

THE LIFE OF A NIGERIAN POET

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Christopher Okigbo, 1930–67: Thirsting for Sunlight. By OBI NWAKANMA. Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2010. Pp xxvii + 276. \$95.00, hardback (ISBN 978-1-84701-013-1).

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As a prominent twentieth-century poet, Christopher Okigbo has attracted the attention of literary scholars, who have commented extensively on his life and poetry. However, none of these publications is as comprehensive as Obi Nwakanma's biography, which provides an insight into the poet's 'path of growth and the influences that conspired to shape his life and poetry' (p. ix). This eight-chapter book is based on extensive interviews the author conducted with individuals who knew and interacted with Okigbo at the various stages of his brief and action-packed life – surviving family members, teachers, educators, schoolmates, colleagues, and friends, as well as on a few published works about him and his poems. As an Igbo/Nigerian-born journalist and poet, Nwakanma brought to bear his literary skills and command of language by presenting succinctly a nuanced biographical narrative of Christopher Okigbo as a famous poet, a schoolteacher, a classic scholar, civil servant, businessman, librarian, insipient arms dealer, soldier, as well as a returned prodigal of Idoto goddess, a husband and a father. He also instructively captures Igbo cosmological worldview, and the Nigerian political economy in transition, which shaped Okigbo's life and influenced his poetry.

Chapters 1–3 present the foundation of Okigbo's poetry by examining his family background and educational pursuits. Born in 1930 to Igbo parents from Ojoto town in present-day Anambra state, Christopher was raised within two conflicting cultural milieus – Igbo and European. Under Igbo mythology, Christopher was the reincarnation of his grandfather, who was the priest of the Ajani shrine, the abode of the Idoto goddess, held as the mother of the Ojoto community. Okigbo identified with the worship of Idoto, both during his formative years and towards the later part of his life. At the same time, Okigbo grew up at the highpoints of British colonialism with its ambivalent consequences. As one of the sons of a pioneer Roman Catholic father and schoolteacher, Christopher was raised amid strict Catholic traditions (both at home and school) and within a society in rapid transformation. He was a product of the elite Government College, Umuahia, and the University College, Ibadan (later, the University of Ibadan), Nigeria. In addition to engaging in diverse sporting and other extracurricular activities at these two schools, Okigbo read widely on diverse topics. Nwakanma portrays Okigbo as brilliant, yet as someone whose academic records revealed an average ability, due to a lack of discipline for rigorous academic work, and a work ethic that caused him to retake his final degree examination.

Nwakanma presents Okigbo as a lover of dangerous adventures, who had difficulty setting his mind on a task at hand for a long time. Consequently, chapters 4–6 of this book discuss the various jobs Okigbo held, including failed business ventures he pursued at Lagos. Okigbo worked for the Nigerian Tobacco Company, Ibadan, as regional sales manager; trainee manager with the United African Company, Lagos; and as an administrative officer with the Federal Ministry of Information and Research, Lagos, between 1956 and 1958. He also operated a private company while he was still a civil servant, an occurrence, which, given his disdain for routine civil service work led to his dismissal from the Ministry. Okigbo's business venture also failed. According to Nwakanma, Okigbo came

closely to taking his own life when, most timely, a friend offered him a job as his vice principal and classics teacher at Fiditi Grammar School, near Ibadan. After a brief stint at Fiditi, Okigbo was employed as an assistant librarian and later, acting librarian, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, a field where he had no prior training and experience. It was at Fiditi and Nsukka that Okigbo began to take poetry seriously, as well as to reflect introspectively about his life and some of the forces that had shaped it. Though he remained nominally Roman Catholic and held ambivalent views about Christianity, Okigbo, according to Nwakanma, reflected Catholicism and Igbo ritual symbolism in his poems. Although his 'poetry is indebted to diverse sources and influence, embedded in his imaginative universe', Okigbo owed a lot to his friendship with Peter Thomas, the Welsh poet, who taught at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and who inspired and sharpened his poetry (pp. 135, 157). For instance, Okigbo's *Heavensgate* reflected ideas borrowed from Thomas's 'Haven's Gate'. Following the hire of a substantive librarian, Okigbo left Nsukka for Ibadan to accept a job as the West African Regional Manager for the Cambridge University Press in January 1962.

In chapter seven, Nwakanma examines the activities of Okigbo at Ibadan as well as the political developments in Nigeria from 1962 to 1966. He shows how Okigbo's poetry blossomed during this period at Ibadan, due to a diversity of reasons that included the intellectual, cultural, and political environment of the city. Okigbo was influenced by the German-born scholar Ulli Beier and the Mbari Artists and Writers Club he founded at Ibadan in 1962 with its publishing unit; and by the works of a cream of African scholars, such as the Senegalese Leopold Senghor and Nigerians Duro Ladipo, John Pepper Clark, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Obumelu, and others. Two famous magazines in Africa, the *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* gave visibility to Okigbo's poetic skills by publishing many of his poems including *Four Canzones*, *Limits*, *Heavensgate*, *Laments of the Drums*, *Lament of the Silent Sisters* among others. Nwakanma also suggests that the assassination of Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, and the political turmoil in Nigeria, including the military coup and counter coup of 1966, and the politically and ethnically motivated killings of the period had tremendous impact on Okigbo's poetry. Okigbo's association with some of the key plotters of the January 1966 coup, especially Emmanuel Ifeajuna, made him a target of those who executed the July counter coup. His works—*Silences*, *Distances*, and *Path of Thunder*—the author argues, encapsulate the dreadful and uncertain political climate of mid-1960s Nigeria. The unfolding political crises with their ominous consequences captured in these poems earn Okigbo a reputation as a prophetic and disillusioned poet.

Chapter eight recounts the horrific ethnic pogrom against Igbo residents in the Northern Region, the beginning of the Biafra-Nigeria War (1967–70), and Okigbo's involvement and his death. Nwakanma opines that 'Okigbo's involvement with Biafra was provoked by his witnessing the wounded, maimed, and the headless dead, who were brought to the East ... He felt his humanity deeply violated' (p. 232). Okigbo embarked on a dangerous mission of arms procurement for the Biafran government. Although there were no casualties, this endeavor ended in a fiasco when the aircraft carrying the firearms crashed near the Cameroon Mountain. He became a Biafran guerrilla fighter without any military training. The author suggests that Okigbo's fascination with difficult challenges and dangerous adventures motivated him to become a combatant, and therefore contributed to his death at Opi, near Nsukka on 18 September 1967 at the age of 37. Nwakanma also speculates that Okigbo was driven by the same fascination in his numerous and complex relationships with women. The woman, who gave him the toughest time to woo due to her family's apprehensiveness and opposition, was the one Christopher married. Okigbo saw marriage to Judith Safinat Atta, an Igbira

princess, and reportedly the first Northern Nigerian woman to earn a university degree as a challenge and he pursued her from the time they met in 1951 until they married in 1962. Nwakanma contends that Okigbo preferred the long-distance marriage arrangement he had with Safinat in spite of his love for her and their only child, Obiageli, because he needed his freedom and did not want to be 'distracted by continuous feminine presence in his space' (p. 190).

One of the strengths of the biography is the author's presentation of the views of an array of people about Christopher Okigbo and his works, and the placement of the narrative within the historical and sociopolitical contexts of colonial and postcolonial Igbo society and Nigeria. Nwakanma often quoted verbatim the opinions of such individuals. But these interviewee profiles, which sometimes appear repetitive throughout the book, obscure the narrative on Okigbo's life and work. Furthermore, almost to the point of distraction to this reader, there is too much emphasis on Okigbo's sexual exploits. Nwakanma's attempt to explain what he refers to as Okigbo's 'habit of compulsive womanizing' and 'perennial quest for sexual experience as conquest' is simply inappropriate in a serious work of this nature. Even more strange is his claim that Okigbo's 'legendary womanizing' (p. 138) could be 'connected to a fundamental sense of the emptiness he felt as a child and his inconsolable longing for his late mother', who died when he was just five years old (p. 12).

There are a number of grammatical errors, omissions, and false information, which better editorial work could have reduced or avoided. For instance, Ojoto town, Okigbo's birthplace, is conspicuously missing in the two maps on pages xxvi–xxvii. On page 10, the author states: 'The three older sons – Lawrence, Pius and Susan – were especially alert . . .' But Susan was a daughter and not a son. It is also not clear which one of these is correct: Susan Anakwenze or Suzanne Anakwenze; Buzotti or Buzzotti (pp. 29, 115–17). Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu declared the Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967 and not on 29 May as Nwakanma states (p. 242). The Biafra-Nigeria War started on 7 July 1967 and not on 6 July 1966. Okigbo could not have 'signed in for combat' on '7 July 1966', and 'Nsukka [falling] into the hands of the Federal army on 9 July 1966' when the war actually started a year after (p. 242). There are also incomplete reference citations. Many direct quotations do not have page numbers. Other than the repeated profiles of the author's interviewees/respondents in the body of the chapters, one does not have a sense of their age, occupation at the time of interview, and when such interviews took place.

Despite the above pitfalls, Obi Nwakanma's chronicling of the forces that helped to shape Christopher Okigbo's life, his sensibility, and poetry is commendable. Hopefully, the biography will help to expand interest (both locally and internationally) in Okigbo and his work.

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