

Three Decades of Written Igbo Poetry: An Appraisal of its Growth

Iwu Ikwubuzo

Department of Linguistics, African & Asian Studies

University of Lagos

GSM: 08033018386

e-mail iikwubuzo@yahoo.com

Abstract

About two and half decades ago, Ugonna asked, among others, the following questions: "Is there Igbo poetry? If there is Igbo poetry, to what extent has it grown? ..." (Ugonna, 1982:2). As at the time he raised these questions, he noted that, A thorough examination of Igbo poetical works will reveal that Igbo poetry has grown not only in quantity but also in quality and with the growth of Igbo poetry, standard Igbo is being firmly rooted (p.23) What has transpired since over two decades after Ugonna had made the above assessment shows that written Igbo poetry has recorded further growth. This is because as at that time, published poetical works were less than ten as against today that we have over forty written texts of Igbo poetry. Again, its study was limited to a few higher institutions as at that time, but today its study is going on in various institutions of learning. This paper makes a brief appraisal of the growth of written Igbo poetry in terms of extant texts, the factors that have contributed to the growth as well as the factors that militate against it. The paper also considers how the study of Igbo poetry has fared. It concludes by suggesting a few steps that can be taken to sustain the growth of written Igbo poetry in the 21st century.

1.0 Introduction

Igbo studies have been going on in the areas of Igbo language, literature, culture, history, religion, philosophy, medicine and such topical issue as gender, among others; and scholars engaged in Igbo studies from these various perspectives have made relevant contributions to the general development and preservation of Igbo studies, especially in the last century. Our focus is however on Igbo literature.

2.0 Written Igbo Poetry: Its Rise, Early Growth and Study

Between the time written Igbo literature made its debut with the publication of the first Igbo novel, *Omenụkọ*, in 1933 and the turn of the century, Igbo literary studies have come a long way. There were obvious initial setbacks one of which was the on-going orthography controversy at the time written Igbo literature emerged; and the general apathy shown towards Igbo language, all of which stifled the growth of Igbo literature.

However, through the tremendous efforts of scholars, who showed interest, and continued with Igbo literary studies, irrespective of the challenges they faced, some successes were recorded. Here, we are looking at the situation

in written Igbo poetry – one of the genres of written Igbo literature.

Ugonna (1982) in the bid to answer the question of whether there is Igbo poetry started by addressing the confusion between the 'written text' and "literature", and the erroneous thinking of some scholars that what is not written is non-existent, hence the assumption by early Igbo scholars that there was no Igbo literature. Defining a poem as "a verbal construction" whether written or spoken", he noted that what is "important is that a text of such construct should be fixed either in a written form or in the consciousness of a speech community", and that 'the oral form is not to be dismissed as non-literature'. With this explanation, Ugonna was making a case for Igbo oral literature as an authentic literature. He went further to highlight the early efforts that were made to collect, compile and publish Igbo oral poetry. He mentioned three published works, which contain collections of Igbo oral poetry.

With the publication, in 1975, of *Akpa Uche*, an anthology of modern Igbo verse edited by R.M. Ekechukwu, written Igbo poetry too was born. And as Ugonna (1982: 22-23) noted,

"the poems deal with subjects that span human experience and are expressed in the most satisfying Igbo poetic diction". He listed some of the poetic works that had been published as at the time he was writing his article in 1982. They include R.M. Ekechukwu's (e.d) *Akpa Uche* (1975), Obike's *Eke Une* (n.d.), Maduekwe's *Nka Okwu* (1979), Onwuchekwa's *Akpaala Okwu* (1979), Obienyem's *Mbem Igbo* (n.d.) and Oguguo's *Obiageli* (n.d.). These six poetic works appear to be the only ones published, as at the time but according to Ugonna, there were "many other works" that were "either in press or in mimeographed form." Obike's *Eke Une*, Oguguo's *Obiageli* and Obienyem's *Mbem Igbo* bear no publication dates but Nwadike (2002) gives the publication date of *Mbem Igbo* as 1979 while Nnabuihe (2005) gives that of *Eke Une* as 1977 based on an oral interview he had with the author. Be it as it may, what is to be noted is that between 1975 and 1982, only a few works of written Igbo poetry had been published notwithstanding Ugonna's appraisal, as at 1982, that "Igbo poetry has grown not only in quantity but also in quality."

As for the study of Igbo poetry, it started with the oral form. As Ugonna (1982: 21) again highlighted, serious study of Igbo oral poetry started after the Nigerian civil war with the establishment of the Department of Igbo Language and Culture in Alvan Ikoku College of Education and the teaching of Igbo in the Departments of African Languages and Literatures of the University of Lagos and of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages of the University of Ibadan.

The study was, however, not restricted to the study of transcribed oral texts as the written texts also developed with the publication of *Akpa Uche*. Apart from including the written form in the literature curriculum and teaching it, some analyses of written Igbo poems have equally been done and published by scholars as articles in Journals (see Emenanjo, 1986, etc).

3.0 Factors that Have Contributed to the Growth of Written Igbo Poetry

3.1 Author- Financed Publishing

For economic reason, perhaps, most reputable publishing companies no longer show

interest in publishing creative works in Nigerian languages, including Igbo. As rightly pointed out by Abdulahi (2000:428), "the profit maximization orientation of most of the publishing companies in Nigeria created a situation whereby writers in indigenous languages are relegated to the background as the publishing houses prefer publishing books in English language". This attitude inadvertently has had both some positive and negative implications for the growth of written Igbo poetry, because the inability of the mega publishers to publish newly emerging authors, has over the years encouraged the proliferation and mushrooming of publishing houses (including ones that exist only in names) which if assured of author – sponsorship, readily accept to publish those materials turned down by the 'big names' in the publishing industry. Some written Igbo poetry texts benefited from this. Some of the new publishers, no doubt, may be more concerned with 'business' – the money they make -- rather than with the quality or standard of what they are producing. And when such publishing is author – financed, the lowest quotation is often considered and the end products are materials that cannot endure or survive for a long time in the hands of the readers.

When Ugonna talked about 'quality' in his assessment of the growth of Igbo poetry, he might have meant either the quality of the poems spoken or written in Igbo language or of the production of the anthologies by publishers. The issue of the quality of the poems in terms of the creativity of the poet is better reserved for individual critical judgment. If he talked in terms of the quality of production of the texts, i.e. books, it might be true of the works produced in those days, and not of some of the ones published in the recent years. A number of the recently published texts are produced with poor and cheap materials. A copy of *Akpa Uche* (not a pirated copy) published by Oxford University Press thirty years ago is still stronger and more durable than a sample copy of some of the texts published a couple of years ago.

Most of the publishers of Igbo poetical works between 1986 and 2005 are mainly newcomers. Old names like Longman, Macmillan, Evans, UPPLC, Heinemann, etc.,

"the poems deal with subjects that span human experience and are expressed in the most satisfying Igbo poetic diction". He listed some of the poetic works that had been published as at the time he was writing his article in 1982. They include R.M. Ekechukwu's (e.d) *Akpa Uche* (1975), Obike's *Eke Une* (n.d.), Maduekwe's *Nka Okwu* (1979), Onwuchekwa's *Akpaala Okwu* (1979), Obienyem's *Mbem Igbo* (n.d.) and Oguguo's *Obiageli* (n.d.). These six poetic works appear to be the only ones published, as at the time but according to Ugonna, there were "many other works" that were "either in press or in mimeographed form." Obike's *Eke Une*, Oguguo's *Obiageli* and Obienyem's *Mbem Igbo* bear no publication dates but Nwadike (2002) gives the publication date of *Mbem Igbo* as 1979 while Nnabuihe (2005) gives that of *Eke Une* as 1977 based on an oral interview he had with the author. Be it as it may, what is to be noted is that between 1975 and 1982, only a few works of written Igbo poetry had been published notwithstanding Ugonna's appraisal, as at 1982, that "Igbo poetry has grown not only in quantity but also in quality."

As for the study of Igbo poetry, it started with the oral form. As Ugonna (1982: 21) again highlighted, serious study of Igbo oral poetry started after the Nigerian civil war with the establishment of the Department of Igbo Language and Culture in Alvan Ikoku College of Education and the teaching of Igbo in the Departments of African Languages and Literatures of the University of Lagos and of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages of the University of Ibadan.

The study was, however, not restricted to the study of transcribed oral texts as the written texts also developed with the publication of *Akpa Uche*. Apart from including the written form in the literature curriculum and teaching it, some analyses of written Igbo poems have equally been done and published by scholars as articles in Journals (see Emenanjo, 1986, etc).

3.0 Factors that Have Contributed to the Growth of Written Igbo Poetry

3.1 Author- Financed Publishing

For economic reason, perhaps, most reputable publishing companies no longer show

interest in publishing creative works in Nigerian languages, including Igbo. As rightly pointed out by Abdulahi (2000:428), "the profit maximization orientation of most of the publishing companies in Nigeria created a situation whereby writers in indigenous languages are relegated to the background as the publishing houses prefer publishing books in English language". This attitude inadvertently has had both some positive and negative implications for the growth of written Igbo poetry, because the inability of the mega publishers to publish newly emerging authors, has over the years encouraged the proliferation and mushrooming of publishing houses (including ones that exist only in names) which if assured of author – sponsorship, readily accept to publish those materials turned down by the 'big names' in the publishing industry. Some written Igbo poetry texts benefited from this. Some of the new publishers, no doubt, may be more concerned with 'business' – the money they make -- rather than with the quality or standard of what they are producing. And when such publishing is author – financed, the lowest quotation is often considered and the end products are materials that cannot endure or survive for a long time in the hands of the readers.

When Ugonna talked about 'quality' in his assessment of the growth of Igbo poetry, he might have meant either the quality of the poems spoken or written in Igbo language or of the production of the anthologies by publishers. The issue of the quality of the poems in terms of the creativity of the poet is better reserved for individual critical judgment. If he talked in terms of the quality of production of the texts, i.e. books, it might be true of the works produced in those days, and not of some of the ones published in the recent years. A number of the recently published texts are produced with poor and cheap materials. A copy of *Akpa Uche* (not a pirated copy) published by Oxford University Press thirty years ago is still stronger and more durable than a sample copy of some of the texts published a couple of years ago.

Most of the publishers of Igbo poetical works between 1986 and 2005 are mainly newcomers. Old names like Longman, Macmillan, Evans, UPPLC, Heinemann, etc.,

seldom come into the picture of publishers of quite a number of Igbo literary works now available in the market.

3.2 Renewed Interest in Writing in Igbo by the Lovers of the Language

Apart from author-financed publishing, another contributory factor to the growth of written Igbo poetry is the renewed interest of writing in Igbo language. The perennial apathy shown to Igbo language as a subject has not discouraged lovers of the language from writing in it. Both the people engaged in the study of Igbo (as teachers or students) and people in other areas of human endeavour have continued to show interest in creative literature in Igbo. As at today, Igbo has become a recognized subject in all the levels of the institutions of learning. On the one hand the need to provide study texts has stimulated many a writer to write in Igbo in the hope that such works will be read in the schools. On the other hand, the possibility that some other people write for economic reason cannot be ruled out. For whichever reason, the end result is that there is an increase in the corpus of Igbo texts.

3.3 No More Orthography Controversy

The issue of orthography is no longer controversial. Since the adoption of *Qnwu* orthography, writers are no longer afraid of the acceptability of their works as they write in the official orthography and in the standard variety of Igbo language.

4.0 Present State of Written Igbo Poetry

The poor quality of some of the published texts notwithstanding, our assessment of the situation in written Igbo poetry is that there has been a progressive and steady growth in terms of extant works from 1982 to date. Nwadike (2002, 2005) and Nnabuihe (2005) catalogue the number of literary works that have been published in the three genres of written Igbo literature between 1933 and 2005. Nwadike, however, remarks that his list has not possibly included all existing literary works, as there is no archive where such works have been documented. He says that it behoves those who have the eagerness, to discover and compile the works not yet included in the list.

From Nwadike's and Nnabuihe's records, the state of the growth trend of written Igbo poetry can be stated as follows:

1975 – 2005: about 43 works of Igbo poetry. If broken down by decades, we have:

1975 – 1985: 14 works

1986 – 1995: 11 works

1996 – 2005: 18 works

However, the growth of written Igbo poetry cannot be measured only in terms of existing texts. It is equally important to consider how its study has fared. It is true that the study of written Igbo poetry alongside other genres of written Igbo literature has been going on in various tertiary institutions - Colleges of Education and universities - in Nigeria and not just in the few institutions mentioned by Ugonna (1982), but over the years, the people's attitude to our indigenous languages has not been very encouraging, especially in terms of their study. This issue has been overemphasized considering the barrage of reactions it has always generated at conferences like this one.

If *Ndijigbo* show one quarter of interest shown to English language to Igbo language, there will be a great deal of improvement in its present level of appreciation. This perennial lack of interest in the study of Igbo - its language, literature and culture - has continued to impede its sustainable growth as many do not see it as a viable course of study. The number of students engaged in the study of Igbo in our various institutions today remains low vis-à-vis what obtains in other disciplines.

Of the three genres of written Igbo literature, poetry is the most unpopular; not in the sense that it is not taught but because of students' general antipathy towards the subject unlike the novel and drama. Generally, poetry is construed as a difficult subject. Olanrewaju's (2000) rating of student's attitude to literature in Nigerian languages confirms our observation. According to him,

In spite of the importance of literary studies ... it is indeed unfortunate that most Nigerian students do not appreciate its values and gains especially when it is Nigerian languages. It is evident that a negligible number of students do enroll for literary studies in Nigerian languages

in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE). The complaint of most students has been that literature in any Nigerian Language is difficult, most especially the aspect of poetry (p.194).

At the tertiary level students' dislike for poetry is usually manifested in their attitude of shunning poetry in their consideration and selection of final year project topics.

As a case study, let us look at what obtains at the Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies, University of Lagos. Here, students do not show much interest in writing their B.A. Projects and M.A. Dissertations on topics in written Igbo poetry as they do in other genres of written literature, and culture. To date only a few B.A. Projects on written Igbo poetry have been carried out in the Department. They include:

1. Azubuike, O. (1990) "Ntule Akọ Bu Ndu A.B. Chukuezi";
2. Nnabuihe, C.B. (1990) "Omenala N'abụ Eke Une";
3. Achusim, M.A. (1995) "Nnyocha Echiche";
4. Matthew, R.C. (1996) "Nnyocha Ndina Na Qdidi Omenka";
5. Uzoka, N.B. (1999) "Ntule Isiokwu Digasi n'Utara Nti";
6. Anyaeche, C.B. (2000) "Ntulerikota Akanka Echiche Uba-Mgbemena na Akọ Bu Ndu Anaelechi Chukuezi";
7. Amadi kwa, C.G.E. (2004) "Nnyocha Akanka Ndi Odee Mazị J.C. Maduekwe na Nka Okwu, na Oruro Lee Oguguo n'Obiageli";
8. Madu, V.N. (2006) "Ntule Mbem Igbo Nke Chukwuemeka Obienyem; and
9. Izuorah, A. U's (1999) "Usoro Nkuzi na Nsoḡbu Di n'lkuzi Abụ na Sinio Sekondri n'Igbado Ukwu na Mbem Akwamozu nke Sam Uzochukwu na Utara Nti nke Mazi Nwanoluo Emenanjo", submitted in the Department of Curriculum Studies, University of Lagos.

An M.A. Project topic, "A Thematic Study of L.C. Okoro's Poems", which has just been approved for a current M.A. student, will, when completed, be the first to be carried out on written Igbo poetry at the postgraduate level. There is not yet any Ph.D research here (and there does not appear to be any in other Nigerian universities) that has explored exclusively written Igbo poetry, as it is the case

with Yoruba written Poetry. Doctoral research has so far devoted attention only to oral Igbo poetry. See for instance, Azuonye's "The Narrative War Songs of the Ohafia Igbo: A Critical Analysis of their Characteristic Features in Relation to their Social Functions"; Uzochukwu's (1981) "The Elegiac Poetry of Igbo: A Study of the Major Types; Nwachukwu-Agbada's (1990) "The Igbo Proverb: Communication and Creativity in Traditional Art"; Ezikeojiaku's (1996) "A Study of the Major Types of Ritual Poetry of the Igbo; etc. Of these four doctoral researches on oral Igbo Poetry, only two were carried out at the University of Lagos. I believe that the situation at the University of Lagos is true of other Departments in our various institutions where Igbo language and literature are studied.

5.0 Prospect for Future Growth of Written Igbo Poetry

Though we have not yet attained the height we aspire to, the study of Igbo literature is on course. From the data we have, the 20th century witnessed the production of about 29 poetical works, which can be said to be a fairly steady growth considering that it is a *late developer*. Between 2000 and 2005, five years into the 21st century, about 14 poetical works have already emerged. This figure shows that the pace of the growth of written Igbo poetry in the new century is accelerating. The critical question is how we can sustain this level of growth that has so far been recorded, and strive to achieve greater height in the remaining part of the 21st century.

To ensure a sustainable growth of written Igbo poetry in the 21st century, the following steps are suggested:

- There is need to evolve a simpler modern methods and techniques of teaching the subject;
- There should be a change of attitude towards Igbo language and its literature. They should be seen as worthy of study.
- Literature teachers should stimulate creativity in the students by encouraging them to write poems as part of their continuous assessment in the subject,
- Teachers are also to encourage students to form Poetry Club where they can come

together and recite poems written by them. This can make them develop interest in the subject;

- Igbo literary studies should be made compulsory and the teaching of Igbo poetry should start from the Nursery School so that interest in poetry can be developed in time;

- The role of publishers cannot be ignored in the development and growth of written Igbo literature. They should accept and publish good creative works as a way of encouraging writers especially in Nigerian languages. In the past, some publishers organized competition among Nigerian authors to write in Nigerian languages. It was that kind of competition that produced the first Igbo novel and a dramatic work in 1933 and 1974 respectively. That spirit can be revived;

- Nigerians themselves should, by reading works written in the indigenous languages, encourage the publishing companies to publish such works.

- Government, on its part, as a way of encouraging the development of indigenous languages and their literatures, should sponsor publishers to publish good literary works written in Nigerian languages;

- Students of Igbo Language and Literature should show more interest in selecting topics on written Igbo poetry for their NCE and B.A. Long Essays or Projects, M.A. Dissertations and Ph.D. Thesis.

6.0 Conclusion

If the rate at which poetical works are being produced since the beginning of this century is sustained, the written Igbo poetry has great prospect for a boom in its growth in this 21st century.

Therefore, let us brace up, be more determined and declare, like Madubuike, in his poem, "Abụ" ("Poem"):

Èdebèghì m ya
Abụ ahụ gā-eme kà ụwà tugharịa
Nke gā-eme kà àhụ maa onye ezè jìjìjì
Abụ gā-ekposàsị Elu nà Àlà
Mèe kà ha dàgharịa
Nke gā-eme kà Elu Igwe nà Elu Àlà
Mekọọ kà di nà nwunyè

Èdebèghì m ya

Èdebèghì m abụ gā-eme kà onye iwe
chègharịa bụrụ mmādu
N'ihì nà abụ ānyị bụ ndèrè
Ọ nà-eme kà obi okwute dī bèlebèle
Ọ nà-emekwa kà obi ndị ezè dī rọghorọgho
Ọ nà-emekwa kà anụrị juputa ụmụaka obi
mekwaa kà ndị okènyè nà ndị kara nka
Nwe ndụ ọhụrụ site n'ike ụdà ya
Abụ ānyị bụ abụ nā-atugharị obi ndị oke
iwe
Abụ nā-ewepụ ike ndị amụsu
Abụ nā-eme kà ndị ezigbo mmādu nā-eme
ihe ọma nā-aga n'ihu.

Èdebèghì m abụ ahụ
Abụ ahụ gā-edogharị ụwà
A GÀ-ÈDE YĀ
A GÀ-ÈDE YĀ
A GÀ-ÈDE YĀ
N'ihì ntugharị gā-àdìriri

(I have not written it
The poem that will transform the world
And make the king tremble
The poem that will disorganize Heaven and
Earth
Restructure them
And make Heaven and Earth
Interact as husband and wife

I have not written it
I have not written the poem that will douse
an angry man and make him normal
For our poem is mellifluous
It softens a strong heart
It also makes the kings' heart soggy !
It gladdens the children and the adult, and
gives the aged
A new lease of life through its soothing
effect
Our poem mellows the hot-tempered
A poem that renders witches impotent
A poem that makes good people persist in
doing good

I have not written the poem
The poem that will reorganize the world
It will be written
It will be written
It will be written
Because there must be a change)

References

- Abdulahi, I.I. (2000) "Nigerian Languages and the Publishing Industry" in Arohunmolase, O. (ed.) *Nigerian Languages in the Third Millennium*, Akure: JBS Printing and Publishing Co.
- Nnabuihe, C.B. (2005) *Agumagu Ederede Igbo: 1933 – 2003*, Green Olive.
- Nwadike, I.U. (2002) "Agumagu Igbo: Iduuazi, Akuko Nkenke, Ejije na Abu, 1933 – 2001" A paper presented at the Conference on Igbo Studies in the 21st Century, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 12 – 13 June 2002.
- Nwadike, I.U. (2005) "Amumamu Igbo Kamgbe 1990 (Igbo Studies Since the 1990s)", A paper presented at the Congress of the Igbo Studies Association on Igbo Studies Since the 1990s, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 21-24 September 2005.
- Olanrewaju, M.S. (2000) "Students' Rating of Literatures in Nigerian Languages in Five Secondary Schools in Lagos State: Implications for the 21st Century" in Arohunmalase, O. (ed.), *Nigerian Languages in the Third Millennium*, Akure: JBS Printing and Publishing Co.
- Ugonna, N. (1982) "The Growth of Igbo Poetry: in Ugonna, N. (ed.) *Igbo: Journal of SPILC*, No.1, Lagos: Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Lagos.