

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Post-War Writing in Nigeria

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/77j9w3hg>

Journal

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

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Emenyonu, Ernest Nneji

Publication Date

1973

DOI

10.5070/F741016425

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

POST-WAR WRITING IN NIGERIA*

by

ERNEST NNEJI EMENYONU

The Nigerian civil war is now a matter of history. The Republic of Biafra now lives in the pages of books, pamphlets, and newspapers. In that form, it is no threat to the people of Nigeria who, in a solemn oath of allegiance in January 1970, pledged to consign Biafra into oblivion and face the task of reconstruction and reconciliation. Biafra is an issue now only for historians who are plagued with the search for the answer of "what might have happened if..." But the war itself has left deep scars not only in the lives of the survivors, but also in their beliefs and attitudes to life in general. Unless one visits the right places in Nigeria, the visitor today may hear nothing and possibly see nothing about the war. There are of course, innuendos, covert and overt references, all of which give hints of what happened in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. Fortunately, there has begun to appear some fiction inspired by life in the era of the Nigerian civil war, and one significance of this type of fiction is that it makes fact have the resemblance of reality. The incidents for the most part have not been portrayed in any chronological order. Some of them never happened at all, but have been invented. For some of the writers the flash-point comes from something which really happened and thus sets off in them a chain of reaction or creativity. A large percentage of contemporary African writers is from Nigeria, and many of the Nigerian writers (especially the novelists) come from the area designated for a while as the Republic of Biafra, and are Igbo by ethnic origin.

All the major Igbo writers, except notably Christopher Okigbo, survived the war. Included are some of the popular names in African writing - Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Onuora Nzekwu, John Munonye, Flora Nwapa and others. They have been joined by a list of relatively new figures in the Nigerian literary scene such as Andre Aletta, Chukwuma Azwonye, Victor Nwankwo, Sam Ifejika, Nathan Nkala, Felix Okeke-Ezibgo, and Arthur Nwankwo. Their works appeared in the first published literary work in post-war Nigeria dealing with the war as seen from the point of view of its participants. There is

* Originally presented at the African Studies Association, Annual Conference: Philadelphia, November 8 -11, 1972.

also a new crop of poets - mostly University students, teachers, civil servants, and others - who have written on various aspects of the war as experienced by them personally or by those they know. The inimitable Onitsha pamphlet authors are also back with their publications, some of which have been boldly addressed to the war and its ugly concomitants.

This study is an investigation into the attitudes and responses of post-Biafra Igbo through their literature. It is, therefore, limited in scope and horizon. It is not an analysis of all literature emanating from Nigeria since the end of the civil war. Nor is it an examination of all literature produced by the Igbo in general since the end of the war, whether or not the subject is the war in one form or another. It is specifically aimed at a discussion of selected representative literature by Igbo writers in the present East Central State of Nigeria, which has been inspired by the events of the war. The purpose is to see what directions are projected by these works of Igbo attitudes and responses to a war that was to a good many of them (at least for a while) a struggle for survival, a search for a new beginning for Africa, and a redefinition of black identity in the context of complex world behavior. Consequently works by such writers as J. P. Clark, Wole Soyinka and others which have direct relevance on the war, have had to be excluded unfortunately for they are more in the nature of commentaries on, rather than expositions of, intrinsic Igbo behavior.

Because among the Igbo, as any other African group, the artistic possibilities of any oral performance are infinite, some post-war Igbo songs have been collected and analyzed from the point of view of what possible light they shed on how far the experiences of the war have been utilized by oral performers, be they drummers, raconteurs, dancers or soloists. Have the war episodes as yet filtered into Igbo idiom, gossip, sarcasm or daily routine expression? If so, how and toward what ends? The proverb is referred to as "the oil with which the Igbo eat their words". How far are the war images and symbolisms mixing with proverbial oil? The oral performers seem to have been more daring than their intellectually-oriented counterparts. They have not hesitated to exploit the traditional function of dance and song as the media; whereby the Igbo express the whole range of their experiences. There have been several compositions - some spontaneous, others calculated - generally by high school students, some of whom had to suspend their studies to join the war. They came out maimed or lucky, but as survivors they had witnessed the deaths of their brothers, friends, and classmates. In their compositions it is the words that generate whatever music is embodied. They are significant both for their meaning and their educative

value in the society. The audience listens for the meaning of words in order to grasp the message without which the whole performance is hardly of interest. For some of them the message of their songs (and thus the entire performance) has direct connection with dead comrades, and this calls from the audience peculiar attention and humility associated with religious occasions. The several collections I made of such performances were regular performances at Church, as well as secular gatherings. With these songs the erstwhile "enemies" are lampooned, the comrades in arms who betrayed the cause are chastised, and heroes, martyrs and the faithful are praised and immortalized. Secular songs are constantly being composed. More books and pamphlets are being written, accepted and released by publishers. This study therefore is limited to the materials available at the time it was undertaken, and is merely a preface to what might become a new and important era in African literary history, stylistic innovations and moral preoccupation.

The two leading Igbo novelists - Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi - have been pioneers in post-war Igbo literary activities. Both were Biafran partisans during the war. Achebe maintained: "It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant - like the absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames" (*The Conch*, Vol. I, No. 1, March 1969). Ekwensi too declared, "The African writer must be committed to the cause of the black man at large and to the African struggle in his own particular area. The mere fact of being African and living in a turbulent world of conflicting values, compels the African writer to develop an extra-consciousness of values and to gauge for himself what share of social justice he is receiving at the hands of the international community" (Personal interview at Madison, Wisconsin, Dec. 1, 1969). Both Achebe and Ekwensi do not hide the fact that the Biafran situation has affected their creativity in no small way. Ekwensi, now virtually a private businessman in Lagos, maintains "the war has left deep scars" (Personal interview at Enugu, Nigeria, August, 1971). He is at the moment doing a series of children's books along the lines of *The Passport of Mallam Ilia*, *The Drummer Boy*, and *Trouble in Form Six*. Three such books have been completed. Two are already in the press. The series is aimed at showing the nature of the post-war society from the point of view of a young boy who knew something of the former society, witnessed the ugliness and horror of the war period and has to live with his life in the after-math of the war. *Coal Camp Boy* and *Samankwe in the Strange Forest* are in print. *Samankwe and the Highway Robbers* will be next in line, followed by *Samankwe and the Money Doublers*. Still being planned is *Samankwe*

and the Kidnappers. Samankwe is a primary school boy who gets into all kinds of fantastic adventures and when he comes back to narrate them at school, no one really believes him. *Coal Camp Boy* is the story of a family returning to Coal Camp (in Enugu, where Ekwensi lived until recently) very soon after the war. All their problems are there - hunger, rehabilitation, thieves, schools without desks. Beyond these, Ekwensi is working on three major novels simultaneously. He writes recently: "I am working on three novels - big ones. I need not say more but will unfold my plans when I have reached a reasonable stage" (Personal correspondence, Oct. 18, 1972).

Chinua Achebe, who until recently was a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nigeria, has not done any major works but he has not ceased writing. He co-authored a collection entitled *The Insider: Stories of War and Peace from Nigeria*. He has brought out a collection of poems *Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems* for which he has recently been named the joint winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. He has also a collection of short stories entitled *Girls at War and Other Stories* comprising some of his early short stories and three dealing specifically with the war and its effects. He had recently co-authored a children's story *How the Leopard Got His Claws* - a modern fable about an African society that loses its unity. It incorporates a poem ("The Lament") by the late Christopher Okigbo. Achebe is the editor of *Okike* - a Nigerian journal of new writing, and *Nsukkascope*, a controversial and incisive analysis of post-war life and government in the University of Nigeria. The stated purpose of *Okike* is "to address itself to the writer's relevance to his society as well as to related problems in creative action and stringent criticism. It will highlight particularly new and experimental works, believing that in form and content African literature is still groping, early on creation day, towards self-realization." Achebe, now at the University of Massachusetts, stressed that he would not leave Nigeria in the first year of the end of the war, maintaining "I wanted to be around at this time particularly. I wouldn't have missed this period for anything, just like the period of the war" (Personal interview at Nsukka, Nigeria, Aug. 26, 1971). The war too has affected him in no small way especially in his writings. His contention is that "the experience of the last four years has been so enormous, so big, that there is no way you can talk about creative work from this part of Nigeria without taking it into account one way or the other. As more and more people feel that it is safe for them to say what they have in their minds, then we are likely to get more and more unorthodox opinions and positions. People have been through a huge experience and this thing is taking time to work out in all kinds of ways. It is not just cynicism, bitterness, or pessimism. There is irony, and all

kinds of things are mixed up with it."

Probably the major catalyst in Igbo post-war literary creativity is the Nwamife Publishing House (Enugu), an indigenous publishing company and the brain child of Arthur Nwan-kwo and Samuel Ifejika, the joint authors of *Biafra: The Making of a Nation* (1969). Their first publication was *The Insider" Stories of War and Peace From Nigeria* (1971). Apart from Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa, all the contributors to this anthology are new names in Nigerian fiction. The lead story, Chinua Achebe's "The Madman", is a satirical piece. Although it makes no direct reference to the war, its commentary on the Nigerian-Biafran situation is hard to miss. In the story many people could not see or reason beyond the surface situation of a respectable man who has been seen running to the market place naked. No one cared enough about the background episode, that a madman had deprived the innocent man of his clothing, and having groomed himself in the borrowed garments, was able to pass as a perfectly normal person, while the sane man is forced to receive treatments for lunacy of the worst kind because he had been caught by public eyes while in pursuit of his stolen garments. As usual with Achebe, a particular local event has been consistently explored until its universal ramifications are unfolded. Isn't it a common human frailty to mistake appearance for reality? This is the message that Achebe tries to communicate in a subtle and appealing way. One sees the relevance of what he is saying in the immediate setting but elsewhere its general applicability is apparent. Satire, where appropriately portrayed, could be a forceful organ of social criticism. Thus, "The Madman" underscores the proverbial wit that "in certain confrontations between the sane and the insane, it may be difficult to tell which is which", and Flora Nwapa's "The Campaigner" exposes "the sham of African post-independence elections and the casual callousness that are the stock-in-trade of some professional African politicians."

The image of madness is repeatedly featured in post-war Igbo literary creativity. The world is portrayed as a rigid confinement in which not only actions but the thoughts of men are rigorously regimented. The lunatic rambles as he rants, an out-cast from a humanity that is anything but sane. These rantings are shattered to the imaginary peace and quiet of the world around the lunatic. He feels the insanity of the surrounding world. He feels the hardships. But unlike hypocritical man, he does not pretend that all around him is normal. He feels the apparent confinement and the impending calamities of a world confronted by the forces of evil. His cacophonous, and to the human ear, unintelligible utterances, are his way of charging "these strategems of hell and devilish machinations to be frus-

trate and come to nought". He is jeered by everybody around him and he becomes the laughing stock but ironically, in the context of these stories, it appears that in the Biafra-Nigeria conflict the only philosophical and strategic heroes were the "lunatics" - they were the only people with vision and insight. They were the only people free in the true sense of freedom, yet they were the only people who commanded no respect and no attention. This imagery is suggestive of a world gone mad, a world in which the cruel actions of man have brought about a rebellion and turmoil in the natural elements. This is a symbol that the natural harmony has been upset by man's insensitivity to man. The stories that embody this imagery never clearly state that even the peace at the end of the war was about to restore the distorted order in the universe.

In Emmanuel Obiechina's "Song of a Madman" (*Okike*, No. 1, April, 1971) we have:

*However fast the yam runs the goat will eat him,
However fast the goat runs the tiger will eat him,
However fast the tiger runs the man will eat him,
However fast the man runs the earth will eat him,
However fast the earth runs something will eat him,
However fast something runs something bigger will eat him,
So, that's how it is, something bigger will eat him.*

Is this pessimism? Impermanence of human glory? The fluidity and futility of victory? Or just nonchalance at vanquished pride and self-aggrandisement?

In his "The Lost Path", Chukwuma Azuonye's madman Izreani Nwa Dimoji is seen by everyone around him as looking like "something out of a tale". The major character, a straggler "took him to be one of the war casualties; one of the village folks whom the war had turned beasts - with no soap to wash, no clothes to wear, beasts crazy with hunger". But Izreani saw the soldier as crazy not to be conscious of the tragedy encircling him as well as everyone else. "You must be a madman" he told the soldier. "Look everywhere, my son. Everybody moving up and down, down and up, up and down, down and up...I don't know my son. Is it just the war? Is everyone in this our land mad?" Izreani wore a frown like one making a serious comment on life. "Come back my child," followed the voice, soft and paternal. "You do not know what bad snake you're pursuing with a short knife. Come back, my child. Say, who put you in the army? Come, my child, let us stay in this our village and watch people." And when this appeal fell on deaf ears, Izreani charged the Civil defenders, who in his malapropism (or is it insanity), he calls "Simple Defend", to keep a strong hand on that soldierman. "He went to Uninvasimtim. He

is a man of Big Grammar. Remember, Grammar caused the war." The soldierman does not heed the warning and thus comes to a bad end. What is acutely disturbing in the situations and commentaries provided by these authors is that human reason had actually fled to brutish beasts. The world is peopled by unthinking human beings and thoughtful beasts with foresight. It is a hard choice to make.

Not all the stories are conceived on this philosophical level. Some deal with the hard, down-to-earth realities of the operations of the war and its effects on the common man, who ends up as the victim of the impetuosity of the big grammar-speaking higher-ups. Cyprian Ekwensi's "Minus Everything" (*Okike*, No. 1, 1971), deals with the criminal phenomenon as an aftermath of the war. He highlights the insecurity of the common man menaced by armed robbers, cheats and hoodlums, and projects the pessimistic view that even with peace restored, for the common man in these circumstances, "life is nothing". The well-to-do are bound to try to deprive him of even his faith in life. The war had cost the man in the story his sight. People whom he could never see have robbed him of all his material possessions and murdered his son - his only link with the human world. He was then "Minus Everything", yet many "came near and jeered at him. Some said he was mad". This theme is reiterated in Achebe's story "Civil Peace" where innocent people are terrorized by insensitive men around them.

Some of the stories have focused on the bribery and corruption which prevailed in the Biafran army and society during the war. Frightening corruption in the highest quarters sharply contrasted with the genuine dedication and optimism of the masses. This corruption in high places was a kind of boomerang. It became a counterforce that shattered all the strategies and idealism of the suffering soldiers and starving masses and indirectly overthrew the higher-ups eventually. For many in the high ranks, the war was an opportunity to build their ego, their businesses, and exploit to limitless dimensions the unsuspecting populace. From their lavish parties, their life of carefreeness and joyous abandon depicted in the stories, one would think that all was well in Biafra, and that these high brows were celebrating the glorious era in the history of their people. They, the intellectual bourgeoisie, are referred to in the "Malaise of Youth" as "the enemy of the masses" and "the most dangerous class" in the society. Power is in their hands, and what hope is there for the country, and posterity as these men are preoccupied with their own selfish pursuits unrelated to the events in the national emergency. "We blamed the old politicians", Professor Jeff comments in the story, "What defence or excuse can we give for the much vaunted angry youth? ...It is scandalous. It is preposterous..." The hint here is

not necessarily one of anti-intellectualism. Rather, it is the apparent disenchantment with what had looked like the last hope of the masses who had already been betrayed by the incumbent politicians. Flora Nwapa focuses partly on this in a story she rightly entitled "Delinquent Adults," (*This is Lagos*, 1971), and in another story "The Loss of Eze," she issues a harsh comment on the general irresponsibility of the elite and leadership. "This is a wretched country. Damnable country. Day in, day out, parties. A friend who recently returned from Britain, after going to four parties in one night, asked me when Nigeria did her thinking. I told him that nobody thought in Nigeria." Evident in these stories that focus on the corruption of the higher-ups and intellectuals, is the belief that the very people whose audacity and impertinence precipitated the crisis, have taken themselves away from its dangerous consequences, enjoying life in an amazingly unprecedented way, remaining at the same time insensitive to the sufferings of the masses. The semi-literate Corporal in Felix Okeke-Ezigbo's "Caught in the Web" remarks contemptuously "Na bookuru cause war, but e no fit win am", and in her story "The Campaigner", Flora Nwapa adds "Eloquence doesn't win elections these days. Big grammar doesn't either." There is bribery by means of which Army Officials conscript aging men with grandchildren and release youthful men who can afford their fees. Ezigbo ("Caught in the Web") sums it up with "No man who exactly understands the purpose of this life should pursue rats when his house is on fire. True, if we eventually get drowned in this deep sea of transition it is because we tied a heavy millstone around our own neck."

Chinua Achebe in his story "Girls at War" focuses on this suicidal exploitation of the people by their own people. He remarks, "Death and starvation having long chased out the headiness of the early days, now left in some places blank resignation, in others a rock-like, even suicidal defiance. But surprisingly enough, there were many at this time who had no other desire than to corner whatever good things were still going and to enjoy themselves to the limit. For such people a strange normalcy had returned to the world." These are the people who use their influence to commandeer relief food meant for the masses. There is an ironic episode in the story where Nwankwo, a senior civil servant is loading his car to overflowing with relief food that in all probability he does not need any more than the starving masses around do need it. Achebe reports the people's protest thus: "As his driver loaded tins and bags and cartons into his car the starved crowds that perpetually hung around relief centers made crude, ungracious remarks like "War Can Continue", meaning the WCC! Somebody else shouted, "Irevolu!" and his friends replied "Shum!" "Irevolu!" "Shum!" "Isofeli?" "Shum!" "Isofeli?" "Mba!" Nwankwo was deeply embarrassed not by the

jeers of this scarecrow crowd of rags and floating ribs, but by the independent accusation of their wasted bodies and sunken eyes." The irony in this piece is that the crowd acknowledged that they are part of the revolution only so far as fighting the war and suffering for the cause. But to the question "Is ofeli?" - "Do you share with them in the eating and feasting?", the stark reply is "Mba!" - "Not at all, Never!"

The full import of this Igbo self-recrimination at the end of the war as evident in these writings, is for sociologists and psychologists to fully analyze. Identifiable patterns in Igbo cultural behavior point to a current of unity under pressure. This unity is sustained long after the crisis when common suffering acts as a persistent bond. The victor is soon out-manuevered, and the Igbo turn defeat into derision and possibly exploitation of the conqueror. In the present circumstances, the disenchantment with the operations of the war, the corruption of the officers, and the oppression of the common man, have been too strong to engender anything but a much more sordid sense of individualism. The key work now seems to be "survival first, that is individual survival".

Asked to comment on life in Enugu, the city that most Igbo rushed to at the end of the war, Cyprian Ekwensi remarked:

I have one fixed impression about Enugu and I don't think it will ever change and it is this: Enugu is a small town which thinks it is big. It is a town in which everybody knows everything about everybody's affairs. Enugu is a town of gossip, nose-poking, etc., because it is a small town. There are only two streets in this town - one running east and the other running west and that is all...if your business is not situated on these two streets, then you have no business... Now, Enugu is trying very hard after the war to pretend it is something else. The traders of Onitsha, the traders of Aba all settled in Enugu immediately after the war ended...They have all gone back to Aba. What attracted them here was that there was relief to be had here...the administration and the Government...and when they settled here they did not have enough money to support the roots they had established. But as soon as they had money, off they fled to the town which had the character they wanted. Enugu is an administrative town; it is simply a shirt-and-tie town; it isn't a traders' town; it isn't a town in which people take risks. Everybody waits for the 23rd of the month and between the 23rd and the 25th

everybody has spent what he has and is broke and keeps on waiting for the next 23rd by which time he is already in debt. It isn't a money town. It is a town of scarcity and pretentiousness...It provides a very good setting for a novel of the sort of vicious type like *Peyton Place*, because everybody I could think of knows everybody. Everybody knows what every doctor does when he closes his door, or what every dentist does, or how much money every trader has in the bank..." (Personal interview at Enugu, August 1971).

And in a similar discussion about the masses Achebe remarked, "This generation which is not used to good things, is not even likely to produce the kind of leadership that you and I want. It is my hope that when the next generation comes up and they are not so fascinated by weaving lace or by wearing gold that reaches the floor, maybe then we are going to find something different." (*Africa Report*, May 1972).

Thus, for both of these writers, Biafra, even in its short-lived existence failed to produce the beautiful ones. If there are heroes, the various authors are saying, they are the masses who were menaced by the Nigerian aggression and defrauded by corrupt Biafran officials. Or as Okeke-Ezigbo puts it in "Caught in the Web", it is "the poor recruits who had nobody to plead on their behalf, young privates who were brave and courageous and had prospects of rapid promotions, non-commissioned officers who quarrelled with the commissioned ones over quotas of salt and garri, and junior officers who clashed with their seniors over women. . . ." These were vindictively sent to dangerous war fronts to perish. The authors portray these incidents emotionally as people who have lived through another colonial institution. There is an emotional accusation of *power* as a dehumanizing, demoralizing institution. Compromise with the Nigerian forces means the ruin and death of conquered Biafrans. They see a new colonialism. Where the people - the masses - see facts and statistics of the war just ended, the authors see the ruins of a civilization that had invented and perfected the powerful *Ogbunigwe*. The war has brought to the Biafrans poverty, depression, dehumanization and the destruction of traditional and cherished values. The authors have seen through the flimsy veil of exploitation, the lies and promises of prosperity and "nation". They cannot be expected to speak any less truthfully than they did about the falling apart of things in their society a century ago, or the nature of colonialism and its destruction of the non-white peoples of the world.

There is a different kind of theme in Arthur Nwankwo's "To Lagos with Hope", the last story in *The Insider*. With the proclamation of peace a young Igbo boy who had fought on the Biafran side goes to Lagos full of hopes, believing every letter of the article of reconciliation. He soon realizes that "above and beyond all official attitudes, reconciliation, like racism, is a thing of the heart". It dawns on him that different Nigerian ethnic groups will have different attitudes towards him. In the story, he comes to appreciate that the Hausa was his enemy as long as the war lasted, but in the post-war days he has a new enemy to confront in the Yoruba who see him as "a rebel and no remorse" and order him to "Go to your Biafra". There is a new crisis for him, and his salvation and that of his mother at home come only from the good will and magnanimity of the semi-literate Hausa he casually meets on the road to Lagos. He welcomes him with open arms... "If that is not my Ibo fren," he exclaimed with transparent enthusiasm. "Go round and come in." I went to the other side. The door flew open. I went in. The door clicked shut and the glass went up."

Other stories set in Lagos are those in Nwapa's collection *This is Lagos and Other Stories* but only the last two stories in the collection have any kind of bearing on the war. They only draw attention to the domestic tragedy emanating from the big issues which throughout the stories are only implied by the author. Flora Nwapa still seems fervently preoccupied, as much here as in her major novels, with a crusade for the reformation of the female image in African fiction. With that kind of missionary commitment, and with the continued militantism of the Women's Liberation Movement, it may take a while before she can be diverted to other issues.

A substantial body of poetry has been produced on the theme of war, although much of it circulates in leaflets, mimeographed sheets and unpublished manuscripts on college and university campuses. Some have appeared in journals such as *Okike* as well as in local newspapers. The University of Nigeria Writers' Club has occasional publications. Some of the poets are the same authors of the short stories, and in some cases they project in their poems the moral preoccupations of their short stories. Okeke-Ezigo, the author of "Caught in the Web" dramatizes in the poem "Rejection" the fate of the common man caught in the cross-fire of the mania for wealth and power by the bourgeoisie.

*And so it was,
that we who were afield when
the blazing sun set at midday
were abandoned naked in the black
while kinsmen couched clothed dogs
in cushioned kennels.*

(UNN Writers' Club)

In a similar disillusioned tone as in his story "The Lost Path", Chukwuma Azuonye in his poem "Lament of the Libertine" writes,

*...I'm being envied; and yet I know for shame
I can expect no fruit of mine at harvest time.
This is my autobiography, these ashtrays -
This is the balance sheet of all my romping days.
Ashes and stumps
Ashes and stumps.*

(UNN Writers' Club)

In "Return of the Exiles" Obiora Udechukwu recaptures the mood and fate of the people as they begin to return to their homes at the cessation of hostilities.

*the whirlwind is over
and the exiles return
but they have no shelter from the rains*

(UNN Writers' Club)

Chinua Achebe's *Beware Soul Brother* is so far the best and most organized collection. As the publishers point out "Few of the poems speak directly about the war but they all bear the mark of its distress and tragedy." This is suggested in titles such as "The First Shot," "Refugee Mother and Child", "Christmas in Biafra", "An 'If' of History". In his review of this collection Donatus Nwoga states:

The collection opens on the explosive note of "The First Shot", ranges through some of the experiences and situations of that civil war of which, one expects, many voices will still speak, and ends on a rather disturbingly tragic reflective note in "We Laughed at Him". A few poems in between present thoughts which are outside of time and recent circumstances. The title poem "Beware Soul Brother", for example, extends its political meaning beyond the particular Nigerian past to the black man, glorifying in his rhythmic soulfulness, unwatchful of others "lying in wait leaden-footed, tone-deaf passionate

*only for the deep entrails of our soil."
There is intense pity successfully conveyed in poems like "Refugee Mother and Child" and "Christmas in Biafra" (1969)
"for the weak, trampled down in the struggles which came to them unknowingly."*

Though not originally in written form, there have been several recent Igbo oral performances which, like the poems and short stories, have focused their themes on the philosophical and practical implications of war in human society but drawing illustrations from the Nigerian situation. One young secondary school composer entitled his song "Ogu Enwegh isi" - "War is fruitless - War is pointless". In it he declares:

*I'm sore and distressed about the dead and wounded
I fled until I was cornered in all fronts
I got tired of fleeing
I was fed up with avoiding death
Whose bullets rained from all directions
This is the sound of death
A people once ate with silver
Now scrape their dishes from barren floor.
War is human tragedy
Brothers disown each other
Friends deny each other
Loyalty and humility set off never to return
The lowly batter their souls for bread
Suddenly in January 1970
We heard news the war was over
It was like a dream.
Survivors are kings
But never again put your fingers in the fire.
For they will burn indeed.
Now let the kite perch and the hawk perch
Hearken wherever you may be
In the North, In the East, In the West
They say we're now brothers.
Survivors remember the wounded
deserve your sympathy
And the dead, affectionate memory.*

(Eleazer Onyeali, Jan. 1970)

Another composer saw the war in the context of its consequences on Africa as a whole. He wonders:

*For how long shall Africans be slaves
in their own father land?
For how long shall we continue to be
treated as slaves in our father land?
Oh Lord will you suffer this to continue?
Even the birds have nests
The squirrels live up the tree
The fish own the water
Of course rabbits have their holes.
But we, where shall we seek shelter?
Where shall we flee if we are chased out
of our land?
Where shall we flee if we are estranged in
our land?
If you pursue an animal it seeks refuge in the
bush.
If I am chased out of my ancestral roots,
what's left to me?
God let me not be found in a state of living
death."*

Sonny Oti

Others sing about personal losses, about the vindictiveness of their more privileged neighbors, about the hostility of armies of occupation and about the confusion in social and moral values brought about by armed-robbers, prostitutes, and frauds. One singer sums it with "Life has as much bitterness as it has joy...Thank God if you are alive...if you have been spared to witness the various facets of life."

It is clear that we have not heard all there is in the attitudes and responses of the post-Biafran Igbo, or about the events of the war years and shortly after. Some of the authors mentioned in the preceding discussion have had things to say elsewhere. Some of them have manuscripts stacked up for a future date. In these manuscripts they have done more than point accusing fingers and apportion blame. Some have focused on the more controversial issues of justice and politics in the conflict. Some have challenged the wider world accusing it of an abdication of moral responsibility for the Biafrans. Some have indicted the so-called humanitarian organizations that purported to help the Biafrans during the war. Ogali A. Ogali, one of the better known of the Onitsha pamphlet authors, in a

recent pamphlet, *No Heaven for the Priest*, charges:

Before the war, the Christian workers, priests, reverend gentlemen, sisters, brothers, catechists, elders, venerables, call them what you like, preached on "comfort the poor, help the helpless, support the needy, be your brother's keeper, we are equal before God", and all what not, but what did we see during the war? It was abominable, abominable before God and man! These so-called Christians put aside the divine Christian principles and went low, too low in moral and religious principles. Instead of helping the helpless, they helped the hopeful, the well placed and well financed ones. Instead of supporting the needy, they supported the have-all, the well-dressed and well-painted "butterflies". People were no longer one and equal before that same God they preached about. And of course, they were their brother's keeper where brother 'meant' people from the same clan with them. These are the people who will still have the effrontery of telling others about God and His blessings Unless these people search their minds and ask for forgiveness from the poor, the needy, the rejected, the hopeless and helpless, there shall be no heaven for them.... Many of them sold relief materials intended for the poor and the needy. Relief materials went to doctors, lawyers, engineers, fellow clergymen, very important personalities, beautiful girl friends and car owners, in fact to all those who had enough and were capable of helping others.
(No Heaven for the Priest, Feb. 1971).

We can expect more indictments along this line. Probably those things which have been published so far, are merely feelers to ascertain official and unofficial public reaction. Hopefully, the more unpalatable materials, the more mature positions and attitudes, the more unorthodox opinions are waiting, perhaps for the time Achebe envisages when "people would feel that it is safe for them to say what they have in their minds." Wole Soyinka's forthcoming book, *The Man Died*,* seems likely to usher in that era of free expression

[* Soyinka's book has since been published by Rex Collins, London. Unfortunately, it has been banned in Nigeria by the military authorities. - Ed.]

for better, for worse. In the final analysis the literary critic, like the vulture in the war days in Biafra, might be the beneficiary of the booty. For if the present trend continues, African writing is likely to witness a new and vigorous dimension of unmasked works of deep social criticism, aggressive political commitment, and the symbolic search or questioning of self. Thus the Nigerian civil war will have proved as literarily productive to the intellectual world as it was physically and mentally destructive to the average Igbo.

* * *

Ernest Emenyonu obtained his first degree (with First Class Honors) at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and later did graduate work at Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. His doctoral dissertation on "The Development of Modern Igbo Fiction" will soon be published jointly by Heinemann, England, and NOK, New York. He also has a book on Cyprian Ekwensi which will be released in November, 1973 by Evans, in their Modern African Writers series. He is currently an Associate Professor of African Literature at the University of Colorado, Boulder.
