The Early Oeuvre of Romanus Nnagbo Egudu

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Poets who are also scholars of poetry occupy a peculiar niche in the ineffable enterprise of memorable music and words. They are not rare birds in the West (or the Orient), but here in Africa, the sighting of one such personage is something to cherish. If granted the further pleasure of not just a glimpse but an actual oriel into their youthful oeuvre as well, that is most definitely cause for genuine celebration. It is almost always the case that one learns more of what makes Yeats, or Eliot, or Pound, or Dennis Brutus, or Césaire the poets and scholars they were – with a lens trained on their youth.



Professor Romanus Nnaegbo Egudu, poet and scholar of poetry, has greatly increased our understanding of both modern African and traditional African poetics with his writings. Samples of his works published in *Black Orpheus* in 1966 and 1967, when he was 26 and 27 respectively, showcase his encounter with modernist sensibilities as well as a thoroughgoing understanding of his native Igbo traditional poetics.

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Egudu the poetry scholar

Egudu's explication of Ojebe poetics is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, on record to systematically analyze Igbo poetry in the Ojebe tradition – its elements, forms and functions, scope, relationship with other Igbo poetic traditions and much more. The interesting contrast in Egudu as a young poet and scholar is also a veritable study for those with an interest in situating African poetic forms in the contemporary world traditions of poetry. Whereas there have been tomes written on the haiku and the renga, analytic work of the quality that Egudu published in *Black Orpheus* regarding Ojebe poetry is so rare as to command continuing study and scrutiny.

To be sure, there are accomplished poets who are also outstanding scholars of the poetries of their people all over Africa – East to West, North to South. In Lingala, Xhosa, Ijaw, Ewe, Venda, Amharic, Bambara, Igbo, Igala, Twi, Yorùbá, Ebira, Tamazight, Shona or Hausa, there are poets so dedicated to their craft and its *scholarship* (though that word is hardly ever applied to them in their native elements) that the continued vitality of their particular cultures owes something to their industry. Contemporary African poetry owes Okot p'Bitek a debt of gratitude for his solid achievements in this regard. His watershed works, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol,* remain a reference point in the entirety of modern African poetry. What is somewhat rare in these climes is the poet-scholar who can also conduct meaningful work about poetry and poetics in and outside his or her mother tongue.

Where and how might one encounter such luxuries of sensibility? Nairobi cafes? Mombasa? Lagos? Kampala? Cairo? Accra? Tshwane? There are those extremely rare happenstances in which one encounters an informed interlocutor while awaiting a connecting flight to Kigali or Arusha, Quebec or Montevideo. It even happens while lining up for coffee at certain conferences, maybe once or twice in twenty years. The irony, the supreme irony, is that it used to happen fairly predictably at Ibadan and periodically on the pages of *Black Orpheus*, the literary journal, between 1957 and 1975!

Revisiting the now priceless trove of the *Black Orpheus,* one is faced with such an embarrassment of riches that a certain lust is stirred for all the gems between the pages – as produced by our earliest, modern, collected culture workers. They were at the vanguard of the modern era: Aimé Césaire, David Rubadiri, J.P Clark, Ulli Beier, Pierre Verger, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Bona Onyejeli, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Peter Thomas, Kole Omotoso, Bakare Gbadamosi, INC Aniebo, Es'kia Mphahlele, Yahaya Aliyu, Janheinz Jahn, and Romanus Egudu. These were some of the most highly educated culture workers of the period; and Romanus Egudu, who is now 85, was one of the youngest in the *Black Orpheus* cohort. Egudu specialized in poetry and the scholarship of African poetry, a bold undertaking at any age but even more so at a time when he was one of the first out on the field.

First published as a poet in *Black Orpheus* in 1966, Egudu's confidence was instantly recognizable and remarkable. Even more striking was his mastery and competence as a critic of African poetry at the relatively young age of 27. The kind of mastery of the subject that the man who would become Professor Romanus Egudu had already begun to demonstrate, is the earliest clue we have of his distinctly singular métier. Not only was he writing worthwhile modern poetry, he had acquired sufficient control of the languages he worked with to help his readers navigate the modernist poetic landscape and its encounter(s) with traditional poetic forms.

When it comes to indigenous African poetic forms, the sheer range of what has been done – and what can be done – is breathtaking. Thus, when Romanus Egudu takes us on what is first akin to a broad survey of the Ojebe poetic landscape, we have the feeling that we are surveilling a treasure island that is palpably new yet strangely familiar. Ojebe poetry is rooted in oral performance,

transmitted through generations via recitation and song. Performance here is more than verbal dexterity and facility; it connotes inventiveness and élan. Egudu's scholarship highlights its dynamic nature, often integrated with music, dance, and ritual.

Ojebe, we learn, is poetic vitality in its most visceral and idiomatic form. It is that strange creature that is ubiquitous yet uncommon, mnemonic and yet psychic, mercurial yet palpable, austere yet rich, lush and yet confined to a magic circle. Egudu translates a couplet of Ojebe thus:

When a blind man mistakes a lump of earth for food

The shame is not his but that of his brother

And in whatever African language these two lines are translated, there are echoes, vestiges. Echoes that help us locate what we ought never to miss in African arguments about form and content.

Romanus Egudu provides analysis emphasizing both aesthetic and sociocultural dimensions underscoring the use of proverbs and metaphors, for example. Rich in proverbs and symbolic language, Ojebe poetry plumbs and then conveys wisdom, moral lessons, and cultural values. Egudu notes how these elements deepen meaning and connect the individual to a pool of communal knowledge and verbal aesthetics.

As Igbo is a tonal language, Egudu's analysis shows how the poetry relies on tonal patterns and inflections to convey nuances, with rhythm and pitch contributing to its aesthetic and interpretive layers. Again, this element is shared with most language families on the African continent. An attentive reader of Niyi Osundare's poetry, even in English, can pick up the tonal play on words and how they add to the redolent and mellifluous tonalities of the final product.

Egudu reiterates the communal themes that are the preoccupation of Ojebe poetry. Focused on collective experiences rather than individual expression, the poetry addresses themes like community welfare, ancestral reverence, filial piety and social harmony. In a world where competing centrifugal and centripetal social forces are constantly exerting themselves on the society, the poet holds things together so they do not fall apart. The element of communal responsibility is evident not only in the poetry but in the fiction as well. Unoka, the father of Okonkwo, who is the accomplished flutist always serving to bring the community together in Chinua Achebe's classic, *Things Fall Apart*, is ignored. He perishes, but the community suffers grievously down the road. The community's choice to valorize Okonkwo – the very manifestation of machismo – saves neither Okonkwo nor the community at the end of the day.

Egudu underscores the role of Ojebe poetry in rituals (festivals, funerals, and other rites of passage), where it invokes spiritual forces, celebrates heritage, or mediates social cohesion. Ritual and ceremonial functions have been so atomized in contemporary society (and the poet's role subsumed by the moneyed class) that what emerges is a transmogrified society where crass display of wealth attempts to stand in for the ineffable.

But perhaps one of the most enlightening aspects of Egudu's early work on Ojebe is on its formal architectonics and structural features. Parsing through the use of truisms woven into paremiology and panegyrics, the adept at Ojebe is a true verbal artist who excels at meaningful repetition and

parallelism for emphasis and mnemonic purposes. The deployment of call-and-response, an interactive performance style engaging the audience but which places a tremendous demand on the poet's sense of timing, is explored. In almost every society in West and Central Africa, this device is a handy tool of the poets. However, as a counter-ballast, skillful use of cyclical narratives, reflecting non-linear narratives is also deployed to accentuate a more holistic worldview.

The highly demanding repertoire of the Ojebe poet is even more so because of the necessary integration of music and dance into the work. Poetry is often performed with instrumental accompaniment (e.g., drums, flutes and gongs) and choreography, enhancing its sensory impact. Perhaps 'repertoire' is not the most accurate word, seeing as Ojebe privileges improvisation. Flexibility in performance allows Ojebe poets to adapt content to context, audience, or contemporary relevance while simultaneously maintaining traditional roots.

And yet Ojebe's time-honoured didactic and social roles serve as a tool for education, preserving history, and critiquing societal issues. Poets act as cultural custodians and moral guides, voices of the communal past, handing down the wisdom of the ages through lessons from nature and ancestral symbolism. Imagery drawn from the natural environment and ancestral veneration reflects Igbo cosmology and spiritual beliefs, while deepening the communal bond. The poet is thus fetching from a well of memory while at the same time desilting the ancestral source.

Egudu's work situates Ojebe poetry within a broader African literary ethos, emphasizing its functional artistry and role in sustaining cultural identity. His analysis bridges linguistic form, performative context, and communal significance.

Professor Egudu illustrates how traditional Igbo elocutionary poetry is rendered (in one breath); and there are Igala, Efik, Tiv, Yoruba and Izon parallels for these. Among the Yoruba, for instance, the so-called 'Alphabet Song' *Nje o bu mo* is one example. Not only are these built out of truisms, they also exercise both the poet and the audience in the language of the people. Some lines of these poems are designed to pique the curiosity of younger people, drawing them in.

Now, 58 years later, Egudu's first published works are enabling us to understand contemporary poets and poems that have since crossed over from their pure originary forms into written, published text. For example, the poetic practices of Amu Nnadi, whose poetry in praise of his father in the volume, *Ihejuruonu*, (2014) is a remarkable accomplishment in English and on its own terms, but which acquires even more significance and depth once the audience becomes aware of the source sensibilities from where the impulse sprang.

The invigorating and moving spontaneity celebrated in such lines as:

"i cannot give you father

ozo okechi amu nnadi

ihe juru onu agidi ntagbute

nnachiri nweze

nwa eze oha ogota elemu

a fitting goodbye

you are an elephant

you are a house

i bite into you in vain

igwurube oru miiii

i cannot hold all of you

a star, i cannot leave your sky

a fish, i cannot leave your river

a tree, i cannot leave your soil

a bird, i cannot fly and not return

to your nest, nwa eze oha ogota…"

speaks to the evolving yet rooted characteristics of Ojebe in Igbo poets past and present. In an apocrypha about a group that once travelled with Christopher Okigbo to his hometown, the poet is said to have summoned his friends at dawn to come hear the village bard and town-crier deliver poetic lines in song and speech – as it had been done from time immemorial in those parts. This is something that most Africans who grew up in rural areas in the period up to the 1970s can relate to.

The advent of radio brought about a kind of experiment in African societies in which the indigenous poet delivers poems of exhortation, adjuration, the lampoon and so on early in the morning on the airwaves. This practice, common in the 1970s and the 1980s, is gradually disappearing as radio takes a back seat to new media.

That bygone era is evoked in the 1998 volume *Horses of Memory* by Niyi Osundare, which straddles Yoruba and English poetic forms. Osundare, in this volume dedicated to the memory of his father, conjures up tenderness using elements of his farmer-father's life. Everything is pressed into service – the native soil and songs sprung from it, the calloused hands of the departed, shared laughter of father and son, the titular horses that serve as steeds of history and heritage all bearing intimations of the unbroken spirit of the clan. Elements Osundare has in common with Ojebe, while remaining firmly rooted in Yoruba poetics; they point to a wider (and shared) sensibility of a thing we may reasonably describe as Ojebean.

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Egudu as a modern poet

Most poets already know they are poets by their early twenties. In 1966, Black Orpheus edited by Ulli Bier and Abiola Irele published three poems (*The Conqueror's Sword, The Fisherman*, and *The Spirits Are Up*) by 26-year-old Romanus Egudu; and in 1967, three more poems (*Nemesis, A Viper*, and *Dungeon*). Egudu's early poems stand apart for their *binocular* vision through which power and responsibility are scrutinized. There is a palpable preoccupation with power and with what ought to be the moral compass of power.

In *The Conqueror's Sword*, Egudu poses the moral question as to what correlation(s), if any, there is between right and might.

"Give it to right?

no, the sharpness of a knife

is in the might of the arm…

so the sword to might

right can grovel

and lie in defeat

then the soil will be blood bathed

It will be fertilized thereof,

and in April shoots of tears

will sprout, and after

we sing the dirge of innocence…"

And what warrior has not encountered this dilemma in the quest for conquest? Whether the theatre is in Iraq or Gaza, the mountains of Afghanistan or the plains of Somalia? And is the dirge of (for) innocence ever sufficient in a world out of kilter by the will of conquerors?

The modernist impulse is evident in these poems – fragmented imagery and abrupt shifts in tone and perspective, the admixture of metaphors and shifts between high and low registers of language, the intertextual import of April, Eliot's 'cruellest month' in *The Waste Land*, for instance, and Egudu's 'shoots of tears'. Beyond the apparent modern devices in the poem is their resonance with the times. 1966 and 1967 in Nigeria are years like none other, years that continue to haunt the nation's history into the 21st century.

From the titles of these poems to the very lines of each, the torsions in the Volksgeist echo and the referents plumb deep psychic aquifers of the collective unconscious. The defamiliarization techniques of modern poetry notwithstanding, read in sequence, these poems reflect the state of mind of the poet and his country. The high register and imagery are a reminder of what the cardinal poets of the period – Christopher Okigbo, J.P Clark, Wole Soyinka and Gabriel Okara – were doing with language, in a time that demanded extreme caution.

Black Orpheus is a fardel of the age of innocence in African writing, and especially in Nigerian writing, with the Nigerian Civil War marking a moment in the same. They say that scar tissue and pristine skin neither look nor feel the same and this is true of Nigerian literature before and after the war. There is a prepuce and an efflorescent quality to these writings, and in the case of Romanus Egudu, an analytic heft that charted and continues to chart the course of contemporary praxis in poetry. The arc traced by his work and sensibilities light a path for all who have come after.

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Postscript:

Prayer of the Powerless, a collection of poems by Romanus Egudu, was published in 2005.