

University of Massachusetts Boston

From the Selected Works of Chukwuma Azuonye

Winter 1991

Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artists, 1966-1990

Chukwuma Azuonye, *University of Massachusetts Boston*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/chukwuma_azuonye/35/



Exhibit 21.

AFRICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION ALA BULLETIN

A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

Volume 17

Winter 1991

Number 1

IN THIS ISSUE

COMING AND RECENT CONFERENCES

ALA: Loyola University, New Orleans, March 20-23, 1991	1
Other Coming Conferences	1
Recent Conferences	3

CALLS FOR PAPERS

RECENT FILMS BY SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN FILMMAKERS

(N.J. Schmidt)

SOUTH AFRICAN BOYCOTT DEBATE

A Reply to Cecil Abrahams (B. Lindfors)	12
---	----

PAFAM AND PUBLISHING IN GHANA

(A. Dekutsey)

TONI MORRISON IN MADISON

(N. Osundare)

REMINISCENCES OF THE ODUNKE COMMUNITY

OF ARTISTS (C. Azuonye)

FREETOWN LAUNCHING: ...LAST HARMATTAN.../...

IN THE DESERT (A.E.E. Smith)

WRITERS IN PRISON IN AFRICA (PEN)

JOBS

FELLOWSHIPS

AWARDS

NOTES

WHAT IS THE ALA?

Back cover

REMINISCENCES OF THE ODUNKE COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS: 1966-1990

[An address presented by Chukwuma Azuonye on the occasion of the launching of Obiora Udechukwu's book of poems, *What the Madman Said*, under the auspices of the Odunke Community of Artists, on Wednesday, July 11, 1990, at the Continuing Education Centre, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. We publish it to reveal Odunke, a little known but important movement in Nigerian literary history, one that formed a meeting ground between the old and the new at a crucial moment in Nigerian history.—ED.]

Mr Vice-Chancellor; Principal Officers of the University; Members of the University Council; Madam Chairman; Deans, Directors and Heads of Department; Chief Launcher, Poet and Novelist, Gabriel Okara; Co-launcher, Chief (Barriater) Ojo Uma Maduckwe; Star Poet, Obiora Udechukwu and Mrs Ada Udechukwu; Members of the University Community; Members of the Odunke Community of Artists; Lions and Lionesses; Ladies and Gentlemen.

You have been called together, this August morning, for the launching of Obiora Udechukwu's book of poems, *What the Madman Said*, under the auspices of the Odunke Community of Artists, an association of creative and performing artists, of which Obiora is a founding member and under whose umbrella most of the poems contained in the book came into being over the past twenty-four years. It behoves me, therefore, as the organizer of this launching to tell you something about the Odunke movement—about the special community of feelings, experiences, thoughts and tendencies which have helped in no small way to fashion aspects of the rhetoric and substance of *What the Madman Said*.

'Odunke' is the name of a traditional festival in Awka-Etiti which features all the arts of the community in a harmonious relationship. It was adopted, in 1968, as a befitting name for what was then an informal community of friends, most of whom found themselves in the Biafran Cultural Centre then located in the serene, tropical woodlands of Alaenyi, Ogwa, in what is now the Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State. At that time, this community of friends led a most intense artistic life in the midst of war. Gabriel Okara was there; T.C. Nwosu was there; Okogbule Wonodi was there; Kalu Okpi was there; Sonny Sampson-Akpan was there; Joen Anyim was there; Enukaoha Okoro was there and so, too, was our Star Poet, Obiora Udechukwu. While Meki Nzewi and Sonny Oti spread rhythm and glee to every nook and corner of beleaguered Biafra through their theatrical and musical performances, the wood-locked artists at Ogwa contemplated the possibilities of new artistic idioms in poetry and the visual arts through which the Biafran nightmare could be recreated for humanity in all its squalid grandeur. It was by no means a form of escapism; each and every one of us was deeply involved in one way or another with the knitty-gritty of the war effort; but we found in poetry, drama and the visual arts an appropriate avenue not only for the canalization of pent-up energies but also for the compensation of dreams and aspirations which the politics of the day had so rudely frustrated. We met frequently to read poetry, to discuss the events of the day and to share ideas about the future of our

traumatized fatherland; and, at that time, the fatherland could have been any fatherland—anywhere in which the lost opportunities could be recouped. So important were the Odunke meetings that some of us who lived and worked outside Ogwa spared no risks to travel in rickety vehicles through thickets of road-blocks and past prouiding hordes of conscripting soldiers to keep every Odunke date.

The intense artistic life of Odunke was not forged overnight. It goes back to the crisis of 1966. Following the massacres of Easterners in July through September, 1966 in the North and parts of the West, most of us who were either enrolled or about to be enrolled at Zaria, Ibadan, Lagos or Ife, found ourselves converging at Nsukka. The gruesome realities of Christopher Okigbo's "Come Thunder" were already with us. Before then some of us had been leading solitary artistic lives of sorts, writing poetry, painting or producing plays. But as we met in the refectories and the cool comfort of the Continuing Education Centre, we gradually found ourselves drawn to one another. Soon we found a forum in the Writers' Club then based in the Department of English. As Secretary, I dusted up the books of that moribund club and before long we were holding weekly poetry-reading meetings at the E.C.E., with one guest poet at each meeting. Michael J.C. Echeruo was there; Obi Wali was there; Ossie Enckwe was there; Dubem Okafor was there; Pol Ndu was there; Stephen Vincent was there; Romanus Egudu, Okogbulie Wonodi, Felix Okeke-Ezigbo, Akomaye Oko and Star Poet, Obiora Udechukwu. We were soon to be joined by Ken Saro-Wiwa whose ethnocentric poems about narrower separatism irked but were endured. Steve Vincent, Michael Echeruo and Donatus Nwoga provided additional fora for our meetings through their parties in which no distinction was made between staff and student. By May 1967, a Meet-the-Writer programme had been drawn up for the 1967-68 session following highly successful poetry-reading meetings with Gabriel Okara. But, alas, that programme, which was to have enabled the University of Nigeria community to meet the leading Nigerian writers of the day in person, one after the other, was destined not to take off. The Aburi accord had been repudiated by the Military Junta of Yakubu Gowon. The secession fever was at the highest pitch. On May 27, 1967, Gowon created twelve States, slashing the Biafran area into three potentially rival states. Biafra was quickly declared on May 30, 1967, and on July 6, shooting was begun at Gakem in the Ogoja province. The situation recalls Obiora Udechukwu's first poem at one of our 1966 poetry-reading meetings:

The Mighty tree
Has fallen
In the dead of night:

The birds scatter
In the forest
Wanting shelter
(*What the Madman Said*, p. 25).

We spent the first few months of the war trying to adjust to the new reality. Some of us, like Ojo Maduckwe, now a leading member of the Social Democratic Party of Nigeria, joined the army while others joined one committee or another of the Biafran information-propaganda complex.

As a war correspondent, and in the company of Chukwujindu Ihikaibeya, I had the good fortune of meeting Major Christopher Okigbo at the Nsukka front where, in his characteristic way, he commandeered our War Report vehicle and forced us to go with him and watch battle at Isienwu, an experience that almost proved fatal. A few weeks later, I met Chris in front of the ACB building at Enugu and he gleefully informed me that my diary and other papers which flew out of my pockets as I fled from the "thundering drums and canons" of the war front had been found and that I could collect them at his camp. Alas! on the very day I returned to the camp, Chris was dead, having vowed that Opi would fall on his dead body. His body was later picked up at Akwegbe by Federal troops and the chilling news froze many a patriotic heart as Radio Nigeria news bulletins stabbed through with it, with unusual frequency.

From the beginning, Chris had been the idol of our community of artists. The late Kevin Echeruo was with me at Enugu when the news first came. Kevin's poetic response was almost immediate: it came in the form of the poem, "Lament of an Artist: which I later included in the Odunke anthology, *Nsukka Harvest* (1972). Many other tributes came in rapid succession. Most of these are contained in *Don't Let Him Die*, the anthology of memorial tributes to Christopher Okigbo, edited by Chinua Achebe and Dubem Okafor (1978). One of the most remarkable tributes occasioned by Okigbo's death is the recently published ritual drama, *The Minstrel (Black Orpheus)*, Volume 4, No. 2, 1982) composed during the Umuahia days of Odunke, in 1968, by Bona Onyejeli. But, perhaps, the most dramatic and intense tribute came from our star poet, Obiora Udechukwu. His "Lament of the Silenced Flute," reprinted in *What the Madman Said* (pp. 16-18), epitomizes the Okigboesque tendency in much of the poetry produced by various Odunke artists during and immediately after the civil war. Later, after the war, Obiora was to add to this magnificent poetic celebration of Okigbo, a memorial poem in Igbo, "Mmonwu Anaa," an experiment matched only by Achebe's "Uno Onwu Okigbo," another tribute to Okigbo written in Igbo.

After the fall of Enugu, we found ourselves converging at Ogbor Hill, Aba, the new location of the Biafran Information and Propaganda complex. At our first poetry-reading meeting at the Seagull Hotel, over chicken and beer, most of the poems presented smelt heavily of Okigbo. But, there in our midst, in flesh and blood, was Gabriel Okara, an intensely introspective and lyrical poet with a kind of zen delight in the paradox of direct-pointing in the attempt at describing the indescribable. His first war poem, "The Silent Voice" and the propaganda piece, "Leave us Alone" which he read to us at Seagull changed all that. We quickly returned to his earlier masterpieces — "Piano and Drums," "The Mystic Drum," "Spirit of the Wind," "One Night at Victoria Beach," "The Snowflakes Sail Gently Down," "Fisherman's Invocations," etc. The charm was inexorable; it left deep marks on the rhythm and idiom of Odunke art and you will see the mystical and lyrical strains of Okara in Udechukwu's *What the Madman Said*.

The Seagull Hotel poetry-reading meetings produced many pleasant surprises. Rosemary Ezirim, an outgoing socialite (who no one would ever have associated with poetry) came up with intense lyrical pieces, notably, "I saw them Sleeping," a poem inspired by the death-sleep of babies seen by the poetess at a refugee camp. So great was the flood of poems that came up that, with the approval of Dr Michael Echeruo,

then Director of the War Information Bureau, I opened a file of war poetry in the People's War Documentation Project of which I was coordinator. The files, managed by Lovett Okoroji, now Dr (Mrs) Lovett Oji, soon became a magnetic centre drawing contributions from civilians and soldiers, both at home and at the war fronts. Contributions flowed from Major Gaius Anoka, Major I.N.C. Anicbo and Captain Ikechukwu Azuonye, and also from Joshua Uzoigwe and Nathan Okonkwo Nkala. Nkala was then a District Officer at the base of the 73rd Brigade and through him news of our files reached the fronts there and brought in more contributions. Unfortunately, our very valuable treasury of action poetry became one of the casualties of the civil war at the tail end of the war in January 1970.

With the fall of Aba, we converged at New Town Tavern, Umuahia, where we held many fruitful poetry reading sessions over palmwine, chicken and *odudu*. Umuahia gave birth to some of the finest poetry of the civil war. Akomaye Oko, always writing his poems "with cup in hand" began a vision of evanescent reality informed by the imagery of the ever-changing cottonwool of the clouds. The "Clouds" sequence, I daresay, is yet to be completed and is perhaps an endless sequence. It was at this time that Uche Okeke joined the movement with his "war-time dishes" of bombs, schrapnells and broken bodies. So, too, did Bona Onyejeli, a member of the first generation of Nsukka poets who, in addition to *The Minstrel* (the ritual-dramatic tribute to Okigbo mentioned a while ago) also began his "Poems to Meiro," creating inter-ethnic relationships brutally severed by the crisis and civil war. A fragment of the "Poems to Meiro" was retrieved from a fire and presented to me by Bona's sister. I subsequently got it published in *Black Orpheus*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1982. Onyejeli's *Poems to Meiro* explore an aspect of a theme which dominates Udechukwu's "Totem of Lament," the first part of the book, *What the Madman Said*. In 'The Prelude,' 'The Whirlwind Elegies,' 'The Aftermaths' and 'Affirmations,' the fragments of the shattered relationships have been sewn together into a magnificent kaleidoscope bristling with the lunacy of our tragic age. At Umuahia, the air raids had become menacingly more frequent and intense. December 1968 saw the most gruesome bombing and strafing of any Biafran town. The Russian MiGs came in rapid relays over areas of civilian concentration. In his apartment in an uncompleted building in one of the most vulnerable centres of Umuahia, I met Gabriel Okara one afternoon in one of the most unrepeatable acts of creation: between bouts of taking cover from the air raids, he scribbled lines that eventually blossomed into one of his most dramatic wartime pieces "Suddenly the Air Cracks":

Suddenly the air cracks
with striking cracking rockets
guffaw of before stuttering LMGs
jets diving shooting glasses dropping
breaking from lips people diving
under beds nothing bullets flashing fire
striking writhing bodies and walls...

Achebe was too busy on the diplomatic front to share directly in these "wartime dishes"; but his "Air Raid" somehow circulated at our meetings. The image of the man cut into two as he stretches his hand to greet a friend strikes a familiar ironical note recorded

in Odunke poetry of this ubiquitous season of raids anticipated in my own "Rituals of Raids" from the Aba Seagull Hotel phase. Star-poet, Obiora, did write an air raid poem which is yet to be anthologized; but his "Whirlwind Elegies" (pp. 12-21 of *What the Madman Said*) are founded on the same pattern of perceptions. Of the Agbasimalo, he writes in "Whirlwind Elegy No. IV" (p. 19),

WHO WOULD have thought, when we shook hands
That morning at Adazi Hospital, and smiling
Under your beret you said
"See you after the war"
Who would have dreamed
That two months beyond
In a grove ten miles away,
You'd leave a scarlet valediction
On the jungle floor...

Kevin Echeruo who shared fellowship with us at Naukka and in the early phase of the Umuahia phase soon joined the band-wagon of premature deaths. His was a natural death but it seemed so unnatural in the circumstances. Like Star-poet, Obiora, Kevin combined the writing of poetry with painting and drawing. Not surprisingly, Udechukwu's memorial tribute to him, originally entitled "Ars Longa, vita brevis" but now published as part VII of the "Whirlwind Elegies" in *What the Madman Said* is a solid piece of verbal painting. This was in October 1969, well after the Umuahia phase and towards the end of the war.

Umuahia gave our community the first taste of an international audience. Ruth Bowert, of Pro-Afrika, recorded a discussion with our group which was later broadcast over West German radio. She also put together a selection of poems from some of us (Udechukwu, Wondi, Nwabiani, Uche Okeke, Akomaye Oko and myself) later published under the title *Gedichte aus Biafra* in 1969. Other poems appeared in such books as *Soll Biafra Überleben* and the magazine *Anstoss*. It was the beginning of a German connection which, I daresay, has come to fruition in the publication in Germany of the volume, *What the Madman Said*, from Boomerang Press, Bayreuth, under the aegis of Ulli Beier.

With the fall of Umuahia, the community once again suffered a dispersion. But with the creation of the Culture Centre and its location at Alaenyi, Ogwa, a new forum for contact culminating in the formal baptism of the community emerged. The creative efforts of this phase bespeak of the deep sense of frustration and cynicism that had overwhelmed the fatherland. We began the war with optimism, optimism not often backed by the facts. "Even the grass would rise and fight," we had believed rather literally and we could see the seabed of the Atlantic Ocean lined up with the debris of the Nigerian Navy, as Ojukwu had boasted. Now, nothing but pessimism prevailed. It was at this point that I began my sequence, *Voices in Exile* (projected as a novel in verse), which is now lost but fragments of which have been published by Udechukwu in a 1982 exhibition catalogue. The pessimism of this phase is also writ large in Udechukwu's "Totem of Lament." But by far the most remarkable piece of the period is the play, *Veneration to Udo*, the first of the communally written and produced pieces

by the Odunke Artists. It was on the eve of the production of this ritual-dramatic prayer for peace that the Odunke Community of Artists took its name.

The end of the war in January 1970 was sudden and even unexpected. Star poet, Udechukwu, has captured the mood in some of the poems in the "Aftermath" (pp. 22-26 of *What the Madman Said*). The title of Echeruo's second volume of poetry, *Distanced*, epitomizes that mood. Distanced from the optimism and hopes raised by the lost fatherland, we also found ourselves distanced from the old fatherland which had succeeded in recapturing and chaining us in one gargantuan triumph of disorder and lunacy. Hints of this lunacy and disorder pervade the immediate post-war creative offerings out of Biafra. Of the seven stories published in the first post-war collection of stories, *The Insider*, three (by Achebe, Nkala and myself) are about lunatics through whose moments of sanity and vision the insanity of the times is brilliantly illuminated. The madman has been saying something to this nation since the end of the war and as the triumph of disorder increases and the nation sinks deeper and deeper into the depths of its delirium, what the madman has been saying about the syphilitic insanity of the land grows more menacingly accurate.

The publication of *Nsukka Harvest* in 1972 ended for us a phase of romantic exile; since then we have found ourselves face to face with a more gruesome tragedy, something more perplexing than Biafra. We have been torn apart in our various quests for survival; but, as often as we have been separated, we have come together again to resume the common pursuit. That common pursuit is the communal search for artistic idioms through which the eternal and liberating values of art can be communicated to the masses without compromising its "high and excellent seriousness." Two plays have been written and produced in Igbo, *Ojaadili* and *Onwukwube*. These are the first two of a trilogy. The third, *Di Ji Muta Ofeke* has just been completed. Our members have vigorously pursued the idea of creating in Igbo, in the language of our immediate environment. You will see in the language and style of Udechukwu's *What the Madman Said* deep imprints of this common pursuit. As Nwoga notes in his Preface to the book, "Beyond the routine poetic achievements of language and imagery is the consistency with which Udechukwu recalls and revives the tones and jokes, the innuendoes and orality of the Igbo literary tradition."

The Odunke Community of Artists salutes Udechukwu on these and other achievements which we acknowledge as one of the best realization of our common pursuit. But above all, we salute him for his social commitment which never runs counter to the highest aesthetic values. *What the Madman Said* sparkles with that honesty and integrity which our community treasures so much and for that we salute Udechukwu. Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, has spoken of "the wasted generation" — the generation of post-independence Nigerians whose vision and commitment to the growth of a stable and orderly polity has again and again been criminally neglected, nay, frustrated by a succession of armed robbers in power! We belong to the very incinerator of this wasted generation, but we refuse to take it tragically. We have, like the phoenix risen again and again from the ashes of our old selves to be reborn with the same incombustible traits, in the words of 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." This is the Odunke spirit, the

esprit de corps which I am proud to claim our community shares in common with the star-poet, Udechukwu, who because he is thus constituted can hear and articulate what the madman says with such accuracy without running mad!

Chukwuma Azuonye
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

WHAT IS THE ALA?

THE AFRICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION is an independent non-profit professional society open to scholars, teachers and writers from every country. It exists primarily to facilitate the attempts of a world-wide audience to appreciate the efforts of African writers and artists. The organization welcomes the participation of all who produce the object of our study and hopes for a constructive interaction between scholars and artists. The ALA as an organization affirms the primacy of the African peoples in shaping the future of African literature and actively supports the African peoples in their struggle for liberation.

The **ALA BULLETIN** (formerly the ALA Newsletter, volumes I-VII, 1974-1981), is published quarterly by the ALA for its members, and members receive substantial discounts when purchasing volumes of selected papers from the annual conferences of the ALA which take place in late March or April. Membership is for the calendar year and available on the following terms: \$30 (US funds) for regular members; \$10 for students/retired/unemployed; \$40 for Institutions; \$50 and up for sponsors; \$1,000 for Life Members. Checks and Money Orders should be made out to the "ALA" and sent to the *ALA Treasurer*, Sandra Barkan, Honors Program, University of Iowa, 219 N. Clinton Street, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.

As space allows, and if content is appropriate, a limited amount of advertising is permitted. The ALA also welcomes exchanges with other periodicals and newsletters. Occasional books of central importance to the discipline are reviewed, and all books received are noted. Apply to the Editor for further information.

The President for 1990-91 is Eileen Julien of the African Studies Center, Boston University, 270 Bay State Road, Boston, Massachusetts 02215; telephone: (617) 353-3673. (The Past-President is Anne Adams of Cornell University.)

THE PUBLICATION OFFICE to which all **BULLETIN** matters should be addressed, is c/o Stephen Arnold, *Editor of the ALA Bulletin*, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Alberta, EDMONTON, Alberta, Canada T6G 2E6; telephone (403) 492-7034 (office); (403) 492-4926 (messages). BITNET & NETNORTH: SARNOLD@VM.UCS.UALBERTA.CA; FAX (403) 492-0692.

ALA HEADQUARTERS; Africana Studies & Research Center; Cornell University, 310 Triphammer Road, Ithaca, New York 14850-2599; Tel: 607-255-0534; FAX 607-255-7116; Electronic Mail: AVA@CORNELLA.

DEADLINES for **BULLETIN** INSERTIONS and CONTRIBUTIONS are: February 1 (Winter); May 1 (Spring); August 1 (Summer); November 1 (Fall).
ISSN 0146-4965