

THE MAKING OF NIGERIAN POETRY AT IBADAN: 1980-1993

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No history of Nigerian poetry will be complete
without an auspicious mention of the eighties.
—J.O.J. Nwachukwu— Agbada

ABSTRACT

This short paper interrogates the misrepresentation of the Ibadan tradition in Nigerian writing. Focusing on Robert Wren's work which is a dominant effort in the mapping of the Ibadan literary tradition, it recognises the continued relevance of the Ibadan tradition in the perpetuation of Nigerian poetry of English expression beyond the time-space that received critical opinion has assigned it in Nigerian literary history.

The title of this short essay plays on the subtitle of Robert Wren's *Those Magical Years: The Making of Nigerian Literature at Ibadan 1948-1966*. This subversive gesture is deliberate. The essay, like the book, is meant to explain the Ibadan tradition in the context of Nigerian literature. But while Wren's book clarifies issues and experiences relating to the creation of Nigerian literature at the University of Ibadan between 1948 and 1966, the paper foregrounds an experience which the book is silent about: the flowering of the Ibadan poetic tradition between 1980 and 1993. In this sense, the paper, in deconstructive terms, is both a supplement to, and an interrogation of, *Those Magical Years* because Wren's work dominates the historical construction of the Ibadan literary experience.

It is necessary to state from the outset that there has never been an Ibadan literary school or movement¹. To say otherwise is to suggest that Ibadan poets – poets

nurtured at the University of Ibadan (the first university in Nigeria) right from the late fifties – came under a common influence. In reality, only a section of the university community at Ibadan created and continues to sustain an institutional base for the production of poetry and the propagation of a vibrant literary culture. When Ibadan witnessed a cultural awakening in the fifties and sixties, it was *The Horn, Black Orpheus*, with the active collaboration of the Mbari Arts and Writers' Club, and expatriates like Martin Banham, Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn that stirred a literary renaissance. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Frank Aig-Imokhue and others then pioneered a poetic tradition which Odia Ofeimun, a foremost Nigerian poet of the seventies and post-civil war Ibadan poet, partly queried. This paper, a panoramic survey, situates new trends and voices in the Ibadan poetic culture within the circumstances authorizing literary creation in Nigeria.

I

Shared experiences have in the last two decades sustained the direction first taken by Nigerian poetry in the decade that followed the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). In the main, frustrations engendered by the failure of politicians in the aborted second and third attempts at democratic governance and the betrayal of public trust by their military successors have legitimized the critical voice that characterizes the poetry. What has been witnessed on the Nigerian poetic scene may at the same time be seen as yet another renaissance: fledgling poets of the seventies have become prolific, while established poets, for fear of becoming irrelevant, have also been responding to contemporary realities². A testimony to this fact was given by the editors of *The Fate of Vultures* (1989), an anthology that grew out of entries for the 1988 BBC Arts and African Poetry Competition:

Altogether, there were some 4500 poems submitted by 1200 poets. There were entries from all over Africa, and some Africans resident in Europe, North America and Asia. Nigeria alone accounted for close to third of the entries, a reflection of its size and population, but perhaps also the vigour of the poetic scene there (xi).

(1) To talk of an Ibadan school in this context will imply that what identifies those we have tagged Ibadan poets is a common approach to poetry. While certain thematic and stylistic correspondences are notable in the works of some of these poets who belong to the same period on account of their responsiveness to shared experiences, there is no justification for saying that they belong to a school. Their emergence was only made possible by their environment. I disagree with the misinformed and misinforming designation of this literary experience by Chinweizu and others in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980).

(2) This is particularly evident in the recent poetry of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo and Wole Soyinka.

We can trace the new awakening to efforts in recent times to popularize poetry in Nigeria. The Association of Nigerian Authors, which came into existence in 1981, has been promoting promising poets. The last decade also saw the growth of newspapers. Newspapers, in the absence of adventurous publishing outfits, have created an alternative outlet for publishing new talents. Equally important is the emergence of writers' groups and formations in cities and institutions of higher learning, outfits that have taken poetry to the public by making poetry performance a public event. But while many poets are associated with these trends, those bred at Ibadan are clearly in the majority.

Ibadan poets enjoy facilities provided by art enthusiasts, informal writers' gatherings and occasional literary journals. Abiola Irele and Femi Osofisan set up the New Horn Press which published the first poetry collections of Harry Garuba, Niyi Osundare and Mabel Segun. The growth of Afam Akeh, Sanya Osha, Sesan Ajayi, Okoro Chima, Emevwo Biakolo, Chiedu Ezeanah, Onookome Okome, Nehru Odeh, Remi Raji-Oyelade and Godwin Ede as poets was also accelerated by their involvement with the Ibadan Poetry Club, which some of them resuscitated in the early eighties. It was about this same time that the Department of English at the University of Ibadan introduced courses in creative writing. The creative writing programme has since produced, to the surprise of many, inventive but unpublished poets like Franklin Ikhiwin, Tony Otiono, David Dai, Adenike Adesuyi, Yebo Adamolekun, Wole Popoola, Ade Adejumo, Charles Edonni, Mark Ighile and Joy Owese.

II

Niyi Osundare, Harry Garuba, Femi Fatoba, Okinba Launko and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, all Ibadan poets who came to the limelight in the eighties, constitute the avant garde of these writers. If Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* is a polemic in that it defines the social relevance of the Nigerian poet, it is in the work of Niyi Osundare that the vision has been broadened. Poor and oppressed people everywhere find a consistent and daring advocate in Osundare. He chronicles their plights, celebrates their victories and defines their legitimate expectations. That he maintains this degree of commitment without disregarding artistic refinement makes him the most distinctive voice in the emergent generation of Nigerian poets. His passionate identification with the marginalised majority must have also prompted Ezenwa Ohaeto to brand him as "the poet of the suffering man" (161). Testimony to his productivity is the fact that he published eight collections - *Songs of the Marketplace*, *Village Voices*, *A Nib in the Pond*, *The Eye of the Earth*, *Moonsongs*, *Waiting Laughters*, *Songs of the Season* and *Midlife* - within the space of a decade.

The populist orientation of his work is stated in "Poetry Is", a poem that outlines his poetic philosophy. Partly restating Wordsworth's outlook on poetry, the poem denounces the alienating obscurantism that marks the work of earlier Nigerian poets and proposes a new poetic, one that accords the intelligible a great deal of primacy. It concludes on the note that:

Poetry is
 what the soft wind
 musics to the dancing leaf
 what the sole tells the dusty path
 what the bee hums to the alluring nectar
 what rainfall croons to the lowering eaves.

Poetry
 is
 man
 meaning
 to
 man. (3-4)

"I Sing of Change", another poem in *Songs of the Marketplace* is important because it articulates the diverse concerns of Osundare which his subsequent volume have amplified. The poem clarifies his quest for global renewal by advocating the elimination of values that entrench oppression, inequality and disharmony, making a case for the brotherhood of man:

I sing
 of the beauty of Athens
 without its slaves

 Of a world free
 of kings and queens
 and other remnants
 of an arbitrary past

 Of earth
 with no
 sharp north
 or deep south
 without blind curtains
 or iron walls

 Of the end
 of warlords and armouries
 and prisons of hate and fear

Of deserts treeing
and fruiting
after the quickening rains ...

I sing of a world reshaped (19-90)

The poems in Osundare's first three volumes are marked by a certain measure of clarity and topicality. His work came to what Emevwo Biakolo in "Explorations in New Nigerian Poetry I" describes as "mature expression" (12) in *The Eye of the Earth*. What attests to the affinity of his art to the Yoruba tradition of popular poetry is the fact that his creative imagination is fuelled by public occasions that license criticism and celebration. His popularity was boosted when he also popularized poetry by writing regularly for the Ibadan-based *Sunday Tribune*. His poems that appeared in the paper are found in *Songs of the Season*.

Harry Garuba is an Ibadan poet of comparable stature, even though his work provides a contrast to Osundare's. In spite of the fact that he has only one published volume, *Shadow and Dream* (1982), he has been a source of inspiration to younger Ibadan poets, particularly those associated with the Ibadan Poetry Club. His career started as early as the seventies when his poems appeared in *Opon Ifa* and *Positive Review*, and he exhibits the kind of penchant for artistic perfection for which we also know Christopher Okigbo.

Garuba's poetry lacks the fury and combative energy found in much of recent Nigerian poetry. Societal problems generally elicit personal lament in his work. And even though his poems thrive on an exploration of the amorous, they sufficiently betray his sympathy for his immediate social environment as well as its wholesome aspiration. He reveals the horror of seeing "a landscape of drought", "barefooted children in ragged clothes" and

The smoothing pain of wounded dreams, dreams shorn of wings,
of colours, of voice, of tone: dreams ruptured in the rank screams
of poli-trik-cians.

("Estrangement", 8)

His visionary projection hints at the possibility of collective fulfilment. This approximates to the quest for regeneration that also animates the work of Ofeimun and Osundare. He says:

We will be here when it all ends
Watching beyond clouds that
Have refused to gather...

We will be here when it ends
 When the harvest comes
 On the fruit-fringes of rain.
 ("Prophecy", 41)

In the poetry of Femi Fatoba, Okinba Launko, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie and Mabel Segun, we discover different but striking tendencies. These poets are known to have started writing long before their individual collections were published and it is ironic that some of them have even been instrumental to the promotion of the better known Ibadan poets of the new generation.

Femi Fatoba, the most prominent of these poets, started writing in the sixties and had been published in several journals before *Petals of Thought*, his first collection, was published. His poetic engagement hinges on humorous, puny and often sardonic exploration of thought that he renders in deceptive simplicity. "They said I abused the Government", one of his new poems published in the BBC anthology, *The Fate of Vultures: New African Poetry* is a typical Fatoba poem, one that blends laconic grace with conversational immediacy. The poem is the more remarkable because it is modelled on the traditional poem of abuse:

The other night (and that's not the first time)
 The police came to drag me away from home
 And locked me up at the mercy of the government
 They paraded me like a criminal
 And made mouth like *tuuku*
 To tell me and the world
 That I abused the government
 How I wish I had a mouth and the right words
 To insult, abuse and mock the government;
 To say the government is deaf
 To the cries of the people
 To say the government is blind
 And does not see where she is going
 That the government is a cannibal
 Killing and eating her own children:
 Who am I to abuse the government:
 I, a common slave to the government... (40)

Okinba Launko (Femi Osofisan) is a notable Ibadan poet who was at a time deprived of critical attention, despite the fact that his first collection of poems, *Minted Coins*, won the ANA poetry prize in 1987. He conceives of himself as a social engineer, one whose sense of mission is coloured by the urgent need to

sensitize the Nigerian populace. He represents the informed members of the Nigerian society who are always stunned by the antics of inept leaders. This perhaps explains why the poet-persona tells his lover in "Fidelity" that:

Our people
are always the defeated victims
their ribs out and screaming,
when trusted leaders return from elections
to become marauders (34)

Dream-Seeker on Divining Chair, his second book of poems, chronicles the exploits of the poet-adventurer. Its structure is based on the prognostic idiom of Ifa and the poems are knit together by the motif of journey, a journey which, in the physical, was undertaken on the road, in the air and on the sea. "Let the Dead Awaken" appears to be Okinba Launko's most successful poem to-date. It presents a subtle fusion of political intention and artistic rigour. Being a dirge, a certain measure of solemnity also runs through it as its writing was inspired by the memory of Okot p'Bitek, a foremost Ugandan scholar and writer whose death provides the poet the occasion to summon committed writers like the dead p'Bitek to purposeful revolutionary action:

Let the dead
Not rest in peace:
We are tired of beating songs
I ask you
What peace is there for us
Who are living?

In this afternoon of election primaries
And of familiar, frightful primates:
These days of sudden horror in the markets
Of roads made uncertain by their thugs
And drivers driven frantic by so many sirens

Tell the dead:
The only tribute we can bring
Is our complaint (106).

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Mabel Segun are important as the only two published female poets Ibadan has produced. Ogundipe-Leslie once edited *The Horn* while Mabel Segun, who began her writing career in the sixties, has also been supporting the Ibadan Poetry Club. Ogundipe-Leslie's *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems* was published in 1985 while Mabel Segun's *Conflict and other Poems* came

out in 1986. Ogundipe-Leslie is probably the best known Nigerian female poet and she explores issues ranging from the intimately private to the overtly political. She generally maintains a Marxist-feminist, pan-Africanist posture and experiments with haiku - a poetic form of Japanese origin. Her first and only collection is not a classic but "her real significance" in the words of Biakolo derives from the fact that "although she shares the burning sense of wrong of the new generation, she clearly departs from the hysteria characteristic of it" ("Molara Ogundipe-Leslie").

Mabel Segun's work, on the other hand, has not attracted much critical attention. We may attribute this to her failure to exhibit formal or thematic inventiveness, though her literary enthusiasm is not in doubt. Her work belongs to the mainstream of the new poetry except that, as an old practitioner, she retains some interest in the conflict of cultures as a theme. She in fact laments the agony of being "poised between two civilizations" (3) in "Conflict" which is the title poem in her collection. Her reputation as a leading Nigerian female writer is built on the success of her fictional works.

Afam Akeh, Sesan Ajayi, Onookome Okome and Chiedu Ezeanah constitute yet another 'breed' of writers. They represent the younger members of the new generation of poets that emerged in the eighties and is increasingly gaining recognition. The clamour for attention by poets in this group forced ANA to publish the personal collections of six promising but unpublished poets and *Voices From the Fringe*, an anthology that features the works of one hundred new poets in 1988. Akeh's *Stolen Moments* is one of the six ANA-sponsored volumes while the project that culminated in the publication of *Voices From the Fringe* was initiated by the Ibadan Poetry Club.

Akeh, Ajayi, Okome and Ezeanah do not form a movement. The unifying factor in their works is their interest in issues relating to life, love and the challenges of living in their own generation. Akeh appears to have found his own poetic idiom in *Stolen Moments*. This is evident in poems like "Sometimes I Sing", "Homecoming" and "Bodies" while Soyinka's voice is in the ascendant in Ajayi's *A Burst of Fireflies*. And rather than being an asset, Ajayi's facility with language crests a barrier, the type that we can also find in Soyinka's early poetry. His occasional poems such as "The Promise of Age", "A Verbal Collage", and "Marriage Song" however show him at his best.

Okome is desperately searching for a voice that he may rightly call his own in *Pendants*. He blends diverse influences, and this betrays his fascination with the achievements of many poets. Like Afam's and Ajayi's, his work evinces the active presence of the poet-persona, and he draws on childhood experiences in and around Sapele, his birth place. The eventual publication of Ezeanah's *Endsong* should be a

major literary event, considering the artistic merit of his poems that have appeared in different literary journals.

III

This short article has shown that Ibadan, more than any other city that houses a University in Nigeria, has been a nursery for literary artists. We have focused on poetic production - for which it is best known, and what becomes obvious from our exploration is the fact that poets raised at Ibadan, on account of their skill and significant presence have been dominating the Nigerian poetry scene. It is interesting that they are not drawn from a definable geo-ethnic location as they come from different parts of the country. It stands as eloquent testimony to the continued prominence of the Ibadan poetry tradition that most poetry prizes awarded to Nigerians at international competitions in the last few years were won by Ibadan poets. This is also true of local awards administered by ANA. The implication of this is that a history of the Ibadan tradition in Nigerian poetry will, with little or no modification, serve as a mini-history of Nigerian poetry.

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