

'A Source for Arrow of God' Revisited: Not To Gild Gold!

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One possible reason for the vacuum existing in source study of African literature is, of course, complacency.

- Charles E. Nnolim¹

...literary ideas like other ideas 'do not fall from heaven, nor do we receive them as gift of God while we sleep.'

- Omafume Onoge²

But there is a kind of critic who spends his time dissecting what he reads, for echoes, imitations, influences, as if no one was ever simply himself but is always compounded of a lot of other people.

- Wallace Stephen (qtd. in Jabbi)³

From every dimension, virtually all Africa's literary critics have failed to make their mark – either because they lack the researching capital, the vigour and alertness, - or that they are not really *au fait* with the overall demands of what they claim to inveterately profess. A third possible reason is that they are (pardonably?) ignorant of their shortcomings – in the concourse of source criticism! One would suspect that African critics have taken it for granted that their counterparts' (creative writers') endeavours are products of sheer talent, and, therefore, the works of literary scholars which they criticize, such as poetry, drama or proses, did not take such scholar the requisite research efforts before writing. But these (critics) think less

of investigating the sources of which they criticize. To think that way by our critics, however, is to be audaciously uncritical, thereby, betraying every heuristic urgency of this *métier*, literary criticism.

One may query: what is it that these critics worry about? The answer is very simple, even simplistic! Whether the writings which they criticize are an exercise that examines the raw materials alone or a fundamental and foundational literary exercise? The true subject of criticism has long suffered untold neglect of its deserved patronage. It seems to have lost its direction. I am not oblivious of the fact that engaging in a source-study of this nature taxes our energy, patience, dexterity and a faithful poise to achieve. Furthermore, I am not aware that both creative writers and their critics have made their necessary efforts at achieving results. Maybe, our critics do not want to dabble into such a gargantuan task or they are afraid of the ire of their unveiled subjects that may feel insulted of being popularly reduced. Or they are afraid they would not do justice to proffering concrete and adequate proof, for Charles Nnolim, would leave us with a diktat that genuine source-study *must* demonstrate the *concrete testimony* of a printed [piece] laid side by side with the original text. Above all, the source-scholar must try to transcend Douglas Bush's good-humoured definition of a scholar as 'a siren which calls attention to a fog without doing anything to dispel it!' (18, emphasis on 'must' not original)

Then, Ben Obumsele who thinks it quite impossible to inspect imaginative motions still believes that investigating the background materials of a finished creative work aims “not to highlight 'sources' for their own sake but to get to grips with the features in the complex structure on which significance and meaning in the work are grounded” (see Onyerionwu 33).

But it could be difficult to achieve, though; but it is not impossible to achieve, after all. And there is another thing to source study: the critic must be a committed pedigree. Yes, he has to be one who does not dread attracting the flail of the creative writer whose source is disclosed, for it seems creative writers abhor being unraveled or discovered. Besides, a more fundamental factor is that African literary critics are yet to pay a carefully needed attention to biographical studies. Ideally, biographical studies are foundational to the business source criticism.

Interestingly, Charles Nnolim is a committed critic who has acquitted himself as an aficionado of the literary-critical business.

With his source study that came with a bang- “A Source for *Arrow of God*” – he not only raised a critical dust that took time to settle (if it has actually settled) as it raised a flak, he also launched himself to a limelight. It is possible he attracted knocks from Achebe's apologists!

For better or worse, however, mine, here, is a reassessment of that long essay on one hand, and Nnolim's melee with C.L Innes who came in defence of Achebe. This is not in spite of but because of historical purposes that would require that records are straightened, and strengthened. This particular exercise of mine recognizes Achebe and Nnolim as two literary giants that Nigerians – if not Africans – pride themselves of.

Let me try a comparative introduction of these literary heavyweights. I shall start from what that seems a convergence. Both Chinua Achebe and Charles Nnolim are from Anambra State of Nigeria; both of them have been - at different times - awarded Nigerian National Order of Merit (NNOM) based on their particularly exceptional prowess in artistry, and both have delivered their NNOM lectures; both are professors and both are living legends. However, while Achebe is from Ogidi, Nnolim is from Umuchu; while the former about now clubs with the octogenarian league, the latter clubs with the septuagenarian's – for while Achebe is eighty this time, Nnolim is almost nine years shy of eighty; while Achebe's NNOM award was based on his creative writing, Nnolim's was because of his literary criticism; while the former's NNOM lecture was entitled “What Has Literature Got to Do with it?” the latter's was adaptively piquant of Achebe's title of his essay collection, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* as he (Nnolim) entitled his, *Morning Yet on Criticism Day*. And while Achebe has remained in the United States of America for decades - for whatever reason - plying his trade, Nnolim has been in Nigeria in his full-blown patriotic fervour and teaching presence, refusing (still) to fall into a critical furlough that has perhaps manacled his generation of writers.

For us to also appreciate why Nnolim's curiously controversial study of Achebe's *Arrow of God* would ignite a flack is arguably owing to the especial biographical credentials of both creator (Achebe) and critic (Nnolim). Such rare resumes have informed a number of tributes waxed on each. I start with Achebe. In his view, Oladele Taiwo sees Achebe as “the best known Nigerian novelist” (111); while analyzing Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Uzoma Nwokochah describes the author as “one of Africa's best novelists” (126); Tony Afejuku rates Achebe as “the father and the dean of [the] African novel” (21); for Emeka

Nwabueze, Achebe is “a canonized writer” (190) Okey Ndibe compares Achebe and Wole Soyinka as two great writers that Africa has produced (55); then, Charles Nnolim himself honours Achebe by saying that “Achebe is a master craftsman... the African raconteur *par excellence* (see Akpuda 62-63)” “Achebe is definitely the father of [the] African novel,” as he goes further to say that Achebe has “made himself Nigeria's public institution number one, Nigeria's national icon. (“Chinua Achebe” 1, 12). Even though Achebe enjoys Anthony Oha's fanship as Nnolim receives his (Oha's) nicest tirades, he (Oha) rates both Achebe and Nnolim almost on a par of high-brow artists: “Achebe and Nnolim are two great men of substance in literature and arts” (26).

Then, on Charles Nnolim!! While trying to introduce Charles Nnolim to his readership, Austine Amanze Akpuda describes him comparatively thus: “he has done for the Nigerian novel what Lu Xun (also Lu Hsun) did for Chinese fiction” (xxvii); J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada shows his love lost on Nnolim based on his “humility in the pursuit of intellectual truth, assiduity in stretching forth a theory or a line of thinking” (“Foreword” xv); for why Chinyere Nwahunanya sees Nnolim as “a resilient scholar” (xx), just as Jasper Onuekwusi views him as “indefatigable” (x); that Allwell Onukaogu marvels at Nnolim as a “great nebulous artist and critic” (78) and the duo of Onukaogu and Onyerionwu describing him as “enigmatic” (10), and Onyemaechi Udumukwu calling him “a master of Nigerian/African literature today” (374) may account for why Onyebuchi Nwosu calls him “an elephant in the intellectual circle” (508) while I have joined by seeing him as a radar to African literature having done a lot to “raise the bar of African literature from its inchoate, subaltern-to-sacramental-level, to its present noble, immaculate, efflorescent alchemy of world-choice literature” (viii). Remember that it is not that Achebe or Nnolim sired these people who eulogize him.

What is the importance of the above mini comparative biographing? It is for us to properly appreciate that both Achebe and Nnolim are African/Nigerian literary evolutionists and pathfinders and lodestars and celebrities for why the 'provocative' essay by Nnolim using Achebe as his subject matter and his (Achebe's) source for *Arrow of God* as theme remains as seminal and stupendously important to African/Nigerian literature as it is most controversial of essays in African/Nigerian literature today. Besides, I have juxtapositionally paired Achebe and Nnolim to wet our appetite as we meta-critically consume “A Source for *Arrow of God*,” an essay Nnolim first published in 1977.

Nobody can take it away from Nnolim that he did a thorough job in researching and coming up with his essay that is immaculate with intertextual stitching as he has showcased his aplomb and perspicacity in researching vigour and discipline and commitment to literature. In tracing *Arrow of God* to its source, Nnolim connects:

Achebe was heavily shackled by his source. Although Achebe has never admitted it publicly, the single most important sources – in fact, the only source – for *Arrow of God* is a tiny, socio-historical pamphlet published without copy right by a retired corporal of the Nigerian Police Force. His name was (he died in 1972) Simon Alagbogu Nnolim, and the title of his pamphlet was *The History of Umuchu*, published by Eastern Press Syndicate, Depot Road, Enugu, in 1953. (*Issues* 18)

Our critic finds out that the stubborn priest (Ezeulu) who refuses to roast and to eat two sacred yams, Winterbottom, plus the Ikolo, the Festival of the Pumpkin leaves, *et alii*, as replicated in the novel are mere borrowings from the pamphlet. Our critic gets stunned that Achebe carries over the characters and activities and objects and numerical signposts (in the pamphlet) to his novel *verbatim*:

I found out to my amazement that Achebe did not merely take the story of the High Priest and blow life into it, as Shakespeare did when borrowing material for *Julius Caesar* from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and the Romans*; Achebe went much further. He lifted everything in the *Arrow of God* without embellishment. (19)

In that amazement that turned suspenseful, Charles Nnolim tells us that after he resisted the impulse to ring Achebe, he met him at a conference in 1975 where he asked him (Achebe) if he knew Simon Nnolim and if he had had access to his (Nnolim's) uncle's pamphlet. He reports to us

that Achebe affirmed having known him, but having read nothing of his authorship:

Yes, he said, he knew him. He went further: he admitted that while working for the Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Service he interviewed Nnolim in 1957. He was visibly shocked to hear of his death. He reminisced that Nnolim and one Mr Iweka who wrote *The History of Obosi* (to which Nnolim himself alluded as the source of his inspiration to write a similar book) were rare people who collected invaluable information that was of historical and anthropological interest. (20)

Since Simon Nnolim did not mention the author of *The History of Obosi*, it was Achebe who filled the gap for this critic. Available facts suggest, too, that Achebe added that he interviewed officers of the E.N.B.N. Outside of this, we do not hear anywhere that Achebe read *The History of Umuchu*, but according to this critic:

it is surely more than coincidence that Achebe's **Umuaro** is Nnolim's **Umuchu**; that Achebe's **Ezeulu** is Nnolim's **Ezeagu**; that Achebe's god, **Ulu**, is Nnolim's **Uchu**; that Achebe's **six villages** which sought amalgamation are Nnolim's **six villages** in Umuchu; that Achebe's **New Yam Festival** is Nnolim's **Seed Yam Festival**; that Achebe's missionary, "**Hargreaves**", is no more than Nnolim's anthropologist, '**Hargroves**', that Achebe's story of **Umuama and the sacred python** is Nnolim's **Umunama and the sacred short snake**; that Nnolim's Gun Breaker, **J.G. Lotain**, is Achebe's Gum Breaker, **Winterbottom**; that Achebe's **Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves** is Nnolim's

'The Feast of Throwing Firs Tender Pumpkin Leaves; that Achebe's ceremony of **Coverture** is Nnolim's ceremony of *Nkpu*; that the main market in Achebe's Umuaro is Nnolim's Umuchu is **Nkwo** where the Ikoro [Ikolo] and the amalgamation fetish in both sources are located. (my bold, 20)

With the above twelve remarkable comparisons of replicas drawn by this critic, which Ezenwa-Ohaeto must have observed though he mischievously double speaks, scarifyingly, adjudging Charles Nnolim as "a brilliant but sensation seeking critic" (192), Nnolim is hard to be disbelieved that Achebe sourced his work(s) from Umuchu's stories; it is hard not to pity our critic for his disconcertedness that Achebe copied his (our critic's) uncle without Achebe acknowledging his source. It seems our critic charges Achebe with plagiarism which Achebe has not technically, in the least, committed!

Charles Nnolim does not end at drawing these curious duplicable comparisons; he goes the extra mile in comparing stories and activities from both books. But for convenience, it is needless to retell and/or recast one event to another here. Yet, it is ideal, I think, I evaluate, at least, one event. I choose the Sacrifice of Coverture in *Arrow*, for the comparison, like others, cannot be entirely out of mere coincidence.

According to S.A Nnolim, whenever a newly married woman goes to live with her husband, she must perform a sacrifice called *Nkpu* (which our critic translates as covering-up). In this sacrifice, all the probable evils that might have followed her from youth to the stage of marriage are covered up, and it is done at night towards the direction of the road she came from. The materials for the sacrifice as recorded in *The History of Umuchu* are

a hen, 4 small yams, 4 cowries that is 24 cowries known as (*ego nano*), tender palm leaves, 4 white chalks, one native pot, the 'Olodu' flower, etc, etc... A juju priest officiating, together with the woman and husband, must be present, with another small pot of water. (22)

When everything is set and a hole is dug at the centre of the path, the juju priest will pronounce what our critic translates thus:

Whatever [evil] you might have seen with your eyes, or spoken with your mouth, or heard with your ears, or trodden with your feet, whatever evil else your mother might have committed, or your father might have committed, I cover them up here. (33, square bracket is original)

This kind of ceremony or sacrifice is observed in Achebe's *Arrow* for Okuata, Obika's new wife. We see the couple and Obike's mother together with a medicine-man and diviner (Aniegboka, hired for the performance) and Obika's elder brother as they head to the highway leading to Umuezeani where the bride came from. As they reach the spot the story goes thus:

The medicine-man chose a spot in the middle of the way and asked Obika to dig a hole there...

'Do not dig any more,' said the medicine-man. 'It is now deep enough. Bring out all the loose soil.'

While Obika was scooping out the red earth with both hands the medicine-man began to bring out the sacrificial objects from his bag. First he brought out four small yams, then four pieces of white chalk and the flowers of the wild lily.

'Give me the *omu*.' Edogo passed the tender palm leaves to him. He tore our four leaflets and put away the rest. Then he turned to Obika's mother.

'Let me have *ego nano*.' She untied a bunch of cowries from a corner of her cloth and gave him...

Other things follow after which Aniegboka pronounces the absolution:

'Any evil which you might have seen with your eyes, or spoken with your mouth, or heard with your ears, or trodden with your feet; whatever your father might have brought upon you or

Chibueze Prince Orié

your mother brought upon you, I cover them all here.' (*Arrow* 119; italics is original)

All does not end here. For me to add any explanation is to gild the lily. All explains itself that nothing seems to differ from the account recorded in S.A. Nnolim's pamphlet.

Again, as J. G. Lotain, the District Commissioner, arrested Ezeagu Uchu for not accepting the offer of warrant chieftaincy so also did Captain Winterbottom arrest Ezeulu for the same refusal of warrant chieftaincy. As Ezeagu Uchu received yams and selected twelve with which to observe the yearly calendar, so also do we observe that Ezeulu collect and selected twelve biggest sized for the same purpose of calendar observation. He did so with the myth of eating habit that goes with it. There exist other likely pairs of events from both books.

Even those events in C. K. Meek's *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (1939) quoted by S. A. Nnolim in the pamphlet, Achebe may have recounted same. The story of Ikenga owned by Ebo which Akukalia madly breaks that results in Ebo shooting him is recounted there in S. A. Nnolim's pamphlet.

What is more? Charles Nnolim's claim does not lack merit. He has done enough comparative analysis that convinces. In Chisom Okeke's poser to J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada *apropos* of Achebe's source for *Arrow of God* that Charles Nnolim argues his own uncle's pamphlet got fictionalize by Achebe, Nwachukwu-Agbada virtually agrees that Achebe made use of that very pamphlet:

Well, for sure, Achebe must have looked at that work, must have seen it, but I do not think he is denying ever having seen it. Whatever it is, he himself as a writer should know that what we have in *Arrow of God* must have been derived from somewhere. ("An Interview" 22)

And Achebe has neither publicly denied nor affirmed having seen *The History of Umuchu* let alone use it! But he claims – not supinely, though – that his work is a product of a blown up oral wares for why he mobilizes that “we have to rely a lot on oral history... I have used such things before [in *Arrow of God*?] and I will use them again. This is what I have set myself to do: to reconstruct our history through literature”

(Nwachukwu-Agbada) “A Conversation” 121-122). Achebe is hereby discharged and acquitted!

Of course, that should not bother us. What is important is that Charles Nnolim adroitly did an assiduous, indepth research that has enormously enhanced the growth, complexion and warm reception of African/Nigerian literature. It is not targeted at denigrating the artistic bravura of Achebe, though it seems a nigh rebuke at him (Achebe) for our critic does not mince words when he says: “in writing *Arrow of God* he has his kernels cracked for him not by his *Chi*, but by Simon A. Nnolim” (45). For saying this, I suspect that one woman would call him boor!

But before this woman, Bu-Buakei Jabbi has to refer to Nnolim's study. Jabbi's interest is on the mythic and ritualistic camaraderie of *Arrow of God*. But he seems to make an arc turn as if straying away from his focus, for instead of positively referring to Wole Soyinka and Nnolim as people who have done wonderful studies on *Arrow*, Jabbi fulminates, making seething remarks against them for the directions through which they have studied Achebe's *Arrow*. Against Nnolim, Jabbi's prejudice that colours his view is obviously immanent in his study. Because of his prejudiced mind – either he wants publicity via defaming these literary sages or he is just looking for what to charge them (especially Nnolim) with – he forgets *in toto* that Nnolim's task only has to do with tracing the source for *Arrow*, not primarily to do an exposition on the mythic and ritualistic, philosophical capitals of activities in *Arrow*. He is not dispassionate on Nnolim. For Jabbi, Nnolim should be vilified for his “basic interpretative myopia” that would “mar what is otherwise an impregnabale array of evidence for the historical authenticity of Achebe's background materials”; and as a self-made judge, he decries that Nnolim “falls foul of a crucial precaution in source analysis” (131) as R.D. Altick would direct. Why would Jabbi allow himself to teeter?

Here, Jabbi needed to have been told that criticism has several pathways to it. In the absence of this his critical works equal a mythic and ritualistic rather than a realistic mode. Though, deliberately, Jabbi has fallen into his own trap or is it not him that has said elsewhere thus?:

Claims of literary influence tend to generate considerable heat of emotion and distemper. Whether a critic is stridently dogmatic, merely depreciatory, or speculatively

tentative in proffering a case of influence in some work or canon, another reader is always likely to decry the suggestion. Or mere talk of influence may be impatiently cried down as lame criticisms, a dull factualism. (106)

Is it not Jabbi that has made this observation?

It is time we reviewed C. L. Innes, brief, meddling, tawdry essay that she regards as a response to Charles the Nnolim's. In more than a reading, Innes' essay - though not a clap-trap – seems viscerally (rather than cerebrally) targeted to be noxious to Nnolim, Maybe. In conjoining between Achebe and Nnolim's silently brewing fisticuff, Innes does not hide her angst against Charles Nnolim; neither does she try to be circumspect by filing off those vituperative edges of her comments. Unless she took off to taunt, not to correct, or to illumine – fighting Nnolim because she was the co-editor of *Okike* with Achebe. She must have been highly stung by Nnolim's revelations; she cannot coordinate her ire, no matter how hard she tries! And this is quite antithetical of her comparison of Nnolim to Achebe's Ofoedu who at the meeting to discuss the road labour would prattle about by opening “his mouth and let out his words alive without giving them as much as a bite with his teeth” (245).

Unfortunately, Innes' essay here being considered, while being manifestly confrontational even in its bogus hue, brandishes an artless defence of Achebe's artistically dexterous popularity. She, arguably, brashly chooses to be conspicuously blind (and that is literally) though her eye balls may bulge, just to ensure she charges Nnolim with *fatwa*. She may pride herself as having made a strong point where she chides Nnolim for his “failure to notice that Achebe's Ulu is a masculine deity” (245) while S. A. Nnolim's is a feminine one. She entirely forgets (out of fury!) that to change a deity from male to female gender is of course one of the cheapest fictional manipulations as long as characterization is concerned. And what about other comparisons that appear as a mere carry over?

Innes appears to be a dilettante, but it might be that she does not understand any parable, in its subtly sarcastic bias, as Nnolim couches. That, probably, is the reason why she thinks Nnolim lacks comments with which to cushion his cited excerpts. Seriously, it is either she is not

au fait with figuratively conjured remarks, remarks that go with some tinge of sarcasm or she is so embittered that the mini-sized, mischievous Charles Nnolim has more or less dismantled the high profiled Achebe of Africa! And Innes elects herself to cry more than the bereaved, or simply be an arrow on Achebe's bow!

And I do not think she means to fan the cinders of that controversy. C. L. Innes appears to miss all the points about Charles Nnolim's worry about Achebe. Nnolim's allegation against Achebe is that the latter refused to acknowledge his source-germ for his novel, *Arrow of God*; it is not that Achebe does not superlatively produce a superbly fictionalized finished product in *Arrow of God*, with his materials.

However, we must bear with Innes since we never heard that she read law; and if she did, she was not called to the bar. In fact, if Innes were a lawyer, I would pity her client, for she would have glibbed without making a concrete defence; she would make us see no substance – regardless of her gesticulation efforts that are only exhibitional of emotions and sentimental swagger – in her defence. Rather, hers would be to chorus 'yes my lord' as she would stare at her client being chaperoned to the door, to prison.

Nonetheless, while we believe that Innes does not entirely mean that Charles Nnolim made specious pronouncement concerning any “A Source for *Arrow of God*”. By this she would miss the whole point. Hence, we must applaud Innes, we must clap for her bravado for being able to speak out in pages as much as he did, though his comments are on two pages only. He did something where others kept mute. She deserves commendation since others refused to comment defensively but not supinely on that controversy, maybe, because they were afraid of meddling with the 'feud' between two literary titans. In fact, that Innes audaciously responded to Charles Nnolim's allegation has enlisted her name among the transmogrifiers of African/Nigerian literature.

Nevertheless, what does Charles Nnolim want his readers to hold on to as regards this provoking essay – “A Source for *Arrow of God*” – of his? I invite him to address us:

... the reader must be warned that the foregoing is in no way intended to denigrate the great artistic achievements of Achebe as a creative writer and novelist. But my study does establish a few facts about Achebe and his sources.

First, we must admit that Achebe is a careful researcher of his facts, which shows great intelligence, for no one has been able to complain that his depiction of Igbo society is distorted or falsified. Secondly, one must admit that it takes painstaking and diligent research to organize and bring alive such complex material. (44)

Yet, again, Nnolim believes that “rather than doing any harm to Chinua Achebe [as some critic misconstrue him to have done], his reputation has, in retrospect, been enhanced by my other article” (see Akpuda 64). But even if our critic is misconstrued and/or crucified, for mistaking him as trying to push Achebe off the parks, it should not perturb him; he should feel mollified knowing full well that that is the price a source critic has to pay and that a committed writer does not always have it on the razzle. And Nnolim's calmness at not taking issue with Achebe's disciples who must fight back for their master is somewhat indicative of his preparedness or pre-knowledge that he would not only receive some hard knocks and bashings for his brash revelations, but would have to be ready to swallow the “perils of such exposure... especially when it involved a writer with the international standing of Chinua Achebe” (Nair 84). That, I think, on a parabolic aura, our critic means when he warns albeit elsewhere that: “The duty of an artist to change his society is not without risk” (“The Writer's” 64) which Breyten Breytenbach in such a euphemistic poise would seem to trivialize: “Call it... the glory of the writer if you like” (166).

While the current study is a paean to Charles Nnolim for engaging in that Herculean task of thoroughly researching on the true source for Achebe's *Arrow of God* and achieving a gargantua, it sure has raised a literary topoi; it encourages more of such research bent, with investigative urgency. For it is its utmost belief that source criticism, where embarked on, as this study encourages, would in no small way ignite healthy controversies as well as enhance the growth, complexion and overall warm reception of our literatures. Now, do you not know that to begin to count off our fingers a number of merits Charles Nnolim's “A Source for *Arrow of God*” has privileged African/Nigerian literature is to gild gold?

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