An exhibition of poetry by late poet Christopher Okigbo and paintings and poetry installations by Obi Okigbo

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO FOUNDATION

Footnotes:

PAGE 10 1 Okigbo, Christopher, The Passage, in: Labyrinths, 1971, p. 3. 2 Judith Sefi Attah was born in Okene, in the north of Nigeria. After completing a post graduate course in Education at Reading, England, she began her career as a teacher in Kogi, Nigeria. She became Director of Higher Education in the Civil Service, which led her subsequently to take on the functions of Nigeria Delegate to UNESCO in the Eighties. She was appointed Ambassador to Rome then Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs and Development. Mrs Attah is also a member of several councils and committees such as the Nigerian Delegation to the General Assembly of the United Nations and Human Rights Commission. 3 Okigbo, Christopher, Collected Poems, 1986, Preface. 4 Pius Okigbo, elder brother of the poet, was a leading economist and policy advisor to international organisations and heads of state. PAGE 11 1 Legend has it that Christopher Okigbo was killed while hauling a grenade at a tank. His last known sector as an officer in the Biafran army was at Opi Junction, a northern Igbo frontier town. His remains were never found. PAGE 12 1 Okigbo, Pius, A Toast of Christopher Okigbo, Glendora Review, vol. 1, no. 2.

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DEDICATED TO OUR BELOVED FATHERS CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO AND OKEY MARK NWANKWO
... For the father quest, is the finding of one’s true self; the hero’s journey – which is our ultimate destiny

I am within the midst of the labyrinth because I asked to be the prodigal searches to live life’s adventures guided by faith and intuition And marks each turning point with a splash of colour seven colours predominantly monochrome my stations of the cross i have no fear (I’m just exhausted!), for Thou art with me

— For the father quest, is the finding of one’s true self; the hero’s journey – which is our ultimate destiny

Obiageli Ibrahimat Okigbo May 16 2003
INTRODUCTION
Annabelle Nwankwo-Mu’azu, 14th March 2007

I pondered for a long while what and how to write this introduction, then a couple of nights ago I woke up and was told to ‘write!’ Not on biblical proportions of course, but I found that I was being guided and felt that if I didn’t document what was coming into my heart this opportunity would not come again. This experience is one of many that have occurred on this ‘voyage’, where one has felt a strong sense of being directed, compelled almost to take steps that we were unclear as to where they might lead, but comfortable (on an almost celestial level) that all would be well.

As a result this has been a powerful journey for me and all who have been involved in this project, but none more so than for the late enigma that is the Nigerian born poet ‘Sir’ CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO, considered to be one of Africa’s most influential writers and his artist daughter, OBIAGELI OKIGBO.

This passage through the LABYRINTH has been awash with new beginnings, awakenings of the self, and realisations of what is TRUE.

MINER INTO MY SOLE WITNESS TO MY HOMECOMING...

Christopher Okigbo, Distances, 1964

Relationships have been LOST in the process, often distraught and painful – my soul mate and inspiration, my father Okey Nwankwo, took his ‘journey home’ in January 2006 and I withdrew into an abyss of numbness. But ‘tapping into my known’ helped me through, because I felt strong in the knowledge that our FATHERS were and still are with us wiling that I/ we go forward. In so doing we came through more passionately, dedicated and inspired to be creative and to enjoy the projects end results.

Relationships were GAINED – Obi’s ‘CONVERSATIONS’ with her father resonated into her wonderful artistic manifestations. Primary colours evoke a mood that transpire into places in time, chapters are crossed and with purity she inhabits her father’s visions and themes encapsulating distinct and inspiring images resulting in breath-taking interpretations of proverbial themes. Through this exploration she came to redefine her identity, finally finding her father and therefore herself, moments with her father that she thought she would never possess.

Okigbo’s haunting prophetic verse, the intensity of each word chosen, that trip and fall, undulating prose and voiced images that dance across your mind, leaving one stunned, alive, breathless, overwhelmed yet soothing to the soul to the point of tears. It seems that Mr Okigbo is uncompromising in what he desires. He knew there would be a time that his daughter would find him…on his creative echelon.

Obiageli was fated to take this journey – a TIMELY meeting of spirits, divine and earthly, for their cosmos is intertwined and all who have been compelled to take it with her are illuminated and uplifted by this wonderful pilgrimage.

An inspiring acknowledgement of PEACE and LOVE has and continues to take place on this endeavour. People have been kind and supportive and we have not been left wanting; prayers have been answered (almost freakishly!) and it seems it was preordained.

In presenting TAPPING INTO THE KNOWN it is our wish that the viewer steps into the Labyrinths open heartedly, this intoxicating maze of shared but personal experiences and hopefully if opportune, find or feel a sense of this profound expedition between Father and Daughter. Then perhaps take one step further where one reaches a point of personal recognition within this delicate but inspirational HOMECOMING….
By far the most influential and enigmatic African poet of the second half of the twentieth century, Christopher Okigbo died in 1967, aged 34, while fighting as a commissioned army officer in the Republic of Biafra. He was among the earliest casualties of the Nigerian civil war. In the half decade prior to his tragic death, Okigbo emerged as clearly the most significant African poet since Leopold Senghor, a reputation that rested on a rather slim but irresistibly powerful oeuvre as well as a penetrating and uncompromising intellect. Having studied at the legendary University College, Ibadan together with the other two giants of modern African literature: Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, Okigbo began to write poetry in 1957. By 1962 he was a celebrity poet, causing a huge scandal at the Makerere Conference on African literature in 1962 when he declared that only discerning poets could understand his poetry. “I don’t care for applause” he told South African critic Lewis Nkosi later that year, and insisted that his single, dearest wish was for “a more intelligent audience.”

Between 1961 and 1965 Okigbo published five cycles of poems with Mbari, the art and literary movement that he and his friends founded in Ibadan with Ulli Beier and Es’kia Mphalele, and in the journals Black Orpheus and Transition. In 1966 he won first prize in poetry at the World Festival of Black Culture in Dakar, Senegal. Derek Walcott, who would later win the Nobel Prize for his poetry, won second place. Characteristically, Okigbo turned down the prize, and let it be known that he did not write for literary awards. Before his death the following year, he revised his oeuvre and brought it together in one volume, Labryrinths. “The versions here preserved” he wrote of the volume, “are final.” Labryrinths was published posthumously in 1971.

In his short but dramatic life Okigbo not only wrote enduring poetry, he also wrote music, began a novel, worked as a teacher, university librarian, parliamentary secretary, publisher, businessman, and finally, a revolutionary soldier. With the likes of Paul Theroux he lived the young writer’s wild life. With Wole Soyinka he played music in nightclubs, and then, he married into royalty. In a recent correspondence James Gibbs recalled “Okigbo’s shouts of joy.” He lived life to the full and left in his prime.

Christopher Okigbo also left another legacy, a daughter, Obiageli Ibrahimat, to whom Labryrinths was dedicated. She was only two when he died. An architect by training, Obiageli Okigbo studied in Nigeria and Britain, and now lives in Brussels where she practices as an artist and runs the new Christopher Okigbo Foundation. In the following conversation, Obi Okigbo speaks publicly for the first time about the father she hardly knew, and how her quest to rediscover him has become a journey of self-discovery.

Olu Oguibe won the Christopher Okigbo All-Africa Prize for Literature in 1992 with his second book of poems, A Gathering Fear, which later received honorable mention in the Noma Awards for Publishing in Africa. His Collected Poems are due to be published later in 2007.

Christopher Okigbo was born on August 16, 1932 in Ojoto, eastern Nigeria, at the time still under British colonial rule. He was the fourth child of Chief Onyeamaluligolu Oda, usually called James Okigbo, school teacher, and Anna Onugwalobi-Okigbo. The family was Catholic but his grandfather, the Chief Eze Okigbo of Ojoto, was a priest of the Goddess of the River Idoto.

Okigbo studied at the Catholic school of Umulobia and began his secondary studies in the State College of Umuahia in 1945. He was subsequently admitted to the University of Ibadan, like other major writers such as Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, John Pepper Clark and Cole Omotoso.
He was destined for a medical career, but he soon changed to studying Greek and Latin. Editor-in-Chief of the University Weekly, he translated Greek and Latin authors. He graduated in 1956 before teaching, notably in the University of Nigeria, where he also held the office of librarian.

**INITIATION**

Christopher Okigbo’s first poems were published in “Horn”, the student literary journal where J.P. Clark was Editor-in-Chief. However, it was the publication of his verses in the “Black Orpheus” magazine in 1962, which gained him his first recognition. In the same year he also published a collection entitled Heavensgate and a long poem in “Transition”, the Ugandan magazine published in Kampala.

Heavensgate marked his return to his sources and a deeply-felt personal rebirth with the mother-goddess. The Nigerian artist shared with T.S. Eliot the vision of a deeply-felt personal rebirth with the mother-goddess.

**THE INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE**

In the Sixties, Nigeria was the scene of political upheavals, which led to independence in 1960. Seven years later, the eastern region, predominantly Igbo rebelled, claiming the creation of an independent nation of Biafra. Although Christopher Okigbo followed the social and political events of his time attentively, his poems remained a personal and mythical record. Path of Thunder is the turn point towards a more political tone. The denunciation of political oppression and neo-colonial exploitation coincided with the emergence of radical movements in the Sixties.

**HERO OF BIAFRA**

When the civil war in Nigeria broke out, Christopher Okigbo was employed by Wartraide, an Italian firm. With his friend Chinua Achebe he started a publishing house project; Citadel Press in Enugu. The conflict caused him to abandon his plans and in 1967 he enrolled to serve in the Biafran War. Refusing safer positions behind the frontline, he fought with the rank of Major. He was killed in September 1967 at Opi Junction near Nsukka, during one of the civil war’s first battles.

Posthumously, he was decorated with the National Order of Merit of Biafra.

**MBARI CLUB**

The time was ripe: many young artists at the beginning of the Sixties were looking for a platform to exchange their views and share their various talents. Okigbo and Soyinka, as musicians, were the products of jazz clubs. Consequently in 1961 the Mbari Writers and Artists Club was born in Ibadan. Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo, Achebe, the German critic Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn, the ethnologist, were founder members. The Mbari Club was a large-scale project: a gallery, theatre, creative workshops and a publishing house. The latter played a decisive role in the birth of modern African literature; in addition to the writing of its members and adherents, it published the South African artist and writer Dennis Brutus and Alex La Guma.

For the visual arts, it presented the pioneers, such as the painters Uche Okeke and Yusuf Grillo, the sculptor and painter Demas Nwoko, and the silk-screen artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya. They all became well-known artists in the country.

**FAIRY GOD FATHERS’**

1. Emech Soyinka
2. Chinua Achebe
3. Ulli & Georgina Beier

Endowed with a strange charm, an apparently fragile physique and a lively and penetrating spirit, coupled with a formidable intelligence, he managed to attract the coveted Judith Sefi Atta, daughter of the powerful monarch, Attah of Igbira. She was probably the only woman to understand his quixotic personality. From this exceptional union, their only daughter, Obiageli Ibrahimat Okigbo, was born in 1964.

Eclectic and adventurous, his career led him into the world of business (time spent with the Nigerian Tobacco Company and the United African Company), into politics (Personal Assistant to the Minister of Information in Lagos), and into the publishing sphere (manager of the Cambridge University Press for West Africa).

Nevertheless, it was poetry which occupied the major place in his life. A vocation which he never shed.

“There wasn’t a stage when I decided that I definitely wished to be a poet; there was a stage when I found that I couldn’t be anything else. And I think that the turning point came in December 1958, when I knew that I couldn’t be anything else than a poet. It’s just like somebody who receives a call in the middle of the night to religious service, in order to become a priest in a particular cult, and I didn’t have any choice in the matter. I just had to obey.”

**Fairy Godfathers**

1. Emech Soyinka
2. Chinua Achebe
3. Ulli & Georgina Beier

Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo, Achebe, the German critic Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn, the ethnologist, were founder members. The Mbari Club was a large-scale project: a gallery, theatre, creative workshops and a publishing house. The latter played a decisive role in the birth of modern African literature; in addition to the writing of its members and adherents, it published the South African artist and writer Dennis Brutus and Alex La Guma.

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The crucial role of the Mbari Club was the creation of a true movement of contemporary African artists, whose ultimate aim was to generate a new artistic culture. They reconciled the continent’s cultural traditions and the technical languages imported by the colonists.
“SILENT FACES at crossroads; Festivity in black...Faces of black like long black column of ants, behind the bell tower, into the hot garden where all roads meet: festivity in black... O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong, hear us at crossroads at the great hinges, where the players of loft pipe organs, rehearse old lovely fragments, alone—, strains of pressed orange leaves on pages, bleach of the light of years held in leather: For we are listening in cornfields, among the windplayers, Listening to the wind leaning over. Its loveliest fragment... THE PASSAGE, CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO, HEAVENSGATE, 1962 * A village Stream. The oilbean, the tortoise and the python are totems for her worship.
OLU OGUIBE: Obi, I would like us to step back, perhaps all the way back to your memory of your father. When Christopher Okigbo passed away in 1967, you were a few weeks shy of your third birthday. I presume also that when he moved from Ibadan to Enugu in Eastern Nigeria to found the Citadel publishing house with Chinua Achebe, you and your mother did not move to the Enugu with him given that Nigerian civil war was about to break out. It may be preposterous then to ask; do you have any memory or recollection of your father and if not, at what point in your life did he become a real and palpable presence, and how?

OBI OKIGBO: I have no conscious memory of my father. I have two children one of whom is four years old and I have often wondered if they would have memories of their father or me should we suddenly disappear from their lives. I am now certain they would. It must have been a traumatic experience for a young child and I’m sure that I do have memories but they have been buried, deep down, in the shadowy caves of the subconscious.

I was brought up by my mother, Judith Sefi Attah and grew up around my maternal family all my childhood. My first contact with my paternal kin was when I first went to Ojoto, my father’s birthplace, for my grandfather’s funeral. I was twelve years old. It was my first family event with the Okigbo clan and I met Christopher’s brothers Lawrence, Pius, and Ijem; his sisters Susie and Vicky; and my cousins and other close relatives, most of them for the first time. I developed a close relationship with my uncle Pius* who took on the role as my father right up till his death in 2000. It was only at his funeral in Ojoto in October 2000 that it struck me that I had never shed tears for my real father. This interview continues on page 20...
Plant the seeds of desire seeds take root
Through the power of pure will sprout forth

The roots nourish the stem (upwards)
The stem supports the branches (downwards)
The branches reach for the light (outwards)

In Time
Passion fuels desire buds;
“tight with all it’s might”
Burst open and blossom
into the fresh colours of spring

The first sign of fruit...

Unleashing the beast...

Emporter par le vent;

SOME end up in the belly of an architect
SOME return to the soil
SOME land on fertile ground

He who has ears; listen

Seed takes root and multiply
Before a going and coming that goes on forever
"SILENT FACES at crossroads:
Festivity in black…

Faces of black like long
black column of ants,

behind the bell tower,
into the hot garden
where all roads meet:
festivity in black…

O Anna at the knobs of
the panel oblong,
hear us at crossroads at
the great hinges

where the players of
loft pipe organs
rehearse old lovely
fragments, alone-

strains of pressed orange
leaves on pages,
bleach of the light of years
held in leather:

For we are listening in
cornfields among the windplayers,
Listening to the wind leaning over
Its loveliest fragment…"

THE PASSAGE

Christopher Okigbo
Christopher Okigbo, "Hurrah for Thunder"

“Christopher Okigbo, ‘Hurrah for Thunder’

I, okigbo, town – crier, together
I’ll soon go to hell,
“If I don’t learn to shut my mouth
I could also sympathize with his message. Since then I have

started working on a series of projects around his memory
which has consequently opened up my past and memories
as I begin to piece together fragments of recollections from
his friends and family, lost manuscripts, and his poetry,
that tell my own story.

Obi, I very much like the idea of healing the wound around
memory which, interesting enough, is a task that our
generation has been engaged in as child survivors of the
Biafra war since it ended in 1970. Most of us were in the
eye of the storm because we were in Biafra itself and
witnessed the visceral terrors of the war; the bombings or
“air-raids” as we called them, incessant migrations as the
theatre of war moved in ever so closer, the massacres, and
of course personal losses as well. Somehow, though, what
was missing was awareness on our part of how the rest
of what I call Biafra’s children, who were not within the
Republic, were no less affected in their personal lives by
the war. This did not occur to me until a few years back
when I came across an essay by the writer Faith Adiele
who was in America with her mother during the war
while her father was trapped in Biafra. In the essay she
recounted how she grew up knowing her father only as
a figment in the family narrative, and how the curiosity of
that loss has increasingly drawn her into a search for that
figment. It then occurred to me that all of Biafra’s children
are caught in this life-long ritual of tending the scars of
memory which, interesting enough, is a task that our
memory by providing a home for his spirit, but the wound
that you refer to is the wound in the memory of his
acquaintances and loved ones. How, though, does your
quest relate to your own loss and possibly, a daughter’s
desire to find and reunite with her father?

There is a saying that we don’t appreciate what we have
until we lose it. But we can turn this round and ask; how
can we appreciate or even mourn what we lost if we never
knew what we had? This is my case. I lived 36 years of
my life in contentment and apparent fulfillment until I
confronted my father’s poetry a year ago. Ironically, I only
realized this when I started to find out about
him and the full weight of this loss hasn’t hit me yet as I’m
only at the beginning of my search. As I begin to dig into the
archives of memory, searching for clues about the poet and
man I knew so little about, I have unknowingly stepped into
my own adventure. As I piece together these fragments:
anzecodes, photographs, original manuscripts and
documents, that I have acquired about my father, big
chunks of my story are actually beginning to fall in place.

Recently Adiele has visited Nigeria to speak to her father
as part of a documentary project on her life. In your case,
of course, your father died in the war as a hero of the
Biafra revolution, leaving only his work as a poet and his
impression on his acquaintances. Yet, I see a number of
parallels. I see the war child in search of the key to an
enigma, the enigma of the lasting effect of war on memory.
I also see the daughter in search of her father, the child on
a journey of discovery and reunion. You mention that your
mission is to help heal the wound around your father’s
memory by providing a home for his spirit, but the wound
that you refer to is the wound in the memory of his
acquaintances and loved ones. How, though, does your
quest relate to your own loss and possibly, a daughter’s
desire to find and reunite with her father?

Nevertheless, a poet-protagonist is assumed throughout;
I have chosen to translate what I am living into a project
called “Tapping into the Known”, a body of artistic
interventions following the theme of Christopher Okigbo’s
masterpiece, Labyrinths. He describes Labyrinths as
“a fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfillment,” and goes
on to say that in this fable, “inevitably, several presences
haunt the complex of rooms and ante-rooms, of halls and
corridors that lead to the palace of the white Goddess,
in which a country visitor might easily lose his way.

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Basically, what started out as a desire to find out about my
father, has led to an unexpected discovery of my own
person. This of course has been very painful at times, as it
is like opening a Pandora’s box of deeply buried memories.

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corridors that lead to the palace of the white Goddess,
in which a country visitor might easily lose his way.
Although you were raised away from the theatres of war, a biblical image nevertheless comes to mind when one thinks of your upbringing: she was an only child, and her mother was a widow. This again underlines the apocalyptic ring of Christopher’s dedication to you and your mother in Labyrinths: “for Salinatu and Ibrahimatu, mother and child”, which though it was written in 1965 when no one could clearly foresee the Biafra war or his tragic death, nevertheless sounds like a father’s last bequest to his family. However, so far very little has been written about your mother, Ambassador Atta. I wonder if you could tell us a little about her? Did she ever recount anything about how she met your father, their relationship, what drew them to each other, the kind of man he was, how she coped with his loss? What does she think of your present quest and in what way, if any, is she a part of it?

Your question is so beautiful in its imagery, but these are issues that concern my mother directly and I cannot answer on her behalf. However, regarding the choice that I have recently made, for me my mother is and has always been like an island in the middle of a vast ocean in which I have set to sail. In the turbulent waters that I know lie ahead, it is reassuring to know that I can always count on her strength, wisdom and faith to lead me back to dry ground and once there, her comfort and patience will tend to my sails till I’m ready to set off again into the horizon. She has given me her blessing to go in search of my father, with no interference or judgment on her part. I have to assume this alone, like a big girl, with no demands or expectations on my part. For this, I am eternally grateful to her.

In The Trial of Christopher Okigbo, a remarkable novel by Ali Mazrui published in 1971, Mazrui described a scenario in the afterworld in which your father is put on trial for sacrificing his art to political ideals, in other words, for committing a crime against art by abandoning his poetry and taking up arms in defense of his political convictions, in the process of which he cost Africa one of its finest modern writers when he got killed in action. In the trial your father’s defense counsels explore the different sides to the argument, thus providing an eloquent reflection on the nature and purpose of art, and the artist’s duties to his or her art and to society. Mazrui was part of the East African extension of your father’s famous corterie, which included the poet and novelist Paul Theroux, and the rest of the group around the journal Transition. The novel was Mazrui’s only published venture into fiction, and, it amply demonstrates the passion around your father’s passing, which you noted earlier on. In other words, Christopher Okigbo’s literary standing and promise, and the manner of his death, placed him squarely in one of the most vigorous modern debates, namely, the question of whether art is supreme in and of itself, or rather subsequent to life. It also placed him in a rather glorious line of 20th century writers and artists such as George Orwell and André Malraux, who took up the gun in defense of political convictions.

Your father was what Eliot would call a metaphysical poet. He was also what you might call a Prima Dona as a writer: he was regarded as a poet’s poet, rejected literary prizes, believed in high art, and was not known to harbor any strong, political beliefs before the outbreak of the Biafra war. I know that you have recently gained access to some of your father’s archives? Is there anything in his unpublished writings that provides an insight into his unequivocal decision to lay down the pen and pick up the gun in 1967? Also, as someone who works in the arts yourself, is this a question that has occupied you?

My father was first and foremost a human being. I believe that we are here on earth to live life by the experience
of being alive. This he fully did. Professionally he worked as cigarette salesman for the Nigerian Tobacco Company, tutor in English and Latin in a secondary school at Fiditi, political activist on the near anarchic side of the divide, civil servant, failed businessman, resident representative of Cambridge University Press in Nigeria, librarian, publisher in his own right, and soldier. In his free time, he was a chess enthusiast, an outstanding cricketer, part-time jazz musician and most uniquely of all, a poet.

His special quality was his acute sensitivity to his environment and times that leant him the vision to recognize the extraordinary in very ordinary, everyday events. That is to say that nothing in his experiences was seen as insignificant, and everything was absorbed to later become material for his poetry. We can witness this in characters like Jadum, the half-demented village minstrel; Upandru, a philosopher and sort of community linguist; and “Kepkanly”, his earliest remembered teacher, all of whom appear in the poem “Heavensgate”. Also, in his introduction to Labyrinths he states clearly that “both parts of Silences were inspired by the events of the day: ‘Laments of the Silent Sisters’; by the Western crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lubumba; ‘Lament of the Drums’ by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his eldest son.” The cycle “Path of Thunder” (1965-1966) he dedicated to “the legendary heroes of the January 15 revolution”, referring specifically to the young military officers who carried out Nigeria’s first attempted military coup in January, 1966. His talent as an artist was being able to translate these “symbols” rooted in his lived experiences into a form that is accessible to others. He chose metaphor as his mode of expression; a metaphor suggests the truth that hides behind the visible image. Labyrinths is indeed an epic in that it strings together a whole repertoire of encounters in one man’s life: love, maternity, fraternity, power, birth, life, death
and re-birth, into an age-old story: our quest for eternity. The genius in him, once found, speaks to the genius in each and every one of us; if one takes the initiative to look, we can all recognize a part of ourselves in his poetry. In this respect, my father’s preoccupation was to serve society because the ultimate duty of art is to constantly recreate the collective experience of mankind in relation to time and place. He fully assumed this responsibility till death.

His death was a loss, yes, but so were the deaths of all the fathers, husbands, brothers, relatives and friends who took up arms to defend their ideals and whom are still greatly missed by their surviving loved ones.

You spoke earlier about the fact that Christopher Okigbo was never properly buried since his remains were never recovered from the war front. Of course this is quite important in the Igbo and African world, namely, that the deceased are accorded proper rites so that their spirit may find repose. In fact in Mazrui’s novel, Hamsi, the character who is appointed to serve as Christopher Okigbo’s defense counsel, finds that he, Hamsi, is still in a land in-between and had not quite arrived in the afterworld. And so, according to Mazrui, a “rite de passage was needed to enable him to be promoted from the status of the merely dead to the status of the immortal”. Defending the famous Okigbo was the rite that earned immortality for Hamsi’s soul. Could you speak a little more specifically about the projects that you have embarked on as part of your engagement with the memory of your father and your effort to finally accord his spirit this final rite?

In 2000 I did an Internet search for “Christopher Okigbo” and found fifteen pages and over 200 links. It was then that I began to appreciate the breadth of his influence round the globe. Sifting through all that information, it became apparent to me that a thorough assessment of the importance of Okigbo’s work in 20th century literature is still outstanding, and that an organizational structure was needed to centralize the research, and. This is what has inspired me to create the Christopher Okigbo Foundation. The Foundation’s goal is to restore to Christopher Okigbo the place he deserves internationally and to further his humanist ideals and vision by promoting contemporary creativity worldwide. In other words, the purpose of the Foundation is two-fold; on the one hand it will be a central platform to assemble and diffuse Christopher Okigbo’s legacy, and on the other, inspired by Okigbo’s eclectic talents, the Foundation will act as a patron to provide opportunity for literary events and prizes, artists’ residences, grants, and other such support to support artistic practice. At present the Foundation is based in Brussels where I live, but in time we will build a parallel centre in Ojoto, my father’s birthplace.

To commemorate the 40th anniversary of Okigbo’s death in September 2007; the Foundation will launch a series of events with themes that reveal the poet and his work. The season of “Celebration” will be opened with a memorial service in Ojoto; envisaged as simple spiritual gathering that concludes with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque marking a symbolic place of rest for Christopher in his own home town. <<<

“I shall never forget the tears that came to your eyes on the day of your recent visit to the Schomburg Center on the advice of a friend that a recording of your father was in our collections...”

James Briggs Murray, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
PREDOMINANTLY RED, Sacrifice and Bliss,
Powder pigment on canvas. 2005
AND AT THIS CHASTE INSTANT of delineated anguish, the same voice, importunate, aglow with the goddess - unquenchable, yellow, darkening homeward, like a cry of wolf above crumbling houses - strips the dream naked, bares the entrails; and in the orangery of immense corridors, I wash my feet in your pure head, O maid, and walk along your feverish, solitary shores, seeking, among your variegated teeth, the tuberose of my putrescent laughter:

I have fed out of the drum
I have drunk out of the cymbal
I have entered your bridal chamber; and lo,
I was the sole witness to my homecoming...
OKIGBO MEETS SOYINKA

It has been a most interesting journey for Obiagelli Okigbo and the most overwhelming thing for her, she says, is the love that so many have for her father, especially the friends who met and knew him. When they meet her, elderly men in their seventies avert her eyes and lapse into long silences as they struggle to hold back tears. Of these men the closest to her father by all accounts was Chinua Achebe. When she met him for the first time in Germany two years ago, she recalls, the great novelist could not meet her.

Memories of more exciting ventures brought out snippets of his own wild youth. He used to ride a loud motor-cycle, he recalled... “Your father used to ride, too,” he told the younger Okigbo, “till he had a major accident.” That bit of the Okigbo myth was hitherto unknown to many. More salacious details the professor merely alluded to with a smile and a titillating “you don’t want to go there.”

Apparently the relationship between Soyinka and the Okigbo family was not entirely broken with the poet’s death. Several years ago, he recalled, the poet’s widow, Ambassador Attah, as Nigeria’s ambassador to Italy, had shown extreme kindness to a troupe that he led to a theatre festival in Siena. One day she showed up with pots full of sorely missed Nigerian cuisine for the entire group, enough, in fact, for participants from other countries who were at the festival. “What a feast!” he recalled.

Olù Ogüìbì
12.16.04
ELEGY FOR ALTO

Taken from Path of Thunder

... POLITICIANS are here in this iron dance of mortars, of generators - THE EAGLES are suddenly there, New stars of iron dawn;

So let the horn paw the air howling goodbye...

O mother mother Earth, unbind me; let this be. My last testament, let this be
The ram’s hidden wish to the sword the sword’s. Secret prayer to the scabbard -

THE ROBBERS are back in black hidden steps of detonators -

FOR BEYOND the blare of sirened afternoons, beyond the motorcades; Beyond the voices and days, the echoing highways, beyond the latescence. Of our dissonant airs; through our curtained eyeballs, through our shuttered sleep, Onto our forgotten selves, onto our broken images; beyond the barricades Commandments and edicts, beyond the iron tables, beyond the elephant’s. Legendary patience, beyond his inviolable bronze bust; beyond our crumbling towers -

BEYOND the iron path careering along the same beaten track -

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...

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 forever..
WATERMAID

EYE OPEN on the sea, eyes open, of the prodigal; upward to heaven shoot where stars will fall from. Secret I have told into no ear, save into a dughole, to hold, not to drown with - Secret I have planted into beachsand Now breaks salt-white surf on the stones and me, and lobsters and shells in iodine smell- maid of the salt-emptiness, sophisticreamy, whose secret I have covered up with beachsand... Shadow of rain over sunbeaten beach, Shadow of rain over man with woman.

BRIGHT with the armpit-dazzle of a lioness, she answers, wearing white light about her; and the waves escort her, my lioness, crowned with moonlight. So brief her presence- match-flare in wind’s breath- so brief with mirrors around me. Downward... the waves distil her; gold crop sinking ungathered. Watermaid of the salt-emptiness, grown are the ears of the secret.

AND I WHO am here abandoned, count the sand by wave lash abandoned, count her blessing, my white queen. But the spent sea reflects from his mirrored visage not my queen, a broken shadow. So I who count in my island the moments, count the hour which will bring my lost queen with angels’ ash in the wind.

THE STARS have departed, the sky in monocle surveys the world under The stars have departed, and I-where am I? Stretch, stretch, O antennae, to clutch at this hour, fulfilling each moment in a broken monody.

PREDOMINANTLY VIOLET, La Pieta, Oil on Canvas, 200
AFTER SHE had set sail after she had set sail
After the mother-of-earth had set sail

After the earth-mother on her homeward journey, The fires at the rear of her the fires of the end. The flaming rainbow behind her like a wolf she devours;

Like a manatee strikes down the waters of the beginning

The going the gone-waters the back-swirling eddies. The waves in battle ahead of her in the attacking storm...

And they came to us after she had set sail bringing to us the secret; And they came bringing to us the secret on, broken clay tablet cooled. From the seven quarters of the globe,Past the seven seas past the seven

Distant deserts, bearing beads of coral and kolanuts fit for a queen, They came bringing to us the secret by Man-Of-Giant-Testicles coded...

The gatekeepers at the seven gates heard them,trembled at their approach; The onlookers marveled at their standards, and their plumed helmets... And they surged round about us, and round about the clearing, Round about us like a fence of thorns raised against the onlookers...
FROM FLESH into phantom on the horizontal stone. I was the sole witness to my home coming...

Serene lights on the other balcony:
delicious fountains bristling with signs -

But what does my divine rejoicing hold?
A bowl of incense, a nest of fireflies?

I was the sole witness to my homecoming...

For in the inflorescence of the white

chamber, a voice, from very far away, chanted,
and the chamber descanted, the birthday of the earth, paddled me home through some dark labyrinth, from laughter to the dream.

Miner into my solitude, incarnate voice of the dream, you will go, with me as your chief acolyte, again into the ant-hill...

I was the sole witness to my homecoming...
The Christopher Okigbo Foundation will dedicate the year 2007; the 40th anniversary of his death, to his memory in celebration of his life and achievements. To work towards this aim, it intends to launch a series of events with themes revealing the poet and his work. This first phase of the project will be spread over the next five years. The scale of our undertaking is inspired by the breadth of his influence around the globe.

The season will open with a memorial ceremony, which will be held in Ojoto, the poet’s birthplace. The occasion, centred on the Igbo tradition, will enable his family, village, and close friends alike, to seal the peace around his memory. This spiritual gathering is envisaged as a simple, sober moment culminating with the unveiling of a commemoration plaque marking a symbolic place of rest for Christopher in his own home town.

Our first priority is the re-publication of “Labyrinths” and “Collected Poems” his two masterpieces, today out of print. To ensure diffusion throughout the African continent, a new bilingual collection of poems will be edited with translations into French and Igbo. The circulation and promotion of these works will be undertaken at literary events and during an international symposium devoted to the poet’s legacy. Its visibility will be accrued with the website of the Foundation.

How and why has Christopher Okigbo marked his contemporaries? An artistic tribute, paying homage to the poet’s contemporary heritage will be assembled showing the work of artists sharing Christopher Okigbo’s vision. A documentary film will attempt to explore the artist’s role in defining the Identity of a newly-independent Nigeria also to decipher the enigma of the man behind the poet.

www.christopher-okigbo.org
Only definition of PRIVATE SPACES are the 'SUDUS' (huts) where the women sleep. These are made from locally collected branches. Brush wood branches a-so only shelter from the sun and wind for the men and cattle.
PLANTING NEW “MBARIS”

Everybody needs a Hero. Someone to look up to
Where are our HEROES?

We have a responsibility to Africans
On the continent and Diaspora
As enlightened citizens of the world
To pass on the beacons of hope

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FROM ANNABELLE: Thank you to the Nwankwo Family, especially my parents, Okey (Baba-Gee I know you are with me) & Felicia, James, Chichi, A’isha, The Venn Family, Edun and Usmam - for being there for me and allowing me to fly!

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FINALLY - To Christopher Okigbo for the genius and inspiration that you are - This was a TRIP of a life time and God bless, for allowing me to be part of it.

To Obi - I love you Sis. Xxx

FROM OBI: mum & dad, uncle P, alessandro, sofia, luca, okigbo-family, majek’-family, attah-family, okuzu-family, dati family, inyang, ah, annabelle, olu, marie-claire, mwanza, chike, alice, julie & lionel, julie & vincent, iscopald, laura, melissa, oni flame, oladele, val2, obiora, fabien, guimette


NUFF RESPECT! Obiageli Ibrahimat Okigbo

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