The Development of Written Igbo Literature (Chapter 27)

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CHAPTER 27

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRITTEN IGBO LITERATURE

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Introduction

There is a close correlation between the main phases of modern Igbo history and the main phases of the development of written Igbo Literature. A study of this development can thus be fruitfully pursued from both the points of view of literary history and historiography. A fusion of both perspectives will be attempted in this chapter. Thus, while charting the main phases of the development of written Igbo literature from "the linguistic labours" of the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, an attempt will be made to highlight issues of wider historical significance not only in the transition from oral to written literature, but also in the contexts, contents and stylistic features of the major works surveyed.

The Transition from Oral to Written Literature

It is no longer fashionable to look upon pre-colonial African societies as simple societies without writing systems of their own. Apart from the Egyptian hieroglyphics and the Meirotic scripts of the Horn of Africa, it has been firmly established in scholarship dating back to the middle of the 19th century that sub-Saharan Africa has indeed been one of the most productive areas of the world so far as the evolution of indigenous writing systems is concerned. In West Africa alone, nearly thirty of such writing systems have been documented and analysed and from some of these, manuscripts such as The Book of Rora in the Vai Script have been recovered.

Igboland is one of the areas in West Africa in which indigenous forms of writing have been found. Some of these forms are associated with the production of literature, although this literature has not been preserved - so far as we know - in recoverable scrolls, parchments, tablets or graphic media of other kinds. Be that as it may, an account of the writing systems of Igboland is vital in any study of the transition from oral to written Igbo literature. It is true that written Igbo literature today exists in the Roman scripts introduced in the 19th century by the Christian missionaries, but the efforts of our ancestors to develop graphic systems for recording their thoughts and feelings cannot be passed over, as they are indeed an
important landmark in the march of Igbo civilization.

It is difficult to ascertain for how long the graphic form of communication has been used in Igboland, but the systems which have been documented so far encompass all the early stages of writing, from the pictographic through the ideographic and logographic to the syllabic stage. The Nsibidi system, found in Cross River Igbo area and shared with non-Igbo Cross River peoples, combines pictographic and ideographic elements with some traces of ancient rock art motifs (see Plate1). The various uri or uli systems are predominantly pictographic, but one can notice in them tendencies towards ideographic stylization. The most advanced forms of writing in Igboland are the syllabic systems epitomized by the Nwagu Aneke Script recently discovered at Umuleri in the Anambra River basin. No phonetic system has so far been discovered.

The presence of archaic rock art motifs in Nsibidi is suggestive of the antiquity of efforts at graphic communication in Igboland. Attempts to probe the origins of the script have yielded little more than myths of supernatural revelation or inspiration from the actions of, or marks on sand by, animals. But from the superior power assigned by the myth-makers to the preservation of knowledge by graphic form rather than in the memory, one can deduce that the myths are no more than elitist contrivances to sustain the monopoly of the power of writing by those versed in it.

The Uri or Uli body decorations seem to me to be the first manifestation of graphic communication in Igbo. These pictographs and ideographs cover every aspect of the human experience. The motifs are probably the basis of the uri-ala script of the Ngwa, the Akwukwo-mmuo of parts of Okigwe and the Aniocha graphic system, manifested perhaps in the yam-marks recorded by Northcote Thomas. Indeed, the yam-marks bear close parallels to the uli motifs documented by Willis as well as to some Nsibidi signs.

The first set of twenty-four Nsibidi signs known to the world of learning was published by a district commissioner, T.D. Maxwell, in the Government Civil List of 1905. Following this, articles by J.K. MacGreggor (1910) and Elphinstone Dayrell (1910, 1911) provided further information about the form and character of the system. And in a chapter of his book, In the Shadow of the Bush, P.A. Talbot (1926) provided evidence of its use for the recording of folktales and court proceedings as well as for the transmission of erotic and cultic messages. Later, M.D.W. Jeffrey (1934) drew attention to the presence of some motifs from the script in objects in the British museum. A summary of the state of our knowledge on the system is contained in Ogbu
Kalu's survey of writing in pre-colonial Africa (1980).

The Nsibidi system is difficult to fully appraise in terms of its origin, form and significance. It is not only a graphic system combining pictographic and ideographic elements with archaic rock art motifs, but also a multi-media system of communication which can be spoken, mimed, drummed or danced. It thus operated like a cryptograph, a sign language and a telegraphic code. The versatility of its form widened the range of its usage to include love-making, cultic messages, recording of court proceedings, recording of folktales, trading, communication between villages and declarations of war. But it remained largely unsystematized, hence the ambiguity of many of its signs. The secrecy of its use prevented its introduction into a popular educational system, thus vitiating its further development by linguists for wider use. The lack of the supporting technology of ink, paper or press made the system ephemeral and perishable. Finally, because of the multi-media nature of the system, there was no particular urge to develop the graphic elements over and above other aspects in a systematic way. Little wonder then that, despite its potentialities as a cross-cultural system of communication accessible to speakers across diverse dialects and languages, it has failed to sustain an extant body of written Igbo literature.

The failure of Nsibidi seems to have been compensated for by other forms such as the syllabic script of Nwagu Aneke of Umuleri (see Plate 2.) This script, in which specific characters have been assigned to the basic CV (Consonant-Vowel) monosyllables out of which Igbo words are composed, is indeed a more highly developed form which, despite Nwagu Aneke's claim of having arrived at it through supernatural revelation, may well be of great antiquity. The script is however deficient because its syllabary (see Chart 1) does not have characters for the eight syllabic vowels (/a/, /e/, /i/, /i/, /o/, /o/, /u/, and /u/) as well as the three syllabic nasals (/m/, /n/ and /n/). Consequently, words beginning with vowels and syllabic nasals can only be read in context, often by conjecture or recall. For example, the names Chukwuma (1) and Chima (2) can easily be written and read in the script since they comprise complete CV syllables, thus:

(1) Chukwuma
(2) Chima

But names such as Ijeoma(3) or Obioma(4) can only be read in context or by conjecture or recall since there are no characters for the V-syllables /i/, /o/ and /o/, as in the following transcriptions:
This and a few other deficiencies show up in Nwagu Aneke's reading of his compositions in the script. We find that he is sometimes forced to pause to recall or conjecture at a word or two when the context is not very clear. Nwagu Aneke, who has since been appointed a Writer-in-Residence at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, claims to have written a trunk-box full of manuscripts in the script, including an account of how he came across it, his diary of events during the Biafran war, philosophical (often apocalyptic) reflections on the state and future of mankind, and critical comments on political, social and cultural issues of the day. The retrieval and study of such manuscripts seem indeed an urgent salvage ethnographic task before historians, linguists and literary scholars. A beginning has been made by Professor D.I. Nwoga whose volume of annotated transcriptions and translations of a selection of Nwagu Aneke's writings is shortly expected from Heinemann under the title, The Scriptures of an African Visionary. But apart from such primary editorial work, there is also the challenge of a fuller understanding of the nature of the evolution of the script to ascertain the extent of its exclusivity. Our understanding of Igbo cultural history will greatly be deepened by the unravelling of the true origins of the script and of similar scripts which perhaps are yet to be discovered.

Whatever significance we ultimately assign to our indigenous writing, it does not appear to have been sufficiently resilient to the imposition of the Roman Script in the middle of the 19th century. The reduction of Igbo to the Roman Script, in 1841, is generally credited to the German Missionary, Rev. J.F. Schon, although vocabularies of the language had been published since 1777. From 1841 to 1933, the series of activities commonly referred to as the "linguistic labours" of the Christian missions not only gave rise to the production of word-lists and dictionaries, but also to the construction of early grammatical sketches, the collection of oral literature and the translation into Igbo of Christian literature and, ultimately, the whole Bible and the Book of Common Prayer at the turn of the century. In the course of their labours, the Christian missionaries broached the problems of standard dialect and practical orthography and groped their way to the creation of the conditions out of which a virile tradition of written Igbo literature emerged in the form of translations from European classics and folktales and supplementary readers for various classes of the missionary school system.
3. The Growth of Written Igbo Literature

It is perhaps too early to attempt to impose any rigid periodization on Igbo literary history at the present time. However, one factor seems to have played the most vital role in the determination of the course of development of written Igbo literature from the very beginning, and this is the search for an appropriate and widely acceptable koine or standard literary language in the face of a confusing multiplicity of dialects. Viewed in the light of this search, the history of written Igbo literature falls neatly into four major periods, each of which is characterized by experimentation in literary production in the particular koine after which it is named. The four periods are as follows:

(a) The Isuama Igbo Period, 1857-1905;
(b) The Union Igbo Period, 1905-1941;
(c) The Central Igbo Period, 1941-1973; and
(d) The Standard Igbo Period, 1973 - the present.

In the Isuama and the Union Igbo periods, literary production was sponsored by the Christian missions purely for evangelical purposes. But in the Central Igbo period, the chief sponsor was the colonial government in pursuit of the provisions of the 1926 Education Ordinance which recognized the value of the use of the mother tongue in the education of the child, in contradistinction to the Education Ordinance of 1882 which specifically discouraged the use of indigenous languages in favour of the English language. In the fourth and ongoing period - the Standard Igbo period - the disappearance of alien patronage, coupled with the socio-political developments of the post-colonial era, has given rise to the production of an Igbo national literature sustained by a cultural nationalist fervour which, as we shall see, was forged during the Biafran war of independence.

3.1 The Isuama Igbo Period, 1857-1905

The Isuama period was dominated by attempts to create Igbo literature in what was mistakenly assumed, by its missionary sponsors, to be “the leading dialect of the Ibo nation”. However, as the missionaries later discovered, the Isuama dialect, was an expatriate form of Igbo which had evolved in Sierra Leone among the community of liberated Igbo slaves there. Although it has been described as a kind of “esperanto”, it was by no means an artificial language; it was rather a natural, compromise form of Igbo arising from the efforts of Igbo expatriates from different dialect areas to communicate with one another in their own native language. It is very
likely that owing to distance from home as well as the cultural amnesia created by the experience of slavery and the predominant use of English as the language of everyday communication, Isuama developed features which made it somewhat awkward and far removed from Igbo dialects of the homeland, a fact which was not discovered until more than a quarter of a century of frustrating literary use.

Three main factors hindered the discovery of the inadequacy of Isuama as a literary standard Igbo. The first was the early involvement of highly patriotic Isuama-speaking Sierra Leonean Igbo expatriates in evangelical work in Igboland; the second was the absence of any other incentive than the missionary enterprise for the development of Igbo literature; the third was the absence of concrete and reliable information on the true linguistic situation in Igboland in early ethnolinguistic works available to the early missionary linguists.

As Tasie has pointed out, it was "through the patriotism of the Sierra Leone Igbo and their compatriots in Fernando Po, Liberia and the Gambia" that "the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) for many reasons already interested in hinterland mission, responded on an Igbo lobby and founded its Niger Mission."13 The Niger mission was foreshadowed by the Niger expedition of 1841 in which Crowther and Schon accompanied a British gunboat up the Niger. In preparation for this mission, Schon had collected a vocabulary of 1600 Igbo words and translated a few prayers into Isuama Igbo and, believing Isuama to be the lingua franca of the area, he braced himself to speak to the people in their own language. But the result was completely disappointing. As Hair reports,

Schon persisted in his efforts to put his Ibo to use, and prepared and read an address in the language to the chief of Abo; the chief, no doubt baffled by the pronunciation and intonation, soon grew bored and interrupted the reading. Higher up the Niger, Schon turned to Hausa as a medium of instruction; and nearly twenty years elapsed before he resumed his study of Ibo. His unhappy experience with Ibo dialects in 1841 was unfortunately significant: it can now be seen as an ill omen of the problems that lay ahead in the development of Ibo literature, problems which have persisted to the present day (Emphasis added).14

With the resignation of Schon from Igbo studies, the mantle of promot-
ing Christian evangelical literature in Igbo fell on Crowther his (companion in the Niger expedition) and John Christopher Taylor, among other Sierra Leonean Igbo who eagerly volunteered to work as evangelists and catechists in their homeland. Unfortunately, when Crowther returned to the Niger in 1853 with his Sierra Leonean Igbo assistant, he seemed to have completely forgotten the lesson of the Isuama fiasco during the 1841 Niger expedition. He called a language conference at Onitsha and apparently influenced by the enthusiasm of the Isuama-speaking Igbo evangelists and catechists in his party, "that conference decided that the dialect to be used in writing Igbo should be Isuama".15 And thus was born the Isuama period of Igbo written literature.

All literary productions of this period were evangelical and pedagogic. The first, *Isuama Ibo Primer* (1857) was a 17-page collection of "words, sentences, Lord's prayer, Decalogue and scripture verses" translated into Igbo by Crowther. Reprinted in 1859, a revised and enlarged version prepared by Taylor was published in 1860 (or 1861) and formed the basis of subsequent primers by F.W. Smart (1870), and Simpson (1887 and 1890) which, at the turn of the present century, evolved into the famous Green Book (*Azu ndu*) which has been described as one of the most powerful seminal influences on the emergence of written Igbo literature.16

Because of the seminal impact of the Primer, Crowther, though a Yoruba, has been described as the father of modern Igbo literature. But it would seem that the Sierra Leonean Igbo missionary, John Christopher Taylor, can lay a better claim to that title not only because his *Isuama Ibo Sermon* (1860) is the first original and individual work in Igbo, but also because of his dominant role in every facet of the linguistic labours of the Isuama Igbo period. Taylor was pre-eminent in all the major translation efforts of the period. His translation works, between 1859 and 1872, include *Isuama Ibo Katekism* (CMS, London, 1859) *Oku Omma nke owu Matia/The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (CMS, London, 1860), *Akwukwo ekpere Isuama-Ibo/A Selection from the Book of Common Prayer* (London, 1860 or 1861), *Okuomma nke Marki na Luki/the Gospels according to St. Mark and St. Luke* (BFBS, 1864), *Oku omma nke owu Yohanu/The Gospel according to St. John* (BFBS, 1865), *Ma oru nke Apostili/The Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles of St. Paul to The Corinthians, Galatians and Ephesians* (BFBS, 1866), *Akwukwo ekpere Isuama-Ibo/A Selection from the Book of Common Prayer, according to the use of the United Church of England and Ireland* (CMS, London, 1871), *Isuama-Ibo Hymns* (London, 1871) and *Isuama Ibo Church Katekism*, incorporating *The Order of Confirmation and The..."
Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth (London, 1872). In addition to these, Taylor revised and enlarged Crowther's *Iseuma Ibo Primer* (in 1860 or 1861?) and collaborated with Schon in the preparation of the first linguistic work on Igbo, *Oyu Ibo: Grammatical Elements of the Ibo Language* (1861). In the preface to the Grammatical Elements, Schon criticizes the translation efforts of Taylor but highlights another important aspect of his literary work, namely the collection of Igbo unwritten literature:

The praiseworthy endeavours of Taylor ... to employ his time and talent in translating such works as promise permanent and everlasting blessings, may be found fault with by our hunters after new languages. They may say of his labours what was said concerning those of others, "that he had saddled the horse by the tail", that is, that he ought first of all to have collected a native literature of stories, proverbs and sayings, from the lips of intelligent natives, have analysed them grammatically, and then have addressed himself to the work of translating the scriptures (p.1).

Taylor, in fact, did make a collection of Igbo proverbs a few specimens of which were published in 1859 as an Appendix to *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, a journal which he co-authored with Crowther. Schon's criticism may therefore be less objective than it appears, reflecting some of the venom in a long battle between him and Taylor in the course of which Taylor accused him, among other wrongs, of plagiarism. As Tasie has pointed out, disagreements of the kind represented by the Schon-Taylor debacle contributed to the slow pace of the development of Igbo language and literature:

By 1868 Taylor had disagreed practically with every fellow worker, and especially, with the Crowther family, and in 1869 he withdrew (after 12 years in the Niger Mission) from the Niger and returned to Sierra Leone where he taught Igbo in the Fourah Bay Institution to agents who were preparing to go to the Niger. His withdrawal from the Niger further delayed the production of an Igbo Bible.17

The departure of Taylor brought to a sudden end the experiment in literary production in Iseuma. In the years following, up till the emergence of
Union Igbo, translation work was done in the dialects of four areas in which various missionaries were active. These include the Unwana dialect (by the United Presbyterian Church), the Onitsha and Owerri dialects (by the Church Missionary Society), and the Bonny dialect (by the Niger Delta Pastorate Church).

3.2 The Union Igbo Period, 1905-1941

With the growth of Igbo Christian populations at Onitsha, Owerri, Unwana and the Niger Delta, at the turn of the century, the need for a common language in which the whole Bible and other Christian literature would be translated became critical. Both the laity and the clergy were sharply divided over the two options available to the missionary translators, namely, the selection and promotion of one dialect as a koine as had been done in the case of the Yoruba or the creation of an esperanto combining the features of the four dialects already in use. The dominant and articulate Onitsha laity (led by G.N. Anyaegbunam) pressed the case for the Onitsha dialect with acrimony, resting their claims on the headstart of Onitsha over other areas in literacy and the reception of Christian education. Besides, a great deal of Christian literature already existed in the dialect. But, in due course, the clergy chose the path of compromise, and following decisions taken at the famous Asaba language conference of August 14, 1905 and a series of workshops at Onitsha and Egbu (Owerri), Union Igbo was born, thanks largely to the effects of the Rev. T.J. Dennis of the Niger mission. Between 1905 and 1913 this new esperanto was put to use in the translation of the whole Bible. Rev. Dennis later died in a shipwreck off the coast of Liverpool while taking the MS of the Igbo Bible to England for publication, but in one of those mysterious turns of events often associated with the intervention of the divine powers in the affairs of men, the MS was washed ashore where it was picked up by a fisherman and ultimately restored to what in hindsight can be described as its preordained publishers.

Union Igbo has been criticized as a lame-duck, artificial koine; but no one can deny the power and majesty of the poetry and prose which it has been able to carry. The Bible is an encyclopaedic melting-pot of literary forms - poetry, prose and miscellaneous forms - from both the oral and written traditions. The Igbo Bible has been able to carry all that and withal some passages of great poetic grandeur. Not surprisingly, the seminal influence of the Union Igbo Bible on Igbo literature has been far-reaching and, can be said to be comparable to that of King James’ authorized version on English literature.
However, Union Igbo was doomed from the start to remain a restricted scriptural and liturgical koine. Hardly had the British concluded their conquest of Igboland when the Igbo people took advantage of the new possibilities of more peaceful traffic to migrate to the new urban centres at Enugu, Aba and Port-Harcourt as well as elsewhere in Nigeria. The consequence of these new patterns of migration was the breaking down of dialectal barriers and the evolution of what has been called a “natural union” or “de-dialectalized compromise Igbo”. This new form which has evolved into what is now known as “Modern Igbo”, or “Standard Igbo” or “neocentral Igbo”, was quick to assert itself in literature during the colonial period, when, with the establishment of schools, it became necessary to produce written materials to be used as supplementary readers in the primary schools. An important feature of the burgeoning “natural union” is the fusion of elements of the speaker’s dialect with selected elements which experience has taught the users to be accessible to other Igbo speakers.

The influence of Union Igbo was glaringly present too in the emergent written form of this union. Among the first works of literature in the natural union of the 1920s and 1930s were Iwekanuno’s history of Obosi, Akuko Ala Obosi (1924) and Dick Udensi Ogan’s translation of Grimm’s Fairy Tales under the title Akuko Ifo Grim Koro. Another major translation of the period, SPCK’s translation of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress under the title, Ije Nke Onye Kraist, harks back to Union Igbo but manages to liberate itself from the liturgical seriousness of Union to be able to allow of the flight of fancy required in an allegorical romance. In Ala Bingo (1933) and Omenuko (1935), we have par excellence examples of literature in natural union in which each writer draws from his local dialect.

In the mid-1930s, when the British decided to send a linguistic expedition to Igboland under prof. Ida Ward, it was hardly known that a natural koine for Igbo literature had already established itself in the works of Pita Nwana and Achara Ward’s report recognized the phenomenon of natural union, (“spoken union Igbo”) but, without a full critical appraisal of its literary efficiency, it went on to recommend yet a new koine, namely “central Igbo”. Said the report:

The suggested Central dialect is as near as can be a consistent whole; it is a spoken, living language with nothing artificial about it. In the Central area the language spoken now is this recognised type; in contiguous areas the differences are slight, and each dialect differs from the suggested "stan-
"standard" in certain particulars only. All have something in common in every branch of the language, in pronunciation, constructions and vocabulary (the latter particularly in a number of basic root words). People will continue to use their own local dialects and to some extent will read the "standard" with their own local accent, just as happens in other languages...

It should be stated that the recommended type resembles closely that used in the publications of the Government Translation Bureau (Ibo), which was decided upon in 1930 by an advisory committee including members of the main Missions, and the primer issued recently by the Methodist Missionary Society is written very nearly in this dialect. It includes also many of the characteristics of Union Ibo and is in line with the development of natural "standardising" by the increased mobility of the Ibo.  

Ward made specific proposals towards the development of Central Igbo as a literary standard dialect, including the rapid production of reading material in the dialect, the inclusion of Igbo as a subject for the School Certificate Examinations, the introduction of a Central Igbo newspaper, the translation of one gospel in the dialect and the encouragement of Igbo writers by the payment of small fees or royalties to produce literary works in the central dialect. The attempt at implementing these and other practical suggestions for the introduction of the new dialect on orthography gave rise to the Central Igbo period of written Igbo literature.

3.3 The Central Igbo Period, 1941-1973

The Central Igbo period was a period of applied linguistic exercises in the practicalization of Ward's proposals rather than a period of imaginative literary creativity. It saw the emergence of such popular Igbo readers as Achinivu's Ihe a na-ahu n'uzo London and Umu nta obi uto and Ahamba's Okeke Tara Ose Oji... among many others. Numerous guide books aimed at Adult literacy classes were sponsored by Adult Education Departments and Translation or Literature Bureaux of the period. These include Uzo e si azu umuaka (E.N. Amaku and K. Achinivu, Ifeolu Printing Works, Lagos), Ihe Kwesiri Orint (Eastern Regional Literature Bureau, 1950), Ihe Kwesiri kammadu mara (Philip, son and Nephew Ltd., n.d.), ihe mmuta Kwesiri Iriba-
ama (CMS, 1943) Ibi Umunwanyi Ugwu Jogburu onwe ya (Christian Council/ Eastern Regional Literature Bureau, 1950), and many others. Such docu-
menciations of customs and institutions as J.A. Durueke's Egwu Onwa (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1948) and K.Achinivu's Ila Oso Ozuakoli (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1948) also appeared during the same period.

A number of translations from European literatures established them-
selves as compelling reading materials at school and in the home. These include: Akuko Ife Ufondu by Dorothy Irvine (Eastern Regional Literature Bureau, ERLB, 1950), Okwu Ufodu Aggrey Kwuru by C. Kingsley Williams (ERLB, 1950), Enwe a na-akpo Candu (Thomas Nelson, 1951) Onye Amamihe Ozo si n'Owuwa Anyanwu Puta by Henry Van Dyke (ERLB, 1950), Nkapi Anya Ukwu by Evelyn Powell Rice (Nelson' and Sons Ltd., 1955), Akuko ife nke si n'Africa by J.O. Iroaganachi (Longman, 1952), among others. The Christian missions cooperated by producing numerous popular tracts in Central Igbo and between 1950 and 1954, a Central Igbo maga-
zine, Amamihe, sponsored by the colonial government, flourished.

But these developments notwithstanding, Central Igbo per se as has
been noted above, never became the medium of any significant creative
literature. Igbo literature continued to develop in the varieties of natural
union found in the writings of, among others, Leopold Bellgam, whose
romance, Ije Odumodu Jere, appeared in 1952. Such literature was how-
ever rather scanty and discontinuous. Between 1935 and 1961, no other
major author emerged. After Omenuko, Pita Nwana wrote nothing else.
Similarly, Bellgam produced nothing else after his Ije Odumodu Jere. After
Ala Bingo, D.N. Achara degenerated into the reproduction of a folktales in
Elelia na ihe o mere.

The slow pace of development of Igbo literature during the Central Igbo
period, has been blamed in part on the problems of the multiplicity of
dialects and that of arriving at an acceptable standard orthography. This is
true only in the sense that the Central Igbo experiment tended to discourage
natural union, which had established itself as the most credible medium of
Igbo literature. Also religious politics led to a situation in which the Roman
Catholic Church insisted on the use of the Onitsha dialect in schools and
churches, while the Protestant Missions adopted Union Igbo and em-
braced the Central Igbo experiment and also allowed literature in the natu-
ral union to be taught in schools. There was no real threat from pure dialect
writing at this time. More important obstacles were those of orthography
and negative Igbo attitudes towards their language and culture.

But its stunted growth notwithstanding, Igbo literature of the colonial
period as a whole, including the Union Igbo and Central Igbo periods, constitute an important body of documentation touching on aspects of the Igbo experience of the era which is not available in conventional historical sources. *Omenuko*, by Pita Nwana (1935), is a biographical novel based on the life of a warrant chief identified as Chief Igwebe Odum of Arondizuogu. Details of the life and career of Chief Igwebe Odum of history vis-a-vis the fictional representation in *Omenuko* have been the subject of historiographic reconstruction (Afigbo, 1966) and speculation (Obi, 1976: 120-147). Other themes of socio-historiographic interests, as summed up in Obi include: “the introduction and implementation of the white man’s government among the Igbo people; the idea of the slave trade in the Igbo society at this period, with (the) attendant social reactions; the traditional judicatory set up in the Igbo society before the advent of the white man; the atonement of crimes in the traditional Igbo society; and the embodiment of ‘an ideal Igbo man’ in the chief’s character”.  

In *Ije Odumodu Jere* (1952), we have a romance reminiscent, on the surface, of Gulliver’s *Travels*, on the one hand, and Robinson Crusoe, on the other hand. Following a shipwreck, the protagonist finds himself in the land of Finda from where he proceeds on a civilizing and Christianizing mission to various countries clearly identifiable as the lands of Lilliputian whites. Essentially, *Ije Odumodu Jere* is a bold revisionist view of history which appears to have been deliberately constructed from the perspective of a liberationist ideology. The reversal of roles whereby an African is presented as saving the souls of primitive whites and bringing the light of civilization to them is clearly an expression of the nationalist sentiment of the period. It is indeed an ultra-nationalist vision, albeit romantic, whereby the readership can imagine a land of backward white natives and thereby draw the necessary confidence to face up to the reality of white domination.

There are no overt historical allusions or ideological positions in the romances of D.N. Achara - *Ala Binge* and *Elelia Na Ihe O Mere* but both works reflect the proximity of oral and written literatures and the continuing relevance of traditional norms and rhetoric in the changing cultural environment. In *Omenuko*, this phenomenon assumes aesthetic reality in the syncretism of form, structure and language in the design of the novel. Here, the form of the folktale becomes the paradigm for the novel and assimilates elements of the Biblical parable. Igbo idioms and proverbs become not only ornaments of speech as in oratory but dynamic instruments for characterization and management of plots, features which anticipate the neo-traditionalism of Achebe. In function, the novel assumes the status of traditional
narrative reborn, for in *Omenuko* will be found all the features of oral traditional history examined in Chapter 25 of this book.

The independence period of Igbo literature includes the latter half of the central Igbo period and the whole of the standard Igbo period (section 3.4, below). It can be said to have begun with the introduction of the Onwu (Official) orthography which brought an end to the acrimonious disputes over a suitable orthography which bedevilled Igbo literature during the Central Igbo period. The resolution of the orthography problem did not, however, bring about an immediate flowering of written Igbo literature. The period between 1961 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1967 was devoted to the promotion of the new orthography by linguists and authors of Igbo textbooks. But the problems of the dialect and cultural alienation remained. It was however not until the Civil War that the conditions which led to their mitigation emerged. The coup of January 1966 was denounced as an Igbo coup and the counter-coup against the Ironsi regime in July 1966 was followed by anti-Igbo feelings throughout the country, which, in the north resulted in waves of Igbo massacres. Between July 1966 and May 1967, the Igbo people found themselves returning in large numbers to their homes and thus was born an Igbo solidarity of a kind never before seen in Igbo history.

The birth of Biafra, in May 1967, was the start of a new Igbo nationalism which was to be tested in war between June 1967 and January 1970. For the first time, Igbo people as a united body-politic faced a common enemy and fought together in the defence of a rapidly-shrinking homeland. This psychological situation and the physical incrowding of Igbo peoples from different dialect areas were critical in the remoulding of the Igbo psyche. In the area of language, it was instrumental to the further reinforcement of natural union as more and more people from different dialect areas interacted, fought and suffered together in the Biafran enclave.

At the end of the war, a new Igbo consciousness had been born. This consciousness manifested itself in an unspoken belief that there was an Igbo cause to be defended. It created an awareness of the need to shed cultural alienation as manifested in the rejection of the alien identity, “Ibo” for “Igbo”. It overturned the arrogant exclusiveness of such riverine Igbo as the Onitsha Igbo and stirred greater *dilettante* and scholarly involvement in the documentation and study of Igbo life and history. It is against this background that one can see what turned out to be a phenomenal flowering of Igbo literature from 1970 onwards. Written Igbo literature not only grew in quantity and quality, but for the first time, it became possible to identify
particular authors as Igbo novelists, poets, dramatists, and essayists. Written Igbo literature had come of age and with this came patronage and recognition from publishers, education authorities and the general reading public.

3.4 The Standard Igbo Period, 1973 to the Present

In direct succession to Pita Nwana in the use of natural union Igbo within the neo-traditionalist aesthetic of Omenuko is Tony Uchenna Ubesie whose first novel, Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya O Daa appeared in 1973. Since then, Ubesie had published five other novels, a book of essays on Igbo customs and institutions and poetry in the first anthology of Igbo poetry, Akpa Uche (ed. R.M. Ekechukwu, O.U.P., 1975). Ubesie's natural union Igbo is firmly rooted in his native Achi dialect; but as a broadcaster, he uses forms of expression of the standard type which have over the years been popularized by the media, especially the Radio. His metier lies in his adroit manipulation of proverbs and idioms for characterization, management of plots and thematic development; but unlike his mentor, Pita Nwana, he lacks the restraint which makes for so much elegance in Omenuko. Again and again, euphuism is the consequence in situations in which he tends to run wild with a pedantic display of traditional rhetoric as in the opening paragraphs of Ukpana Okpoko Buuru and Juo Obinna.

Ubesie's novel's fall into three thematic groups covering some of the main issues of living in contemporary Nigeria. The themes of love, courtship and marriage are dealt with against the background of the generation gap between parental concerns and youthful exuberance in Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya O Daa (1973) and Mmiri Oku Eji Egbu Mbe (1975). In Ukwa, love triumphs over the decadent material calculations of parents, while in Mmiri, tragedy befalls the youthful lovers as a consequence of such calculations. In these two novels, Ubesie deals with a theme which has not often been the stock-in-trade of popular novelists in Nigeria and elsewhere, and by and large reflects some of the basic concerns of his age. His portraits of school life, police corruption and the stresses and tensions of family life, the pretences of the been-to and the nouveau-riche are portraits of great historical significance.

The second group of Ubesie's novels deals with the theme of armed robbery, an ever-present reality in post-Civil War Nigeria. Mmiri Oku Eji Egbu Mbe is the story of a master-robber, and Ukpana Okpoko Buuru a tale which mirrors the kleptocratic realities of Nigeria today. In Ukpana, a band of robbers seize the government of a town and turn the customs upside down.
down, establishing robbery as a high social ideal for which the honours and titles could be won. In the third group of novels - Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala and Juo Obinna - Ubesie explores the ugly realities of the Civil War. Isi Akwu presents one type of that phenomenon known as the “win-the-war gal” - a woman who turns against her husband and shamelessly indulges in perverse sexual orgies with army officers in pursuit of personal survival. In Juo Obinna, the pretences of the younger generation are exploded in the figure of the braggart, Obinna, whose only wounds are sustained in poaching raids rather than on the battle front.

The Igbo novel has been born laden with heavy social responsibilities. Ubesie’s novels have shown a capacity to carry these without cracking, but not so the other novels most of which appear to be the products of sheer verbal carpentry - the knocking together of bits of proverbs, idioms and other pieces of traditional rhetoric for school examinations. In a sense, the bulk of what we have may be called literature textbooks rather than novels. In them, the story-frame is merely an excuse for tiresome lectures on Igbo customs, institutions, mores and values.

By the same token, modern Igbo poetry and drama appear to be tailored for classrooms and examination halls. Although a very successful series of Igbo plays initiated by Mr. Chijioke Abagwe have been run on Radio since the early fifties, it was not until 1974 that the first modern Igbo play, Udo Ka Mma by Anaelechi Chukwuezi, was published by Oxford University Press. The late start and desultory growth of Igbo theatre has been attributed to the fact that Igbo traditional social structure and community life is opposed to what would portray the individual as an idler. To the Igbo, a theatre is an idle enterprise. This may (be) the reason why pioneer Igbo educationists and writers did not encourage theatrical plays or organize plays based on tradition just for entertainment or enlightenment. There was an obvious fear that no audience would be got for such plays.

However, by the time Udo Ka Mma was first staged by ATTC Owerri, such fears had been largely contained, partly through the experience of the Civil War when theatre played an important function in social mobilization and propaganda and the post-war Igbo cultural awakening, mentioned earlier, which aroused the desire to explore the riches of Igbo traditions from as many perspectives as possible. Since 1974, over thirty Igbo plays have
been published covering practically all the diverse social conflicts in contemporary Igbo life. A number of major playwrights have also emerged, including Anaeechi Chukwuezzi, Goddy Onyeakaonwu, and the Odunke Community of Artists. Two major schools or tendencies have also emerged - the traditionalist and modernist - the one recreating traditional dramatic modes for the modern theatre and media, and the other founded on western theatrical forms, ranging from the classical, the medieval, and the Elizabethan to the modern well-made play. Although the news media (of Radio and television) have provided important outlets for the Igbo play, modern Igbo drama is yet to reach the grassroots - the rural population - for whom it could function as a medium of enlightenment.

The earliest anthology of Igbo poetry, Akpa Uche covers such topics as natural phenomena, philosophic issues such as death and mortality, but the most intense pieces focus on socio-political issues touching on African freedom and survival. The experience of the Civil War clearly broadened the outlook of the Igbo and created in him a keen interest in international and pan-African politics. More conventional poetry modelled on oral tradition appear in Utara NtN. Both Akpa and Utara contain poetry or verse written in various types of natural union; but in Aka Weta, an anthology edited by Chinua Achebe and Obiora Udechukwu, dialect has been deliberately given a free play in pursuit of the editors' aim of giving "full and unfettered play to the creative genius of Igbo speech in all its splendid variety"^50, an objective which Emenanjo regards as a misplaced and "deliberate attempt to foster some Northern Igbo dialect in opposition to the central-based literary Igbo of today"^31.

There is indeed something truly worrying in this reintroduction of the dialect issue. What Emenanjo^32 calls the "blackout" is threatening to re-emerge on the Igbo literature scene as linguists quibble over the use of the emergent standard koine vis-a-vis the claims of dialect. Until Igbo writers turn their attention from such polemic and settle down to genuine creativity, Igbo literature will continue to lag behind other national literatures of Nigeria. There is no doubt that the natural union established by Nwana and Achara has come to stay and that this union will continue to be enriched from the dialects. Pure dialect poetry does certainly have a place in modern Igbo literature, but one that can only be determined by popular taste and market forces. Dialect writing will die a natural death if works in it fail to elicit wide readership and hence the patronage of publishers. Literature in the natural union, now accepted as standard Igbo, will continue to grow so long as it is patronized by the school and examination system. How far a literature for a
wider popular readership can emerge remains to be seen.

4. Summary and Conclusion:

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to highlight the major phases of the development of written Igbo literatures, chiefly from the point of view of their historiographic significance. On the transition from oral to written literature, a great deal of emphasis has been laid on the need for a more serious study of indigenous writing (or at any rate, graphic systems of communication) in Igboland with a view of ascertaining their true origins and patterns of evolution and significance. This, it is hoped, will open the way to an understanding of an aspect of Igbo civilization on which very little is as yet known. On the contexts and phases of development of written Igbo literature surveyed in section 3, it has been stressed that these constitute an important part of contemporary Igbo cultural and social history on which there is still a great deal of basic research to be done, especially with the opening up of various missionary and colonial archives in Europe, Nigeria and elsewhere. But more than that, the growing body of written Igbo literature constitutes in itself a powerful mirror of the realities of Igbo colonial and contemporary history and thought which the Igbo historian can no longer afford to neglect.

8. For details of this and other references in this paragraph, see Note 7 above.

9. This is not peculiar to the Nwagu Aneke Script. Early forms of similar scripts in many other parts of the world, especially the Middle East, exhibit a comparable deficiency. See Bloomfield, Leonard, Language, Unwin University Books, London, 1935 (1973 reprint), Chapter 17 (Written Records), pp.285-287.


18. For a full account of the translation of Igbo Bible, see Tasie, G.O. M., "Igbo Bible Nso ...", pp. 61-70.


32. Emenanjo, E.N. "After the Blackout...", p.93.

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