

## Living the myth: Revisiting Okigbo's art and commitment

Dan Izevbaye

Dan Izevbaye is Dean of the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences, Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria; he was previously Professor of English at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.  
E-mail: izevbayes8@yahoo.com

### Living the myth: Revisiting Okigbo's art and commitment

This is a study of the nature and sources of the persona's quest in Christopher Okigbo's poetry. The protagonist in Okigbo's writing explores the fluid borders between aesthetic and spiritual states, with language and social action as instruments of the self's aspiration towards spiritual and aesthetic fulfillment. Although Okigbo's narration is presented in the form of dramatic ritual, the distance or severance of the material from the poet's own spiritual history is not total, for the historical content eventually intrudes into the writing and reestablishes the authentic autobiography of the poetic self. The historical context, the 1960s, is an age of transition. Okigbo's characterisation of his persona as an actor in a state of personal transition reflects the poet's sensitive immersion in the spirit of his times and establishes Okigbo the poet as perhaps its ideal representative. One of the issues raised in this study is that in spite of the protagonist's recurrent return to the point of passage, there is a relentless drive towards death seen ambiguously as the ultimate goal and state of perfection as well as the perfect form of transition. The central question explored in this study is the roles of poetic diction, the tense politics of the 1960s and the poet's own intense temperament in determining his peculiar choice of resolution to the dilemma at the centre of his poetry. **Key words:** Aesthetic; myth; Nigerian poetry; ritual; Christopher Okigbo.

#### 1

Christopher Okigbo created and lived his myth. As Uzoma Esonwanne (2000: 1–2) argues, the meagerness of biographical sources can generate myths about a poet like Okigbo. But such myths can also be influenced by the poet's own attitudes. Chinua Achebe ends his preface to *Don't Let Him Die* (1978), a collection that asserts the triumph of poetry over death, with the rather curious statement that "Okigbo had taken care to ensure that he will not die" (1978: ix) – a figurative reference to posthumous memory and reputation as a response to the depth of the poet's friendships and literary achievement. It is, of course, an ironical statement to make about one who seems to have consciously courted death in literature and in life – that is, in poetic image and theme as well as in the decision to fight at the war front.<sup>1</sup> What is curious here is the idea that Okigbo consciously cultivated his posthumous reputation. It is possible to produce evidence in support of this statement; for example, that Okigbo was conscious of the importance of his poetry because he probably felt, like Keats, that he would be

numbered among the poets of his race. Unlike most African poets, he recorded the dates of composition for virtually all his published poems, thus inviting posterity to pay attention to the historical phases of his work. The attention that he paid to the style and structure of his poems has been much studied and imitated. Achebe and Okafor's 1978 collection probably contains many more instances of the replication of phrases, images and other elements of his poetry than tributes to any other African writer.<sup>2</sup>

## 2

Okigbo was a poet of the 1960s in Nigeria. Although his early poems show a deliberate paring away of the source materials of the poetry, it would be useful to place his life and works in the historical context of their composition. Of especial importance in this context is the question of the isolation of the artist, a question that is foregrounded by the allusiveness and not-always accessible symbolism of the poetry.

The end of colonial rule and the early years of independence had two fundamental effects on Nigerian society. The first of these, which had significant consequences for the country's future, was the amalgam of peoples who were separate before colonial rule. The second was the rise of the western-educated elite. The two factors are linked in unexpected ways. The colonial creation of a multicultural nation gave the English language a key cultural and political status as a unifying tool that contributed to the rise of a privileged middle class who were in the vanguard position in the development of a national consciousness and relied on English, the official national language, for the expression of their nationalist aspirations. The centrality of these two factors during the early years of independence meant that the political atmosphere would be intensely charged, and it would be difficult for thinking individuals not to evolve a full social consciousness in response to the events of the period.

The new elite had to be defined not only by their training and class privilege, but also by their consciousness of their responsibility for the cultural and political future of the country, a theme that became dominant in the novels of the 1960s. One could summarise the cultural and psychological attributes shared by the members of this new elite, although the class was made up of individuals and groups that were differentiated by the degree to which they were conscious of these attributes. They shared a common awareness of their national responsibility as makers of a new culture and the need for a cultural resurgence. They implicitly accepted the important contribution of the European language to this syncretism, although they were generally conscious of the threat inherent in English as a politically privileged culture bearer. It is now commonplace for writers of the period to be considered the representatives of their age and its mouthpiece. This middle class culture was serious-minded and utilitarian, and its discourses were concerned with the cultural and political direction that it envisaged for the newly independent state. This concern

was reflected in the forms of entertainment that it favoured. Perhaps this seriousness was because the middle class culture of the sixties was university based. The cultural organs of this middle class were university centred: the major cultural events did not reflect the lifestyle, daily rituals or cultural festivals of that class, nor was the curriculum designed to encourage university students' appreciation of their indigenous arts. Members of the new middle class were drawn by their sense of responsibility to the traditional festivals that were organic to traditional society, just as Yeats was attracted to the arts that could still remind him of their origins among the common people.

African indigenous cultural events and material products were brought to the university or its centres as cultural exhibits or processed for assimilation into the new cultural direction that was being shaped through the discourse of this new middle class. Even when there was a deliberate attempt to break the influence of the university on the new middle class, as in the creation of the Mbari Society of writers and artists at Ibadan, the influence of the university was still present, at least in the background of members and the nature of its discourses. There seems to be a strong penitential element in much of these gestures towards the study, appropriation and assimilation of traditional arts into the culture of the new middle class. The psychological character of these gestures towards indigenous culture is highlighted in the guilt-ridden return of Okigbo's prodigal at the beginning of *Heavensgate*, presented as a drama of a poet who had abandoned the priesthood of Idoto for modern western education and the vocation of writing. The sense of responsibility to the development of African culture is the price for the new culture. There were major cultural gains from this sense of responsibility, not only in the efflorescence of the literature, but in the emergence of new forms of visual arts, notably the sculptures and architectural designs of Ben Enwonwu, Felix Idubor and Demas Nwoko, Okigbo's illustrator. At that time the visual arts did not seem to have the kind of currency and immediate impact on social and communal life that verbal forms have, given that language is the medium of everyday communication. That is why Ulli Beier (1960: 9) argued that in 1960 "[t]he new Nigerian middle class [was] not particularly interested in the arts at the moment [...] In other words the artist [was] no longer considered to be an essential member of the community as he used to be in traditional African society." Although many writers at the time did not think so, the theme of the writer straining for an audience was a central motif in Okigbo's early poetry. For Okigbo and his contemporaries it is through language that a poet expresses his responsibility to his society.

### 3

One of the literary consequences of this social awareness and feeling of responsibility is the foregrounding of the public function of language, such that the more private forms of poetry were not only unpopular for not being readily accessible, they later

came under attack for more ideological reasons. A case of obscurantism has even been made against many of the major Nigerian poets of the sixties on the simplistic assumption that the best of African traditional poetry is plain and straightforward, and that the poetry of cultural independence should draw on that model, whereas there is a lot of esoteric poetry and poetry of restricted reference in the oral tradition.

Okigbo was caught up in this debate and was often its main target. It is ironical that although he is one of the representative literary figures of this period, he emerges in some of the criticism as an outsider to the culture of the sixties not only because the diction of his early poems is not reader-friendly, but also because of his careful cultivation of the image of the poet as outsider. There is indeed a difference between the ego-driven quest of the dramatic early poems and the greater social orientation of the later poems whose point of view became even more lyrical than the earlier poems. The named protagonist of the later poems, "I, Okigbo," stands in sharp contrast to the complete anonymity of the earlier hero. But the two sequences are connected by a consistency of commitment and a continuity of purpose, if not of theme. Okigbo's literary reputation was secure by the time he wrote the last poem in the *Labyrinths* sequence, but two issues are likely to remain at the centre of the discussion of Okigbo's poetry: the diction of the poetry and the autobiographical element.

Language is by its nature a social product. Although words are generated by individuals and sometimes in private during the act of communication, they have to be socially acceptable and sanctioned before they can become a meaningful part of language. For that reason, no individual has his meaning to himself, except he or she is not engaged in the act of communication. The rules of language are social; they rein in the individual's experiment with utterances that are not socially viable. This means that when we intend to communicate our utterances are affected by three factors: their meaning is social; their syntax imposes limits on the private elements of utterance; the psychological context in which experience is fashioned into words, as D. W. Harding puts it, makes creativity possible by loosening the close relationship between language and reality. The creative freedom which this psychological element guarantees makes it possible for a poet to imagine a world that is not necessarily a faithful reflection of his experience or a logical account of the reality that he knows, although that freedom is limited by the elements that make communication possible. This means that except in the most consciously autobiographical forms of poetry, there is only a tenuous relation between the source experience – which we call the inspiration for the poem – and the imaginative product. But the utterance remains social even at this private level, except perhaps in a madman's utterance and the nonsensical lines in nursery chants. For example, Okigbo's presentation of a child's oral transcription of a nursery rhyme (*etru bo pi a lo a she*) and the singing of Jadum the madman accompanied by an imaginary drum in *Heavensgate* are both poetic accounts of nonsense utterances. They both remain non-social and private to us as readers, but

only for as long as we do not recognise in them a different form of language or dialect or creole from our own.<sup>3</sup> If we do accept them as meaningful statements, they no longer remain nonsensical or private utterances but statements in an idiom different from our own. And if we recognise them as translations of utterances that already exist in our own language, our verbal experience is enriched by this knowledge of the possibilities of the renewal of experience through poetry. Publication is the other additional step in the socialization of poetry.

Publication is the final stage of that process. Published private poetry cannot but be social and available as long as it finds an audience. Even at its most private, the critical task of elucidation and evaluation makes such private poetry socially available by working towards its assimilation into the language of its audience. The point is that genuinely esoteric poetry meant for a restricted audience should be recognized as such and not judged by the standards of public poetry, although such poems would not be published for the general audience in the first place. Critics of Okigbo's early poetic diction do not always recall that his poetic insists on the search for an audience as an essential stage in the making of poetry. The effects of abstract poetry and obscure diction arise mainly when the reading of the poems is restricted by the kind of symbolist theory set out in Paul Valéry's "Poetry and abstract thought".

I now wish to turn to a point that I raised earlier about poetry as a restructuring of autobiographical elements, and the extent to which such poetry should be read biographically. This point has a bearing on the social nature of poetry in general and on Okigbo's poetry in particular, and it may help to define the nature of the privacy of his poetry. Two of Okigbo's major poetic techniques are relevant to this question. The first is that his language is figurative to the point of symbolism – that is, it creates its own autonomous meaning in the sense that the poem is designed not so much as an expression of the poet's emotion as a verbal structure aimed at eliciting an emotional response from the reader. The second is the function of transition as a theme and as a basic structural instrument, and its relevance to the social and autobiographical contexts of the poems.

The verbal and structural design of "Distances" plays down the historical element in the poem. The historical residues in the poem are those of the poem's hero, not those of the poet. Okigbo himself provides the immediate autobiographical source for the poem – surgery under anaesthesia; but he immediately pre-empts autobiographical readings by foregrounding the translation of this source into aesthetic and spiritual values and hedging these round with allusions to mythological and literary sources (Okigbo 1972: 154–55). There is thus a transmutation of the sources into an independent literary drama that criticism cannot nail to a specific biographical meaning, especially because of the symbolic character of the drama. Its symbolic intention is clear from the anonymity of the protagonist, for this discourages his identification with any of the literary and mythological heroes who are evoked only

as aspects of his character. Sunday O. Anozie's structuralist study of Okigbo, *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (1972), analyses these literary and historical sources, traces the various allusions and references and comprehensively documents the sources of the quest form that shapes the poems. But much of the poem's meaning relies on an underlying metaphor of sexual fulfillment with its constant invocation of goddess and siren, as well as a collocation of related similes: the dream as vision and memory, sleep as the transition between memory and amnesia, death as the ultimate amnesia. It is because of the search for consciousness and its loss that poets throughout the ages have appropriated the image of sleep, which Samuel Daniel calls "brother to death," and which recurs in many African dirges where death is the semblance of sleep (see Daniel's "Care-Charmer Sleep," and also Shakespeare's "Orpheus," in Peacock 1963: 320, 414).<sup>4</sup> Okigbo extends the simile by turning it into a symbol in "Distances". It begins when the surgeon, presiding over the patient's ether-induced unconsciousness, metamorphoses into Death herself, then evolves into a trope for the artist's impersonal creativity, described by Okigbo as a state of aesthetic grace. But there are further extensions of meaning, as in the verbal associations and sexual overtones of images like island, feverish shores, maidenhead and dream. For death and sex are often linked in poetic evocations of unconscious states. This passage makes sleep and death kin to sexual experience. For Death, whose gender is feminine in this poem, is at once the goddess of the first movement of "Distances" and the maiden of the final movement. The purpose of this image complex (death-sleep-dream-sex) is described by Okigbo as a "sensual anaesthesia" resulting in "a state of aesthetic grace," a verbal play that implies both a formalist poetic and an other-worldly theology.<sup>5</sup>

What is the significance of this formalist play with poetic language and form in an age of transition, this apparent indulgence in art for art's sake in an age of political commitment? The first point is that in this context homecoming does not necessarily imply the arrival at a destination. The tropes of sleep, sexual fulfillment and even death, only indicate a stopping point and preparation for a new beginning. "Home" itself becomes ambiguous in the context of the associated images of dream, sleep, sex and death as stages rather than terminals in the hero's progress. Homecoming is only the fulfillment of one more stage in the hero's growth – a recurrent stage anticipated – or attained twice in "Siren Limits" with its "low growth among the forest" turning into "A green cloud above the forest".

Then he turns to the next stage of the unending quest as the sequence ends on yet another note of incompleteness and anticipation with the hero as a chloroformed patient near an altar for the stitching of his wound. Passage, with its various tropes is the defining theme of Okigbo's art and commitment. The social context in which he operated was itself in transition, its emergent middle class culture was in a state of flux and, as his 1966 elegies suggest, the state was in transition, its politics in a state of chaos.

I take as the focus of discussion a central attitude in Okigbo's poetry, a stance so important that it becomes the image by which nearly all his major themes are defined – that of transition, recurring in the form of the hero at the passage. The true nature of this attitude or image is perhaps best seen in "Distances", in which the poet attempts some form of conclusion to an experience or an image that by nature does not admit of a closure. In earlier sequences, that attitude takes the form of a static image. The attitude or image remains static even where there is movement, for movement – when it occurs – is only circular: the eternal supplication; standing before Idoto; waiting at heavensgate or for the mortar to get dry; the still fennel on an empty sarcophagus,<sup>6</sup> even the brief gesture towards a breakthrough in the sudden talkativeness of the weaverbird poet in "Siren Limits," and the optimism of the low growth in the forest, are soon halted by the image of *creaticide* in *Guernica*.<sup>7</sup> the bleeding tongue of the Sunbird by the end of the sequel, "Fragments out of the Deluge". This still attitude becomes activated in the linear movement of "Distances" which, by its progress, brings the labyrinthine movement of the sequences to a close with the hero as the only witness of his own homecoming. Because of this periodic arrest of movement the narrative of Okigbo's "Labyrinths" is pictorial in the manner of Keats' "Grecian Urn", rather than cinematic. Even here, homecoming seems an ambiguous attitude on which to conclude given that it is really the circular movement of the sequences, not the individual theme or image that dominates and determines the meaning of the hero's experience. The question remains, what kind of station is "home" in this context: is it a terminus or a junction? In the prelude to "Distances" a voice chants an aubade that promises the Odysseus-like hero a homecoming and takes him through a maze, which ends at his home, "the dream". The reader can now identify this voice as a composite of the inspirational second self of the poet and the seductive Siren of *Limits* – for there is a sense in which the hero is an Odysseus longing for his Penelope. This prelude anticipates the distinctly sexual overtones of the quest.

"Distances" marks the end of the first of three major phases in Okigbo's career – a literary and spiritual phase involving an eight year period of wandering through a labyrinth whose winding corridors leads the hero to some kind of fulfilment. This is followed by the short, overtly political phase of "Path of Thunder". The turbulent, linear action of the second phase contrasts with the labyrinthine quest for the illumination of the inner life in the earlier phase. A number of significant changes are now evident, notably an overt political commitment, and the dismantling of the barrier of anonymity that separates author and hero in the earlier sequences. But is the hero-poet out of the labyrinth yet, and has the quest reached an end? Not when the poet is caught up in a different kind of maze – the political vortex of the mid-1960s. Gone is the euphoria of the early independence period with its middle class leisure, the pleasure of rediscovering a cultural heritage in *Heavensgate* and the inner peace which the aesthetic and spiritual quest seems to bring at the end of "Distances". The

verbal plunge into the politics of the mid-sixties begins with a violent invocation of Thunder that contrasts with the calmer invocation of the Goddess in *Heavensgate*. A series of contrasts is thus set up in the two preludes – an anger of thunderbolts in contrast with the reassuring presence of the goddess from the deep. There is a profound spiritual and psychological dimension to these images. Because the myth of the Mammy Water or Water Goddess is “native” to Okigbo’s culture, it is placed in sharp contrast to the alien Christian imagery of the rainbow pact that follows Noah’s destructive flood or the hell fire next time. The natural phenomena of earth and sky, fire and water are still the materials of both experiences. The main difference is the change of location, gender and pace of the action. Thus, the watery depths of *Heavensgate* contrast with the fiery path of Thunder in the later poems. Furthermore the vision expands beyond the inner world of the earlier poems to a more social and even cosmic vision, as is evident in opening and closing sections of “Elegy of the wind”:

WHITE LIGHT, receive me your sojourner; O milky way,  
 let me clasp you to my waist;  
 And may my muted tones of twilight  
 Break your iron gate, the burden of several centuries,  
 into the twin tremulous cotyledons...  
 [...]  
 And the chant, already all wings, follows  
 In its ivory circuit behind the thunder clouds,  
 The slick route of the feathered serpent...  
 (*Labyrinths*, 64).

This second phase cannot lead to the peaceful closure of the first phase because the poet as hero is not in control of the political events that have drawn him in. If the allusiveness of the earlier sequences has been eclectic, “Path of Thunder” draws its metaphors and symbols from the African bestiary, as J. P. Clark does in *Casualties*, a collection of the same period. In spite of the predominance of figures from the world of the African folktale however, the key to the social significance of the poems is probably the mythological figure of Palinurus, a figure from Roman Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and the subject of the third movement of “Lament of the Drums”. Except for this one allusion to Latin literature, the poem looks forward to African folklore from which “Path of Thunder” draws its allusions. This 1964 poem, composed the same year as “Distances” but preceding it in the *Labyrinths* arrangement, is of interest for at least two reasons. First, it is important in Okigbo’s development. Given its subject, it develops as an exercise in the social purpose of art, drawing source material from the kind of preparation for drum performance studied by the Ghanaian scholar, J. H. Nketia. In the second place “Lament of the Drums” is virtually a bridge between



*Labyrinths* and “Path of Thunder” and, given its satirical reference to contemporary public issues, was probably Okigbo’s first overtly political poem. His *Palinurus* takes on the social responsibility of the Fisher King and the fate of Phlebas in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In the context of Okigbo’s divination for a sick country in “Lament of the Drums” his *Palinurus* is strangely prophetic of his own fate. In one of his elegies Peter Thomas invokes Okigbo’s ominous allusion to the *Palinurus* myth:

What has become of our lost *Palinurus*  
Who struck for us across darkening waters  
Into your inmost cave?  
(Achebe and Okafor 1978: 2).

The parallels are clear, taking into account the status of *Palinurus* as pilot, and the widely canvassed view during the nationalist and early post-colonial period, of the African writer as the watchdog of his community, a commitment that often tempted the writer into politics. *Palinurus*, Aeneas’s trusted helmsman, falls off the ship and is murdered when he gets to the shore. When Aeneas meets his shade in the underworld he is still in transition, a liminal figure on this side of Styx. However, the mythical figure of *Palinurus* brings out the problem of reading symbolic poems. Its characters do not bear a consistent reference to historical or real characters, but are primarily a verbal structure within an environment that has its own existence. Anozie reads Okigbo’s intention into the poem and identifies *Palinurus* as Awolowo, for Peter Thomas reading retrospectively, *Palinurus* the lost leader is a poetic allusion. Both readers are right in a very limited sense for, like words, such items exist not so much as historical references but as part of a structure of poetic meaning, formal items in an autonomous narrative or poem. For example, there is no reason why “Lament of the Masks,” the tribute to Yeats, could not have been made out for Eliot with equal justification. The lack of a precise and stable social reference marks the indeterminate character of symbolic poetry and the poetry of myth, and can be a problem for readers of private poetry.

One could say of a poet as intense and formalist in his poetics as Okigbo of the early poems that, by moving from the private, textual world of his early poems into the tense political atmosphere of the sixties, he had begun scripting the last part of his autobiography. The codes that were encrypted to protect the privacy of the anonymous hero of “*Labyrinths*” are now decoded for the reader and incorporated into the public utterances of “*Path of Thunder*” and, more important, the author and his persona are now united by verbally discarding the impersonality of the poet and the anonymity of the hero:

If I don’t learn to shut my mouth I’ll soon go to hell,  
I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron bell.  
(*Labyrinths*, 67).

Given the choice of the poetic genre rather than reportorial prose for this declaration, the responsibility – and immunity, of the autobiographical “I” is poetic rather than personal and authorial. It is pinned down to the poet’s socially symbolic role by the emblems of his office – the figurative, non-literal town-crier with his iron bell.

The last poems demonstrate the practice of art and commitment that the sixties held out as its ideal. But the poems are not free from the attitude of the early poems where the philosophical outlook is reflected in the central symbol, the labyrinth with its repetitive form.<sup>8</sup> In this respect Okigbo was representative of his age. Many writers of the period tend to interpret their national histories in terms of this kind of maze-like, repetitive pattern that we also encounter in Soyinka and Armah. But of all the major writers it is perhaps only in Okigbo that this attitude extends beyond its applied philosophy of history into an artistic creed inspired from deep psychological sources. Generally in the work of the other major writers, the satirical option liberates the writer from the tragic implications of cyclical history. In Okigbo the form repeats itself not only in the inner world of the “Labyrinth” poems and the social world of “Lament of the Drums,” it is eventually elevated into a cosmic vision in “Elegy for Alto”. Here too the celestial symbols become predominantly recurrent, as is evident in the closing lines of the sequence:

AN OLD STAR departs, leaves us here on the shore  
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;  
The new star appears, foreshadows its going  
Before a going and coming that goes on forever...  
(*Labyrinths*, 72).

The six poems in “Path of Thunder” are evenly split between elation or hope and despair. The futility expressed in the last two elegies, “Elegy for Slit Drum” and “Elegy for Alto,” both of which were inspired by the tragic killings of 1966, raises for Okigbo one of the central issues in the African debate about art and commitment. The debate about the actual political value of art, has produced various options like Ousmane’s choice of the cinema and Ngũgĩ’s choice of drama and the question of the language of literature and its audience that is implicit in Achebe’s tribute to Okigbo in “Don’t let him die”. The other major option for the writer, an involvement in politics, has been kept alive by references to the example of Senghor. Many of the contributions in *Don’t Let Him Die* make this problem the subject of their tribute.

The problem of poetry and war is not of such acceptance as to justify Okigbo’s choice. The fundamental problem is the actual value of art as an instrument of social change, especially in the context of the troubled and eventually militarized societies of the first two decades of African independence, which give such circumstances a different character from the cases usually cited as precedents for passing judgments on poets’ military engagement, from the Homeric glorification of war to the cases of

Shelley and the trench poetry of the first World War. In spite of the almost unanswerable case formulated in Ali Mazrui's fictionalized trial of Christopher Okigbo for exchanging his pen for a sword, Okigbo's choice would not seem an unexpected and illogical or unique act not only because there is an African precedent that is not cited, in the resistance war of Angola and Mozambique with their involvement of poetry and national independence, but also because it seems to be in character with the tropes in his poetry. Okigbo's lively personality was such that it seemed to take everyone by surprise that he would jeopardize such promise by going to war. In a tribute at a memorial gathering to honour the poet, Pius Okigbo, the poet's brother draws on the physical horrors of the Nigerian Civil War for his spirited defence of Okigbo's choice:

Only someone versed in the most abstruse form of taxidermy could have lived through the Eastern Nigeria of 1966 to 1970 and pretended that the psychopathology and trauma of the society could not touch him and that his life would ever remain the same or that he could just go about writing inanities while the life experience around him betrayed the most desperate craving. (Pius Okigbo 2000: 324).

Achebe's (1978: vi) last contact with him gives that impression:

When he took the decision to join the army he went to such lengths to conceal his intention from me for fear, no doubt that I might attempt to dissuade him from taking that hazardous step. I probably would have tried. He made up an elaborate story about an imminent and secret mission he was asked to undertake to Europe which put me totally off the scent.

On the face of it this implies a dissociation of Okigbo's art from his commitment if he thought it important to hide his enlistment from those who might dissuade him on account of friendship as well as his vocation as poet. On the other hand the aesthetic and spiritual experiences and the visionary states recorded in his poems include more than the encounter with death in "Distances," and anticipate conflict, defeat and death:

THE GLIMPSE of a dream lies smouldering in a cave,  
together with the mortally wounded birds.  
Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let this be  
the ram's ultimate prayer to the tether...  
(*Labyrinths*, 72).

The only other question left to consider is why Okigbo did not take account of the real danger in his action. The poems document his fatal fascination with death. That he chose the lyric form as the poetic mode for expressing his political commitment in his later poems reinforces the impression that this literary fascination may not be at

such a distance from the poet's own convictions as to require the more impersonal dramatic form of the earlier poems. This may be because he is essentially a poet of transition for whom death is not a final destination but only an archway.

#### Endnotes

1. The references to this choice include Ali Mazrui's fictionalized, posthumous trial of Okigbo and Michael Thorpe's Audenesque tribute, "He challenged foreseeable harm / and proved that the symbol / Holds no ultimate charm", (in Achebe and Okafor 1978: 22).
2. The poet is a victim of his own linguistic quest for immortality, for the idea of immortality is itself ironical, combining as it does the two contrary ideas of life after death. Ikiddeh's elegy offers Okigbo only rest, not the conventional peace, by a magical invocation: "You cannot rest at Heavensgate Brother / not now, you cannot rest / For I must call you up" (20), while Lilburn, another contributor, evokes the opposite idea of Easter the season of resurrection, by his phrase, "grey, returned / from the grave and breathless" (32). Pol Ndu extends the usual idea of canonization ("mortals with immortals share the stage" – that is, life *after* death), to the paradox of Okigbo as "the dying immortal" – that is, a permanent alternation or co-existence of life *and* death (13). A few writers have picked on the more immediate idea of Okigbo's transitional state. One of the most direct of such images occurs in at least two of the poems in Achebe's collection. Peter Thomas' two opening poems (in Achebe 1978: 1–3) refer to the strange liminal state of the poet. His "Homage" imagines the horror of the dead poet lying in his natural state without the conventional mortuary rites, an image also present in Dubem Okafor's "Without a grave he lies" (21): "A mock grin on his face / he lies abandoned at the confluence... / and after the turmoil they show us the spot / that we pay obeissance [sic] / and do the rites of interment." All page references refer to Achebe and Okafor (1978).
3. In the case of extreme acts of private communication like the recluse's meditation, the devotee praying or speaking in tongues and that stranger talking to himself, the classical answer is that the recluse communicates with his second self, much like a writer and his implied narrator, the devotee's interlocutor is his deity and the stranger's soliloquy can be interpreted if overheard by a passer by as unintended audience.
4. In his tribute to Yeats "[you] will remain a mountain / Even in your sleep," Okigbo (1965) adapts a poetic formula from the Yoruba lament genre: "The elephant has fallen: [The deceased] sleeps like a mountain."
5. Okigbo's view about the relevance of music to these themes is important at this point. The recurrence of such experiences is linked to the repetition of words and sounds in literature and music, and the repetition as a sleep-inducing technique in lullabies, incantations and hypnosis.
6. This imagery will not completely escape an ambiguous response. Ostensibly a resurrection image, the plant image, conventionally a natural image of movement and growth – sometimes gets petrified, figuratively speaking, by being juxtaposed with images of death. For example, lilies sprouting from rosebeds and canalilies are compared with the sprouting of tombstones from pavements, and the life-affirming act of eating is strangely linked with the morbid image of the corpse of the dead lion in "Limits VII".
7. Soyinka's (2003: 136) coinage in a Nigerian Academy of Letters Convocation lecture.
8. The form of the later poems is only deceptively linear, being the trajectory of a circle. It is the invocation of death in "Distances" and in "Path of Thunder" that gives the game away, for what we encounter here is death as a passage, not an end.

#### Works cited

- Achebe, Chinua and Dubem Okafor (eds.). 1978. *Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo, 1932–1967*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- Anozie, Sunday. 1972. *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric*. London: Evan Brothers Ltd.; New York: Holmes and Meier, Inc.
- Beier, Ulli. 1960. *Art in Nigeria 1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ibadan, Nigeria: Division Ministry of Home Affairs.

- Esonwanne, Uzoma. (ed.) 2000. *Critical Essays on Christopher Okigbo*. New York: G. K. Hall & Co.
- Harding, D. W. 1974. *Experience into Words*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Mazrui, Ali. 1971. *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*. London: Heinemann.
- Nketia, J. H. 1963. *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*. Edinburgh: Nelson.
- Okigbo, Christopher. 1965. Lament of the Masks: For W. B. Yeats: 1865–1939. In D. E. S. Maxwell and S. B. Bushrui (eds.). In *W. B. Yeats, 1865–1965: Centenary Essays*. Ibadan University Press, xii–xv.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1971. *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Okigbo, Pius. 2000. Christopher Okigbo: A Toast. In Uzoma Esonwanne (ed.). *Critical Essays on Christopher Okigbo*. New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 321–25.
- Peacock, W. (ed.). 1963. *English Verse. Volume I: Early Lyrics to Shakespeare*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Soyinka, Wole. 2003. The Nigerian ideal: The politics of art in the quest for a Renaissance. *The Nigerian Ideal*. Ibadan: The Nigerian Academy of Letters.
- Valery, Paul. 1972. Poetry and abstract thought (abstract from *The Art of Poetry*). In David Lodge (ed.). *20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*. London: Longman, 254–61.