Literature, Language and National Consciousness:

A Festschrift in Honour of Theo Vincent

Edited by:
T. Akachi Ezeigbo and
K. King Aribisala

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CONTENTS

Page

Acknowledgements xi
Prefatory Remarks xiii
Introduction xvi

SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND AND THEORY

"And What's Your Level?": Theo Vincent and the Making of Modern African Literature Scholarship 1
Osita Ezeliora, School of Literature and Language Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Nativism and the Anachronistic Project: A Reading of the *Bolekaja* Agenda 25
Yomi Olusegun-Joseph, Department of English, Lagos State University, Ojo

Managing Ethnicity Towards Nation-Building in Nigeria: The Zebra Approach 43
Jason Osai, Institute of Foundation Studies, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt

Opon Ifa's Rebirth: Chaos and Creativity in Our Literary Compound 59
Femi Osofisan, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Language, Culture and National Development 81
Felicia Durojaiye Oyekanmi, Department of Sociology, University of Lagos, Akoka

SECTION TWO: GENDER ISSUES

Striving to Be Heard: Women and Publishing in Nigeria Today 107
Akachi Ezeigbo, Department of English, University of Lagos, Akoka

THE MYTH OF A "BLACK GOD" IN CHUKUEZI'S POETRY

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INTRODUCTION

Anaelechi Chukuezi is one writer who, in spite of his primary professional engagement as a medical doctor, has shown a tremendous interest in the growth and survival of Igbo literature. He is a playwright and poet who has, through a number of his literary works, portrayed the value, meaningfulness and purpose of Igbo culture. In two of his plays, he gives prominence to Igbo deities, demonstrating their potency through their awe-inspiring and destructive acts. The plays are a dramatization of the Igboman's belief in invisible powers that control or challenge human actions.[1]

Chukuezi's allegiance to Igbo culture, his advocacy for its preservation and his belief in the dignity and potentiality of the black race do not find expression only in his dramatic works but also in his poetic creativity. His literary expression depicts him as an un-compromising Africanist who believes that the African heritage should be guarded rather than deformed or distorted by the influence of an alien culture.

In this paper, we intend to examine one of Chukuezi's poems in which he revalues the blacks, berates them and invents a myth of a "black God" to assert the African personality which Africans themselves do not seem to realize. But before we look at the myth of the 'black God', let us briefly consider the concept of God.

THE CONCEPT OF GOD

The question of God has in one form or another always been a central one in both Western and Eastern philosophies. On what God or his nature is, the question has been asked as to whether he is "the anthropomorphic deity of religion, as, for instance, depicted in the Old Testament of the Bible or, on the contrary, "the eternal, immutable, impassible, self-subsisting, self-sufficient, perfect being", seen as "the

greatest" in classical philosophy (Omoregbe, 1).

Different people have different ideas of God. St. Augustine, for instance, sees man's innate restlessness as a manifestation of his search for God whereas to Sartre, God does not and cannot exist because the very idea of God is contradictory – "man is seeking the impossible, yet this is man's basic passion in which his whole being is involved" (Omoregbe, 2). Different cultures, religions and philosophies also have different conceptions of God. Each culture conceives God according to its view of reality. This is why, according to Omoregbe (3),

> a man of one culture can ... understandably find it impossible to accept the conception of God by another culture. Not belonging to that culture, he does not and cannot see or interpret reality within the framework of that culture. This explains why a growing number of Western men and women today find it impossible to accept the Judeo-Christian conception of God, which originated from Jewish and Hellenistic cultures, reflecting, as it does, the worldviews and life-experiences of the peoples of these cultures.

The God of religion is glaringly anthropomorphic in nature, having been endowed with all human attributes. He has eyes and can see; he has ears and can hear; he has a mouth and can speak; he is subject to emotions like human beings. In other words, he can be angry, jealous, merciful and compassionate; he can love, hate, etc. The Yahweh of the Jews, for instance, is conceived as "a very emotional deity, subject to anger, jealousy, love, hate, sympathy, etc." Above all, he is portrayed as a tribal God, having once introduced himself to Moses in the wilderness as "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus, 3: 6, 15).

In the Christian concept of God, the anthropomorphic attributes, typical of God of religion are still retained. He is a father, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ and a loving father who, because of his love for the world, gave his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to die for the redemption of humankind (John 3:16).

In Africa, as Parrinder (quoted in Ikwubuzo, 103) rightly observes, "nearly all, if not all, African peoples believe in a Supreme

Being, the creator of all things." Most African myths narrate that at the beginning, God lived among men and interacted with them. Men could present their demands to God and he would answer them, giving them instructions. He later withdrew from the earth when man's actions upset him. This implies, according to their myths, that Africans also conceive God as an anthropomorphic deity. It is, however, now believed that man cannot directly communicate with God except through some intermediaries – minor gods or deities.

ChukuezI'S MYTH OF A "BLACK GOD": AN ASSERTION OF AFRICAN PERSONALITY

As pointed out above, the Judeo-Christian conception often refers to God as God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob which, by implication, portrays Him as a "white people's God" or "White God" since these people are not blacks.

The allusion to the blood of Jesus and of Jacob in the poem under review is an indicator that the poet is indeed referring to the God of Jewish and Christian religions.

Perhaps, conscious of this Jewish anthropomorphic conception of a God who is seemingly tribal, Chukuezi in his poem, 'Chukwu Ndi Isi Ojii' ('A Black People's God') (Emenanjo, 26-28), creates a parallel God – a God of the black people – endowing him with those attributes with which blacks are identified. One of such attributes is that this God himself is dark in complexion:

> O di ike na-eji nji puru iche.
> (He is powerful and extraordinarily dark).

This God is capable of doing all the things that the Jewish God does. Like the Jewish and Christian God, he accepts blood sacrifice, be it that of Isaac or of Jesus or of the lamb in addition to his special sacrificial food of "Ewu...ga-agba abuba, gbaa ihu.../Nwasisi...ma o bu oke okpa/Ga - achapu ka igwe ocha/Na....naani ...oji ugo. (A befitting fat goat /A chick...or cock/ That is as bright as white sky/ and ...solely, ugo kola nut).

But he is the most powerful and eternal:

> Chukwu ndu isi ojii kachasiri ike

Chi anyi anaghi ánwu anwu
(The God of the black people is the most powerful
Our God is eternal)

Chukuezi takes the time to describe other features of this black God, extolling his virtues, but drawing attention to his unsparing tendency when provoked:

Chineke anyi di ebube
...
Na- egosi anyi obioma na -asoghi ngongo
Na-egbu oha na eze
Mgbe iwe dabara ya obi
...
Eziokwu bu ebe obibi ya
Mmegbu di ya ka isi na-awa ogbenye
O nwe onye o ruru aka
Mara na o burula ya onwu
....
I kpasuo ya iwe, o chowa obara gi
(Our God is wonderful)
...
(He) shows us unflagging kindness
And smites the people
When he is infuriated
...
(Truth is his abode
Oppression to him is felt like a headache suffered by a poor man.

Anyone he accuses,
Know you that for such a one death it portends
...
If you provoke him, he longs for your blood).

And yet he is like all other "Gods."

Chukuezi conceives of a God that is relevant to his own African culture and his portrayal of the uniqueness of this God lends credence

to what Omoregbe's (3) claims:

> Culture is epistemologically determinant, for it is the framework within which a people live their lives and interpret their life experiences... In other words, a people's culturally conditioned view of reality determines its conception of God.

With the Christianization of Africa during the loss of independence, blacks in their new religious sensibility jettisoned their traditional religion seeing it as "a pagan practice", and regarding their gods as inert. This, obviously, is the attitude Chukuezi sets out to address and satirize with the new religious myth he has created. He creates a parallel powerful God with African attributes in order to counter the black people's adherence to the Judeo-Christian notion of God, which they have embraced. He uses the myth to achieve his artistic need – to counteract a foreign religious myth that encourages the alienation of the black people from their culture. He wants to raise Africa's consciousness to the fact that they have a God who is not inept but capable of liberating them from the oppressive forces of colonial society. He wants to revolutionize the negative attitude of black people by restoring their confidence in their indigenous religious culture, and their faith in their God and his power. As stated in the following lines of the poem, the "black God" is supreme, good and worthy of veneration:

Chi anyi bu ezigbo Chukwu
Kwesiri nsopuru na ofufe
...
Chi anyi di ebere kachasi Chi niile
(Ours is a good God
Who deserves reverence and worship.
Our merciful God is supreme over all other Gods)

Chukuezi may have perceived the Judeo-Christian conception of God as alien to African religious life. Thus, with the myth of a parallel "black God", Chukuezi seeks not only to restore the confidence of the black man in his African religion, but also in himself and his ability, thereby reminding him that his freedom and salvation lie in his own

hands.

By this literary effort, Chukuezi identifies with the propositions of negritude philosophy. Negritude is a philosophy devised to raise the stature of people of African descent in international affairs and to remove all the disadvantages, which previously went with the black skin (Taiwo 46). Leopold Senghor gave force and direction to the movement. Other proponents of the movement are Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas.

Presence Africaine, which is a periodical established in 1947 to achieve the aims of the Negritude movement was, according to Taiwo (45), devoted to the "propagation of Negro-African culture and defence of this culture against anything and any group that tends to humiliate it or detract it from its importance". It also undertook "the task of impressing on the world the importance of Negro culture and of erecting a permanent bridge of cultural understanding between the black race and other races." Negritude promotes Negro culture and civilization, that is, black heritage. It emphasizes the Negro contribution to human civilization, especially in the areas of music, dance and arts. In keeping with their tradition, the Negritude philosophers extol African religion. Indeed, everything African is extolled.

The greatest achievement of Negritude is that "it has made people of African descent all over the world to accept the fact that they have a right to be different from other races" (Taiwo 46). Writers who have drawn inspiration from this philosophy belong to two schools of thought. The first, who are of French-speaking African orientation, believe that any literary work that is worthy of the attention of Africans should be irrevocably committed to the cause of African liberation, both political and cultural. They maintain that the contribution a work of art makes towards the restoration of the dignity of the African is of great importance. The second school of thought formed by English-speaking African writers "claims that the African writer should be influenced mostly by the uniqueness of his own experience, his desire to be integrated with his environment and propagate his own culture rather than by any philosophy originating elsewhere" (Taiwo 45).

Chukuezi's writing is representative of what both schools demand from a work of art. He has demonstrated that a work of art can be used to raise our consciousness to the concept of African

personality and uniqueness of African cultural heritage in the modern era. It is also true to say that his literary work is committed to the cause of African political and cultural liberation, as can be deciphered from the content of his poem under consideration. Chukuezi, therefore, can be said to have reconciled the two schools of thought by satisfying their respective demands in his poem.

The Negritude movement in the literary field is said to have been fairly successful. Literature and other forms of its (Negritude) propagation have, according to Taiwo (46), "aroused the consciousness of the Negroes and alerted them to their present need and opportunities, and to the fact that they have responsibilities to their own race". The Negritude view of African heritage and consciousness falls within the framework of the philosophy of Pan-Africanism.

Chukuezi's artistic intention is not only to revive the consciousness of black people to place value on what is theirs but also to address socio-political problems of contemporary African society: the social ills that pervade the society and the problem of oppression inflicted by colonization. The poet frowns at the attitudes of the blacks and indicts them for being the architect of their problems and the cause of their undoing, but exonerates the "black God" of any charge of inactivity. Some people, the poet observes, accuse the "black God" of impotence because he allowed Namibia, Zimbabwe and Azania[2] to wallow in the bondage of colonialism. Others think that he has slumbered because he spares evildoers. And yet others think that he is simply a castrated he-goat because his mercies endure a great deal. As the poet puts it,

Ufodu si na o naghi akpa ike
Maka o hapuru Namibia, Zimbabwe na na Azania
N'aka ndi ocha
Ufodu chere na ura eburula ya
Maka o naghi emenyu ndi ojoo anya
Ufodu si na o bu okiri a piri api
N'ihi na ebere ya gabigara oke. (Emenanjo 28)

(Some say he is powerless
Because he left Namibia, Zimbabwe and Azania

In the hands of the whites
Some think he has slumbered
Because he punishes evil-doers not
Some say he is a castrated he-goat
Because of his abundant mercy)

In the poet's opinion, as conveyed in the lines of the poem below, the problem the blacks are facing is not their God's making. It is rather as a result of the fact that the vices perpetrated by them are on the increase. They are retrogressive and lack progressive zeal. Their God is not the author of their wickedness or their dishonesty. Blacks choose these courses of action and turn round to accuse God of inertia and insensitivity. The poet's satirical outburst is articulated in the following lines:

Njo ndi ojii na–eme akariala
Ila azu buuru ha ihe anuri
Nta oganiiru anaghi emetu ha n'obi
Obi ojoo anyi bu ndi ojii esighi n'oke Chi anyi
uba taa na echi
ipunari mmadu ihe ya abughi oke Chukwu anyi
Kenyeere anyi
O bu ekike ndi ojii kenyeere onwe ha
Wee tugharia si na Chi ha adighi ike
Na Chi ha gbakwutara ha azu
Chi anyi di ebere kachasi Chi niile (Emenanjo, 28)

(The evils perpetrated by the blacks abound
Retrogression for them is a thing of joy
With complacency they consider progressive efforts
Our (the blacks') cruelty derives not from our God.
The get-rich-quick syndrome,
Forceful dispossession of someone's belongings
Are not a trait bestowed on us by our God
It is a trait developed by the blacks themselves
Who then turned round to accuse their God of impotence;

And that their God has forsaken them
Our merciful God is supreme over all other Gods).

The literary effect of Chukuezi's poem is that it heightens thought about the bondage a people can bring upon themselves due to their wickedness and perpetration of vices. Sober reflection on this can lead to change of attitude. With the presentation of the image of a powerful "Black God" who can both save and kill, emotions of joy and fear are engendered. There is joy because of the sense of security one now has that he has a powerful God who can save, and fear, because of the unsparing tendency of the God when provoked.

On his attitude as regards the use of this myth, Chukuezi could be classified with the fourth group of writers identified by Okpewho as the "young generation of writers". These writers are guided by a certain revolutionary conscience following their dissatisfaction with the old mythology which they consider inadequate in solving the problems of the contemporary society. They create new mythology with a view to introducing a new socio-political order. Chukuezi creates something new based on the old myth. The old myth in this instance is the Judeo-Christian conception of God that makes God appear like the white people's God, even though He is believed to be universal. However, Chukuezi himself ends up creating another racial God – a black people's God who is exceptionally dark in complexion. In identifying with negritude's literary trend, Chukuezi asserts the authenticity of blackness.

CONCLUSION

Chukuezi's literary work, which we have examined in this paper, is one of commitment in that it applies the negritudist ideology to African social and racial problems. From the perspective of its theme, the poem could be said to be Chukuezi's literary contribution to the general efforts being made on different fronts towards redeeming the image of Africa.

The poet is very blunt in pointing out the evils that bedevil African society, and in the fashion of a preacher, he vehemently condemns the negative attitudes of Africans, holding them culpable for their many misdeeds. There is no doubt that Chukuezi intends to encourage rectitude and social change. This change is essential in Africa today because if efforts are being made through music, sports, arts, etc, to project the

positive image and great potential of Africa, the perpetration of evils and crimes – economic sabotage, despotism, political assassinations, etc, will negate any effort made in the direction of portraying Africa's dignity. Africa needs to be proud of her identity culturally.

Notes

1. In my paper titled "The Image of the Gods in Chukuezi's" *Aku Fechaa* and *Akwa Nwa*, published in *Trends in the Study of Languages and Linguistics in Nigeria: A Festschrift for Philip Akujuobi Nwachukwu*, 2005, 303-314.
2. Namibia, Zimbabwe and Azania mentioned in the poem had not become independent countries at the time the poem was written. But they have since become independent. Azania was the name given by radical anti-apartheid groups to South Africa.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The book discuses various aspects of Igbo culture, Igbo origin, political systems, organization, traditional economy, religious beliefs and social practices such as divination, oath taking, sharing and breaking of Kola nuts, birth and naming ceremonies, circumcision, various aspects of marriage, deaths and burial systems. The book therefore offers insight into the culture and socio- political lives of the people before the arrival of Europeans. The book also attempts to unravel the enigma that is the Igbo man, and how understanding him will create better relationship with other Nigerian groups.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Faluyi Kehinde is an economic historian by training. However, he has diversified into other aspects of historical knowledge over many years of his academic career. The scholar has co- edited two books on Economic history, and another on General African studies. He has also contributed scholarly articles in reputable national and international journals.

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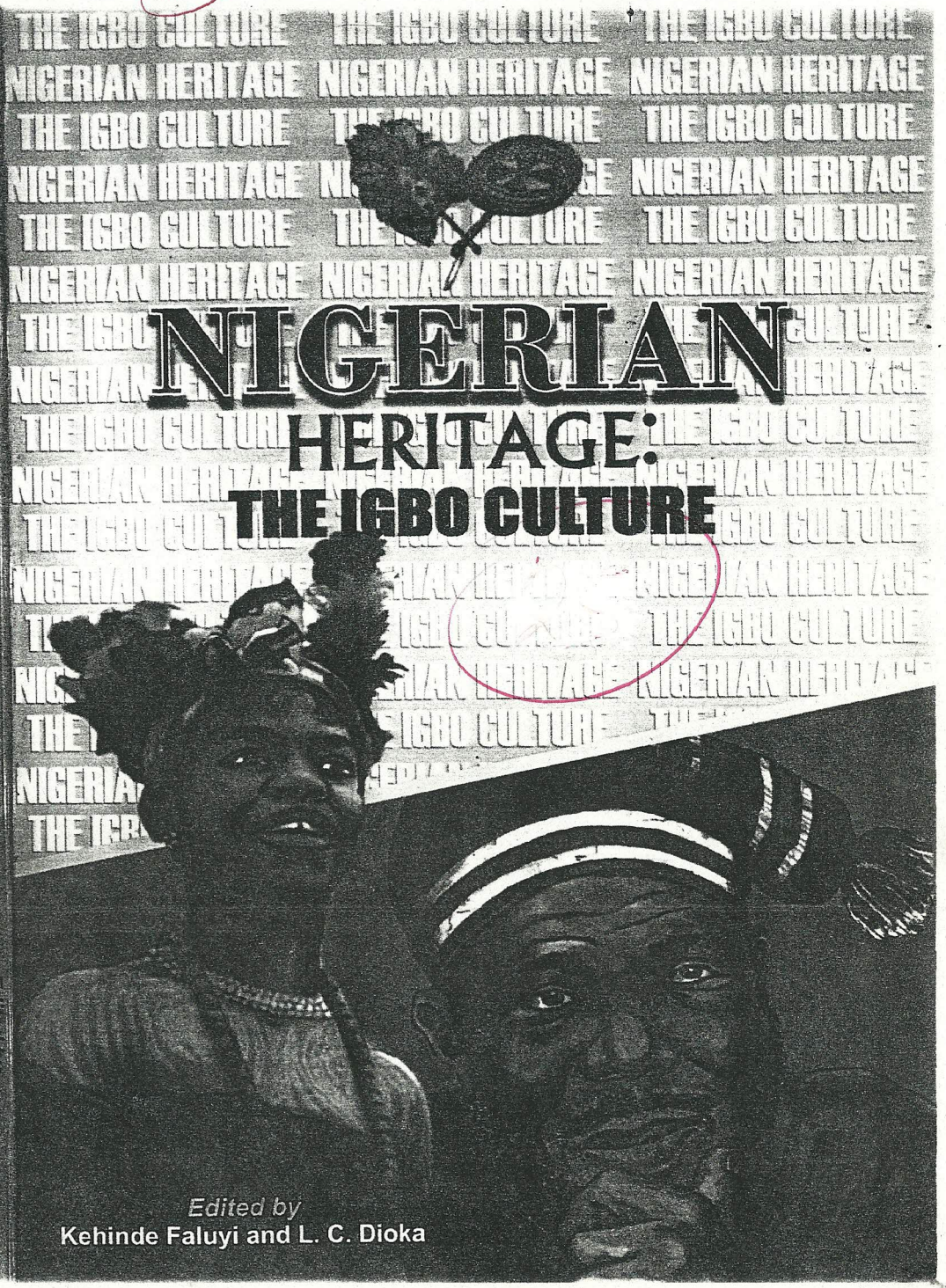
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