

**THE POETRY OF CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO:
NEW PERSPECTIVES AND CURRENT TRENDS**

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Abstract

Christopher Okigbo was a promising poet as at the time his life was cut short during the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War that began in the year 1967. Towards the end of his life, his poetry began tilting towards the themes of homecoming, return to one's roots and a style now known to be literary symbiosis—a mixture of the traditional literature and the written medium. This is done by sourcing one's literary material from Africa's rich cultural residue. In this study, we are concerned about the relevance of Okigbo's poetry to contemporary Nigeria, and by extension, Africa. We discussed his poems which feature the themes highlighted such as homecoming to one's roots and focus on other afro-centric issues. From our analysis, it is clear that his poems remain relevant today as much as they were years back. We also realize that the issues of homecoming and the return to one's roots he highlighted in his poems are current issues that Africans still have to continue to focus on. The tide of westernization has been growing on abated and an equal dose of a renewed campaign to return to one's root has to follow. Literary symbiosis remains relevant because the traditional literature enriches the written one while the written medium helps to preserve the traditional literature which exists orally.

Introduction

Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo was a Nigerian poet, teacher, and librarian, who died fighting for the independence of Biafra from Nigeria. He is today widely believed to be one of the most outstanding postcolonial African poets and one of the major modernist writers of the 20th century. With what Okigbo was able to achieve in the short time he spent alive, many scholars are of the opinion that he would have towered even more. The subjects of his poetry remain relevant today as they were many years ago when he wrote them.

Okigbo was born on 16 August 1932, in the town of Ojoto, near Onitsha in Anambra State. His father was a teacher in Catholic missionary schools during the heyday of British colonial rule in Nigeria, and Okigbo spent his early years moving from station to station. Although his father was a devout Christian, Okigbo had an affinity, and came to believe later in his life, that in him was reincarnated the soul of his maternal grandfather, a priest of Idoto, an Igbo deity. Idoto is personified in the river of the same name that flows through Okigbo's village, and the "water goddess" features prominently in his work. *Heavensgate* (1962) opens with the lines:

Before you, mother Idoto,
Naked I stand,

And while in "Distances" (1964) Christopher Okigbo celebrates his final aesthetics and return to his indigenous religious roots like the biblical prodigal son:

I am the sole witness to my homecoming

The return to his roots, perhaps, materialized into what led Danbudzo Marechera to declare that "Okigbo's poetry is unique in African literature. What the Soviet writer Andrei Sinyavsky said of Yevtushenko, I think applies to Okigbo" (1989). Both Yevtushenko and Okigbo, at a very critical moment of their artistic developments, drew their material largely from their oral traditions. Their

actions made their art unique considering criticism from Ali Mazrui that, Okigbo for instance, has been "...too far removed from indigenous modes from poetic expression in Africa" (qtd in Nwahunanya, 75). This perhaps is a clarion call on many African writers today to look homewards and reflect on issues that deserve attention rather than behaving like the proverbial man who goes chasing a rat that has come out of his burning house rather than try to quench the fire.

New Perspectives and Current Trends on Christopher Okigbo Poetry

Heavensgate

One interesting thing about Okigbo's poetry is the autobiographical dimension many of his poems took. Okigbo's father was a Catholic who took his faith seriously while Okigbo's maternal grandfather was a priest of the river goddess, Idoto. The experiences of these two family members raised a number of conundrums regarding his identity and cultural heritage. Okigbo's religious and spiritual experience is vivid throughout his poem, "Heavensgate." As at the time Okigbo started writing poetry, it cannot be said that he was a devotee of his traditional religion neither was he very much a devout Christian. But evidence from his poems suggests that at one point he was at the crossroads trying to choose where to turn to. The poem "Heavensgate" also referred to as "Idoto" or "Mother Idoto" heralds Okigbo's decision taken at that crossroad of his life. The poem marks his glorious return to his root which he has been known to run away from in confusion. Having been sandwiched between Christianity and traditional religion for so long, he returns and declares at the River Idoto:

Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand,
before your watery presence,
a prodigal,

These four lines indicate the state of his heart; repentant and begging for forgiveness for the many years he has refused to serve the goddess as a priest. Okigbo turned down the call for him to assume the position at the point when he can be said to be at the crossroads, confused. This return to the goddess is a turning point in his life as he appears and is willing to do the needful. As he stands naked before the goddess, it is a sign of total submission and recognition that he is nothing without the goddess. It is also an acknowledgement that he knows nothing and therefore is ready to learn. The truth is that everybody came to this world naked and will exit naked as well. The picture painted in the first stanza is the picture of one going to the river goddess for supplication and that requires the imagery.

The first stanza also very much resembles some biblical images. The first is that of Adam and Eve who were naked until they fell for the serpent who deceived them into disobeying God. The nakedness shows innocence and chastity because as soon as Adam and Eve ate the fruit of knowledge their innocence left them. This explains why the persona in "Heavensgate" appears naked before the revered goddess of River Ijoto. Another biblical allusion we can invoke here is the story of the prodigal son who takes his inheritance in advance, squanders it, only to return to his father pleading for forgiveness and re-admittance into the family. The persona hopes the goddess will forgive him and forget his wrong doing just as the father in the biblical story did concerning his prodigal son.

In the second stanza, the persona laments his loss after staying away from his root for too long. The two lines of stanza two aptly capture the scenario:

leaning on an oil bean;
lost in your legend...

The oil bean is an article to worship the Mother Idoto. The "oil bean" stands as a concrete symbol for traditional roots. He tries to lean on it, but fails. He pictures himself as the prodigalson, on whose return he finds the loss of his inheritance and riches. To Okigbo his ultimate asset is his cultural

heritage. He is currently lost in the legend or ‘antiquity’ of the land. The term “watery presence” may refer to its diluted existence. It may also connote the traditional land where the poet was baptized.

The last two stanzas sum up the poem. The persona declares that he is ready to continue to wait and watch until Mother Idoto responds by taking him back. The bare feet with which he waits at Mother Idoto’s shrine is typical of reverence that usually goes with appearance at such holy places. And in the last two lines, he tries to convince Mother Idoto of the sincerity of his return. In fact, he passionately refers to his return as a cry for which he craves to be listened to by Mother Idoto.

out of the depth my cry
give ear and hearken

Edward Sackey puts the significant effect of drawing from African traditional material into written literature very clearly:

In the growth and development of modern African literature,
African traditional oral poetics is playing a very significant role.
This is seen in modern African poetry, modern African drama,
and the modern African novel. Indeed, it is at the centre of the
on-going experiments and innovations in modern African
literature (389).

As many African writers are realizing themselves and looking inwards, it is as well a moment of realization also for African literature. Nobody can tell our stories better than we can and nothing enriches our story better than our traditional literature. This is the point Okigbo made with his poetry then and that point remains valid until today in contemporary Africa. The likes of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiongo, to mention these few, all drew largely from the oral traditional literature of their people to tell relevant, twenty-first century stories.

Watermaid

The poem “watermaid” very much resembles “Heavensgate” or what many people have preferred to call “Mother Idoto” or “Idoto”. The major difference between “watermaid” and “Heavensgate” is that in “Watermaid” Okigbo sets out to praise and pour encomium on the goddess which he returns to like a prodigal son in “Heavensgate”. From the first line of the first stanza to the last line of the last stanza, Okigbo employs the services of the natural environment to worship the goddess.

Bright
with the amplit-dazzle of a lioness,
she answers

Here Okigbo likens the goddess to a lioness. Lionesses generally show their strength and gaiety by displaying their armpit. It is with this vigor the persona is answered by the goddess as he calls for her presence for supplication. The dazzling beauty of the goddess is further enhanced by the moonlight which the persona says she is:

wearing white light about her

The persona continues in his praises and worship of the goddess as he describes her movement and her gaiety. Every natural element seems to complement the goddess and all that she does. In the third stanza, the persona goes thus:

and the waves escort her,
my lioness,
crowned with moonlight.

The waves, the winds, the sun, the moonlight and the wild beasts all portray her majesty and this is exactly why Okigbo deemed it fit to return to Mother Idoto and take up his post that he abandoned in

pursuit of westernization and vain things. Watermaids are usually heralded by the reactions of all these natural elements.

The next stanza captures the slippery presence and the transient nature of the goddess whom the persona reports to have shown no desire to stay some more time. Her apparition is almost like the appearance and disappearance of the shooting star that no sooner have you seen it than it vanishes into thin air. According to the persona:

So brief her presence-
match-flare in wind's breath-
so brief with mirrors around me

In the next stanza, vivid description is given as to how the watermaid or the goddess actually exits the persona's presence back into her abode. Having taken all the praises and worship from her devotee, she dives back into the water with her usual gaiety and elegance. The following lines offer a pictographic effect:

Downward...
the waves distil her:
gold crop
sinking ungathered.

The last two lines of the poem tell us the persona's summary of his loyalty to the watermaid. Being a child that listens to advice, the last line "grown are the ears of the secret" are assurances that he has heard and has grown enough to keep secret that which should remain a secret.

Okigbo's resort to drawing largely from traditional and cultural material is not surprising at all. Chinyere Nwahunanya, like many African literary critics, has advocated for afro-centric African poetry and criticism. In his words "...contemporary African culture is under foreign domination" (72). He is of the opinion that, in African literature, concerted efforts should be made to reject the neo-colonial mentality and "...map out new foundations for an African modernity" (72). This explains why Okigbo and many other African writers have turned to sourcing their creative literature material from their culture, especially the oral traditions. The Okigbo poems under review in this paper are a typical example of Nwahunanya's proposition.

The Stars Have Departed

One thing that needs to be taken seriously when studying Okigbo is that he is inclined to writing about the spiritual strivings of man on earth. Okigbo's poems call for personal involvement in the interpretation because they speak to individual souls variously as abstract as they may appear. Some scholars have said this poem was prophetic of Okigbo's tragic death during the civil war. Not just because Okigbo was a star but the manner of his departure from mother earth resembles the one mentioned in the poem.

The poem can as well be seen as a monody to all departed "stars" to use Okigbo's very own word. Unknown to him, he too would depart as a star and be celebrated long after he has gone. As at the time Okigbo wrote this poem, he must have had to contend with the many deaths of close friends and relatives who he felt may have died when they were mostly needed. In the first stanza, the poet opens thus:

The stars have departed,
thesky in monocle
surveys the worldunder

A picture of darkness is created here as the stars have departed from the sky and the sky in a vain effort holds a monocle surveying the world under. The repetition of line one, stanza one followed by the rhetorical question in line two, stanza two begin to bring the meaning in the poem home. Even the poet is not sure of himself. He seems to lack account of his safety and whereabouts. According to him:

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The stars have departed,
and I—where am I?

The vanity and transience of life are captured in the two lines above. The poet is helpless as to what he sees around him; death everywhere to the extent that he is not sure of his own state.

In the next stanza, the poet states thus:

Stretch, stretch, O antennae,
to clutch at this hour,

This stanza above further reflects the poet's vain search for meanings of life, but to no avail. The poet ends the poem in a sad note:

fulfilling each moment in a
broken monody.

Okigbo saw himself in the stars whose departure he laments in this monody. And since he ends the poem with the line broken monody, we can suggest that this line refers to his abrupt and sudden demise at the age of 35 while fighting on the frontline during the Nigerian civil war. His death can be likened to a broken monody; an abrupt end to his beautiful poetry and bright future.

Newcomer

This poem is written and dedicated to the wife of the elder brother of Christopher Okigbo whose name is Georgette. Georgette's newly born baby is the reason for the beautifully written poem but the striking poetic assemblage calls for attention. From the beginning of the poem to the end of it Okigbo creates imagery and aura heralding the coming of the little baby who is their bundle of joy. For instance, the first three lines of the poem have this beautiful picture:

In the chill breath
of the day's waking
comes the newcomer

The "chill breath" and "the day's waking" are employed to paint the picture of the time of the coming of the new baby into this world. The child was definitely born in the early hours of the morning when it was still dark but close to daybreak. Okigbo's ability to speak of time without mentioning the obvious attests to his artistic prowess.

In line four to ten, Okigbo paints the picture of the time of the year when the baby was born. His striking use of beautiful imagery is typical of Okigbo's poetry. He says in the poem:

when draper of May
has sold out fine green
garments, and the hillsides
have made up their faces
and the gardens
on their faces
a painted smile

The "draper of May" tells us that the season was rainy and the poet says it "has sold out fine green garments". This means that at this important time of the year heralding the birth of this precious niece of Okigbo, the rains have so settled down that everywhere has become green with bushes, leaves on trees, plants and shrubs forming a beautiful landscape. This also means that the baby has come into productivity, freshness and newness, and this is visible everywhere. This is why the poet mentions "the hillsides...and the gardens" having a painted smile of green. As the green environment of the rainy season brings good tidings so the new baby has brought good tidings and smile on the faces of her parents and everyone else including Okigbo.

Further down the poem, Okigbo mentions the time of the morning when this baby was born. This time Okigbo does not just suggest morning but he specifically mentions "at the cock's third siren" which

means third cock crow. The beauty of this poem lies in Okigbo's ability to summon imagery and symbols to communicate just as we see in his other poems.

Love Apart

In this poem Okigbo talks about imaginary love. Okigbo discusses the relationship between two people whose love has dissipated, waned or turned awry. In the past, their love can be said to be vibrant and warm but now it has diminished and comparable to a tree without roots and sap.

The futility and the loss of the once vibrant love is reflected and dramatized with these words: "moon", the "two pines", "our solitary stems", "shadows", "cling to each other", "love with the moon" and "kiss the air". Only few poems are successful in the development and execution of the content and form as this poem has been. The poem can also be looked at as the love between regions, states, religions and ethnic groups of one country, which ends and often time leading to catastrophe if not checked. And as the lovers "kiss the air" in vain, such a country whose constituent parts have lost their love for each other will continue to exist in pain, making vain efforts to find love again and only "...shadows that cling to each other, but kiss the air".

Path of Thunder

Path of Thunder is another very important poem of Christopher Okigbo. The voice in the poem is actually the voice of Christopher Okigbo's maternal grandfather, Ijejiofor, whose incarnate we are told Okigbo was. Ijejiofor was a devotee of Mother Ijoto and the priest of her shrine at the Ijoto River. Christopher Okigbo was as well appointed by supernatural ordinance to take up the same Priesthood before his famous abandonment of the task and remarkable return years after.

According to Chinweizu in his essay "Prodigals, Come Home!" he mentions some African writers and their writings such as:

...Ahmad Nasir's *Gnomic Verses* (Swahili), to p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (Acoli and English) and Okigbo's "Path of Thunder" (English). No matter in what language they are written, these poems stand as prototypes of what a modern African poetry might be like (219).

This shows that, despite the language of the poetry, its African root will stand out. "Path of Thunder" is prophetic, futuristic and at the same time reprimanding. The persona in the poem foretells the Nigerian Civil War and foresees Christopher Okigbo taking part in the war. This poem is said to be prophetic because it was actually written before the war. By taking part in the war, Okigbo does not only abandon Mother Idoto's shrine once again, he as well abandons his career in creative writing.

In the first paragraph, the persona asks: "Why did you leave me?"

This first paragraph sets the tone of the poem. The persona goes ahead to paint a picture of Okigbo's abandonment of his divine calling at the shrine of Mother Idoto. To show that the persona knows the object of his complaint very well, he speaks thus:

Dee Christopher,
Town crier,
Why did you leave me,
On the paths of thunder?

In the second stanza, the persona recalls Okigbo's calling and purpose on earth. He tells Okigbo that he left him in the desert for his "baptism" and under the guidance of Mother Idoto. Baptism is a Christian term but it is used here probably as a word Okigbo would easily understand. In the same stanza, the persona goes ahead to warn Okigbo thus: "I left you to fight another war", which means Okigbo has gone astray or was about to go astray. The inspiration for this poem might have come at a time when Okigbo began to contemplate joining the Biafran army in the battle field.

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The third stanza comes clearer thus: “Do you have to fight that war?” and therefore abandoning the war meant for him which is his service to Mother Idoto and the use of his pen in creative literature. According to the persona:

There are men and women
Trained to fight that war
You are a town crier

Okigbo is being warned to keep off a war not meant for him and face the war meant for him. Here the persona defines Okigbo’s duty as a town crier and not a soldier on the battle field. Okigbo was already armed with a pen and therefore does not need to arm himself with guns and bullets.

In the last stanza of the poem, the persona dismisses Okigbo from his presence with the words:

Begone apprentice

By using the word apprentice, Okigbo is reminded of his being a prospective inexperienced soldier who stands the risk of being wasted on the battle field. Okigbo is reminded of the gong and sticks left for him at the shrine of Mother Idoto for his use which he is warming up to abandon. This admonition was re-echoed later on in the famous novel titled *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* by the renowned scholar, Professor Ali Mazrui.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most of Christopher Okigbo’s poems are similar in themes and philosophy. In very many ways, his poems capture his most memorable moments in life when he found himself trapped between his loyalty to his culture and tradition and to western influences such as education and Christianity. The image of Mother Idoto is a frequent occurrence in his poetry even though mention might not have been made in its exactitude in some of the poems. In his poems we find prophetic impulses, willingness to return to the service of his community deity and evidences of a man at the crossroads. These themes are relevant to the contemporary African society today as they were to Okigbo and the Africa of his time. At no time have Africans wondered away from their culture and tradition as they have now. Okigbo’s symbolic return to Mother Idoto, and by extension, Africa is celebrated in his poems using literary symbiosis which beautifully marries the traditional literature and the written literature into one beautiful literature such as we have seen in Okigbo’s poetry.

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