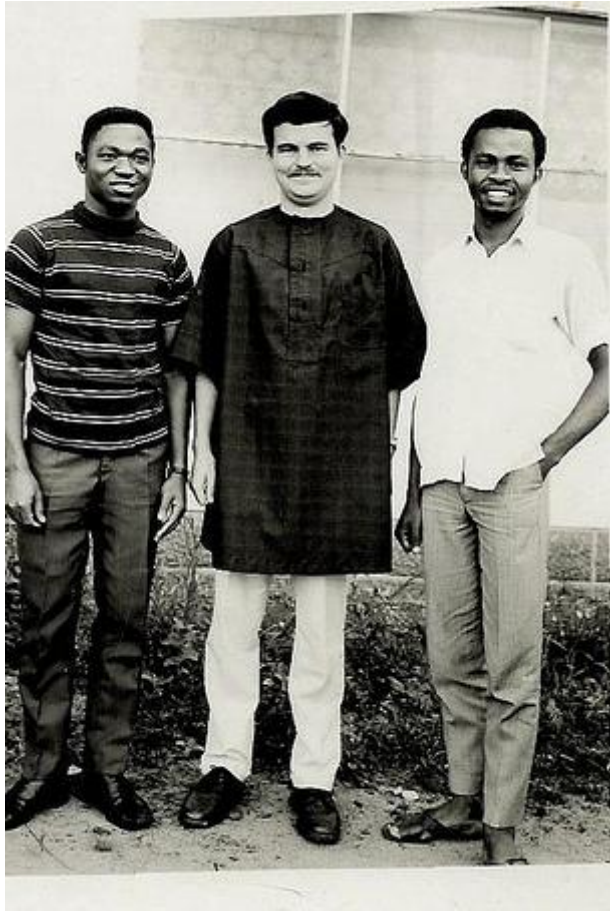


*His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, 'This was a man!'
(Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, 5.5.68)*

ONE of the leading members of the Biafran war generation of Nsukka poets, Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo—an elegant and consummate man of words—was born in Alor, present day Anambra State of Nigeria, on October 14, 1944. After his high school education at Igwebuike Grammar School, Awka, and Holy Ghost College, Owerri, he enrolled in the Department of English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in September 1966, graduating in June 1972, among the best in his class, with a BA *magna cum laude* in English literature.

Like other members of our generation, which has been described by Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka as “the wasted generation,” he lost three years to the sad but absolutely necessary Biafran war of independence of July 6 1967 to January 12, 1970. During that time, he served as a war correspondent, shuffling to and from various war zones on his motorcycle for the War Information Bureau of the Ministry of Defense under the directorship of Dr. Michael Echeruo. Throughout the war, he was among the coterie of young men, within and around the War Information Bureau and the Biafran Cultural Affairs Directorate under the poet Gabriel Okara

who kept alive the fire of Biafran creativity through their day by day poetic recreations of the war experience.



[L to R: Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo, Stephen Vincent (Poet and American Peace Corps Lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, & Chukwuma Azuonye, June 1967. Source: <http://stephenvincent.net/blog/?m=200709>]

Before and after the war, at Nsukka, Okeke-Ezigbo featured regularly in the weekly poetry readings of the Writers' Club of the English Department and of the Odunke Community of Artists which I organized. Under the dark shadows of war in a suffocating atmosphere of anger and pessimism suffused with the smell of blood, we relentlessly pursued and sought rapprochement with the muse of modern African letters who came to us a watermaid, earth goddess, dancer or crystal of beauty. So deep was the impression made on me by his presence at my side that, in an Igbo poem I presented at our first poetry reading at the CEC, in October 1966, it was to him, as my *fidus Achates*, that I cried out in anguished solicitation of support when my muse, Adamma (symbolizing the ethereal beauty of the goddess), appeared far too evanescent and elusive:

*Okeke, o buzikw' ikorobja ka-anyi n'eto?
Gbatakw'osọ ka-anyi chuba!
Okukọ hapu wọkọm o ji ginị az' umu ya?
Biko bja ka-anyi kiri ugo mma m....*

He was naturally among the war poets showcased in *Nsukka Harvest*, the collection of new poetry from Nsukka which I had the honor of editing and publishing under the imprint of Odunke in 1972 (see http://works.bepress.com/chukwuma_azuonye/77/). He also published poetry in *The Muse* and *Omabe*, literary journals from the English Department of the University of Nigeria which he later edited before proceeding to the United States where he obtained his doctorate in English with a 1979 dissertation characteristically entitled "Eagle Against Buzzard: The Dialect Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson," from the State University of New York at Buffalo (see *Dissertation Abstracts International* 40). Okeke-Ezigbo's focus on dialect poetry in this dissertation opened the way to his strong commitment, throughout his academic career, to the exploration of the nuances of language use in literature and everyday national life.

After a brief spell of teaching at SUNY-Buffalo, he returned to Nigeria as a Lecturer in English at the University of Benin where he quickly rose to the rank of Associate Professor, serving variously as the Director of university's General Studies program and Chair of its Department of English. But in the early 1990's, he became part of the great transatlantic drain of Nigerian intelligentsia occasioned by the triumph of disorder and reckless economic mismanagement of the country by a succession of military dictatorships. After a brief stint, in 1991-91, as a visiting Professor of African and African American Literature at the University of Arizona at Tempe, he joined the University of Rhode Island in Kingston as an Associate Professor, rising to the rank of full Professor of English and Africana Studies in 1995. One of the most respected and highly rated professors in the university, he remained in that position until his untimely death on June 25, 2012.

Okeke-Ezigbo first broke into print, immediately after the Biafran war, with a short story, "Caught in a Web," in *The Insider: Stories of War and Peace from Nigeria* (Nwankwo-Ifejika, 1971), a collection featuring short stories by Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Arthur Nwankwo, Victor Nwankwo, Nathan Okonkwo Nkala, Andre Aletta and the present writer (Chukwuma Azuonye). Along with his two poems ("Nostalgia" and "Rejection") in *Nsukka Harvest* (p. 29), reprinted below, "Caught in a Web" has been repeatedly singled out for commentary by critics as among the most incisive representations of the ironies and social wounds of war (See, for example, "Post-War Writing in Nigeria" by Ernest Nneji Emenyonu, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer, 1973, pp. 49-54, and "The Spirit of Agony: War Poetry from Biafra" by Afam Ebeogu, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 35-49). It is to be hoped that his little known collection of verse, *John the Baptist and Other Poems* (Eagleglory Publications, P.M.B. 48, Nsukka, 1974) can now be revisited by critics and that its proper place in the canon of twentieth-century African verse of the Nsukka school can be better ascertained.

Okeke-Ezigbo's scholarship is bold, brilliant, incisive and thoroughly in accord with the ideal of criticism as a system of values that insures that falsehood does not establish itself as the truth. Notable for its Arnoldian high and excellent seriousness, it comprises close to thirty full-length articles on modern African letters, African and transatlantic African popular culture and folklore, and global discourse on race, class and culture published in such journals as *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*; *Black Literature in Review*; *CLA Journal (Official Quarterly Publication of the College Language Association)*; *Comparative Literature Studies*; *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*; *Ife Studies in Africana Literature and the Arts (ISALA)*; *Journal of African Studies*; *Journal of Popular Culture*; *Neohelicon*; *Notes on Contemporary Literature*; *Obsidian*; *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing: Studies in Modern Fiction*; *Nigeria*

Magazine; The Explicator; The Western Journal of Black Studies, Additionally, in 1997, he co-authored, with John Stoner, an ethnographic monograph on the Makonde of southeast Tanzania and northern Mozambique for the Rosen series, Heritage Library of African Peoples which I had the honor of serving as commissioning editor

Strongly versed in the fundamentals of the New Criticism and averse to the fetishization of theory with a strong preference to teasing out all possible nuances from every word of the page under his penetrating critical eyes, Okeke-Ezigbo situated himself at the center of the twentieth-century debates on the language of African literature with his 1982 essay, "The Role of the Nigerian Writer in a Carthaginian Society" (*Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*. #21. pp. 28-38) in which he argues that Pidgin is a "practical, viable, flexible language distilled in the alembic of our native sensibility and human experience." Says he: "This lusty language, which transcends our geographical and political boundaries grows daily before our eyes. It is our natural, unifying weapon against the divisive forces of English. In West Africa, English splits; Pidgin unites." A follow-up to his earlier essay, "What is a national literature?" (*Nigeria Magazine*. #149. pp. 1-13), he adds that "the adoption of Pidgin will automatically make the writer national by domesticating his outlook and sensibility," and he concludes, "On adopting Pidgin and becoming a real nationalist the Nigerian writer can now speak with the knowledge of an insider" (35). In a rejoinder, published in the same issue of *Okike*, playwright Femi Osofisan counters that "the use of Pidgin cannot automatically make any writer patriotic or progressive" (Osofisan, 43) but agrees that Pidgin is a viable language and capable of sustaining works of literature.

Okeke-Ezigbo's acerbic wit and uncanny insight into the underbelly of contemporary social realities comes through vividly through the carefully crafted titles of his essays, to take a few examples: "The Alleged 'Self-Pity' in Afro-American Folk Songs" (*Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 108-115); "Cultural Exorcism: A Re-Examination of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (*Ife Studies In African Literature and the Arts: ISALA*. No. 1, Harmattan 1982, pages 71-86); "The Frogs Incident in *Henderson the Rain King*" (*Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 12, #.1, 1982: 7-8); "Begging the Beggars: Restoration of the Dignity of Man in *The Beggars' Strike*" (*Neohelicon*, Vol. 19, no. 1: 307-322); "The Automobile as Erotic Bride: Nkem Nwankwo's *My Mercedes Is Bigger Than Yours*" (*Critique*. Vol. 25. Issue 4, 1984: 199); "The Strangling Hold of Zurrjir: Nigerian Writers and the Burden of the 'Half-Bodied Baby'" (*Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, Vol 15, No 4); Three Artificial Blacks: A Re-examination of Flannery O'Connor's 'The Artificial Nigger.'" (*College English Association Journal* 27,1984: 371-82); "The Impossibility of Becoming a Gentleman in Nigeria: A Neglected Theme of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*" (*Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 12 #2. Summer., 1985: 93-97); "Three Artificial Blacks: A Reexamination of O'Connor's 'The Artificial Nigger.'" (*College Language Association Journal*, 27 (4): June 1984: 371-382); "Anu solu nwa-enwe o majie aka: Ogbuefi Nnamdi Azikiwe as an Igbo Folk Hero" (*The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 19, Issue 4, 1986: pp. 131-144; reprinted in *The Hero in Igbo Life and Literature*, ed. Donatus Nwoga and Chukwuma Azuonye, 2002). Through these works, Okeke-Ezigbo has carved out an indelible niche for himself among the leading African intellectuals of the twentieth-century and the turn of the third millennium!

Twenty-one years ago, I wrote as follows in my article, "Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artists," about our "wasted generation": "We belong to the very incinerator of this wasted generation, but we refuse to lake it tragically. We have, like the phoenix risen again and again from the ashes of our old selves only to be reborn with the same incombustible traits,

in the words Georges Davy on Durkheim's Lorrainian upbringing: 'scorn for the avoidance of effort; disdain for success accomplished without work: horror at everything that is not reliably founded'" (*ALA Bulletin*, Volume 17, No. 1, Winter 1991, pp. 20-26) This, in sum, is of the essence of Felix Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo's experience of life and letters.

Quintessentially debonair, intensely passionate yet almost monastically withdrawn, imbued with uncommon folk wisdom, loving and beloved, ever caring, Felix is survived by his soul-mate and gentle wife of nearly forty years, our classmate, Dora Ifeoma Okeke-Ezigbo (nee Mogbo), their two lovely daughters (Nnenna and Chioma), their two charming twin sons (Chinedu and Chiemeka), and a closely-knot family of sons-of-inlaw and grand children. May his soul rest in perfect peace!

TWO EARLY POEMS BY OKEKE-EZIGBO

[from *Nsukka Harvest: Poetry from Nsukka, 1966-1972*, ed. Chukwuma Azuonye, Oduke Publications, 1972, p. 29)

NOSTALGIA

We mourn,
not so much the strange soil
we thought was fertile land;
neither for timepenny lost nor booktime fleeting;

Our lone hoe has broken
towards the last mound

When
shall we sit
in the cleanswept open
in the background of playing
children well-mothered,
astride long kegs of frothing
to food the harmattan fire
with the harvest wood,
and toast the new yam
in the natural harmony
peppered salt and
virgin palmoil?

When?

REJECTION

And so it was,
that we who were afield when
the blazing sun set at midday

were abandoned naked in the
while kinsmen couched clothed dogs
in cushioned kennels.

And so it came to be

that we who gulped down
catechism to receive baptism
we who bowed before that crucifix
feared the Sacristy
and stopped dead on roads
to say the Angelus
were to groan beside the guarded fence
as They dispensed corned beef in Lent
gossiped With the market women
communed with money doublers'
and They suffered b ,
not the little children *it*
to come unto Them

We drained our manhood

sleepless,
spading in the heated blackout
to raise Ivory Salem on
Quicksand layered with
wholesome blood and splintered bones;
dragged, rudderless
we are lumbered home
to re youth in coldfisted darkness
gilded with tepid rainbow colours