

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo: Its Evolution and Significance

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9gg6983b>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 4(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Leslie, Omolara

Publication Date

1973

DOI

10.5070/F741016423

Copyright Information

Copyright 1973 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

THE POETRY OF CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO:

ITS EVOLUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

BY

OMOLARA LESLIE

"The Lament of the Masks," one of Okigbo's last poems, was written in commemoration of the W.B. Yeats centenary (1865-1965) to be included in a volume published by the University of Ibadan English department.¹

It was appropriate that Okigbo should write a poem to celebrate Yeats and his influence on other poets since contemporary African writers coming up then had been much influenced by the tradition of modern verse represented by Hopkins and Yeats, Eliot and Pound. Interestingly though, Okigbo does not use a modern English style in this poem; rather, he sings Yeats in the style of the traditional Yoruba praise song in which the attributes of a hero, ancestor or aristocrat are hailed in animal imagery and analogy from nature. Some of the lines here are in fact reworkings of actual praises to the Timi of Ede,² whose military kingship was created and the town of Ede was settled in the seventeenth century from the need of the Yoruba emperor to provide a defensive military outpost to the old Yoruba empire of Oyo. Section III of the Lament combines the direct address and the naming of the deeds of the hero, typical of the praise song, with the use of special symbolism, "the white elephant." Such use of special symbolism occurs in the Yoruba praise song, where in contrast to Okigbo's use, the meaning of the symbol was known by all members (at least by the elders) in the community.

*They thought you would stop pursuing the white elephant
They thought you would stop pursuing the white elephant
But you pursued the white elephant without turning back--
You who charmed the white elephant with your magic flute
You who trapped the white elephant like a common rabbit
You who sent the white elephant tumbling into your net--
And stripped him of his horns, and made them your own--
You who fashioned his horns into ivory trumpets...*

In Okigbo's "Lament," the white elephant symbol serves a more Western poetic function because individual interpretation is permissible, even necessary. Yeats's white elephant

could be many things: his poetic activity; his mystical ends expressed in his later poetry; even the cause of the Irish.

However, "The Lament of the Masks" is not in the style of poetry associated with Okigbo's name. It represents a new direction in his poetic style, for after this poem he was to speak more and more in an African voice. In fact, by the time he writes his last poems, agonized outcries prophesying war, he had dropped all affectations and was using a poetic rendering of his own conversational voice combined with the style of traditional verse. With Okigbo's name comes to mind a very personal poetry written in so recondite an idiom that it has given rise to critical debate as to its value, its effectiveness and even its nonsensical nature³, and as to whether a reader is not a profane intruder into such hallowed and subjective verse.⁴ [This may be why the publishers of his volume of verse *Labyrinths* (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1971) had him comment on his own work to have the secret from the horse's mouth.] Though the poet or artist is not always the best explicator of his own work, Okigbo's introduction, itself a beautiful prose poem, will assuredly be of immense value to Okigbo criticism.

Born in Ojoto in Eastern Nigeria in 1932 of a father who was a trader and who travelled around a great deal in Nigeria, Christopher Okigbo is said to have lived as a boy in the northern part of Nigeria among the Hausa and Fulani. (Shades of days to come.) Okigbo and his siblings eventually entered the professional middle class in Nigeria. He took a classics degree from the University of Ibadan in 1956 which at that time meant that he studied Greek and Latin literature, Roman and Greek history and culture. He worked at various positions after graduation: as a high school teacher in Fiditi, a provincial town in Yorubaland; as librarian at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where his poetry flowered, probably due to his reading; and as the West African representative for the Cambridge University Press. In appearance he was small, fine and dapper, in fact somewhat of a dandy; in manner quaintly elegant, irrepressible and hilarious in conversation, animated by a divine madness. Some would say it was all a 'put-on'. Okigbo loved music and the effect of this is everywhere evident in his verse.

Okigbo's earliest poems, dated 1957 (a year after he left Ibadan University) and ranging from 1957-61, are

entitled *Four Canzones*, and they show the influence of his classical education. The first canzone, "Song of the Forest," is modelled on the first verse of Virgil's First Eclogue, *Tityrus*, which in Joseph Warton's translation goes:

*In beechen shades, you Tit'rus stretcht along,
Tune to the slender reed your sylvan song;
We leave our country's bounds, our much lov'd plaine,
We from our country fly, unhappy swains!
You, Tit'rus, in the groves at leisure laid,
Teach Amaryllis' name to every shade.*⁵

and for Okigbo becomes:

*You loaf, child of the forest,
beneath a village umbrella,
plucking from tender string a
 Song of the forest.
Me, away from home, runaway,
must leave the borders of our
land, fruitful fields,
 must leave our homeland*

*But, you, child of the forest,
loaf beneath an umbrella
teaching the woods to sing a
 song of the forest.*

["Song of the Forest" (with ubo)]

Okigbo's rendering has the simplicity, brevity and delicacy which Warton thinks makes the eclogue natural and delightful.⁶ In theme, Okigbo juxtaposes town and country, also in true pastoral tradition.

Okigbo's little poem is a pastoral in Dr. Johnson's sense of "an action or passion...represented by its effects upon country life."⁷ The poet Okigbo is sitting in Lagos gazing mentally back at the country, writing like Virgil for an urban reading public, musing about a modern Nigerian problem of alienation from rural life. Okigbo has the good taste, though, not to affect the pastoral device of the imitation of the action of actual shepherds. Okigbo's short exercise is nothing of the scope of Virgil's Eclogue which is a long interchange between the shepherds, *Tityrus* and *Melibeus*, in which Virgil brings together Rome's imperial destiny, the young Augustus who is to fulfill it, and the misery of rural Italy into a single poetic vision. Okigbo does not develop his eclogue; nor does he expatiate

on public themes. He brings into the poem rather the personal subjectivity of the poet in the twentieth century; in this way, imitating Virgil innovatively and achieving a new approach to the pastoral in material and tone. Might not Okigbo's imitativeness, which is to be permanent in his work, owe something to his knowledge that in the Roman tradition of verse, imitation, even plagiarism, was systematized and honorable? As Virgil took from Theocritus, (among others), so did Okigbo from Virgil, making something new of the pastoral.

In fact, Okigbo's second canzone seems to be a variation on the pastoral device. Instead of two shepherds in a dialogue, there are two characters A and B who in solo and unison poetise about the misery of life, deciding to "rest with wrinkled faces/ watching the wall clock strike each hour/ in a dry cellar" until they choke and die rather "than face the blasts and buffets" of "the mad generation" presumably in the cities. Despite the imitation of Virgilian pastoral poetry and the echoes of Pound and Eliot, these early canzones also show some African traits. Firstly, three of them are written to be read or sung to musical instruments after the style of Senghor and in the tradition of the indigenous presentation of African oral poetry. Secondly, like Achebe in his novels, Okigbo reveals a partiality to the "goose pimpling" ogene. Thirdly, the poems voice neo-African themes, such as the contrast between the old and the new after colonialism; the traditional and rural in Africa contrasted with the urbanized and the Westernised; the alienation of the Westernised African; the Hobson choice he faces between joining "the mad generation" in the filthy Westernised cities or remaining with the alienated and restless poor in the hinterland; the challenge posed by Western intellectual activity to African thought, in particular African religion--the last a very close subject to Okigbo's heart because he was of the priest's family in his native village.⁸

"The Lament of the Masks" indicates a new development in style from the clear Virgilian statement of the first canzone to the subjective imagery of modern verse:

*TIDEWASH... Memories
fold-over-fold free-furrow,
mingling old tunes with new.
Tidewash... Ride me
memories as astride on firm
saddle, wreathed with white
lilies and roses of blood...*

and the forcing of meaning out of sense perceptions:

*We follow the wind to the fields
Bruising grass leafblade and corn...*

Despite the literary echoes in this canzone such as 'white lilies' and 'roses of blood' 'woodnymphs' and 'snow-patch', the poem does show new confidence in the use of language; as for example:

*Comes Dawn
gasping thro worm lungs
Day breathes
panting like torn horse*

and a newly-expressed concern with the religion of his village, in particular the female diety, Idoto, his "Watermaid"; his "lioness with the armpit fragrance"; his "white queen and goddess" whose worship provides some of Okigbo's most beautiful lyrics with their symbolism and imagistic pattern as in *Heavensgate*. Most significantly, however, in "The Lament of the Masks" there emerges for the first time a poetic persona who is put to more than thematic use, who will now and subsequently in mythopoeic form explore the delicate labyrinths of the poet's subjectivity. In the tradition of the modern suffering protagonist, Okigbo's persona will tell the beads of experience, 'those globules of anguish strung together on memory.' This poetic personality will be increasingly dramatised, placed always at the center of Okigbo's envisioned rituals and creative act. So much does Okigbo identify with this poetic self that in the last poems prophesying war, in particular in the poems, "Hurrah for Thunder" and "Elegy for Slit-drum," the artistic self is inadequately subsumed into vision and experience. The face breaks through the mask.

The fourth canzone, "The Lament of the Lavender Mist," carries forward the theme of memory as an important experiential dimension to our poet's imaginative vision. This theme is now more symbolically expressed than previously. In style, the canzone is more broken in rhythm than the earlier pieces. It is evocative of meaning, cumulatively through phrase juxtapositions, repetitions and re-phrasings, free collocating of images from Christianity and African religion.

Eagles in space and earth and sky,

Shadows of sin in grove of orange,

*Of altar-penitence,
Over me at sundown,
Of wind on leaves,
A song of Christmas of—*

*Echoes in the prison of the mind,
Shadows of song of love's stillness,
Shadows of the stillness of the song
Over me at sundown
In an empty garden
Where
Wounded by the wind lie dead leaves.*

It is this lament which ends with lines which have been anthologised in isolation with an arbitrary title, "Love Apart" in *Modern Poetry from Africa* (Beier and Moore: Penguin, 1963),

*The moon has ascended between us--
Between two pines
That bow to each other;
Love with the moon has ascended,
Has fed on our solitary stems;
And we are now shadows
That cling to each other
But kiss the air only.*

and which has been argued over and discussed as if it was a solitary lyric.⁹ Such amputations of poems are often unfortunate, if not unnecessary and misleading.

By 1961, with the writing of "The Lament of the Lavender Mist" in Nsukka, Okigbo had attained his distinctive voice and his chosen stance towards the purpose and the doing of his art. From this lament onwards, the act of creation, the writing itself, is a rite transposed in medium, as when "The Lament of the Masks" ends:

But will a flutist never stop to wipe his nose?

*Night breezes drum on the plantain leaf:
Let the plantain leaf take over the dance. . .*

The poet, as in Soyinka's early poems, is in a self-conscious act of creative ritual. The transposed rite is about experience, limned from memory and recast as ritual, while the poetic self is always at the dramatic center of the creative concentricity. On one level, "The Lament of the Lavender Mist" can be read as the history of a love relationship; on another, as an account of the poet's love for his art and his evolution as a poet. It is the mythopoeic form employed in this Lament which is to energise Okigbo in the following long poems: *Silences* (Transition, 1962), *Heavensgate* (Mbari, 1962) and *Limits* (Mbari, 1962).

The first part of *Silences*, subtitled "The Lament of the Silent Sisters" was inspired, according to Okigbo in his introduction to *Labyrinth*, by the events of the day which were the Western Nigeria crisis and the death of Patrice Lumumba. This Lament shows the poet borrowing from all and sundry, taking poetic flight from any image which touched his imagination. He has admitted in an interview in *Transition* to have been influenced in this period by "everything and everybody."¹⁰ Not only does this lament reveal the rewards of predatory and eclectic reading, it indicates yet another new poetic direction, (more evident in the *Black Orpheus* version) towards the conscious and experimental use of the resources of the song form, such as in the use of choruses, refrains, and repetitions; and in the conveyance of meaning through a contrapuntal use of assonance, dissonance and even pure sound itself. The poet corroborates this intention in his introduction to *Labyrinth* where he says that *Silences* is "an attempt to elicit the music to which all imperishable cries must aspire. . . and the motif itself is developed by a series of related airs from sources as diverse as Malcolm Cowley, Raja Ratnam, Stéphane Mallarmé, Tagore and Lorca" among others.

Most striking in the "Lament of the Silent Sisters" is the symbolist influence of transferring the modality of one sense to another:

*We hear painted harmonies
From the mushroom of the sky--*

*Silences are melodies
Heard in retrospect*

And how does one say no in thunder?

*One dips one's tongue in the ocean;
Camps with the choir of inconstant
Dolphins, by shallow and banks*

Sprinkled with memories;

*Extends one's branches of coral,
The branches extends in the senses
Silence; this silence distils*

In yellow melodies.

Subdued in the *Labyrinth* version is Okigbo's despair with the young African elite for their cultural rape; and his sense of their doom and his by inclusion, a sense which so permeates all his poetry, and which is so often concretised in images of the poet as martyr and sacrificial figure, as to be described as self-destructive by one Nigerian critic.¹¹ From "the Lament of the Silent Sisters" comes also the title of Kofi Awoonor's dedicatory poem to Okigbo entitled "Lament of the Silent Sister," in his book of poems *Night of My Blood* (New York: 1971)¹² where a female persona is made to sing Awoonor's lament of Okigbo's death. A dramatised sensual encounter objectivises the human incomprehension and failure of emotional contact which is the proper subject of Awoonor's poem. The African association of tenderness (physical and aphysical) with the woman, and the African male's liking for the female consciousness make, in my opinion, the use of Awoonor's persona an appropriate one for Okigbo's dirge.

The second part of *Silences*, titled "the Lament of the Drums," is an agitated poem about deprivation and loss; unavoidable pain and mourning expressed through analogues of unanswered praise songs and unconsumed feasts, uncommencable journeys, and unanswered letters; unstemmable tears of wailing populations; and the lament of Ishtar for Tammuz. The emotions of this poem were aroused, according to the poet in *Labyrinth* in the introduction, by the imprisonment of Chief Awolowo and the death of his eldest son, both Yorubas--which should interest expositors of the ethnic nature of the Nigerian civil war. Like *Distances* (Transition, 16, 1964)¹³ which is to follow, *Silences* foreshadows orgies of violence and carnage on the national landscape. *Distances* is a unified apocalyptic vision of consummation, rendered as a ritual of sacrifice involving the

poet, who as victim and votive personage, walks the experiential stations of his cross, beyond "Death, herself... paring her fingernails" to his homecoming to which he is "sole witness."

Okigbo's last poems from "The Lament of the Masks" (1965) to "Path of Thunder" (*Black Orpheus* 21, Feb. 1968, pp. 5-11) exploit, more than his earlier writing, the attributes of African traditional poetry. Not only are popular proverbs and sayings, epigram and innuendo used, dramatic and situational African images abound, such as the ritual of circumcision in "Elegy of the Wind"; animal allegory used in the manner of the folktale in "Hurrah for Thunder"—in a mode J.P. Clark later employs in *Casualties* in a more sustained manner.

It is easy to see how Okigbo could move from exploiting music in general to using a specific musically expressive form such as African traditional poetry. The poems in *Path of Thunder* convey the rhythms of African verse in the long line and in the structural penchant for inculcating complete thoughts in single lines, best exemplified by "Come Thunder" and "Elegy for Slit-drum": the latter being perhaps the most African poem of the group in its structure and presentation, and in its dramatic tensions and use of language. The imagination behind the poem is decidedly African. Yet these poems cohere in mythopoeic vision with the earlier ones. The old symbols return with added meaning: the robbers "who will strip us of our tendons" in "Lament of the Drums" now descend, in "Elegy for Alto," to "strip us of our laughter, of our thunder." The recurrent metaphor of iron, thunder, sentient elements and predatory life are compounded in an African mode to describe the violent political upheaval of the period. The favored elephant symbol reappears as the obdurate Nigerian nation, among other meanings, stumbling towards its doom.

In "The Lament of the Silent Sisters," Okigbo expresses in these lines: (from the *Black Orpheus* version)

*We are the dumb bells
We are the dumb bells
Outside the gates
In hollow landscapes:*

We carry

*In our worlds that flourish
Our worlds that have failed*

*This song is our swan song
This song the stillness of our breath*

*This song is our swan song
This song is our senses' silence*

his sense of a personal and generational doom which finds final resolution in "Elegy for Alto":

*O mother Earth, unbind me; let this be
my last testament; let this be
The ram's hidden wish to the sword, the sword's
secret prayer to the scabbard*

The poet prays to be prodigal in a sense different from, yet cumulative to, the composite sense of his prodigality in *Heavensgate*. In this poem, his last, his prodigality reverses the sense of the word. His prodigality is in the ram's ultimate prayer to the tether, in his artist's bond to his vision and his art; his life at once a sacrifice and a giving.

Okigbo's poetry will have to be evaluated in two sets since the published forms of his poems under the title *Labyrinths* are so dissimilar to their earlier published forms and so re-worked as to be completely new poems. His introduction to the volume sheds light on the artists who have influenced him. No mention, however, is made of Senghor, to whom one finds similarities in poetic modes and in formal presentation—situational and verbal—the main difference being the stance of the poet protagonist.

Okigbo is significant because he did what most of the West African writers in English were doing in the 60's—a very personal poetry in a personal idiom—and he brought this mode to a virtuoso point. He represents their initially "art for art's sake" attitude which changed over time. His development therefore traces a West African pattern of artistic evolution from private anguish to public commitment. In addition, Okigbo exemplifies a neo-African wedding of the African to the Western poetic traditions to the rejuvenation of the effeteness and world weariness of the latter. He is, to my mind, one of the finest African poets in English, to be valued for the sheer beauty of his finely honed verse, his most delicate sensibility, and the artistic discipline which

informs the structure and the lyrical simplicity of his verse—a simplicity which conveys a false impression of facility. In much the same way that Achebe leads a school of Igbo novelists, Okigbo can be said to lead and to have brought to being, directly or indirectly, a school of good Igbo poets—Okogbule Wonodi, Romanus Egudu, Michael Echeruo among others—who, in their various ways, are much indebted to Okigbo. This role as teacher is another measure of the importance of Christopher Okigbo.

Footnotes

1. D.E.S. Maxwell and S. Bushrui, eds. *W.B. Yeats: 1865-1965: Centenary Essays* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965).
2. O.R. Dathorne, "Ritual and Ceremony in Okigbo's Poetry," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 5 (July, 1968), 79-91.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Ulli Beier, "Three Mbari Poets," *Black Orpheus*, 12, p. 46. Wole Soyinka, "And After the Narcissist?" *African Forum* 1, 4 (Spring, 1966).
5. Joseph Warton, *The Works of Virgil in Latin and English* (London, 1753).
6. Joseph Warton, "A Dissertation on Pastoral Poetry," *ibid.*, p. 37.
7. Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* 37.
8. See Marjory Whitelaw, "Interview with Christopher Okigbo, 1965," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 9, (July, 1970), 28-37.
9. See Romanus Egudu, "Okigbo Misrepresented: Edwin Thumboo on 'Love Apart,'" *Presence Africaine*, 76 (1970) 187-193.

10. "Transition Conference Questionnaire," *Transition*, vol. 2, no. 5 (July-August, 1962), p. 12.
11. D. Izevbaye, "Politics in Nigerian Poetry," *Presence Africaine*, 78.
12. The title "Night of My Blood," by the way, is from Senghor's poem, "Congo" in *Ethiopiennes*. The phrase also appears in the poem, "Chaka."
13. Recommended studies of *Distances* are Sunday Anozie, "A Structural Approach to Okigbo's *Distances*," *The Conch*, vol. 1, no. 1. (March 1969) 19-29; Gerald Moore, *The Chosen Tongue* (London: Longmans, 1969).

P.S. Since this essay was finished in August 1972, an insightful and scholarly book, *Creative Rhetoric* (London: Evans 1972) appeared in November by Sunday O. Anozie, a personal friend of the poet who, as I recall, practically chose Anozie as his critic. The work is highly recommended.

* * * * *

Omolara Leslie was educated at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where she once held the editorship of *The Horn* (after J. P. Clark and Abiola Irele). She has published major studies on African Literature, and is now working on a book on African women for Joseph Okpaku's Third Press. Until recently, she was a Research Fellow at Ibadan, but is now a Visiting Scholar at the School of Education, Northwestern University.