On Lineage and Voice

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On a humid afternoon, after a few years back from Germany, in our house in Nigeria, where my childhood had its formative years, I found a book lying on our dining table. Its cover showed a pair of drumming hands, brown against the dim yellow and blue of the jacket, and just beneath them, my surname. I remember standing there for a long while, staring at it. It was *The Chants of a Minstrel*—my father's collection of poems published in 2003. I lifted it with both hands. The spine was cracked in the middle from use, and the pages emitted a faint scent of ink and age. I didn't yet know what a poem was meant to do, but I knew, in that instant, that something in me had been summoned. I opened to a page at random and began to read. The words felt real— even when I didn't understand some of the lines. Thereafter, I think, I read about four poems from it. When I finished, there was a small trembling inside me; it was an urge, the kind that comes when beautiful and powerful language awakens the imagination. That day, I wrote my first poem. I cannot recall the lines anymore or what the poem was about, but I remember the paper in my hand as I ran to find my father in his bedroom. "See, Dad," I said, out of breath. "See what I wrote." He took the paper from me, his face soft with curiosity. After reading it, he smiled and said, "Chinua, just put your own feelings down."

That was the first encouragement I ever received as a writer. And it was from my father. I didn't know then that those words would become a compass for my life—an instruction that writing must come from the depth of feeling, from memory, from what the heart dares not say aloud. Since then, the thought of my father's words, to put my feelings down, not only has excited me to write and explore the distillation of one moment or emotion, to dissect and measure memories, and to shape or reshape the layers of meanings, but has also permitted me to treat poetry as a way of delving into memory and identity. They also became the axis around which my life as a poet would turn. Every poem since has been a way of keeping faith with that moment— of writing my way back to the dining table, to my father's smile, to the beginning, then to my lineage and ancestors.

Over the years, I have taken my writings as a devotion—an act that requires a kind of trembling and honesty. And even dismantling. Poetry demands dismantling and asks that one look within, unearth what hurts, and give it form. As an Igbo person, I have learned that to write is also to return—to call on the ancestors and, even, to ask questions. When I began working on *The Naming*, my first full-length collection, I did not yet know what I was building or doing. The title of this collection itself suggests several layers of meaning, including summoning the possibility of the unknown. The poems began as small, uncertain offerings to questions of identity, lineage, and belonging. Much later, I realized that the act of naming—of calling a thing by its true name—is the oldest ritual of all. In my culture, it is both prayer and prophecy. To name is to summon the living and the dead into dialogue. The act of naming in Igbo culture is far more than a mere labeling of a person or object; it is a profound ritual that shapes identity, destiny, and spiritual alignment. From the moment a child is born, the naming ceremony (*ịkụ aha*) is central to communal life. Names are chosen carefully for the power and significance they carry. A name such as *Chinonso* ("God is near") is both a plea for divine presence and a declaration of the child's expected guidance through life. Similarly, *Nkeiruka* ("The future is greater") embodies hope, calling forth a prosperous path while simultaneously proclaiming it. In this sense, every name functions as both a prayer and a prophecy, linking the individual to forces beyond the human sphere, and even to the people who came before them. Hence, *Chinụalụmọgụ*, my first name in full (the Igbo people have "Chi", a personal and spiritual guide that descends from the great God, Chukwu), which loosely means "Chi fight for me." Because I was given this powerful name, I discovered I can also name things (things I do not understand or have been causing me problems) before my ancestors, through my poetry collection, so I would understand where I come from, why the things that are happening to me are happening, and then figure out how to walk into my future.

During my time at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, before *The Naming* became what it is now, I remember one afternoon in one of Andrews Halls, sitting in my supervisor Kwame Dawes's office. He leaned back in his chair and said, "Break all your manuscripts. Find what is strong." I left his office confused, with the word *strong* reverberating in my chest. How does one measure strength in poems that were written through anything? Which of my poems held enough truth to risk their own exposure? That evening, I returned to my father's *The Chants of a Minstrel*, the same collection that first called me to writing, and later a co-winner of the 2005 NLNG Prize for Poetry. Reading him again, I saw the booms and intricacies of invocation of the Igbo people—the way his lines reached across time, speaking to the ancestors as if they were seated beside him. The Igbo minstrel appeared in his poems as a symbol and as a guide, unraveling the enigmas of our people's ontology. I understood then that I was to continue this tradition—that my work was speaking in the same language of summoning, of genealogical remembrance.

When I started putting together *The Naming*, I ensured that my ancestors did not come across as ghosts or spirits, but as presences. The two opening poems in it are invocations, and through them, my ancestors arrive through kola nut, *nzu*, and palm wine—the trinity of invocation in Igbo cosmology. The kola nut, often presented at ceremonies and gatherings, is broken and shared as a gesture of respect, unity, and communication with the divine. *Nzu*, with its purity and whiteness, signifies clarity, sanctity, and spiritual focus, while palm wine serves as a medium of offering, a liquid conduit through which the living communicate with forces beyond the material world. Together, these elements create the ritual space necessary for ancestral presences, opening a pathway through which ancestors may be summoned from their realms, *Alaandiiche*, to witness, bless, and guide the living. Each— kolanut, *nzu*, and palm wine— is a portal, a core reminder that one must return home for any offering to be complete. So I return, each year, to my hometown in Nigeria. I kneel at my homestead, on the red earth, then break the kola, and call the names of those who came before me. I tell them about my journeys, my poems, my fears. I tell them I am trying to remember and that they should guide me.

After the invocation, I then share with my ancestors through a series of revelatory poems my experiences, the economic and socio-political issues in the country, my childhood, and adulthood. I ask my ancestors, *How do I know whether the future will be better?* I confront them with what I call "the monkey's hand" on my past and present. The "monkey's hand" evokes both mischief and burden; an unnatural intrusion, and something inherited or lodged that distorts and complicates. The metaphor of the monkey's hand is applied as something that reaches in tangled, perhaps mischievous or uncanny, interfering with the past-present continuum. It is part of inheritance, the colonial history, familial ruptures, migrations, unsaid things, things one cannot fully recover.

I also confront the tension of honoring my ancestors through poems that embody unclear visions about them while seeing clearly what must be challenged. I learn from the past while not being stuck in it, and seeing what the Igbo tradition offers and which traditions burden it. Uncertainty about the future is also a core motif. In that drive, I know it is in itself an act of hope and hoping. In the collection, I traced my lineage to about 400 years ago, to a man named Ikaigbo from Agbo in Delta, who had a grandson, Ishigbo, who resettled in the present Owèrrè-nkworji in Imo, which is where my family originates. Ishigbo fathered Owèrrè, who fathered Ishiowèrrè, who fathered Iduma. Iduma fathered Ọbashị, who fathered Ibegwa. Ibegwa fathered Ohaeto, followed by Ogbonna, then Ezenwa, and finally, me. This was told to me by De Amarachi Ndubuisi, who got it from De Odoenyi Ndubuisi, who, in turn, got the story from Da Uma-Obashi. The credibility of this relies on my belief in orality, especially on the side that Ikaigbo was from Agbo. I chose to focus exclusively on exploring my lineage from Ọbashị, the first son of Iduma, to gain exclusive control over the movements in the collection. The position of the head of the clan and kindred was passed down to me through the lineage of the first son.

Writing about lineage meant risking discomfort. I knew that some of what I revealed might unsettle some of my family members. But truth-telling requires courage, and poetry, if it is to live, must disturb what silence has protected. There were nights I dismantled myself, breaking and rebuilding, allowing the poems to take on their own what they can allow. To achieve this through poetry, I must compress certain narratives and grant the poems the freedom to be just poems. I learned, in that process, that dialogue with the past must be reciprocal. I speak to my ancestors, but I also wait for them to answer. Sometimes they speak in myth; sometimes in my father's remembered voice. And sometimes, in the stillness after writing. But even when their voice is mediated, the act of listening complicates it. This mutuality is what grieves and what hopes.

This bidirectional dialogue is essential. I want the past to be engaged. There is also the question of belonging and naming, which involves understanding what it means to be named, to inhabit names, and to be named after someone like Chinua Achebe. I probe my ancestry through these vulnerable poems, and their inherent literary details in terms of responsibility, expectation, and heritage. Therefore, this brings up the concern of the future, the uncertainty, the hope, and the burden of knowing that what comes next depends in part on what is reclaimed, spoken, and even remembered. The poems in the collection ask how one knows whether the future "will be better"—implicitly, whether the work of naming can itself change trajectories.

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