September 19, 2007


Chukwuma Azuonye, University of Massachusetts Boston

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Christopher Okigbo International Conference
An Multidisciplinary Celebration of Okigbo's Legacy
Theme: Postcolonial African Literature and the Ideals of the Open Society/Teaching and Learning from Christopher Okigbo's Poetry

September 19-23, 2007
PROGRAM

hosted by
Harvard, Boston University, University of Massachusetts
Boston, & Wellesley College
Edited by Chukwuma Azuonye, Convener

Logo: Drawing of Christopher Okigbo by Obiora Udechukwu
Illustrations from Obiora Udechukwu’s Exhibition Catalogue,
Homage to Christopher Okigbo (Lagos, Nigeria, 1975),
& an illustration from the original Mbari edition of Heavensgate (1962)
By Demas Nwoko

Quotations from Okigbo’s Poetry by
Courtesy of Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium

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To the Memory of
SUNDAY OGBONNA ANOZIE, 1940-2004
&
PETER THOMAS, 1939-1997
Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
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Boston Pan-African Forum

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- Obiora Udechukwu, Poet, Artist, Poet, Artist, Charles A. Dana Professor, Department of Fine Arts, St. Lawrence University., Canton, NY 12504, USA.
- Wole Soyinka, Nobel Laureate, Playwright, Poet, Novelist, Essayist, First Alphonse Fletcher Fellow, W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

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GUESTS OF HONOR

Sefi Judith Attah (Safinat), Christopher Okigbo’s wife, Distinguished Teacher and Educational Administrator; Formerly Nigerian Federal Minister of Women’s Affairs and Social Services and Nigerian Ambassador to Italy; currently United Nations Human Rights Commissioner.

Obiageli Okigbo (Ibrahimat), Okigbo’s daughter; Founding President, Christopher Okigbo Foundation, 83 Chausée de Boondael, 1050 Brussels, Belgium.

Iyom Victoria Azuka Okuzu, Christopher Okigbo’s immediate younger sister, 16 C Dakar Road, Off Oduduwa Road, GRA Apapa, Lagos, Nigeria,

An early 1960's photograph of Christopher Okigbo and his wife, Sefi Judith Attah [set against the background of a commemorative painting by their Daughter, Obiageli, in an exhibition of her paintings, honoring her father’s legacy, at the Brunei Gallery (SOAS) London, UK (12 April - 23 June 2007).
Keynote Speaker, Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, and Obiageli Ibrahimag Okigbo, June 2005 (Courtesy Christopher Okigbo Foundation)
INTRODUCTION

THE ROBBERS are back in black hidden steps of detonators—

FOR BEYOND the blaze of sirened afternoons, beyond
the motorcades;
Beyond the voices and days, the echoing highways; beyond
the lateness
Of our dissonant airs; through the curtained eyeballs,
Onto our forgotten selves, onto our broken images;
beyond the barricades
Commandments and edicts, beyond the iron tables,
beyond the elephant’s
Legendary patience, beyond the inviolable bronze
bust; beyond our crumbling towers —

BEYOND the iron path careering along the same beaten track —

THE GLIMPSE of a dream lies smoldering in a cave,
together with the mortally wounded birds.

—Christopher Okigbo, “Elegy for Alto” (Path of Thunder)

IT IS PERHAPS NOT TOO MUCH TO SAY that Christopher Nixton Ifekandu Okigbo (1930-67) was by far the greatest postcolonial, modernist, African poet of the twentieth-century. Born on August 16, 1930 to a prominent Igbo Roman Catholic family in Ojoto, in present day Anambra State of Nigeria, and educated at the Government College Umuahia and later at the University College Ibadan where he majored in Greek and Latin Classics, he began writing poetry seriously in the late 1950’s after a period of intense exercises in translating poetry from Latin into English and vice versa. Within the ten-year period between the composition, in 1957, of his earliest published poem, “Song of the Forest,” and his death in August 1967 while fighting as a field-commissioned Major on the Biafran side of the Nigeria-Biafra war, he established himself as a commanding force, not only in modern African poetics, but in world literature at large. Today, he is widely recognized as one of the exemplars par excellence of global or transnational modernism.

Okigbo’s claim to greatness rests on five main factors, namely: his all-inclusive multicultural sensibility; his mythopoeic imagination; his infusion of ritual seriousness into the praxis of his poetry; his masterly fusion of a wide diversity of poetic modes from traditions across the world; and, above all, his all-encompassing vision of reality—the phenomenal and the imaginative—in the fortunes of his poet-hero, the Prodigal, through whose “burden” and “journey” of “several centuries” he has constructed a complex “fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfillment,” in cycles of poems which, “though written and published separately are organically related.”

Running through, and unifying, all these dimensions of his poetry is his overriding concern with the ideals of the open society—decolonization of the mind, cultural freedom, human rights and civil liberties, security of life and property guaranteed by the
rule of law—ideals which are clearly manifest in his consistent recreations of, and references to, "the events of the day" (the traumas of social change, crises of identity, political crises, failure of leadership, violence, and other social upheavals) culminating in the direct, active involvement in the Biafran war which cost him his life in August 1967.

The 1970s and 80s saw a remarkable efflorescence of critical attention to, and imitative adulation, by younger writers, of Okigbo's poetry—a few proclaiming it abstract, opaque and even irrelevant, a few others not quite sure what to make of it, while the great majority lavished praises on his achievement, at times almost to the point of bardolatory. It is indeed an index of the high and excellent seriousness of Okigbo's poetry that resonances of his seminal influences on the generation of African poets immediately after him have continued to be felt till today, as can be witnessed from Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo, edited by Chinua Achebe and Dubem Okafor (1978) and the most recent collection of poems celebrating his legacy, Crossroads (An Anthology of 115 Nigerian Poets in Honor of Christopher Okigbo, on the 40th Anniversary of His death and on His 75th Birthday Anniversary), edited by Patrick Tagbo Oguejiofor and Uduma Kalu, with a Foreword by Isidore Okpewho (in press, 2007).

Further acknowledgement of the greatness of Okigbo's poetry can be found, in addition to several doctoral and masters dissertations or theses, in such works devoted to his life, career or poetry, as the novel, The Trial of Christopher Okigbo (Ali Mazrui, 1971); the critical studies, Creative Rhetoric: Christopher Okigbo (Sunday Anozie, 1972), Christopher Okigbo: The Poet of Destiny (Emmanuel Obiechina, 1980), Nationalism in Okigbo's Poetry (Dubem Okafor, 1980); and Dance of Death: Nigerian History and Christopher Okigbo's Poetry (Dubem Okafor, 1998); the collections of essays, Critical Perspectives on the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo (ed. Donatus Nwoga, 1983) and Critical Essays on Christopher Okigbo (ed. Uzoma Esonwanne, 2000); and the critical editions of his poetry, Christopher Okigbo: Collected Poems (ed, Adewale Maja-Pearce, 1978) and most recently, Christopher Okigbo: Complete Poetry (including his previously unpublished works, edited with critical notes by Chukwuma Azuonye, in press, 2007).


In other works, at least a chapter is devoted to Okigbo's life and works. For example: The Chosen Tongue: English Writing in the Tropical World (Gerald Moore, 1969); Whispers From a Continent (Wilfred Cartey, 1969); The Example of Shakespeare (John Pepper Bekederemo-Clark, 1970); Introduction to Nigerian Literature (Paul Theroux, in Bruce King, ed., 1971); Reader's Guide to African Literature (Hans Zell and Helene Silver, eds., 1972); The Critical Evaluation of African Literature, (Dan Izevbaye, in

In 2001, a major online resource for the study of the poems, Concordance to Okigbo's Poetry, was created by Michael J. C. Echeruo (http://echeruo.syr.edu/biodata). Other online sources—keyword “Christopher Okigbo”—list several thousand references. Additionally, a major critical biography, Thirsting for Sunlight, by Obi Nwakamma is in the offing. Most recently (2006-2007), as part of the preparation for the present celebration of Okigbo’s legacy, a critical study of the organic unity of the poems, The Quest for Fulfillment: Narrative and Dramatic Continuity in Okigbo’s Poetry, and a study of his previously unpublished works (Christopher Okigbo at Work), have been completed by convener. Hopefully other recently completed works or those in progress will be unveiled at the events of September 19-23.

Associated with recent developments in Okigbo scholarship is the nomination by the Christopher Okigbo Foundation (spearheaded by the founder, Obiageli Okigbo), and acceptance by UNESCO in the Memory of the World Register, of the unpublished previously papers, including new poems (among them a remarkable handful of poems written in Igbo and drafts of an unfinished “Anthem for Biafra”). The Okigbo papers were the very first papers from Africa to be accepted in this important international register of documents of exceptional significance worthy of preservation as monuments of the unaging intellect of humanity. A special session focusing on these papers has been worked into the present program (evening, Friday, September 21).

The Theme of the Present Celebration:
Postcolonial African Literature & the Ideals of the Open Society/
Teaching & Learning from Christopher Okigbo’s Life and Works

The organizing principle of the present celebration of Okigbo’s legacy is the age-old wisdom that literature is a powerful, socially transformative force. Okigbo’s poetry epitomizes this principle. Existing and current scholarship, exemplified by the papers to be presented as keynote addresses and in various conference panels, reveal that his poetry...
is not only a mirror of the socio-cultural and historical realities of his time but a complex of prophetic visions rooted in these realities.

The theme of the conference is particularly appropriate from the point of view of socio-political developments in Africa at a time of rapid growth of global culture and consciousness. Traumatized by colonialism and destabilizing neo-colonial relations with the more powerful nations of the world, the postcolonial nations of Africa are passing through a transitional phase of intense struggle. There is a deeply felt need to rediscover the values and ideals of the open society, which have been sadly obscured by colonialism, as well as the post-independence entrenchment of military, one-party dictatorships, and sham democracies without democrats, in places in neo-colonial states such as Nigeria. For the most part, in contemporary African states, neglect of the rule of law, contempt for human rights, endemic political crises; senseless and wasteful wars; ethnic cleansing, and other recurrent cycles of tragic loss of human life, have become the order of the day. Attempts to resolve these destabilizing developments and the disillusionment that has come in their wake, have often sidetracked creative solutions of the kind which are writ large in the structures of the imagination of great African writers such as Okigbo.

Over the past four decades, active scholarly discourse on Okigbo’s poetry, has tended to focus on its aesthetic and mythological dimensions almost to the exclusion of the multiplex subtexts covering the entire spectrum of the humane values of the open society which the poems clearly embody. Against this background, Okigbo’s poetry raises two interrelated questions, both of which are embodied in the central theme of the present celebration. First, to what extent are the ideals of an open society—that is, a free, democratic, just, lawful, and purposive society—expressed in Okigbo’s oeuvre? Second, how can these ideals be learned and taught through close reading of Okigbo’s poetry, both inside and outside the classroom? Taken together, these questions move us beyond the strict purview of “high modernism,” “aesthetics,” and “form,” to consider poetry’s social implications and positive impact on the march of civilization.

These concerns seem to have been telescoped in the very last but telling socio-political statement contained in the poet’s swan song, “Elegy to Alto” (quoted above) the final segment of Okigbo’s last published sequence of poems, *Path of Thunder*. Within the framework of a poignantly accurate prophecy of the degeneration of postcolonial African governance into organized armed robbery (wherein “the robbers are backing black hidden steps of detonators”), Okigbo calls on us to critically reexamine our inner selves with a view to moving “beyond” numerous impediments to the attainment of the ideals of free, open and confident society, among them, the reckless and annoying pomp and pageantry of the post-independence elite as manifested in endless processions of their expensive cars; the malaise of “highways” filled with echoes or impassioned but confusing noises which are no more than a daily parrot-repetition of the deceptive cant of the political leadership; the innumerable causes of disunity (“our dissonant airs”) which call for a binding force; our collective blindness (“curtained eyeballs”) and consequent ability to securitize or to engage in bold face-to-face negotiations on matters affecting our collective destiny; a blinded populace whose “shuttered sleep” conjures an unflattering image of Africa as a sleeping giant; our collective mental numbness, manifested in cultural amnesia or forgetfulness of who we are as a people; the destruction of our
traditional cultural icons; and the numerous barricades already flourishing in our national life and impeding progress, complicated and further reinforced by the authoritarian and unquestionable orders of the godlike military or dictatorial civilian rulers of the day. In the end, this horrendous vision crescendoes into the image of an alienated and traumatized nation of people with “forgotten selves,” whose fruitless effort at nation-building is aptly recaptured in hyperbole of “crumbling towers” and of “the iron dream careering along the same beaten track,” in a repeating cycle of meaningless Sisyphean labors.

Objectives of the Present Celebration

In exploring the challenges of fostering the ideals of the open society, through the teaching and study of the life and works of Christopher Okigbo, the present literary and artistic celebration is designed to pay particular attention to seven main objectives.

The first is to reawaken active interest within the global scholarly community in the study and teaching of Okigbo’s poetry. The last decade has witnessed a remarkable and unfortunate decline, not only of research and publications in scholarly journals on the poetry of Christopher Okigbo but a sharp decline in its representation in academic curricula and course syllabi at all levels of the educational system. Consequently, collections of Okigbo’s works (Labyrinths and the Collected Poems) have gone out of print and there has been a notable decline in the representation of his poetry in new anthologies of African writing. It is with a view to remedying this situation that the conference has been designed to pay close attention to the value and challenges of teaching and learning from Okigbo’s poetry. In this exercise, it is hoped that the reprint of Labyrinths (contracted by Obiageli Okigbo) and the publication of the annotated critical edition of Christopher Okigbo: Complete Poetry (including the previously unpublished works) will play a central role.

Beyond the artistic virtuosity of the works, attention will be paid to the issues of global culture and consciousness, multiculturalism, perennial philosophy, cultural syncretism, cultural freedom, decolonization of the mind, and, above all, the humane values of an open society, which the works clearly embody, as outlined above.

Further to the foregoing, an attempt will be made to breakdown the ivory tower insularity that has barricaded not only the outside world but even lower levels of the educational system, from the benefits of teaching and learning from Okigbo poetry. It is therefore hoped to explore the prospects and challenges of extending the values of teaching and learning from the poetry of Christopher Okigbo to primary and secondary schools, through appropriate junior level readers, anthologies and related tools, and to the general public, through the full exploitation of the enabling twenty-first century technologies of audiovisual or multimedia representation, the Internet and other dimensions of cyberspace. In this respect, the curriculum diversity and enrichment workshops for high school teachers, associated with the present and future conferences, are expected to play a decisive role.

It is hoped that this conference will attempt to set an agenda for future studies and pedagogy. To this end, the conference will revisit and attempt to resolve old controversies with a view to putting paid to contradictory readings of the poems and
opening the door to a fresh understanding of the mythos and praxis of the works. Close attention will be paid to available new tools of scholarship and research. With the courtesy of the Christopher Okigbo Foundation, the conference will have the opportunity to examine, both in print (in the pages of the present conference catalog) and through special PowerPoint presentations by the convener and Okigbo's daughter, Obiageli Okigbo (in the evening of Friday, September 21), previously unpublished and recently discovered writings and to place them in their proper perspective vis-à-vis the existing and well-known corpora.

Furthermore, it is hoped that the conference will conclude with a comprehensive vision, mission statement, and agenda for the future of research in, and the teaching of, the poetry of Christopher Okigbo.

Finally, the conference will, in its closing business session (Sunday morning, September 23, 2007), discuss ways and means of supporting and propagating the goals of the newly-established Christopher Okigbo Foundation, organized by Christopher Okigbo’s daughter, Obiageli Okigbo. This business session will consider, among other agenda, the rules of the Christopher Okigbo Society, an annual or biannual Christopher Okigbo Conference, a quarterly, semi-annual or annual Christopher Okigbo Newsletter, and support for the website of the Christopher Okigbo Foundation.

Bio-Critical Roundtables

Among the special scheduled highlights of the conference are bio-critical roundtables (of free discussions, presentations, homilies, reminiscences, personal appearances, and questions and answers) featuring four key “connections” in Christopher Okigbo’s personal experience of life and letters:

(1) The Years of Childhood, School Days & Family Life (featuring Obi Nwakamma, Okigbo’s biographer; Iyom Victoria Okuzu, his younger sister; Chinua Achebe and Chike Momah, his high school mates at Umuahia Government College; and Bede Okigbo, his cousin and childhood companion. Members of Christopher Okigbo’s immediate nuclear family—his wife, Sefi Judith Attah, and daughter, Annabelle Obiageli Okigbo—well-known to readers of his poetry through the dedication to “Safinat and Ibrahimat” in Labyrinths (1971)—will be in attendance and will speak in this forum. For the first time, the international community of Okigbo scholars and literary friends, will hear the voices and intimate reminiscences of these two women, closest to Christopher Okigbo’s heart. The forum will be chaired by Chike Momah.

(2) The Great Mbari Renaissance of the Late 1950’s & Early 1960’s (featuring the poet’s literary friends and colleges at Fiditi, Nsukka, and Ibadan, in the heyday of the Mbari Writers and Artists Club, during which he published his first book of poetry, Heavensgate, made his dramatic entry into the African literary scene through his participation in the Mbari Conference of African Writers at Kampala, Uganda; and became the West African Editor of Transition as well as the West African Representative of Cambridge University Press at Ibadan. Among the speakers expected at this forum are Wole Soyinka, Michael Echeruo, Demas Nwoko, Gerald Moore O. R. Dathorne, Ben Obumselu, and Abiola Irele (as Chair)
Old Controversies & New Perspectives (featuring Ali Mazrui, Ihechukwu Madubulike and Onwuchekwa Jemie, looking back into the future of Okigbo scholarship in the light old controversies initiated by them over the alleged obscurity and abstractness of Okigbo’s art, his pandering to Euromodernism at the expense of his own African indigenous aesthetic standards, and his alleged prodigal sacrifice of his life in pursuit of a narrow sectional cause). The forum, holding at Harvard University, will be chaired by Jacob Olupona (Professor and Chair, African Studies Committee, Harvard University).

(4) The Post-Independence Crises of the 1960’s & The Biafran War (reminiscences of Okigbo’s intellectual and active involvement in the crises and war in which he lost his life with candid reflections on the extent to which Okigbo’s death in action can be construed as Martyrdom or prodigal waste of life, featuring Okeleke Nzeogwu, Emma Okocha, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe (who will chair the forum).

Keynote Addresses

The conference will feature eight outstanding keynote speakers, some of them Okigbo’s close personal friends while others are artists of the younger generation influenced by him or distinguished scholars of Okigbo’s transnational modernism.

The intimate tone of the keynote addresses will be set on the first day of the conference (Thursday, September 20, 2007) by the personal reminiscences of two close-friends of the poet, Michael J. C. Echeruo, First generation, postcolonial Angolphone Poet (author of Mortality, 1968, and Distanced, 1971), Critic, Scholar, Distinguished University Administrator, currently William Safire of Modern Letters, Syracuse, and Ben Obumselu, Emeritus Professor of English, African and Comparative Literature, Abia State University, Nigeria, Okigbo’s close friend, routinely acknowledged in the early versions of Okigbo’s poems “for criticism which led to improvement in phrase and structure.” In “Five Poems for Okigbo and Some Reminiscing,” Echeruo re-memories several crossings of the path between him and Okigbo in the early 1960’s, about the time Okigbo burst into the limelight as a leading bard of his time, while in “Cambridge House, Ibadan, 1965-66,” Obumselu remembers Okigbo’s last two years at Ibadan amid the “splintered flames” of Nigeria reeling from bloody crises to shooting war.

On the second day (Friday, September 21, 2007), Chinua Achebe, world-acclaimed novelist, poet and essayist; currently Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and Wole Soyinka, versatile avant-garde playwright, poet, social activist; and 1986 Nobel Laureate, will reflect on Okigbo’s profound assimilation of wide-ranging influences from, and impact on, his time as well as his radical transformation from a visionary and committed artist to a warrior-poet in their bio-critical keynote addresses: “Christopher Okigbo and his Time” (Achebe) and “Soldiering On: Arms and the Poet” (Soyinka).

The conference will close (on Saturday, September 22) with two pairs of contrasting keynotes, the first by Ali Mazrui, Author The Trial of Christopher Okigbo (1971); Professor and Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University, New York and Chimamanda Adichie, author of Purple Hibiscus and Half of
A Yellow Sun, and winner of the 2007 UK Orange Prize for Women writers. By contrast to his novel, The Trial of Christopher Okigbo, in which Okigbo is arraigned before the court of After-Africa and charged with prodigally wasting his artistic talents in a narrow sectional cause, Mazrui's keynote, "The Muse and the Martyr in the African Experience: Christopher Okigbo in Comparative Perspective," reconfigures the poet as a martyr for the ideals of the open society, while in her address to the high school teachers (Okigbo, Memories of Biafra and the Composition of Half of the Yellow Sun), Adichie reflects on the challenges of writing (often under the shadow of Okigbo's influence) about the traumatic effects of the Biafran war she experienced through the re-memories of older friends and family, in her bestselling and UK Orange Prize-winning second novel, Half of the Yellow Sun (2006).

The second pair of keynotes on the closing day of the conference are reflections on Okigbo as one of the finest exemplars of 20th century globalist or transnational modernism. by Jahan Ramazani, Professor and Chair of English, University of Virginia and Poetry Editor, Norton Anthologies (in "Christopher Okigbo's Transnational Poetics: Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalization"), and by David Richards, Professor and Chair of English, University of Stirling, Scotland, author of the Chapter on Okigbo in Aestheticism and Modernism: Debating Twentieth-Century Literature (2005), in "The Art Behind': Okigbo's Archaic Modern."

Closely related to the keynotes are three special lectures or presentations—a lecture at Boston University in the evening of Friday, September 21, “Odinaana na Ichomma [Tradition and the Search for Beauty]: Art and Okigbo's Poetry,” by Obiora Udechukwu, Poet, Artist, Charles A. Dana Professor, Department of Fine Arts, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY 12504, preceded on the same day, at Harvard, by two PowerPoint presentations focusing on Okigbo’s previously unpublished papers—“Christopher Okigbo at Work: A Survey of His Previously Unpublished Papers,” by Chukwuma Azuonye, Professor of African Literature, University of Massachusetts, Boston and “Nominating the Unpublished Papers of Christopher Okigbo for the UNESCO Memory of the World Register,” by Obiageli Okigbo, Okigbo's Daughter, President and Founder, Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium.

Conference Panels and Papers

The conference is planned around invited or received papers from leading and upcoming Okigbo scholars, all of which will be presented in plenary sessions, each lasting about 1 hour and thirty minutes. Each paper will explores one aspect or another of the conference theme with reference to Okigbo’s poetry sequences—Four Canzones, Heavensgate, Siren Limits, Fragments out of the Deluge, Laments of the Silent Sisters, Lament of the Drums, Distances, Lament of the Masks, Dance of the Painted Maidens, Path of Thunder, or the previously unpublished poems, edited by the convener, Chukwuma Azuonye, samples of which are presented in the present program. Most of the papers focus on the poet’s representation of the ideals of the open society in one or more specific sequences. Alternative topics exploited in other papers include the global contexts and influences on Okigbo's work, intimacy and freedoms of expression,
interracial and intercultural exchange, syncretistic ritual, the enigma of cultural origins, modernism, postcolonialism, globalism and globalization, as represented in his poetry and life as a whole. In general contributors have included a brief summary of the state of Okigbo criticism and a critical examination of the challenges of teaching and learning from the poetry, as they pertain to the topic examined.

Curriculum Diversity Workshop for High School Teachers

Associated with the present and future conferences in this series is a series of workshops for US high school teachers aimed at creating incentives for teachers at the lower echelons of the educational system to adopt African literature texts in their literature, language arts and social studies classes. In collaboration with school authorities, beginning with the Boston School Board (in the present 2007-2008 cycle), it is hoped to use these workshops to create a program of systematic diversification of the school curricula in response to globalization and global cultural trends and in recognition of the fact that one of the factors militating against minority high achievement in the US educational system is the feeling, especially among blacks in high schools who are preparing for college, that their African roots and heritage are not equitably represented in school curricula, including inner city schools where they constitute a demographic majority. Looking into the mirror of the educational system, they fail to see their own faces. Our hope is that through constant exposure to African authors and texts at our annual conferences and teachers’ workshops, this situation will be steadily and systematically ameliorated.

Our conference series thus has two distinct but closely interwoven components—the scholarly dialogue among scholars and between them and K-12 teachers in the Fall, followed by a workshop for the teachers in the summer of the following year focusing on teaching and learning from selected African texts and systems of thought, beginning with Summer 2008. At the annual conferences, such as the present Okigbo conference, leading scholars in the field of African literature will examine theoretical and pedagogic issues pertaining to carefully selected African texts, authors or themes from the point of view of the challenges which they pose to non-African teachers and learners. To this end we have invited teachers from the greater Boston area to attend the present conference in preparation for the first high school teachers’ workshop planned for Summer, 2008. Supported by art exhibitions, films, musical events and dramatic performances, these associated teaching workshops will seek to diversify the high school curriculum by introducing a range of important African writers: members of and earlier generation that includes Nigerians such as Chinua Achebe (Novelist, Poet and Essayist), Christopher Okigbo (Poet), Wole Soyinka (Playwright, Poet, Novelist and Nobel Laureate), and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (Novelist and Playwright) as well as the new, rising generation of writers represented in the present event by Chimamanda Adichie (Novelist). Through an intensive study of literary works and their socio-cultural settings, (under the theme, Thematic Focus: “African Voices, Primary Sources”), it is hoped that teachers selected from high schools across the country will diversify their literature and social
studies curricula. It is also hoped that, in time, such a program of curricular diversification will broaden the cultural base of various schools, and create incentives for deeper engagement, and love of learning, among culturally alienated minority students.

Proposed authors and texts for the first workshop in 2008 include Christopher Okigbo’s *Labyrinths or Complete Poetry*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (widely available under several imprints); and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (widely available from the original publisher). Best known for her work *Purple Hibiscus*, young woman novelist Chimamanda Adichie, will speak at the opening ceremony of the conference on Saturday, September 22, 2007 alongside Ali Mazrui, and invitations have been issued to teachers in high schools in Massachusetts to attend this event. Her address will followed by book-signing during the coffee break.

The first teaching workshop (a detailed program of which will be available later in 2007) will no doubt be useful as models for future workshops in Africa and elsewhere, aimed at introducing a wider coterie of African writers and their works into secondary and even middle- and elementary-school curricula.

### Exhibition of Modern Nigerian Art Related to Okigbo’s Poetry

An exhibition of contemporary Nigerian art (organized by Cynthia Becker, Assistant Professor, Department of Art History, Boston University, 725 Commonwealth Avenue, Room 302, Boston, MA 02215, 617-353-1471 (phone), 617-353-3243, cjbecker@bu.edu) will be held from September 11 through October 19, 2007, in the George Sherman Union Gallery at Boston University. Two participating artists (Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu) consider Okigbo’s life and poetry in their work, under two intersecting themes:

- **Another Modernity: Works on Paper by Uche Okeke**
- **Nigerian Poetics: Works by Obiora Udechukwu**

Funded by the Boston University Humanities Foundation and hosted by the Department of Art History in collaboration with the university’s College of Fine Arts (CFA), the program will conclude with a lecture, “Ojima na johuma [Tradition and the Search for Beauty]: Art and Okigbo’s Poetry,” at the CFA Concert Hall, Boston University, Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA, by Obiora Udechukwu, Poet, Artist, Poet, Artist, Charles A. Dana Professor, Department of Fine Arts, St. Lawrence University., Canton, NY 12504.

### “Hurrah for Thunder”: PoetryFest in Honor of Okigbo

In 1978, Chinua Achebe and Dubem Okafor published a collection of memorial poems for Christopher Okigbo entitled, *Don’t Let Him Die*. In this volume, as characterized by keynote speaker, Ben Obumselu, “poets, painters, soldiers, professors, and various contemporaries offer their tributes of undying affection.” The celebration of Okigbo’s legacy at the 2007 is planned to include a reenactment on a larger scale of a similar poetic celebration in the evening of the first day of the conference at the University of...
Massachusetts, Boston (Thursday evening, September 20, 2007, from 8:00 pm). Sponsored by the William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Its Social Consequences and facilitated by the Director, Kevin Bowen, the program will be staged under the theme, “Hurrah for Thunder” (as a re-enactment of a similar event held at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, on June 20, 2007, under the auspices of the Christopher Okigbo Foundation). Participants will be enabled to hear leading African poets, representing the older and younger postcolonial generations, reading their poems and engaging in interactive talk-back with the audience. Among those expected at the reading, coordinated by Esiaba Irobi, are Chinua Achebe, Ifi Amadiume, Chukwuma Azuonye, Ijeoma Azuonye, Dennis Brutus, Don Burness, Syl Cheney-Coker, Michael J. C. Echeruo, Esiaba Irobi, Ihechukwu Madubuike, Ifeanyi Menkiti, Obi Nwakamma, Chimalum Nwankwo, Michael Odokora-Okigbo, Chinyere Okafor, Dubem Okafor, Gabriel Okara, Ije Okigbo, Obiageli Okigbo, Sofia Dati-Okigbo, Tanure Ojaide, Wole Soyinka, Obiora Udechukwu, Steven Vincent, and Olu Oguibe, among other past winners of the Christopher Okigbo Poetry Prize as well as selected members of the Christopher Okigbo Society from Nigeria, and of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). The program will also include readings from the new anthology of memorial poems for Okigbo, *Crossroads*, edited by Patrick Tagbo Oguejiofor and Uduma Kalu. Above all, it will include songs and music inspired by, or related Okigbo’s *oeuvre*, as described below.

**Songs and Musical Performances**

In one of his Interview with Lewis Nkosi (1965), Okigbo, who taught himself the saxophone and piano and loved performing jazz on the saxophone, reminds us of the musical roots of his artistic inspiration and career.

Wole (Soyinka) made his first public appearance as a singer, I accompanied him at the piano....I was writing music seriously up to 1956. I started writing poetry when I stopped writing music.

And on the composition of his first poetry sequence, *Heavensgate*, he recalls in the same interview:

I was working under the spell of the impressionist composers Debussy, Caesar Franck, Ravel, and I think that, as in the music of these composers who write of a watery, shadowy, nebulous world, with the semitones of dream and the nuances of the rainbow, there isn’t any clearly defined outline in my work: this is what happened in my ‘Heavensgate’.

It is appropriate to honor the musical roots of Okigbo’s art as an integral part of the 2007 celebration of his legacy. To this end, three varieties of musical performances related to or inspired by his poetry have been worked into the program, *Hurrah for Thunder*!

The first, *Lustra Variations*, is a symphonic poem for the piano composed by the late Joshua Uzoigwe (1946-2005), based on a set of three poems. “Lustra” (*Heavensgate* IV), by Christopher Okigbo. It consists of a central theme with six variations, with each variation representing a sonic impression of different segments of Okigbo’s poems. This
unique composition which adroitly illustrates the interface between African traditional and European classical musical motifs in Okigbo’s poetry will be performed both as an introit and conclusion to Hurrah for Thunder! by a young, New York based Japanese pianist, Aya Kato, further illustrating the cross-cultural appeal of Okigbo’s art.

The second, comprising Solo Performances of Igbo and Yoruba Folk Songs, as arranged by the outstanding Nigerian composer, Joshua Uzoigwe (1946-2005), by his companion, the Nigerian soprano, Joyce Adewumi, accompanied by Aya Kato. The songs are not merely an arrangement of folk lyrics but artistic re-compositions of traditional melodies. In them, traditional tunes are presented not in their usual order/phrase organization. They are instead, divided into motives which serve as tools for creating a contemporary art-song. But in performance, both the voice and piano play equal but independent roles as in the African sense of music making.

The third musical performance, Predominantly White would have been a composition for chamber orchestra (with flutes, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, French horns, 9 strings, harp and classical percussion) inspired by dominant “white chamber” imagery in the early sections of Okigbo’s Distances) The work of Belgian Composer Erwin Vann, professor of composition (jazz department) at the Royal Conservatory of Brussels (Erasmus), Predominantly White embodies the influence of the French impressionists (Debussy, Ravel, Franck) on the poetry of Christopher Okigbo. The performance was cancelled at the last minute owing to the composer’s loss of his position at the Royal Conservatory.

Films Inspired by Okigbo’s Life and Works

Further with the sponsorship of the William Joiner Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, two films based on Okigbo’s life and works will be screened and discussed in the course of the conference, namely Meditation on Okigbo’s Labyrinths, a short film by the Nigerian Filmmaker, Toyin Adepoju, now based in the Comparative Literature Programme, University College, London, and The Pilot and the Passenger (or Who killed Christopher Okigbo), by the award-winning German-Nigerian filmmaker, Branwen Kiemente Okpako. Both films will be show in the afternoon of the first day of the conference (Thursday, September 20: see program).

The program will begin with Meditation on Okigbo’s Labyrinths, a short film of only 5 minutes inspired by Adepoju’s explorations of ideas in endogenous African systems of thought, and the poetic cycle Labyrinths by Okigbo. The film develops its effects through associations between images, written texts and music. Selections from Okigbo’s poetry are juxtaposed with other expressions of the philosophical and artistic significance of underwater life that recur in Okigbo’s work, including photographs by the great underwater photographer David Doubilet, texts of the Upanishads, poems by the Christian mystic St. John of the Cross, and the haunting landscapes of the Russian artist Nicholas Roerich. In addition, the film’s musical score derives from Christian Gregorian chants and Sanskrit chants from the Hindu Bhagavad Gita in order to evoke the numinous resonances of Okigbo’s work.

The main film, The Pilot & the Passenger (or Who killed Christopher Okigbo), by Branwen Kiemente Okpako (winner of the 2000 Bavarian documentary film prize and
First Prize at the 2001 Dubrovnik Documentary Film Festival), is a 90-minute documentary film-essay which explores Okigbo’s life as a poet and soldier. Completed by the summer of 2007, the film was inspired, according to Branwen Okpakpo, “by Chris’s reference to the pilot Palinurus and himself.” She further comments: “It is a documentary essay combining the classical interview style (with friends, colleagues and family of Christopher Okigbo) but it is shot through with images and dramatizations inspired by Christopher’s poetry and the accounts related in interview. Christopher Okigbo is an almost mythological figure and his life has a poetic, symbolic quality that takes any film out of the realm of the conventional documentation of dates and places and the relating of anecdotes, into the sphere of the spiritual and philosophical.” The film draws from several hours of interviews and lots of impressions from Ojooto to Lagos and Ibadan, as Ms Okpakpo further notes: “I went to Brussels and met with Obi (Chris's daughter) and she showed me her father’s poetry and we talked about the project (it was actually her idea for me to make this film). Last summer (2004) I was able to start primary shooting in Nigeria. I visited Ojooto and filmed the river (Idoto) which is the inspiration to many of Christopher's poems; his cousin guided us to the place. We also filmed the various shrines for which Christopher (as reincarnation of his maternal Grandfather, the priest) was responsible. We filmed with Bede Okigbo in Ojooto and he told us a lot about Christopher's life. In Ibadan I was able to get a guided tour around Cambridge house where Christopher lived when he ran the Cambridge university press. Jooj Burkhatou took us around and told a few stories he also gave me footage of the opening ceremony which was attended by Pius Okigbo, Wole Soyinka and JP Clark to name a few. Also Tunji Oyelana was there. We visited Demas Nwoko in his incredible house in Delta State and he told us all about the days of the Mbari club, as did Chief Higo in a really fun interview on his golf course in Ibadan.” Needless to say, the film promises to provide powerful visual backdrops to Okigbo’s biographical profile.

**Future Conferences and Diversity Workshops**

While the present celebration (for 2007-2008) focuses on Christopher Okigbo, the larger project of which it is a part, is already looking ahead to the programs for the subsequent three years, beginning with **Chinua Achebe (2008)**, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the publication of his landmark novel, *Things Fall Apart*, widely read at all levels of the US school system; **Wole Soyinka (2009)**, focusing on global culture and consciousness in the mythic universe of his works; and **Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2010)**, focusing on the past, present and future of literature in African languages. In these subsequent programs, the authors around whom the program will be developed will be examined along with a constellation of younger authors and other artists influenced by them as well as those by whom they have been influenced.

**Chukwuma Azuonye**, Convener,
Professor of African Literature, University of Massachusetts, Boston,
Fellow, W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University

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Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
PROGRAM

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11 - FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2007
[Sherman Gallery, Boston University, Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA]
Concurrent Exhibition of Art Works Celebrating Okigbo's Modernity & Poetics

- Another Modernity: Works on Paper by Uche Okeke
- Nigerian Poetics: Works by Obiora Udechukwu
[Organized by the Newark Museum & Department of Art History, College of Visual Arts, and the Sherman Gallery, Boston University]

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BRIGHT
with the arm-pit-dazzle of a lioness,
she answers.
wearin white light about her;
and the waves escort her,
my luminous,
crowned with moonlight.
So brief her presence —
match-dance in wind's breath —
so brief with mirrors around me.
Downward,
the waves distill her
gold crop
 lingking ungathered.
Watermaid of the self-emptiness,
grown are the ears of the secret.
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"Bright with the arm-pit dazzle of a lioness"
(from Homage to Christopher Okigbo, Obiora Udechukwu, 1975)
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2007

- Arrival of Conference Participants and Guests
- Individual and Group Viewing of Exhibition of Art Works by Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu at Boston University

“Watermaid” by Demas Nwoko (reproduced from Heavensgate, 1962)
09:30 - 11:30 am: Session I: Remembering Christopher Okigbo
Chair Winston Langley, Associate Provost
- Welcome to the Conference by Convener, Chukwuma Azuonye
- Brief Welcome by Chancellor Keith Motley/Associate Chancellor Winston Langley, Provost Paul Fonteyn, CLA Dean Donna Kuizenga, and Africana Studies Chair Jemadari Kamara
- Keynote Addresses 1 & 2:
  1. Michael J. C. Echeruo, William Safire Professor of Modern Letters, Department of English, Syracuse University, “Five Poems For Okigbo and Some Reminiscing.”

11:00 - 11:10 am: Coffee Break
11:00 am - 12:30 pm: Roundtable I: Okigbo’s Childhood, Education & Family Life
Chair: Chike Momah, Okigbo’s classmate at Government College, Umuahia; retired UN librarian, now resident in Houston, TX

• Lead Papers
1. Obi Nwakamma, Department of English, St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri, “From Ojoto to Umuahia: Figurations of Childhood in Okigbo’s poetry.”
2. Bede Okigbo, Okigbo’s cousin and childhood buddy; retired Professor of Agronomy and Director, International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, Ibadan. “My Relationship with Christopher Okigbo,” read in absentia by Stella Okigbo.

• Personal Reminiscences
1. Iyom Victoria Okuzu, Okigbo’s younger sister; businesswoman, Lagos, Nigeria.
2. Chike Momah, Okigbo’s classmate at Government College, Umuahia; retired UN librarian, now resident in Houston, TX,
3. Sefi Judith Attah, Okigbo’s wife, Distinguished Teacher and Educational Administrator; Formerly Nigerian Federal Minister of Women’s Affairs and Social Services and Nigerian Ambassador to Italy; currently United Nations Human Rights Commissioner

12:30 - 12:40 pm: Coffee Break
12:40 – 02:00 pm: Session II: Okigbo, History and Prophecy

Chair: Tanure Ojaide, Frank Porter Graham Professor, Africana Studies Department, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC

1. Nyong J. Udogueyop, Department of English, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, “Christopher Okigbo: Poetry as Quest, History and Prophecy.”
3. Chinyere Nwahunany, Visiting Professor of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State; “Prophets, Watchmen and Towncriers: The Role of the Poet in Okigbo's Poetry.”
5. Tanure Ojaide, Frank Porter Graham Professor, Africana Studies Department, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC, "Christopher Okigbo and the African Poetic Imagination: New Frontiers."  

02: 00 – 02:40 pm: Lunch & Special Keynote Address


02:50 – 04:15 pm: Session III: Okigbo and the Postcolonial Experience I:

Chair: Helen Obiageli Chukwuma, Department of English and Modern Foreign Languages, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS.

1. Helen Obiageli Chukwuma, Department of English and Modern Foreign Languages, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS, “Okigbo and His Goddess of Poesy: Tradition and the Poetic Impulse in Heavensgate.”
2. Frances Ajashi-Nzeribe, Lecturer, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Enugu State, Nsukka; “What Manner of Man?—Christopher Okigbo: A Phenomenon in Postcolonial African Literature.”
5. Chimulum Nwankwo, Professor and Chair, Department of English, North Carolina A&T State University, Greensboro, NC 27411, “Christopher Okigbo, African Literature and the Diffident Detour into Western Myths: A Post-Colonial Syndrome.”

Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium

04:15–04:30 pm: Coffee Break

04:30 - 06:15 pm: Two Films Inspired by Okigbo’s Life and Art
1. Meditations on Okigbo’s Labyrinths by Toyin Adepoju, Department of Comparative Literature, University College, London, WC1, UK (Presented in absentia).
2. The Pilot and the Passenger Or Who Killed Christopher Okigbo: A DocuDramatic Film and Talk by Branwen Kiemente Okpako.

06:15–06:30 pm: Coffee Break

06:30 - 07:30 pm Session IV: Okigbo and the Postcolonial Experience II:
Chair. J. O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, Professor of English, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria
3. Romanus Egudu, Emeritus Professor of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria; “Christopher Okigbo and Postcolonial Experience” (Tabled in absentia).
4. Dan Izevbaye, Department of Human Communications, Bowen University, Osun State; Emeritus Professor of English, University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, “Revisiting Okigbo’s Art and Commitment” (Tabled in absentia).
5. Sule E. Egya, Professor, Department of English, Nasarawa State University, Keffi; “From the Crossroads to the Slit-Drum: Christopher Okigbo as a Political Poet” (Tabled in absentia).

7:30 -8:00 pm: Recess

8:00 pm – 9:30: Dinner and PoetryFest: Hurrah for Thunder: A Program of Poetry Reading, Music and Songs in Honor of Okigbo
Moderator: Esiaba Irobi
• Introit: Lustra Variations (based on Heavensgate IV: Lustra) by Joshua Uzoigwe, performed on the Piano by Aya Kato
• Poetry Reading by Dubem Okafor; Steven Vincent; Ijeoma Azuonye; Sly Cheney Coker; Don Burness, and Michael J. C. Echeruo

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• Nigerian folk songs recreated by Joshua Uzoigwe) rendered by Soprano Joyce Adewumi
• Poetry Reading by Dennis Brutus; Ihechukwu Madubuike; Amatoritsero Ede; Ossie Onuora Enekwe; and Esiaba Irobi
• Predominantly White: Chamber music composition inspired by Okigbo’s Distances, Directed by the composer, Erwin Vann
• Poetry Reading by Ifeanyi Menkiti; Olu Oguibe, Chimalum Nwankwo; Ije Okigbo; Tanure Ojaide; Sofia Dati Okigbo; and Rebecca Saunders.
• Solo (Nigerian folk songs recreated by Joshua Uzoigwe) rendered by Soprano Joyce Adewumi
• Poetry Reading by Obi Okigbo; Ifi Amadiume; Chinyere Okafor; Michael Odokara-Okigbo; Obiora Udechukwu; and Wole Soyinka
• Recessional: Lustra Variations (based on Heavensgate IV: Lustra) by Joshua Uzoigwe, performed on the Piano by Aya Kato.

Idoto, Water Goddess of Okigbo’s hometown, Ojooto, invoked at the beginning of Heavensgate (1962)

Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2007
[Thompson Room, Barker Center, Harvard University, 12 Quincy Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138]

09:30 -11:00 am: Session V: Christopher Okigbo: Arms and the Poet
Chair Henry Louis Gates Jr, Alphonse Fletcher Professor of the Humanities, W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Welcome to the Events of the Day by Convener, Chukwuma Azuonye
- Welcome Address by Chair, Henry Louis Gates Jr.
- Keynote Addresses 3
  Wole Soyinka, Nobel Laureate, Playwright, Poet, Novelist, Essayist, First Alphonse Fletcher Fellow, W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA Soldiering On: Arms and the Poet.”.

11:00 – 11:15 am: Coffee Break

11:15 am -12:20 pm: Session V: Christopher Okigbo and His Time
Chair Michael J. C. Echeruo, William Safire Professor of Modern Letters, Department of English, Syracuse University
- Keynote Addresses 4:
  Chinua Achebe, Novelist, Poet, Essayist, Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504, "Christopher Okigbo and His Time"

12:20 –12:30 am: Coffee Break

12:30 -2:00 pm: Roundtable 2: Christopher Okigbo & the Great Mbardi Renaissance
Chair Abiola Irele, Okigbo’s Contemporary at Ibadan; Editor of The Horn in which one of Okigbo’s early poems, “On the New Year,” first appeared.
- Lead Paper:
- Personal Reminiscences by Okigbo’s contemporaries and literary friends
  1. O R. Dathorne, Emeritus Professor of English, African and Caribbean Literatures, University of Kentucky, Nicholasville, KY
  3. Michael Echeruo, William Safire Professor of Modern Letters, Department of English, Syracuse University, 401 HL, Syracuse,
  4. Wole Soyinka, Okigbo’s Contemporary at Ibadan; and one of the leaders of the Great Mbardi Renaissance.

2:00 – 02:40 pm: Lunch break.

2:40 – 04:10 pm: Session VI: Okigbo, the Nigerian Crisis, and the Biafran War I:
Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
Chair: Gerald Moore, Emeritus Professor of English, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, and University of Jos, Nigeria; Via Muggia 29, 33100 Udine, Italy

1. Gerald Moore, Professor of English, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, and University of Jos, Nigeria; Via Muggia 29, 33100 Udine, Italy, "The Voices out of Silence": Silences as the Great Turning-Point in Okigbo's Poetry.

2. Isidore Diala, Professor, Department of English, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria; "Lament of the Masks: Okigbo and the Oriki Tradition."

3. Paula García-Ramírez, Senior Lecturer in Postcolonial Literature, University of Jaen, Jaen, Spain; "The Lament of the Deer: An Okigbo Poem Inserted in a Story for Children."


5. Chuks Ihekaibeya, Formerly Special Assistant to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Commonwealth Secretariat, Pall Mall, London, WC1., "Christopher Okigbo and a Poetics of African Conflict: A Reading of the Later Poems" (Tabled in absentia)

04:10-04:20 pm: Coffee Break

04:20-05:30 pm: Conference Session VI: Special Presentations:

Chair: Paula García-Ramírez, Senior Lecturer in Postcolonial Literature, University of Jaen, Jaen, Spain

1. Chukwuoma Azuonye, University of Massachusetts, Boston, "Christopher Okigbo at Work: A Survey of His Previously Unpublished Papers."

2. Obiageli Okigbo, Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium; "Nominating the Unpublished Papers of Christopher Okigbo for the UNESCO Memory of the World Register."

03:30-06:00 pm: Recess: Relocation of Interested Participants from Harvard to Boston University

[CFA Concert Hall, Boston University, Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA]

06:00 pm – 07:00 pm: Keynote Address on Okigbo and Art

Moderator: Cynthia Becker, Assistant Professor of Art History, Boston University

Obiora Udéchukwu, Poet, Artist, Poet, Artist, Charles A. Dana Professor, Department of Fine Arts, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY 12504, "Odinaana na Ichomma [Tradition and the Search for Beauty]: Art and Okigbo's Poetry."

7:00 pm - 08:30 pm: Reception and Poetry Reading [Sherman Gallery is located on the second floor of the George Sherman Union at 775 Commonwealth Avenue]
ARRIVING suddenly and like twilight showers, we hover;
And like the fly the butterfly
Chancing on the cist's excrement, we circle the scene

The moon, far off from the temple;
And ever thus our forebears
Are our forerunners of conversant with cult secrets.

The rowbill attacks, and so forth.

Our forerunners of conversant with cult secrets
Are our forebears.

The cist of our revelry, our revelry.

Our cist of revelry, our revelry.

The path becomes a road, a market-place;
The lithe, 

The cist of our revelry, our revelry.

The cist of our revelry, our revelry.

The lithe, 

A brace ball with long chain kinman to the rope...
09:00 - 11:00 am: Session VIII: Old Controversies, New Perspectives
Chair Jacob Olupona (Professor Chair, African Studies Committee, Harvard University).
- Welcome to the Day’s Events by Convener, Chukwuma Azuonye.
- Keynote Addresses 1 & 2:
  2. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511, “Okigbo, the Biafran Experience and the Making of Half of a Yellow Sun”.
- Comments by Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie

11:00 - 11:10 am: Coffee Break

11:10 - 01:10 pm Session VII: Okigbo, the Nigerian Crisis, and the Biafran War II
Chair: Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, Director, Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, Dakar, Senegal
- Lead Papers:
  2. Robert Fraser, Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures, Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, (R.Fraser@open.ac.uk), “From Bebop to Biafra: Okigbo, Lyricism and Jazz” (Tabled in absentia).
  3. Obadiah Mailafla (Central Bank of Nigeria, FCT Abuja, Nigeria; The Trial of Christopher Okigbo Re-Visited: Ethnicity, Commitment and Nationhood” (Tabled in absentia).
- Open Forum:
  1. Emmanuel Okocha, author of Blood of the Niger and a notable historian of the Nigerian crisis and the Biafran war
  2. Okeleke Nzeogwu, Brother of the leader of the January 15, 1966 coup d’etat in Nigeria; Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu
  3. Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, author of Biafra Revisited; and a notable historian of the Nigerian crisis and the Biafran war

1:10 - 01:50: Lunch Break
1:50 - 3:00 pm: Session IX: Okigbo's Global Vision & Transnational Modernism  
Chair: Anita Patterson, Associate Professor of English/Modernism, Boston University & Reviews Editor, Twentieth Century Literature.
2. David Richards, Professor and Chair, Department of English Studies, University of Stirling, Scotland, UK, “The Art Behind: Okigbo’s Archaic Modern.”

3:00 – 03:10: Coffee Break

03:10 - 04:10 pm: Session X: Okigbo's Modernism: Language & Poetic Logistics  
Chair Ime Ikiddeh, Professor of English and Dean, Postgraduate Studies, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria
1. Ime Ikiddeh, Professor of English and Dean, Postgraduate Studies, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, “Voices in the senses' stillness’: A Re-Assessment of the Coded and Elliptical Idiom of Christopher Okigbo's Poetry” (Tabled in absentia).
2. Anthony Chukwuemeka Oha, Lecturer in Creative Writing/History of Ideas, Department of Arts, Benson Idahosa University, Benin City, Nigeria; “Onomastic Force as Semiotic Iconicity in Okigbo's Poetry.”
3. Uduma Kalu, Journalist, The Guardian; Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria; Okigbo as the Eye/I of His Poetic Hero: Making the Poet Accessible through the Auto/Biographical Mode” (Tabled in absentia).
5. Austine Amanze Akpuda, Department of English, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria; “Constructing the Christopher Okigbo Canon” (Tabled in absentia)

04:10 - 04:10 pm: Session XI: Okigbo’s Modernism: Comparative Perspectives  
Chair Ifeanyi Menkiti, Poet and Professor of Philosophy, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts
1. Ifeanyi Menkiti, Poet and Professor of Philosophy, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts; Proprietor, Grolier’s Poetry Bookshop, Cambridge, Massachusetts, “'And asked him to do a rock-drill’: A Comparative Examination of the Political Poetry Christopher Okigbo and Ezra Pound.”
2. Obiwu, Director, Writing Center, Central State University, Wilberforce, OH 45384, “The Eco-Poetics of Pound and Okigbo.”
05:20 - 06:30 pm: Session II: Cultural Inheritance & Artistic Legacy:
Chair: Uzoma Esonwanne, Department of English & Comparative Literature, University of Toronto, Medical Arts Building, 170 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario M5R2M8

1. Uzoma Esonwanne, Department of English & Comparative Literature, University of Toronto, Medical Arts Building, 170 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario M5R2M8, (uzoma.esonwanne@utoronto.ca) “Orality and the Genres of African Postcolonial Writing: The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo”

2. Dubem Okafor, Department of English, Kutztown University, Pennsylvania, PA, “Okigbo as a Cultural Globalist.”

3. Folu Agoi, Chairman, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Lagos; “Gender in Christopher Okigbo’s Poetry.”

4. Emma Ngumoha, Senior Lecturer in English, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria; “Folk Music and Chants in Okigbo’s Poetry” (Tabled in absentia).

5. Harmony Uzoigwe, A Graduate of English, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria; No 15, Rd Q World Bank Housing Estate, Umuahia, Abia State; “Christopher Okigbo: A Legacy—Influences on Two Younger Generations of Poets/Poetry (Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare and Esiaba Irobi)” (Tabled in absentia).


05:40 - 05:50: Lunch Break

06:30 - 07:30 pm: Closing Plenary Session
Chair: Emmanuel Obiechina, Distinguished Okigbo Scholar—Critic, Poet and Recently Visiting Professor of Literature of African Literature, Harvard University, and former Vice-Chancellor, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

07:30 - 8:30 pm: Recess/Bus to Hotels and U Mass Boston

[Campus Center Ballroom, University of Massachusetts, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125-3393]

08:30 pm – Midnight: Conference Banquet Dinner and Ball
Hosted by Nigerian Cultural Organizations in the Greater Boston Area, Coordinated by Chioma Azuonye, Department of Education, University of Massachusetts, Boston

• Dinner (Assorted Nigerian Cuisine)
• **A Toast for Christopher Okigbo** by Sefi Judith Attah, Christopher Okigbo’s wife, Distinguished Teacher and Educational Administrator; Formerly Nigerian Federal Minister of Women’s Affairs and Social Services and Nigerian Ambassador to Italy; currently United Nations Human Rights Commissioner

• **Gala Nite: Music and Dance interspersed with Open Mic poetry reading**
  With highlife music by Okigbo’s contemporaries (Victor Olaiya, Rex Lawson, etc)

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**Socialite Christopher Okigbo lighting a pipe, early 1960’s**
(courtesy Christopher Okigbo Foundation)

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2007**
[University of Massachusetts, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125-3393]

- 08:30 am -10:00 am: Business Meeting:
  1. Christopher Okigbo Foundation/Christopher Okigbo Society
- Departure
Achebe, Chinua, Novelist, Poet, Essayist, Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504, USA, "Christopher Okigbo and His Time."

In his keynote address, Okigbo’s close personal friend, Achebe, with whom he started the Citadel Press and shared a hilltop house at Enugu in 1966-67, offers intimate reflections on shared experience of life and letters between him and Okigbo, whose poetry he sees as representative of the spirit of the postcolonial world of their time.

Acholonu, Catherine Obianuju, Country Ambassador, United Nations Forum of Arts and Culture, PMB 5197, Abuja, Nigeria, “From Pre-history to Post-history: Revisiting the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo, the Prophet of the New African Renaissance.”

Christopher Okigbo was a child of two worlds: very much at home with European Classical Literature but at the same time Okigbo had a personal knowledge of African culture, in particular his native Igbo culture. Okigbo’s poetry was beautifully and densely molded with allusions to Africa and classical Europe. He saw parallels between motifs of African folklore and folk myths and those from classical Europe. Okigbo had a private, mystical life deeply rooted in his Igbo cultural environment and the initial conflict arising therefrom, was the driving force in his poetry. The resolution of that conflict was his raison d’etre.

Though born to a Christian family and raised a Christian, his works demonstrate that he practiced his traditional Igbo religion. Not only did he see deep rooted similarities between the two religions, he actually came to the realization Pre-historic links between his traditional Igbo religion and the beginnings of Christianity. He devoted himself to providing poetic teasers in this regard, mindful that his audience was not yet mentally and evolutionally ready for the whole truth. He thus attempted to re-interpret the universality of Igbo cosmology from a classical European perspective.

As a very devoted Christian and an initiate of the cult of the goddess Idoto, Okigbo was a mystic and a prophet in every sense of the word. He reinterpreted African geometric symbols and gave them a global mystical relevance transcending space and time. He predicted the Biafra war. He saw and celebrated his own imminent death. But he also saw the end of the millennium, the end of Western civilization that would be heralded by the fall of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. He saw the primordial unity of all global cultures and civilizations. He saw Africa re-birthing: the rise of a new star in African skies propelled by the eternal return of the Christ: the coming Age of Nietzsche’s Superman, the Post-historic Age of the God-man.

Agoi, Folu, Flag International (Publications, Communications, Educational), P. O. Box 322, Ijanikin, Lagos, “Gender in Christopher Okigbo’s Poetry.”
This paper attempts to characterize the substance and aesthetics of the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, a dominant modern African poet. Modern African poetry, like any other, is largely a function of historical, philosophical, religious and literary circumstances. Situating Okigbo’s poetry in the context of a conservative society dominated by patriarchal values, this paper critically examines Okigbo’s poetry, and projects the post-pioneer poet’s “outer and inner worlds”, with particular emphasis on his perception and treatment of the female gender as a metaphor. The poet’s Heavensgate, a collection of poems, opens the debate on his use of the female gender as a medium for expressing deep metaphysical essence of life worthy of exploring in order to unravel the mystery of an imagined new Nigerian society.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, Novelist, Author of Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun, 123 York Street, New Haven, CT 06511, “Okigbo, Memories of Biafra and the Composition of Half of the Yellow Sun.”

In her keynote address, specially targeted at high school teachers attending the conference, 2007 Orange Prize laureate, Chimamanda Adichie, discusses how memories of the Biafran war (which she never experienced first-hand) crystallized into the poignant representation of the traumatic impact of the struggle on the ordinary people under the shadow of Christopher Okigbo as acknowledged in the postscript to her novel, Half of the Yellow Sun, whose title alludes to the image of the half sun on the Biafran flag.


A well-written life is almost as rare as a well-spent one”.-Thomas Carlyle(1795-1881)

This statement applies very well to Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo, a trailblazer in postcolonial African literature whose striking imageries and vibrant style have charmed and greatly influenced innumerable younger poets in Africa and beyond.

While some critics are of the opinion that his poetry is obscure, others citing "Path of Thunder," admire its musical, mellifluous and incantatory qualities and his use of repetition, parallelism and invocatory rhythms to drive home his message. Despite the strictures of his critics, the influences of European classical impressionist composers (such as Debussy, Cesar, Ravel, Handel, and Mozart) and Euromodermist poets (like T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound) do not run counter to, but rather help to bolster, the social relevance of his message. Despite the enigma which his eccentricities made him out to be in the eyes of many of his contemporaries, he remained focused in his commitment to the ideals of the open society, a commitment which underlies his active involvement and self-sacrifice for these ideals in the Biafran war which he saw as a war against gross injustice. A soldier of extraordinary valor, he vowed that Opi junction (gateway to the University town of Nsukka) would fall over his dead body, and so it did. Because his choices and behavior were often at variance with the opinions and views of his society and time, some writers and even close personal friends of his have called him an "ogbanje" (a spirit who rushes to be born into the human world only to rush back in early death to the spirit world). He believed so much in the concept of "ogbanje" which his
nature of life depicted. But it seems better to understand his choices and behavior in the light his unusual, often prophetic insights into the roots of the angst of his postcolonial time and his uncanny resort to creative solutions deeply rooted in his indigenous African tradition.

Akpuda, Austine Amanze, Department of English, Abia State University, P.M.B 2000, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria, “Constructing the Christopher Okigbo Canon”

Granted Obi Nwakamma’s thesis that “Okigbo’s pre-eminence as Africa’s poet of the century can be glimpsed, from the fact that he is the most studied and most cited Africa poet in the century whose works…still dominate the most important seminars on African poetry anywhere in the world” (“Speaking for Okigbo” Vanguard Dec. 19, 1999 p.29), any celebration of Okigbo’s 75th Birthday Anniversary that does not consider the critical industry that his poetry has spawned would be incomplete. Against the above background therefore, our purpose in this paper is to attempt a construction of the Christopher Okigbo canon as discernible from the works written around his poetry. In doing the present study, we shall keep in focus the major issues and trends in Okigbo scholarship, especially within the last thirty seven years.


The present paper is an overview of a much larger project with the working title, *Christopher Okigbo at Work: Resources, Logistics and the Creative Process*. Its objectives are two-fold: first is to produce a critical edition of the complete corpus of the previously unpublished papers of Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967), who is today widely acknowledged as by far the most outstanding postcolonial, Anglophone, African, modernist poet of the 20th century; secondly to offer a pilot critical interpretation of the previously unknown poems in the corpus and to ascertain their place in the Okigbo canon. Most of the papers in the corpus are currently under the custody of the poet’s only child, his daughter, Annabelle Obiageli Okigbo, well-known to readers of her father’s poetry through the dedication to “Safinat and Ibrahimat, Mother and Child,” in *Labyrinths* (1971), the collection of his mid-career poetry prepared by Okigbo himself. Others were located at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin and in the Peter Thomas Collection at the Goelieb Archival Research Center in the Mugar Library of Boston University. The project is closely-linked to other ongoing or recently completed work on Okigbo’s poetry (Azuonye, 2006a-e, and 2007a-e). Among these are an annotated critical edition of Okigbo’s complete poetry (Azuonye, 2007a, forthcoming) and the present international conference on Okigbo’s life and works.

Blyden, Isa Espadon, “Christopher Okigbo & Dr. Edward W. Blyden III at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.”

I am interested in participating in your seminar on Christopher Okigbo with a brief essay on his poetry written in 1963. Christopher Okigbo used to work in my father, Dr.
E.W. Blyden III’s library at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and they were great friends. My mother, who is 78, used to read some of his poems and critique them. I was ten years old at the time but remember him well and would love to share that at the end of my essay or in the intro.

Brown, Matthew H., Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Wisconsin Madison), “Synthesizing a Newcomer: The Process toward Art for Okigbo and Soyinka.”

Christopher Okigbo’s poetry is characterized by a strategic comparison of contradictions, out of which he synthesizes a new perspective. In the European Tradition, this strategy dates at least as far back to the contentious philosophies of Hegel who articulated the cycle of Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis. In the African tradition, the cycle may be as old as the gods themselves. According to Okigbo’s compatriot and fellow poet, Wole Soyinka, this is exactly how the Yoruba pantheon inspires the art of man. In his essay, “The Fourth Stage,” Soyinka explains the origins of Yoruba tragedy through the “Mysteries of Ogun.” God of Iron, War, and Artistry, Ogun has become Soyinka’s patron saint of tragedy. Yet for Soyinka, Ogun’s defining role in tragedy exists only in contrast to the god Obarala. Soyinka’s definition, then, is also characterized by a strategic comparison of contradictions, out of which he synthesizes a new perspective.

In this paper I conduct a close reading of Okigbo’s Heavensgate, illustrating the juxtaposition of thesees and antitheses upon which the poet’s philosophy is built. Through references to Soyinka’s essays and his own poetry, I also illustrate the similarities that exist between the two poets’ existential hypotheses. I intentionally leave room for questions about whether this overlap in existential schemata is the result of collaboration, collusion, or coincidence. However, Soyinka’s sympathy for the Biafran cause and Okigbo’s involvement in it, illustrate the influence that this philosophy has had on social praxis. The Ogunian aesthetic of forging useful novelty from destruction and opposition led both writers to feel strongly about the need for cessation in order to foster something bigger than Nigeria, something based on the human rights of freedom and self-determination.

Chukwuma, Helen Obiageli, Department of English, University of Mississippi, Jackson, MI, “Okigbo and His Goddess of Poesy: Tradition and the Poetic Impulse in Heavensgate.”

The sixties in Nigeria’s history and literature were marked with a robust sense of nationalism and experiential culturalism. The period witnessed an upsurge of literary creativity by indigenous writers who introduced new voices to echo the spirit of the times. Having studied and been saturated with literary masterpieces of Britain and America, those writers fresh from university felt the need to record Nigeria’s very own literature.

Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, were the earliest poets of this period to come out of Nigeria. The colonial period of course, had
men penning poems of sorts that addressed the political struggle for Independence. These include Dennis Osadebe, Mbonu Ojike and Nnamdi Azikiwe.

Christopher Okigbo as a poet was much concerned with the creative process, the poet's affectations and the torment of the creative impulse which leads to the realization of poesy. Okigbo reflected this driving spirit in an incarnate way whereby he came to the encounter and embrace of his progenitor, the goddess Idoto, whose reincarnate priest he was. This watery essence became his Muse. Only then did he discover his true self and his calling to be a poet, a writer, a singer of tales, a culture bearer and a town-crier.

This paper examines this fusion of tradition and talent in the making of a poet in Okigbo's first book of poems, Heavensgate. It shows the eclectic transverse of many currents in Okigbo's formation and experience of poetry. As in James Joyce's work, so Heavensgate is the portrait of Okigbo the artist.


A discussion of the Ibadan group of which Christopher Okigbo was part and how his poetry has impacted on global realities

Diala, Isidore, Professor, Department of English, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria), “Lament of the Masks: Okigbo and the Oriki Tradition.”

Christopher Okigbo’s poetry highlights in a striking manner the international character of a poet’s heritage. Learning his trade from and serving his apprenticeship at the feet of such diverse poets as Virgil, Eliot, and Pound, Okigbo was equally drawn to the art of traditional African poetry mainly through the influence of Senghor and Yoruba poetry. Invited in 1965 by Desmond Maxwell to contribute a poem to commemorate W. B. Yeats’s centenary, Okigbo’s deep fascination with the Yoruba praise poetry, the oriki, led him to write an oriki for the English poet. The resulting poem, Lament of the Mask, was modeled on the “Praise of Oba Olunloye” and actually repeats some of the praises for the oba. However, if Okigbo’s lament is demonstrably modeled on a Yoruba poem, the oriki itself has been shown to transcend ethnic borders, being an international literary form seen in an infinite variety of manifestations from the Wolof, Serer, and Mandinka, in the Sahel region to the Bahima of Ankole in Uganda and to the land of the Ngqika, Xhosa and Sotho. By Okigbo’s recognition of cultures as dynamic and hybrid, his adoption of the entire human patrimony as his heritage, he entrenches an open society that thrives on the virtues of human complementarity. Lament of the Mask, the work of a poet of Igbo extraction, paying tribute to an English poet, in a Yoruba poetic tradition which however has a demonstrable international character, foregrounds Okigbo’s enlightened exaltation of the dialectic of cultures.

Echeruo, Michael J. C., William Safire Professor of Modern Letters, Department of English, Syracuse University, 401 HL, Syracuse, NY 13244, Tel: 315 443 9477, Fax: 315 443 3660, “Five Poems for Okigbo and Some Reminiscing.”

Of his keynote address, Michael Echeruo, Okigbo’s friend and contemporary at Ibadan and Nsukka in the early 1960’s, writes:

Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
My presentation will be in two parts. First I will reminisce on my association with Christopher Okigbo: from 1960-1962, a very crucial period in his development as a poet, and from 1966-1967, from the counter-coup of 1966 till his death at Nsukka during the Nigeria-Biafra War. I was very close to Christopher during these two periods.

My recollection will touch on his literary development during the first of these periods, with some general remarks on the paths that led to the “turn” (as some people have seen it) in his poetic style from Heavensgate to Path of Thunder. It will also add some details to suggest that Okigbo’s role in the Biafra War went beyond that of a volunteer infantry officer.

The second part of my presentation will be a reading from my unpublished “Poems to Okigbo,” poems which (I hope) will offer another aspect of these reminiscences in his memory.

Egya, Sule E., Professor, Department of English, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria “From the Crossroads to the Slit-Drum: Christopher Okigbo as a Political Poet.”

The basic argument in this paper is that though Christopher Okigbo uses far-fetched images, which are often said to be private, he is after all a public poet. He is in fact a political poet concerned with the affairs of his nation. He evolves “aesthetics of rage” against the sociopolitical maladies that generated the early postcolonial tension in Nigeria. Deflecting the exegetical paradigm that sees the goddess mother Idoto and other metaphors used by the poet as private imagery, I attempt to project that the metaphoric essence of the water goddess transcends the so-called “privatist chant” and establishes the “publicness” of Okigbo’s poetry, which becomes fully realized in “Path of Thunder”. Masked in the idiom of religion and myth is a poet not only political in his themes but passionately so. This reading of Okigbo’s selected poems disregards his utterances against committed writing because he is, as I intend to point out, as committed as any political poet in Nigerian literature.

Egudu, Romanus, Emeritus Professor of English and African Literature, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria “Christopher Okigbo and Postcolonial Experience.”

In “Hurrah for Thunder” (Path of Thunder), Okigbo calls himself “town-crier”, thus showing that he certainly believes that as a poet his duty (or, at least, part of it) is to inform/educate, alert and mobilize his community/nation, especially in crisis-situations. And the tool he uses—the “iron bell”—is, of course, his poetry, which, though the poet has been sent to the grave, survives and will continue to render the town-crier’s services to the nation and even to the world. Indeed the functions of the “town-crier” have been reflected in Okigbo’s earlier poetry dealing with the colonial period and they therefore foreshadow their own presence in the poems dealing with the postcolonial period. In this connection, Dan Izevbaye has observed that in view of the “prophetic” and “publicity” functions of the “Sunbird” (which has announced the coming of the enemy-fleet of eagles in Limits VIII and which is the first victim of the same enemy in Limits X), there is a link...
between it (sunbird) and “the dawn’s charioteer in Limits IX, the messiah and diviner of Limits VI, and the town crier with his iron bell in ‘Hurrah for Thunder’” (141).

Since Okigbo has overtly assigned to himself the functions of the “town-crier”, one finds it difficult to agree with Anozie’s view that the “element of social criticism” in Silences I was introduced by the poet as “marginal commentary” (63). On the contrary, one thinks that there is enough evidence in Okigbo’s poems dealing with the postcolonial era for the conclusion to be reached that the plight of Nigeria is the core of his concern in those poems.

Ekwe-Ekwe, Herbert, Director, Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, Dakar, Senegal
“Okigbo, the African State, Genocide and the Peoples.”

The state in Africa demonstrates a glaring inability to fulfill its basic role to provide security, welfare and transformative capacities for society’s developmental needs and aspirations. The state is virtually at war with its peoples, having murdered 15 million in Biafra, Rwanda, Darfur, southern Sudan, the Congos and elsewhere on the continent between 1966 and 2007. Christopher Okigbo’s incisive scholarship not only anticipates this development, but it rigorously interrogates its tragic consequences. Forty years on, it is evident that it is the African genocide-state that is the bane of African social existence. It is what constitutes the firestorm of the emergency that threatens the very survival of the African. It is not the ‘debt’, ‘poverty’, HIV/AIDS/other diseases and the myriad of socioeconomics indices often reeled off in many a commentary. Africa must resolve the contentious issues that fuel the conflictual existence of its peoples before achieving urgently needed socioeconomic transformation. This is a political question. The widespread feeling of alienation by most constituent peoples in the typical African state is palpable enough. Africans urgently need a principled, unfettered, and unsentimental debate on its genocide-state, with its ultra-centralising and utterly unviable ethos. Genocide is obviously not a viable option to resolve Africa’s outstanding problems. All arms should henceforth be removed from Africa as vehicle for the settlement of disputes. The creation of democratic and extensively decentralised new states that guarantee and safeguard human rights, equality and freedom for all peoples constitutes the basis for the way out of this quagmire.

Esonwanne, Uzoma, Department of English & Comparative Literature, University of Toronto, Medical Arts Building, 170 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario M5R2M8, “Orality and the Genres of African Postcolonial Writing: The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo”

Critical consensus divides Christopher Okigbo’s literary career into two phases. To the first phase belongs Heavensgate, Limits, Silences, and Distances, and to the second belongs Path of Thunder. For nativist critics, the poetics of the first phase constitute a faux modernism on which he eventually turned his back. Thereafter, in his post-faux modernist phase he adopted the public idiom and poetic performative style widely associated with African indigenous orality. Such accounts of Okigbo’s poetic career presuppose that orality, which they conceive of as an archive of residual expressive forms uncontaminated by history, only made a belated appearance in Okigbo’s poetry. By
means of a close reading of Okigbo’s poetry, including his juvenilia published in *Christopher Okigbo: Collected Poems* (1986), I would argue that the trajectory of Okigbo’s literary career can be best understood as a sequence of often intense, imaginative exercises in the adaptation of a wide variety of oral genres, of which those of a recognizably African provenance are just a part. Implicit in this argument is the proposition that what the more pronounced imaginative evocation of African “indigenous orality” in *Path of Thunder* marks is not so much a reversion to an authentic traditional poetics as it is a specifically postcolonial African modernist sensibility that, in possibly the most powerful elegiac in contemporary African writing, attempts to mobilize its audience to resist the fate that threatens it.

Fraser, Robert, Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures, Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, “From Bebop to Biafra: Okigbo, Lyricism and Jazz.”

A critical examination of the transatlantic pop culture connections, through Jazz, of the lyricism of Okigbo’s later poems and the social activism that culminated in his death in action in the Biafran war.

Garcia-Ramirez, Paula, Senior Lecturer in Postcolonial Literature, University of Jaen, Spain “‘The Lament of the Deer’: An Okigbo Poem Inserted in a Story for Children.”

“The Lament of the Deer” is one of the less known poems by Christopher Okigbo. It was published posthumously in 1972 as part of a story for children: *How the Leopard Got his Claws*, written by Chinua Achebe and John Iroaganachi. This folk tale tells how the animals, which had a peaceful coexistence with the leopard as their king, turned their backs on him. The text is a small poem (fourteen lines), in which the deer shows its pain after being attacked by the dog and dreams with the happy years of the leopard’s peaceful government.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the importance of this poem in the general context of the story and the procedure used to insert it in the narrative structure of the tale. Thus, I want to point out the way this short poem condenses many of the poetical keys which characterise Okigbo’s poetry: i.e. the integration of the oral Igbo poetry with western tradition, the combination of an epic base with an emotional lyric counterpoint, etc. For all this, I consider this poem must be vindicated in the general frame of Okigbo’s poetry.

Ihekaibeya, Chuks, Formerly Special Assistant to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Commonwealth Secretariat, Pall Mall, London, WC1. “Christopher Okigbo and a Poetics of African Conflict: A Reading of the Later Poems.”

Okigbo’s poetry is the product of his liberal classical education and was inspired by his experience of the Igbo world view, postcolonial emergence and the Nigerian crisis and civil war of the sixties. This paper explores the extent to which the prophetic credentials of the later poetry can aid our understanding also of the wider experience of conflict in Africa. Since independence in the Sixties, the continent is perceived to have been dominated by deadly conflict, failed governance, material poverty, disease and famine. The causes and character of the conflicts are complex and the processes of their
resolution remain daunting. The paper provides a background analysis of the conflicts and examines the later poems of Okigbo against this background. The aim is to demonstrate that the poems are a parable of the wider African experience of tragedy, enriching our insight into the origins, causes and nature of Africa’s conflicts, their implications for society and the possibilities of redemption. It is suggested that the precision of language and structure, lyrical energy, the interplay of historical, prehistoric, natural, spacious and inclusive imagery, in their totality, provide the strategy with which Okigbo conveys the depth and complexity of the African scene. It is concluded that Okigbo’s poems, written during the most crucial ten years of Africa’s independence, 1957 – 1967, provide a timeless mirror to illuminate the phenomenon of African conflict in our time and the possibilities of its resolution; that the lived experience and the poetry are mutually reinforcing, enhance the accessibility of the poetry and broadens its appeal.


In his poem ‘the African Muse of Okot Okigbo’, emerging Nigerian critic poet, Maxim Uzoatu makes a case for the fusion of Uganda’s Okot p’Bitek and Nigeria’s Christopher Okigbo to produce Okot Okigbo, as the quintessential African poet, the chief personage in a hallowed African poetic pantheon. This Okigbo-apotheosising, now strident, had been whispered by older critics (Beter, Fraser). Heavensgate is replete with initiation and worship totems, but of the equally visible geometric forms there has not been much study. This paper studies Okigbo’s use of geometric forms in Heavensgate. The aim is to distil an Okigboesque ‘worldview’. What is the sociopolitical and mythopoetic message of the ‘rainbow’, ‘the cross’, and the ‘rhombus’? Could he go from the innermost of the concentric arcs of this ‘rainbow’ to the outermost? Our method involves a review of existing literature on Okigbo (including online resources). Rather than grapple with the several revisions of Heavensgate, we stuck to the version in Labyrinths (Heinemann, 1971). We tried to find out if, beyond iconoclastic exuberance, there was a method to the madness of this poet engagé. We find that Okigbo moves from the ‘planes’ of innocence (Initiations) to the ‘pentagon’ of prodigality (Lustra) wading through ‘quadrangles’ and other forms including the ‘scar of the crucifix’. ‘Square’ and ‘rhombus’, different forms of this quadrilateral, locate not only Okigbo but us all, at various points on the initiate - prodigal continuum. We expect scholars with deeper interest in the mysticism of forms to take up the study. (Notes: 1. Maxim Uzoatu, The God of Poetry, (Lagos: New Gong Publications. 2006); 2. See also ‘The Bard’s Burden’ in Anaele Ihuoma’s Song of the Threshing Floor (Whitecock Press, 2006.; 3. Robert Fraser, West African Poetry: A Critical History (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986)

Ikideh, Ime, Professor of English and Dean, Postgraduate Studies, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, “‘Voices in the senses' stillness’: A Re-Assessment of the Coded and Elliptical Idiom of Christopher Okigbo’s Poetry.”

Okigbo’s characteristic poetic style in Labyrinths is marked by a severe economy and distant imagery of words in communicating a spiritual and psychic experience that draws
on myths from diverse sources without warning. Other observable traits in his versification are the short stanzas, and lines which end with three dots (...), raising various suggestions in the reader’s mind. These characteristics which constitute a significant part of the problem commonly associated with the interpretation of Okigbo are the subject of this paper, the major interest being in their antecedents, their prevalence and functionality in Okigbo’s poetry. The paper observes that the economical verbal style continues into some poems of Path of Thunder but not the elegies which belong more to the African (Igbo) tradition of the lament with the emotional effect deriving rather from long, sprawling lines. As for the short stanza and three dots, they are a recurrent feature in all of Okigbo, although diminishing somewhat in Path of Thunder. The paper argues that although the three dots represent an obsessive tendency in Okigbo’s poetry, in their best conceived locations they are an imaginative device by which the poet achieves a variety of non-verbal communication effects. The paper concludes that Okigbo’s art and the impact of his poetry derive, at least in part, from a combination of the poet’s economy with words, as well as his characteristic versification which includes a personal manner in stanza arrangement and the punctuation of his verse.

Izevbaye, Dan, Department of Human Communications, Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria; Emeritus Professor of English, University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, “Revisiting Okigbo’s Art and Commitment”: This is a Study of the nature and sources of the quest of the persona in Okigbo’s poetry, in Okigbo’s writing the Protagonist explores the fluid borders between aesthetic and spiritual states, with language and social action as instruments of the self’s aspiration towards spiritual and aesthetic fulfillment.

Although Okigbo’s narrative is presented in the form of dramatic ritual, the distance of severance of the material from the poet’s own spiritual history is not total, for the historical context eventually intrudes into the writing and reestablishes the authentic autobiography of the poetic self.

The historical context, the 1960s is an age in transition. Okigbo’s characterization of his persona as an actor in a state of perennial transition reflects the poet’s intimate and sensitive immersion in the Spirit of his times, and establishes Okigbo the poet as perhaps its ideal representative.

One of the issues raised in this study is that in spite of the protagonist’s recurrent return to the point of passage, there is a relentless drive towards death seen ambiguously as the ultimate goal and state of perfection as well as the perfect form of transition. The central question is explored in this study is the roles of poetic diction, the tense politics of the sixties and the poets own intense temperament in determining his peculiar choice of resolution to the dilemma at the centre of his poetry.

Kalu, Uduma, Journalist, The Guardian; Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Okigbo as the Eye/I of His Poetic Hero: Making the Poet Accessible through the Auto/Biographical Mode.” Most readers/ears look at Christopher Okigbo’s Labyrinths as an autobiography. As has been forcefully argued by Nwoga and Anọzie, for example, the poems in the
collection, as an organically related whole, tell the story of the life and poetic career of the Okigbo, from his years of childhood to the very last few months of his adult life. Evidently, Okigbo makes the collection autobiographical in several ways. From allusive and mythopoeic childhood memories of the Cable Point at Asaba (in *Lims I I I*) and earlier recollections of the antics and witicism of Jadum, the mad minstrel of Ekwulobia (in *Heavensgate II: Initiations*), he finally enters directly into the drama of the poems, in "Hurrah for Thunder" (the third poem of the final sequence, *Path of Thunder*) in which he names and unmasks himself: "I'll soon go to hell, I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron bell..." In *Labyrinths*, therefore, Okigbo puts his life in the text, making himself the subject of discourse, the hero of his own poetry. He becomes the eye/I who determines how the reader/ear looks or hears the time and place of the poetic hero. His life is the mirror of an historic moment and reality of a particular period in a postcolonial society. But the questions that arise are: Is *Labyrinths* really an autobiography? How do we define poetry as autobiography? And how poetic can autobiography be? And where is the meeting point? Why does the poet decide to make himself the subject of his own verse? These are some of the questions my paper will try to answer. I will try to answer this by showing that while Okigbo struggles to put himself in the text, he ends up becoming, not the subject but object of his collection. In the end, he becomes the vanished subject and object of his own text. Because his poetry could not yield all the details about his life, he becomes the ellipses in his own poems, providing absences and thus the need to fill in those spaces. Here lies the significance of the existing attempts to understand the poet through biographical reflections, analysis or narrative (notably by Obi Nwakanma, Sunday Anozie, Pius Okigbo, and Donatus Nwoga).

The paper will contrast Okigbo with the novelist, Chinua Achebe whose *Things fall apart*, Robert Wren describes as a collective biography of Africa. Achebe is famous for his literary skills. He is the invisible object of novels whose mind and perceptions define the drift and structure of his books. He is the unheard voice, molding the lives of his characters. He is the manipulator, the invisible camera that directs what we read and see. And because of the invisibility of the novelist in the text, he becomes, like Okigbo, and the subject to deal with in the biographies that have been written about him. He is the vanished novelist, the self in space (outside the text), but whose absence overwhelms his creative writings. How successful are these two writers in their chosen points of views? Is there a meeting point between the two in Okigbo's *Path of Thunder*? What difference does this make to his poetry?


The aim of my paper will be to explore what I consider to be the dangerous innocence of well-trained African elite who were served with the same intellectual menu the Okigbos met in the Classics, English Literature, and European History and thereafter made forays into African politics from where they were sufficiently traumatized to have ended up with an identity crisis that rendered them irrelevant to both the traditional, and the modern.
I wish to look at, as a practitioner myself, at the conflicts between ethics and politics; the dilemma of the intellectual in African politics who genuinely wants to make a difference; and the crippling doxmatism of the incontinent critics from the Ivory Tower who mess up virtually every government appointment thrown at them after a long season of anti-establishment posturing.

My paper will not spare the regular politician – for there will be an attempt to look at the limits of pragmatism from the witness that any pragmatic platform that is not established on the timelessness of certain core values will invariably come to grief much sooner than later. An attempt will be made to see how the great Christopher Okigbo addresses all these experiences, including locating his prophecies as they relate to our times.

I will end on a pragmatic note myself – reducing the whole business to the challenges of confronting poverty on the continent, de-linking corruption from culture, infrastructural decay, and decline in educational standards. But germane to all that will be to channel the righteous indignation of Christopher Okigbo towards creating an authentic Black Renaissance.

Mailafia, Obadiah, Central Bank of Nigeria, FCT Abuja, Nigeria, “The Trial of Christopher Okigbo Re-Visited: Ethnicity, Commitment and Nationhood."

The paper takes its point of departure from the novel written by Professor Ali Mazrui ("The Trial of Christopher Okigbo"). The novel raises the dilemma over art and nationhood, i.e. whether the artist or poet has a duty to his nation over and above his duty to his ethnic community. It was Leopold Sedar Senghor who propounded the thesis of the Universal ('l'Universel') and the duty of the poet to subject himself to it rather than to the narrow provincialism of his ethnic group. Contrasting, for example, Lord Byron, who went to fight for the liberties of the Greeks against a barbarian onslaught against an Okigbo who chose to fight for his ethnic group against the nation into which he was born. Did Okigbo have a choice in this matter? Part of the dilemma was the pogrom against Igbo during the latter part of 1966. But we have no evidence that as a gifted poet whose outlook was more universal than that of, say, Soyinka, Okigbo did not make any efforts to stand above the narrow confines of ethnicity. And in choosing to die as a frontline soldier, he put in stark relief his commitment to his ethnic group rather than to the nation. This paper concludes that Okigbo had no right to die the way he did and that he ought to have done more to prevent the outbreak of civil. This author believes that the Nigerian civil war was a ghastly mistake deriving from a clash between demented egocentric ambition (Ojukwu) and lack of intellectual sophistication (Yakubu Gowon). Contrary to what many suppose, the civil war was not inevitable and the fact that our elites put their egos above consideration of the lives of millions of people makes it a criminal case. The author laments the fact that nearly thirty years after its ending, the winds have not fully healed. Part of the problem, in the author's view, is the 'forgotten project of nation building'. the country missed an opportunity in July 2007 when ex-Biafran soldiers and policemen who had been in the Nigerian system as officers and policemen had their pensions restored. That should have provided an opportunity for everyone to repent. Nigeria also needs a permanent national memorial to mark all the millions of those who...
perished. We need also a 'National Unity Day' in which all Nigerians ask each other for forgiveness, a day that would be marked by inter-communal dialogue and sharing of meals and a pledge never again to kill each other.

Mazrui, Ali A., Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities, Professor in Political Science, African Studies and Philosophy, Interpretation and Culture, and Director, Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, “The Muse and the Martyr in Africa's Experience: Christopher Okigbo in Comparative Perspective.”

In his keynote address, the author of the controversial novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971), in which the dead poet is arraigned before the court of After-Africa and condemned to sacrificing his prodigious talents in pursuit of a narrow ethnic cause, repackages Okigbo’s self-sacrifice in the light of the experience of poet-warriors who have suffered martyrdom in Africa and elsewhere across the world.

Menkiti, Ifeanyi, Poet and Professor of Philosophy, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts; Proprietor, Grolier’s Poetry Bookshop, Cambridge, Massachusetts, “‘And asked him to do a rock-drill’: A Comparative Examination of the Political Poetry Christopher Okigbo and Ezra Pound.”

This paper takes a detailed look at the poetry of Christopher Okigbo in its engagement with issues of public life. I compare Okigbo's poetics with that of Ezra Pound in the latter of political order, taking note of the classical influences on both their work, and of certain recognizable Poundian echoes in some of Okigbo's early as well as later poems.

Moore, Gerald, Editor, Critic, and Independent Scholar; Emeritus Professor of English, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, and University of Jos, Nigeria; Via Muggia 29, 33100 Udine, Italy, Tel +39 0432 580678, “‘The Voices out of Silence’:

The title of my paper, “The Voices out of Silence,” expresses an enigma. How does one discover voices within silence? And this same enigma lies at the heart of Okigbo’s poetry. The watchman for the watchword at Heavensgate must attend in silence, for it is only in silence that the heart really listens. And it is only in silence that the sounds of nature speak to us. A poet and musician like Okigbo was well aware of this. And through what does the voice out of silence transmit itself to us? Through melody. And melody is always primary in his verse. Words may be changed—often were changed—to refine his meanings, but melody, once found, must be jealously preserved. This is the significance of one of the central passages of *Siren Limits III*: “Then we must sing, tongue-tied, Without name or audience, Making harmony among the branches. The Silences sequence, evidently composed during 1962, is the hinge turning early into mature Okigbo. The whole sequence is built around antiphonies, and antiphonies are one of the basic structural elements in traditional African poetry and music, to which Okigbo now draws closer. We move away from the lone prodigal in search of revelation and seek meaning through exchange of messages; between Crier and Chorus, or between the long drums and the elephant horns. Another innovation here is the much more direct

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Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
interpretation of current events which deeply disturbed the poet. There are no more obscure references to Upandru or Kepkanly. Palinurus alone in his hot prison has a meaning unlikely to be lost on a contemporary readers or listeners. It is the first clang of the iron bell of Okigbo, the town crier. The essence of the sequence is concentrated in a couplet towards the end of “Lament of the Silent Sisters V”: “Silences are melodies/Heard in retrospect.” This brings together silence and melody exactly as argued in the paper.

Ngumoha, Emma, Senior Lecturer in English, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria, “Folk Music and Chants in Okigbo’s Poetry”

It is a well known fact that Christopher Okigbo had a great soul for music and that the art of articulating poetry as music was central to his poetic oeuvre. This paper explores how Okigbo incorporates certain elements of folk traditional music in his poetry. Some of these include the traditional chorus, the ram song, the heroic chant, the funeral chant, the martial sin-song and drum lore. This paper takes a critical look at the form and aesthetic functions of some of these folk traditional music and chants, especially in the light of their roles in furthering the socially transformational goals of Okigbo’s poetry.


In this paper, Christopher Okigbo is examined as a pace-setter in postcolonial African writing, through a close reading of his life, beliefs, socio-political commitments, and vision of a new postcolonial society, in Labyrinths with the Path of Thunder (1971). The paper tries to examine the colonial and neocolonial scenario which prompted Okigbo’s poetry. The picture created by other African postcolonial authors is also studied alongside with Okigbo’s exciting approach to postcolonialism in the context of an open society. By and large, Okigbo’s innovative contribution to African poetry is examined with regard to his role as a prophet and a town crier mirroring societal consciousness.

Nwachukwu, Mac Philips, Literary Editor, The Vanguard Newspaper, Lagos Nigeria, “Diasporic Remembrance for Okigbo, the Poet of Labyrinths.”

Christopher Okigbo, who started writing poetry seriously at Fiditi College, was discovered, as it were, to the admiration of undergraduate students of English a the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, by Peter Thomas, who taught in the department. Okigbo was at that time working as a Librarian at the newly established university. As critic Sunday Anozie (one of the students) later recalls in Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric(1972), on the introduction of Okigbo’s poetry to his group of students at the residence of Peter Thomas (Okigbo’s next-door neighbor) not even one of them could identify the arresting beauty and eclectic aura that defined Okigbo’s poetic composition, nor associate such artistry with a librarian in their own university. This paper examines the phenomenal rise of Okigbo from obscurity to preeminence among twentieth-century postcolonial African poets of his generation and his growing recognition in the African
Nwachukwu-Agbada, J.O.J., Professor of English, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria, “Christopher Okigbo, Uprooted Culture and the Roots of Afro-Pessimism in His ‘Fragments Out of the Deluge’

Okigbo’s “Fragments” sequence of poems, also identified as “Limits V-XII” and written in 1962, two years after Nigeria’s independence, and five years after Ghana’s, the very first independent modern African state, portrays him as a visionary poet for more than one reason: it shows that he was an acute observer of his immediate social and political environment, the euphoria of post-independence then notwithstanding; it equally gave him out as a committed writer who considered the future of his country as one of his responsibilities as an artist; and finally it said of him as one who believed that nothing could be as authentic as the autochthonous. The position of this paper is that Okigbo, perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, knew early enough that to lose one’s culture, brutally represented by the decapitation of the gods of the land by European missionaries, would lead to loss of confidence in self and nation, would lead to doubt and cynicism, would lead to a state of stasis. It is argued here that the current climate of despondency from within and from without, the climate of hopelessness, of ennui which pervades African discourse, now referred to as ‘Afro-pessimism’, had its roots in what Okigbo perceived soon after independence as ‘fragments out of the deluge’.

Nwahunanya, Chinyere, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria, “Prophets, Watchmen and Towncriers: The Role of the Poet in Okigbo’s Poetry.”

Many studies on Okigbo have tended to emphasize his rejection of Christianity, and his identification with his African background from which he was sequestered by Western education. This is the dominant impression one gets from seminal studies of Okigbo’s work by Anozie, Izevbaye, Egudu, Nwoga and Udoeyop. This position arises from Okigbo’s portrait of the suppliant poet-persona returning to Idoto, and the images of the desecration of traditional religion and its structures by Christianity. Despite the seeming validity of this position however, it is not the entire truth, for we are constantly being reminded by evidence in the poems that Okigbo was a man who came into contact with the Christian faith quite early in life, and in spite of what might be called his abdication, he had been sufficiently influenced, for Christianity to leave a remarkable imprint on his work. This paper argues that one area where this imprint is most evident is in his modeling of the figure of his poet-persona after such biblical prophets as Moses, Samuel, Nathan, Micaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and St. Paul.

It starts with restating the common view that like in classical Greece and Rome where the poet expressed his views fearlessly in a manner that left no-one in doubt that he was aware of his social responsibility, in traditional African societies the griot or bard performed not just the role of entertainer, but was also “the guardian of the word”, the watchman or custodian of the people’s conscience. Granted too that Okigbo’s work was an amalgam of various mythologies, we insist here that Christianity had such a profound
influence on Okigbo that he used it as the inspiration behind the writing of many of his poems, and manifests most in his use of the model of the poet/watchman as a metaphor for the poet who in traditional Africa was also a towncrier of some sort. Very often in the Bible, the offices of priest, prophet and seer were combined in one individual, as we see for example in the relationship of Samuel and king Saul, and Nathan and king David. If the prophet/seer refuses or fails to function in his office, it becomes an abdication of responsibility, and Okigbo was aware of this. But instead of openly adopting the Christian ethic, he creates a persona who assumes the role of a traditional griot, to achieve an even better effect. We therefore argue that part of the misfortune of various African nations, implied in Okigbo's poetry, is that their poets and other writers who know the responsibility of the artist refuse to bear it, and feel safer and at ease not speaking against the pervading sense of corruption all around them. In that manner, they behave like those who prefer to hang "DO NOT DISTURB" signs on their doors while the houses in which they are snoring are burning.

Our conclusion is therefore that Okigbo implicitly and prophetically posits that even in this post-colonial age of globalization, for African societies to really develop, for there to be an end to dictatorship and bad governance, the poet must not abdicate his responsibility as a watchman and seer who has the prophetic mandate to redirect a society set adrift by rulers who have little or no commitment to national development.

Nwakamma, Obi, Department of English, St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri, "From Ojoto to Umuahia: Figurations of Childhood in Okigbo’s poetry."

This paper discusses Ekwulobia and Umuahia as two significant places which were central to Okigbo's emergence as a poet: It specifically examines the place of Jadum, and the traveling minstrel Up-Andrew (Upandru) and the entire "Agba-emu" (Rockland) landscape of Heavensgate, and the deep influence of the poet's teachers at Umuahia like the principal William Simpson, and particularly the poet and cricketer, Charles Low (after whom Okigbo modeled himself when he decided to go to teach at the Fiditi Grammar School), and the famous historian Saburi Biobaku (then Saburi Bisiriyu) who returned with a tripos from Cambridge, and at Umuahia influenced Okigbo to study for an arts rather than a science degree to which he was naturally headed. These are important influences and narratives, and in fact, Umuahia had a far more central place in his evolution as a poet, than say, Fiditi, where he basically, with Alex Ajayi began to write. Okigbo's poetry, highly autobiographical, represents something of a stations of his cross, and each point was referenced - "the quadrangle: the rest, you and me...", is in some way an oblique reference to the emergence and shared life of his generation of Umuahians— Achebe, C. C. Momah, V. C Ike, who had begun to write with him late in the 1950s.

Nwankwo, Chimulum, Professor and Chair, Department of English, North Carolina A&T State University, Greensboro, NC 27411, “Christopher Okigbo, African Literature and the Diffident Detour into Western Myths: A Post-Colonial Syndrome.”
The trauma of the colony remains under-represented in terms of the effect of that juncture of history on the psyche of its best minds. From cultural consumption to production and representation, the syndrome of diffidence remains high and stark. It is reflected in the choices Africa makes regarding models of governance. It is there in the choices Africa makes even when pretending to be original in its creativity. It remains there in the choice of who Africa chooses to do or not to do business with. Much of the crises of the colony today go back to what Africans think of them selves in relation to others. Perhaps it is now generally a problem that could be called a pan-African malaise. Toni Morrison has suggested that the black person only accepts that what s/he has is good only after somebody else has averred such. Not even poets like Christopher Okigbo could escape that syndrome, hence the pursuit of symbols and tropes from other universes despite the plenitude of such in the African universe. To even some of the best sabre-rattling culturally nationalistic critics of African cultural productions, the hermeneutic of choice remains some times so disgracefully alien, and not only alien but so undomesticated that at the conclusions of their exercises you wonder what they are talking about. When Okigbo apolitically declared himself just a poet, and not an African poet, I wondered, callow as I was in the field at that point whether the poet understood his own art.

Obiwu, Director, Writing Center, Central State University, Wilberforce, OH 45384, P. O. Box 395, Xenia, OH 45385, “The Eco-Poetics of Pound and Okigbo.”

Eco-poiesis in Ezra Pound and Christopher Okigbo is a code and a divagation from questions of politics. In Pound and Okigbo the environment is bigger than just flora and fauna; it is also elemental and supernatural. Blake’s “Tyger” anticipates the overwhelming force of nature in the poetics of Pound and Okigbo. Yeats, Lawrence, and Eliot, were contemporaries and kindred spirits of Pound, and all four prefigure the nature poetics of Okigbo. Such power is in their trees, animals, and seas. The subject of love in Pound and Okigbo is not the predictable love of most poets, but an exploration of human correlations with the non-human other. By studying specific poems, this paper demonstrates that the poetics of Pound and Okigbo is consciously driven – and subverted – by their faith in the redemptive powers of the ecosystem as the ultimate artist.

Obumselu, Ben Emeritus Professor of English, Imo State University, Okigwe, Nigeria, "Cambridge House, Ibadan: 1965-66"

In his keynote address, Christopher Okigbo’s close personal and literary friend, Ben Obumselu, often acknowledged by the poet for “for criticism which led to improvements in phrase and structure,” in several of his published poems, reflects on Okigbo’s last two years at “Cambridge House, Ibadan” (his official residence as West African Representative of Cambridge University Press) during the post-independence political crisis that precipitated the coup d’etat of January 15, 1966 and the consequent bloodbaths and chaos under which he wrote composed his last testament, Path of Thunder, in which the Biafra war in which Okigbo laid down his life is envisioned.
Oha, Anthony Chukwuemeka, Lecturer in Creative Writing/History of Ideas, Department of Arts, Benson Idahosa University, Benin City, Nigeria, “Onomastic Force as Semiotic Iconicity in Okigbo’s Poetry.”

Okigbo’s poetry is laden with names. We have anthroponyms, toponyms and other ‘nyms’ in the poetry that have been of concern to anthropologists, sociologists, theologians, linguists and advocates of history of ideas. “Mother Idoto” as a naming force vibrates in the Onomastic consciousness of Okigbo scholars who believe that Okigbo’s naming has so much to do with the mystical, spiritual or certain levels of abstractions. It is the premise of this paper that the Onomastic imperatives in Okigbo’s poetry have much iconic referent that helps in the elevation of his message. Iconicity as a semiotic notion refers to a natural resemblance or analogy between the form of a sign (‘the signifier’, be it a letter or sound, a word, a structure of words, or even the absence of a sign) and the object or concept (‘the signified’) it refers to in the world or rather in our perception of the world. The similarity between sign and object may be due to common features inherent in both: by direct inspection of the iconic sign we may glean true information about its object. Drawn from the Igbo milieu, these Onomastic applications imbues cultural and sensitive underlyings in Okigbo’s poetry. This paper shall through a semiotic explication of the naming in Okigbo’s poetry, reveal the iconic properties as carriers of meaning, sense and realities.

Ojaide, Tanure, Frank Porter Graham Professor, Africana Studies Department, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223-0001, (704) 687-2665; Fax (704) 687-3888, "Christopher Okigbo and the African Poetic Imagination: New Frontiers."

In Christopher Okigbo’s poetry, there is the recognition of one’s roots while at the same time going beyond cultural frontiers to tap into the poetic energy of others. Like the tailor-ants’ labyrinth, Okigbo’s poetry is “constructed” with materials from everywhere resulting in an artistic work that is undeniably his and still African. My paper will explore Okigbo’s possible influences, his experimentation with poetic form, and the outcome of his poetic craft in Heavensgate, Limits, and Distances. Through his daring poetic exploration and discovery, Okigbo’s poetry gives a cosmopolitan outlook to the African poetic imagination as had never been done before or after. His poetry expands the scope of modern African poetry to embrace the world.

Okafor, Dubem, Professor of English, Postcolonial Discourse and Cultural Studies, Department of English, Kutztown University, Pennsylvania, PA, “Okigbo as a Cultural Globalist.”

Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo (1932-67) was a world citizen. Even though his passport was Nigerian, he saw himself in global terms, and was not to be bound by the constraints of geography or race. His education had prepared him for world citizenship, and his vast and polymath erudition ensured that he remained solidly in that select category of people. Thus, he was very much at home among the ancient Greeks and Romans, as he was with the moderns. His affiliation was with writers, artists, and learned people of all races, even though he was very much at home with the folk, especially the artistic, from whom he
continued to learn. His range of reference was, therefore, broad, indeed. In terms of thematic coverage, he oscillated from Graeco-Romanism to Worldism to Africanism, while his style was a movement from symbolist and modernist obscurity to the deceptive simplicity of traditional Igbo rhetoric. Okigbo was truly a cultural globalist.

**Okigbo, Bede retired Professor of Agronomy and Director, International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, Ibadan. “My Relationship with Christopher Okigbo.”**

This paper offers brief reminiscences of the author's shared childhood with his cousin, Christopher Okigbo, and their close interaction and association in various ways, from the time they were both attended Government College, Umuahia, through their struggles to establish themselves in their different professions, to the poet's death in action in the Nsukka front of the Biafran war.

**Opata, Damian, Professor and Head, Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria, “And there are here/ the errors of the rendering': Signs Towards an Epistemic Ordering of Okigbo's Heavensgate, Limits, and Distances.”**

A great deal of literature exists on Okigbo's creative perspectives on the encounter between traditional Igbo and Judeo-Christian world views. This paper attempts to extend the scholarship on this theme through a consideration of the repeated use of the lines, "the errors of the rendering", and "I am the sole witness to my homecoming", each repeated three and four times respectively. No other lines in Heavensgate, Limits, and Distance are repeated in this magnitude. In more specific terms, the paper uses these lines to cast light on the epistemic ordering of the poems. I use the term "epistemic ordering" to mean justified true beliefs that anchor the poet-protagonist's liberatory mental attitudes which in turn lead to the momentous decision of an intellectual homecoming for the poet-protagonist, even when this homecoming is attended by a 'putrescent laughter". The stages through which these orderings play out themselves are then identified. My approach is informed by insights from epistemology and critical discourse analysis.

**Ramazani, Jahan, Edgar F. Shannon Professor of Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Postcolonial Literature, Chair of the Department of English, University of Virginia, "Christopher Okigbo's Transnational Poetics: Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalization"**

In his paper, keynote speaker, Jahan Ramazani, will consider Christopher Okigbo's poetry as exemplifying twentieth-century poetic transnationalism. How can Okigbo's poetry and the work of other writers help us reconsider assumptions about poetry as local or national expression? What is the relation between Okigbo's work and the larger contexts of postcolonialism, modernity, and globalization? How does the alienated social imaginary of Okigbo's poetry compare with that of other postcolonial, as well as Euromodernist, poets?

**Richards, David, Professor & Chair, Department of English Studies, University of Stirling, Scotland, UK, “The Art Behind’: Okigbo's Archaic Modern.”**

Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
In this paper, keynote speaker, David Richards, shows that Okigbo’s poetry reflects an extraordinarily eclectic range of interests: classics, archaeology, politics, history, music, poetry, painting, religion, and ancient mythologies. Such extravagant ‘confluences’ indicate that Okigbo’s poetry bears the characteristic modernist hallmarks of fragmentation, juxtaposition and defamiliarization, where converging images break into ellipses and discontinuities splinter into prismatic divisions, offering a paradigm for a postcolonial ‘culture of displacement’ where meanings can associate, proliferate, collide, disintegrate and reform. Okigbo’s poetic practice replicates, with a passionate precision, his analysis and evocation of the African postcolonial condition. Yet little critical attention has been devoted to Okigbo’s equally innovative and committed exploration of time within this praxis, particularly his devotion to archaic, profound, or ‘deep’ time.

This paper will begin by exploring Okigbo’s evocation of the archaic motif of the labyrinth as ancient ruin, aesthetic construct, political model, and historical avatar. For Okigbo, the archaic and the modern meet in the labyrinth to challenge the edifice of historical progress. The labyrinth has a brutal, angular, and unaccommodating architecture; filled with troubling echoes, it is located in gaps in the narratives of time and space. The labyrinth brings him, as the oxymoron in the subtitle suggests, to a radical strategy of ‘temporal uncoupling’: an archaic/modern imaginary where Okigbo discovers dissident cultural artefacts, images, and inscriptions. This is where social life is both represented and reimagined, and where the ancient and the contemporary are fused together in productive contradiction to create ‘temporal illusions’ in which the ancient past and the postcolonial present bleed into each other until it became difficult to distinguish between times and places, the living and the dead. Okigbo’s oppositional poetics of subtle engagements and critiques negotiate new relationships between the postcolonial, the modern, and the archaic.


Christopher Okigbo (1932-1967) died during the Biafran War, actively engaged in battle. Unlike another famous soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen, he did not respond to his experience in the front lines in his work. The posthumously published cycle of poems in English, “Path of Thunder: Poems Prophecying War”, was completed by May 1966, and the Biafran War began with the secession of the Igbo people from the Federated nation of Nigeria in July 1967. Okigbo was killed in August, 1967. “Path of Thunder” appeared in Black Orpheus in early 1968. But Okigbo’s poetry is extremely conscious of life in the shadow of death, and of cultural schism and loss caused by massive incursions of power.

“Path of Thunder” is centrally concerned with death and is intensely elegiac. Several poems carry titles which mark that concern, “Elegy of the Wind”, “Elegy for Slit-Drum”, “Elegy for Alto”. But Okigbo’s earlier English poetry, contained in four cycles within Labyrinths (1961-4) was concerned with death also. In “The Passage”, (1961), “Silent faces at crossroads...” considers the death and funeral of Anna Okigbo, Okigbo’s mother. The cycle of poems in which this poem occurs, “Heavensgate”, was originally conceived as an Easter sequence, and understandably therefore considers death in the context of Christian belief. But as Okigbo says, this sequence ultimately became deeply
crosscultural, in his words “an offering to Idoto”, as well as a journey of a celebrant “a personage like Orpheus”, about to begin a journey. The story of Orpheus is deeply implicated in the story of elegiac writing, writing which witnesses the role and meaning of death in creative life.

In the other cycles of poems in *Labyrinths*, “Limits”, “Silences” and “Distances”, death and rebirth are key themes. “Limits”, with its strong references to rapacious British colonialism in West Africa and to the bloody history of Europe caught by Picasso’s “Guernica”, precedes two “Laments” in “Silences”. These, as Okigbo explains in his preface to *Labyrinths*, express the voices of two sets of mourners: the first marking the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the crisis in Western Nigeria in 1962, and the second, the imprisonment of Obafemi Owolowo and also the death of his eldest son. In the first “Lament”, Okigbo invokes Gerard Manley Hopkins’ great poem “The Wreck of the Deutchesland”. In “Lament of the Drums”, the long-drums are, Okigbo says, “the spirits of the ancestors, the dead”. In Section V of the cycle, in ancient lament of the goddess Ishtar for Tammuz is invoked. In “Distances”, loosely inspired by a medical procedure Okigbo experienced, death appears as an active character.

My argument in this paper is that Okigbo’s poetry is productively read in the frame of elegiac work, by Eliot and others, which began to use the lyric voice to witness large scale violence, death and loss. Sunday Anozie (1972) pointed out that “Eliot was Okigbo’s favorite guide” (77), and like Eliot, Okigbo purposefully references to or echoes from other texts (including Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess* (1961), the work of Ezra Pound, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the ancient epic telling the story of Gilgamesh. Although he was early criticized for this, as if this made him somehow less Igbo or Nigerian or committed to African identity and culture, it is always clear that he transforms these elements into a new creative whole, rooted in his time and place.

The cultural crises of the First and Second World Wars in Europe contributed importantly to the shifts of aesthetic direction we call modernism and postmodernism. But we also recognize now that there is not one modernism (or postmodernism). Nor are these to be seen as exclusively or even centrally European. They provided and provide a series of avenues of cosmopolitan connection via their understanding of the interconnectedness of a world so beset with violent change as to appear broken. Okigbo’s cosmopolitanism did not turn its back on Nigeria and his own Igbo culture, but increasingly, as his work progressed, brought both the Nigerian and the international reader closer to realizing the impact of colonialism on Nigeria via a powerfully woven aesthetic fabric in which non-Nigerian poets such as Wordsworth are functional within a Nigerian context. Okigbo’s use of the image of the “weaver-bird” in “Limits” is important here, and I use it as a metaphor for the poet’s purpose in utilizing fragments of world poetry within his own aesthetic.

I therefore argue (and hope to demonstrate in this paper) that an important way (though certainly not the only way) of reading Okigbo’s work is in the context of the modern and postmodern elegy which marks mass death, loss or violence, and begins to create a global poetic communication which witness, by their themes, the very global currents of power which cause such traumatic mass events. The elegy is also above all a testament to the living who create it, and Okigbo’s last published poem in “Path of
Thunder” references the star which is so key an element in famous elegies such as Shelley’s elegy for Keats, *Adonais*, and Whitman’s elegy for President Lincoln, “When Lilac last in the Dooryard Bloom’d, an image which suggests how the mortal may be transformed into an ever-present reminder of human survival. The very aesthetic complexity of Okigbo, like that of Eliot (with his wide-ranging cultural references), reflect a recognition that mourning for events caused by extra-national and extra-cultural forces interacting with the local cannot be mourned simply from within, even whilst the local and particular remains the lyric voice’s major source of inspiration and expression, and a crucial location from which it should be read.

**Udechukwu, Obiora, Poet, Artist, Poet, Artist, Charles A. Dana Professor, Department of Fine Arts, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY 12504, USA, “Qđînaana na Ịchọmma [Tradition and the Search for Beauty]: Art and Okigbo’s Poetry.”**

Keynote speaker, avant-garde artist and art critics explores the indigenous and traditional roots of the intriguing interface between visual and verbal aesthetics in Okigbo’s poetic art.

**Udoeyop, Nyong J., Professor of English, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria “Christopher Okigbo: Poetry as Quest, History and Prophecy.”**

We reason in this article that there is in Okigbo’s poetry ample evidence of not only a crisis of culture but perhaps even more importantly crises of the individual. His poems therefore indicate stages in the poet's quest for ways and means to manage these crises. In the process he becomes a historian not only of his culture but also of his personal life in changing world. This history includes an examination of the past, a chronicle of the present and prophecy of the future or history in advance. We maintain that the Okigbo's quest or exploration, his history and prophecy are conducted in the context of his dual definition of poetry on the one hand as logistic and on the other as prophecy; and we argue that much of the appeal of the poems consists in the tension between these two elements of his definition, as the with other disparate elements within the poetry. We conclude that the personality and society which emerges from the poetry dynamic, often restless, sometimes even violent, but always open to many influences, which need reconciliation.

**Soyinka, Wole, Nobel Laureate, Playwright, Poet, Novelist, Essayist, First Alphonse Fletcher Fellow, W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, “Soldiering On; Arms and the Poet.”**

In his keynote address, Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka places in a broad comparative, historical and philosophical perspective, the integration, in Christopher Okigbo’s life and poetry, of the activism of a socially committed artist and of a warrior-poet who takes up arms in defense of his beliefs.

**Uzoigwe, Harmony, “Christopher Okigbo: A Legacy—Influences on Two Younger Generations of Poets/Poetry (Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare and Esiaba Irobi.)**

Christopher Okigbo International Conference, September 19-23, 2007
Co-hosted by Harvard University; Boston University; University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Wellesley College in association with Christopher Okigbo Foundation, Brussels, Belgium
Christopher Okigbo’s abiding relevance in African poetry is significant because of the enduring legacy he has bequeathed to poets after him. This paper investigates how Christopher Okigbo’s importance in Nigerian poetry can be measured by examining the influence he has had on at least two generations of Nigerian poets/poetry. Our interest is to demonstrate how this legacy can be read through an acquaintance with the works of such poets as Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare and Esiaba Irobi.
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