

THE CLANGOUR OF THE GONGS...

Kenneth Kanu

Driven by the clangour of the gongs, the melliflence of the flute and the sonority of the slit wooden drums, Oguejiofo staggered off his bamboo bed. He dressed in an overflowing jumper of a locally made fabric which hung limply on him. He had lost much weight from his illness and it was glaring. The sound of Oduma music from a reasonable distance filtered into his ears that morning and he could not resist it. He loved Oduma dance. He did it very well and was known for it far and wide. But illness had dogged his steps in recent years and he had not been featuring. His slight frame and knock knees were endowments about doing the dance well.

Oguejiofo was a blacksmith and he made modest wealth from it. His bellows were the best in the locality. He took ill as soon as his wife gave birth to their last daughter. His illness was variously diagnosed. However, a dibia was consulted who promised to cure him if they paid well. Agreement was reached and medication started. He had had medication for eight market days and there was a remarkable improvement.

That fateful day, as soon as he fathomed that the music came from Umuduru, a neighbouring town, he rose, removed specks of dust and cobwebs that had collected on his bicycle and made ready to go. As his wife noticed that he wanted to go out, she pleaded with him to stay back. But he refused. She fell on her knees and pleaded passionately, reminding him of his health condition. Yet he refused.

As Oguejiofo rolled out his bicycle, the wheels seized. His wife pointed out that, that was enough sign for him to stay back. Oguejiofo thundered at her to shut up. To him, it was the ranting of an ant. His wife retreated, soliloquizing, she sat on the dwarf wall and looked into space. For nearly twenty minutes, Oguejiofo worked on the wheels of the bicycle. He mustered all courage until the wheels eased off. As he set to go, he dusted the saddle of the cycle with a dirty rag. He sat on it and called his dog with a coded whisper and they moved. It was dry season, late November. His dog trotted behind him jingling the rattles on its neck. As they advanced, Oguejiofo pedaled his cycle lethargically and lazily towards Umuduru, driven by the clangour of the gong of the Oduma dance. Slowly and steadily, they inched their way until they got to Umuduru. The atmosphere was bright and gay.

On arrival at the scene, Oguejiofo's old friends; Amadi, Ibe, Nwaubani, Gaius, Obadiah and Nwamkpa welcomed him warmly. They exchanged pleasantries during which they noticed that he looked wizened. There, the air was charged and aflame with activities. All corners were festooned with banners and buntings. It was the funeral of a great man; Ukoye, a palm Kernel merchant. It was grand and epic. Food, music and dance juxtaposed. Food was tendered and served and music wafted through the air. At intervals the harmattan dust rose and settled. The drums rose to a frenzy as the men beat them with padded sticks, working feverishly from one to another, sweating away. The flute sang high and low, piercing harmattan air melodiously. Those beating the gongs were possessed by

Kenneth Kanu
Department of
English/Literature
Alvan Ikoku Federal
University of Education
Owerri, Imo State,
Nigeria.

Correspondence to
Kenneth Kanu
Email: obi.echina@yahoo.com

the spirit of it. People surged forward wanting to have a glimpse of the dancers and performers. Young people were mad with excitement while the old nodded to the beat of the drums and remembered with nostalgia the days when they danced to its intoxicating rhythm. Okoye whose funeral was in question was a great man by all standards, so all the clan was at his funeral. Guns were fired. Cannons called and answered. The earth quaked and tremored. It was the funeral of a hero. Ferocious young men jumped over walls and danced on the roof. Some of them were very violent, others merely entertained. Masquerades were not left out. They featured greatly; notables like Ijele of Nnewi, Otakagu of Agulu, Agaba of Umuagu, Egbeigwe of Nanka, Kitikpa of Nnobi, Adanma of Ngwoo and Okwonma of Izuogu. The Ijele masquerade had a flutist that deftly communicated with it. The flutist wove soulful melodies and blended esoteric messages into the intoxicating rhythm of the drums and gongs. The Otakagu masquerade walked with the strides of a giant, belched smoke from its head and dangled a red cock by its waist. It was solemn and breathtaking.

Okoye was a traditional ruler. His colleagues featured with pomp and splendor and accorded him valedictory rites. Chiefs of all sorts came. From North, East, South, West they came; chiefs in regalia and out of regalia, chiefs with thrones and chiefs without thrones, chiefs with subjects and chiefs without subjects, natural chiefs, social chiefs, they all were there. It was a gathering of who was who in the society. Lunatics and imbeciles also came. They ate and drooled saliva.

That was the situation when the Oduma dance came alive and overwhelmed the atmosphere. Oduma dance was an ancient dance, a dance of warriors, done with verve. The songs, the clangour of the gong, the flute and the rattles which were rendered with measured crescendo and diminuendo were an exquisite ensemble that radiated a euphony too alluring to resist. At that point, Oguejiofo went wild with excitement when the drum and flute called him over and over. He was overwhelmed. It reminded him of old times. He could not contain himself anymore. Oblivious of his health condition, he stepped out in high spirits to dance but staggered and missed his steps. He fell, rose, staggered and tottered. People quickly gathered and held him. They took him to a corner where he rested and recouped. Still, the music continued, calling every man by their title names. Oguejiofo went wild once more. The clangour of the gong and the timbre of its music penetrated his soul and propelled him again. Dancing to Oduma music was his forte. Everyone knew it. Years before, he had won awards and known to have beaten his fellow contestants in the dance.

When the music took a different tempo, Oguejiofo rose again to dance. His friends saw that he was weak and advised him to sit down. But he refused and they left him. As he stood and moved with the rhythm of the dance, he attracted attention but his steps were wobbly and uneven. Yet he managed. First step, second, third and fourth into the dance, people clapped and cheered and went wild with excitement. That was it. His performance was beyond the ordinary. He relived forgotten steps to everybody's admiration. It was in a bid to do the fifth step that he fell head long, fainted and died..... the clangour of the gong. At that, people were awestruck. They gathered and carried his lifeless body aside. His dog was startled. It barked and snarled at people. The dance stopped abruptly. By then his bicycle was still leaning on the oil bean tree where he kept it. "He was warned' said Nwaubani. At times what we love kill us.

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Editors:

Isaac Eyi Ngulube

Ibiere Ken-Maduakp

Anaele Ihuoma

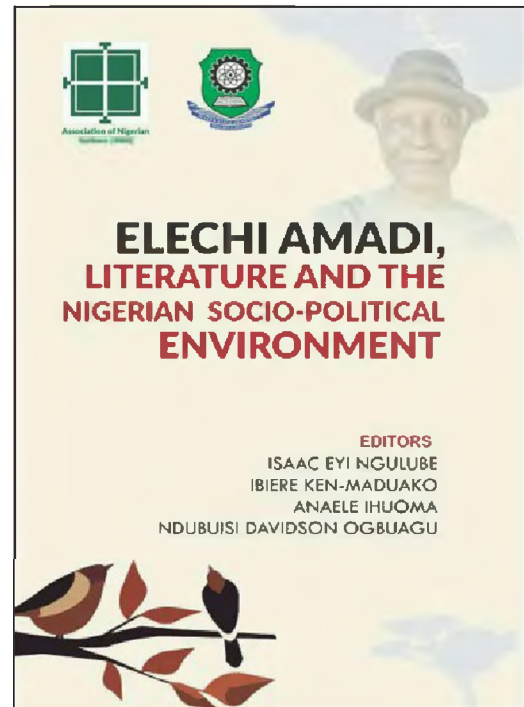
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ELECHI AMADI COMES ALIVE IN ICONIC NEW BOOK

One of Africa's foremost literary icons, Elechi Amadi, has got a taste of his own sweet medicine, as he is the subject of a fine collection of critical articles in a new book, *Elechi Amadi, Literature and the Nigerian Socio-political Environment*. The 22-piece collection is the brainchild of a literary collaboration between the Association of Nigerian Authors, Rivers State, and the Rivers State University, Port Harcourt.

Edited by a team of editors led by Professor Isaac Eyi Ngulube of the University's Department of English and Literary Studie, the 314-page book is one of the outcomes of an international conference on creative writing that highlighted the contributions of the Rivers State-born traditional wrestling enthusiast and author, famed globally for his acclaimed novel *The Concubine*, published in 1966.

The new book has come as an answer to one of the issues raised by the Vice Chancellor, Prof Nlerum S. Okogbule while welcoming delegates to the international conference which the University had hosted in 2022. At the occasion, Okogbule, who is a professor of law, remarked that unlike what obtained in the western world, the non-recognition, in Africa, of the "works of our literary and other academic icons" was one of the problems that needed redressing.

The bulk of the articles in this erudite collection deal with Elechi Amadi's works, and on scholarship that centres around him, while the rest take on diverse other literary subjects.

Some of the articles include: "Elechi Amadi: The Art and Commitment of the Story Teller" by Kontein Trinya, professor of poetry, who argues, among other things and against the tide of widely held view that Elechi Amadi abhors commitment, that indeed the author is a committed artist. "The cultural nationalism' of which Williams speaks with respect to Achebe and African literature of the colonial era, is that literature pursuing a cause? Or is it lesser commitment because it is not couched in Marxist terminology", he asks rhetorically (p.21).

Other articles include "A Certain Amount of Madness: The Worldview, Culture, Religion and Ideology of Elechi Amadi", by Isaac Eyi Ngulube, who in this Lead paper posits, inter alia, that "Amadi demands of his readers to display great dignity or nobility in their African roots whereas other writers explore the dynamics of

conflict or cultural clash with the West”, gesturing towards Achebe, John Munonye, Nkem Nwankwo, Buchi Emecheta, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, among others.

Weighing in on the language aspect of Amadi scholarship, Ibiere Ken-Maduako, professor of linguistics at the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, in her paper “A Pragmatic Analysis of Two Poems by Elechi Amadi”, co-authored with Stanley Ordu of the same institution, x-rays the linguistic dynamics of two of Amadi's poems, “Song of the Dead” and “Morning”, employing mechanisms such as phonological and morphological analysis, speech acts, syntactical and stylistic analysis, among others, broadly using the multi-modal critical pragmatic model, a model propounded by Ken-Maduako.

On her own, Priye E. Iyalla-Amadi, Elechi Amadi's widow and professor of French, added more than a personal dimension to the enrichment of the discourse. In her paper titled “Elechi Amadi the Poet: Feminist or Womanist?”, she relates Amadi's poetry to current trends in gender and feminist studies, and tries to locate some of his works within the interface of Womanism and Feminism, which is a brave scholastic move, given that, in the space within which African literary critics operate, Elechi Amadi is more likely to be associated with patriarchal, and therefore, anti-feminist postures than with sentiments affirming any strand of feminism, notwithstanding what some consider Amadi's “soft spot for women” (Albert 105).

Other scholarly articles in the book include “Humanism and African Literary Criticism, Redressing a Critical Shortcoming” by veteran university don, Bobo Agava, who advances a theory that the dominant critical canons on the African literary scene do not provide a ready fit for certain literary works conditioned by Africans' socio-cultural consciousness, thus leading to the unacceptable “lumping of some African writers into literary categories to which they do not truly belong” (163).

On his part, Ndubuisi Ogbuagu in his article “Civil War Metaphor and Environmental Degradation in Ifeanyichukwu Duruoha's *Eaters of Dust* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*”, in which he uses the Nigerian Civil War as metaphor, points to the horrors and devastations of war, especially on the Biafran side, as evidence that the best way to fight a war is to deploy the weapon of dialogue – in other words, to refrain from it!

John Otu, in his paper, “Elechi Amadi: Celebrating and Interrogating Traditional African Beliefs”, starts off on the notion that Amadi is quite possibly the only African modern novelist “whose early works do everything but allow even a shadow of the white man or foreigner”, and goes on to explore Amadi's immersion in psychology and African cultural ethos in his works, chiefly *The concubine*.

In his own article, “Pretensions to Divinity: Human Dimensions of the Gods in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*”, Anaele Ihuoma suggests that the gods who are supposed to help humans are themselves helpless, and questions the very essence of their divinity.

In “Electroconvulsive Use of Proverbs in Elechi Amadi's *Concubine*”, Okachukwu Wosu explores Amadi's inventive use of Ikwerre/Igbo proverbs, usually adopted to avoid having to state inconvenient truths in a plain manner that could cause offence. Sample: 'a child cannot scratch for food with her two legs simultaneously’ (p.99). Amadi's use of proverbs is also Ndubuisi Nwaonyeocha's preoccupation in his article, but this time, *The Great Ponds*, part of Amadi's famed trilogy, is his field of exploration.

On his part, Daniel Eluke tackles the invincible Isiburu, as he wrestles with demon of rituals, culture and tradition in “Dramatisation of Egelege Wrestling Festival of Iwhuruohna People of Rivers State: A Study of Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu*”. Eluke also reviewed the “Symbolism in the Tragedy of Adata by Michael Nwaesei: A Semiotic Perspective”. In “The nature of Conflict in Elechi Amadi's *Concubine*”, Kingsley Echem avers that the novel makes a case for harmony between humans and spirits.

Joyce Duru's review of two of Amadi's poems in “God-Determinism in Elechi Amadi's 'To Ali' and 'Imo River'” precedes Humphrey Ogu's fine analysis of Amadi's drama and dramaturgy in “Intercultural Marriages in Elechi Amadi's *The Woman of Calabar* and *Peppersoup*”. There is a return to the theme of proverbs with Stephen Akirika and Charity Elekima co-authoring “Pragmatics Analysis of Proverbs in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds*”.

Extending the breadth of the perspectives offered by the book, the nagging issue of national security is boldly tackled in “Language-based Solutions to Insecurity in Nigeria: integrative Pragmatic Approach” co-authored by Ngulube and Emmanuel O. Alfred. There is a return to Adata with “Ecocriticism in Michael Igwebuike Uwaesei's *The Tragedy of Adata*” by Paul Bulabari Fubara.

Apart from that of Okogbule, the book also contains goodwill messages from Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo,

Professor of Literature at the Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, and chairperson of the governing board of the Nigeria Prize for Literature, as well as those of Wale Okediran General Secretary of the Pan-African Writers Association (PAWA), who describes Amadi as “an icon of immeasurable esteem”, and Camilus Ukah, former national President, Association of Nigerian Authors, who commended the theme of the conference that yielded the book as “highly relevant” at a time the country is “troubled by divisiveness and toxic politics” (p.11).

The team of co-editors who worked with Isaac Eyi Ngulube were Ibiere Ken-Maduako, Ndubuisi Davidson Ogbuagu and Anaele Ihuoma.

The book *Elechi Amadi, Literature and the Nigerian Sociopolitical Environment* is more than a celebration of the literary icon. It speaks to the diversity of scholarship on Elechi Amadi and, indeed, some hitherto less illuminated aspects of Nigerian contemporary literature.

Anaele Ihuoma

Anaele Ihuoma, author of *Imminent River*, is currently a doctoral student of English and Literary Studies at the Rivers State University, Port Harcourt.

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The author grew up in Nigeria where he obtained his early education before emigrating to the United States.

Currently, a healthcare professional living and working in Texas.

He is an avid reader and writer who has written several unpublished manuscripts.

A motivational speaker who is obsessed with self improvement and overcoming obstacles, a music composer, and a fine artist.

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