

Ben Obumsele (1930-2017): Pioneer African Literary Critic



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Every man,” Ben Obumsele wrote, “is a lover and follows the Muse.” Prodigiously gifted, extraordinarily learned and informed, oracular in his pronouncements in spite of his unassuming mien, Obumsele was himself the fulfilment of every ambitious student's deepest dream of the intellectual Muse. And he, moreover, had the patience, the compassion, and the generosity to guide the enthusiastic student on the challenging path to truth. When I and my generation of students at Imo State University, Etiti (now Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria) first met Obumsele in the classroom in the early 1980s, the experience was nothing short of a revelation of the enthralling delights of the life of the intellect. Our stars could hardly have been more auspicious. Dreams were engendered; careers were born; eternal discipleships were begun.

Discovering Obumsele and his work has been one of the profoundest experiences of my life. A pioneer student in the honours degree programme in English in the University College Ibadan introduced by Professor Molly Mahood, Obumsele entered the University in 1951 as the winner of the Open Scholarship for the best candidate in the Faculty of Arts. He maintained the scholarship level of performance for the six years he spent as an undergraduate and won the Faculty Prize as the best graduating student in 1957. He achieved these results while holding the office of the President of the Students' Union in 1955/56 and the first President of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) in 1956/57. Remarkably, he was offered a scholarship for postgraduate studies at Oxford University England even before he had earned his first degree. On his return from Oxford with a doctorate, Obumsele taught for three years at the University of Ibadan before moving at the onset of the Civil War to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Fleeing the country at the end of the War because his roles in Biafra placed him under military surveillance, Obumsele led the life of a wandering scholar and taught in universities in England, Zambia, Zaire, Botswana, and Swaziland. He returned to Nigeria in 1981 to serve as Special Adviser to the then Governor of Anambra State, Jim Nwobodo, and, at the collapse of the Second Republic, taught for several years at Abia State University, Uturu. Obumsele left the university in 1986 to begin totally new careers in Lagos.

Obumsele, however, expressed special preference for the vocation of the university teacher. He thought particularly highly of research as a means of generating new insights and saw scholarly publication as a serious gesture aimed at the attainment of immortality. Consequently, beginning from his first essay "The Background of Modern African Literature" published in Ibadan in 1966, he consistently demonstrated the rigour which responsible scholarly publication demands. He was remarkable for the catholicity of his interests, the thoroughness of his modes of enquiry, and the charm of his formulations. He was also typically tireless in his zeal to trace ideas to their ultimate sources and to follow their varying mutations. Regarding cultures as necessarily alive, dynamic, and exogamous, he methodically explored the history of a great diversity of literatures, sculpture, music, languages, religions, and other human endeavours to contend that the mystique of national culture is a twentieth century error. One of the pleasures of reading Obumsele is that every typical piece is an ambitious multidisciplinary tour de force, expressed, moreover, in graceful and powerful language. Two publications of his set this in particular relief: his 1980 publication in *Research in African Literatures*, "The French and Moslem Backgrounds of The Radiance of the King" and his 2010 publication also in *Research in African Literature*, "Cambridge House, Ibadan, 1962-1966: Politics and Poetics in Okigbo's Last Years."

In the earlier article, refuting the stereotype of Laye as an African writer drawing on privileged African material to exalt a permissive moral outlook, Obumsele locates *The Radiance of the King* in the context of values that derive both from Islam and the twentieth century intellectual novel in France. If Obumsele's exploration of Islam with its Sufi revivals is astonishing, he equally methodically explores the oeuvres of many influential French writers and thinkers of the twentieth century to foreground Laye's indebtedness to the West with regard to his moral vision. Sartre, Camus, Julian Green, Francois Mauriac, Flaubert, and especially Kafka are studied with breath-taking mastery as writers whose works are instructive for understanding Laye's craft and preoccupation.

"Cambridge House, Ibadan, 1962-1966: Politics and Poetics in Okigbo's Last Years," like "Christopher Okigbo: A Poet's Identity" which preceded it, has as its thesis Okigbo's multicultural filiations. Obumsele's contention is that Okigbo observes no cultural frontiers but regards the entire baggage of humankind as his patrimony which his genius subjects to an original and life-enhancing synthesis. Serving his apprenticeship at the feet of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Stéphane Mallarmé, Okigbo, Obumsele demonstrates, in his pupilage to Leopold Sedar Senghor and oral African

(actually primarily Yoruba) literature was equally absolute in his dedication. Examining Okigbo, Obumsele ranges through the poetry of Virgil, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Lorca, Mallarmé, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Senghor, and through the varying genres of indigenous Yoruba poetry as well as the music of Debussy and funeral African drums. In obvious adulation of Okigbo's supreme embodiment of the active and contemplative lives, Obumsele also brings to his study of Okigbo insights that derive from his earlier examination of Tolstoy, André Malraux, Iris Murdoch, André Brink, and Ancient Greek tragedy. Reflecting at length on the mystical tradition in Western philosophy which pictures virtue as a kind of dying, Obumsele repeatedly dwelt on the recognition of the temporality of human life as a creative realisation capable of inspiring selflessness and self-transcendent action. Thus, in his reading of Okigbo's "Elegy of the Wind," he highlights with great admiration and power how the poet's acceptance of his mortality and transience beside the imponderable mystery of life liberated him from the fear of death and released his energy for gallant self-forgetful action. In its ambitious scope, as in its intellectual depth and speculative resonance, "Cambridge House, Ibadan, 1962-1966: Politics and Poetics in Okigbo's Last Years" is a typical Obumsele offering.

Obumsele spent the last days of his life as an "Igbo icon" and played an exceptional role quietly, persistently, creatively, selflessly, and almost invisibly in Igbo public life in restructuring the community both in politics and cultural formations. He had equally played prominent roles in Biafra as a member of the Briefs Committee that produced drafts of most of the young nation's pivotal documents and especially in setting up "His Excellency's Special Brigade." He was reading voraciously too in his final years and was at work on a book on the African novel. As always, the planning was painstaking; the procedures and execution rigorous. Old books were reread and new ones were ordered from different parts of the world; new and old journal articles were consulted, and the writing itself was meticulous and unhurried. But the body was steadily giving in to the exertions of a life that always reached out to new horizons. Obumsele's response though was even greater devotion as he found in scholarly work a refuge from searing pains.

I met Professor Obumsele for the last time on 9 February 2017 at his residence in Lagos, as he was about leaving home for the last time for the hospital. He had been in and out of hospital for quite a while. He certainly felt the need to say much to me but could not on account of his health. His words when they came that afternoon were like haloes, luminous above the grating of rasping coughs and the thundering silence of the intervals. Speech

was an act of defiance and he typically persevered. I strained in vain to decipher meanings that had transcended mortal thresholds. He spoke of the state of African literature and scholarship, and of his unfinished book project on the African novel. He was much stronger and his voice firmer when he called me on the phone from the hospital on 26 February. We discussed placing his new article on Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, a part of the book project, in a journal. A perfectionist to the end, even on the hospital bed, he gave instructions on bibliography! That article was accepted posthumously by *Research in African Literatures* and is to be published in 2018.

In his tribute to Obumsele at his passing on 4 March 2017, Professor Wole Soyinka appraised him in veneration as “a solid academic, one of the pioneers of the distinctive University of Ibadan brand, and one whose personality helped to shape Nigeria's collegial culture before its later debasement”. Soyinka regretted that Obumsele had been “for far too long a yawning gap in any compendium of African literary criticism, since Obumsele was such a reticent expositor of his own productivity.” In like manner, preeminent literary scholar, Professor Abiola Irele, who himself was sadly to depart this earthly realm of being shortly after Obumsele, eulogised Obumsele's career and remarked especially on “the acuity of his insights and the elegance of his formulations.” Appraising Obumsele's article on Laye particularly highly, Irele commented that Obumsele's work deserved wider dissemination especially after his death so that his memory could be kept alive “as part of the institutional heritage of the University of Ibadan and our other academic institutions in Nigeria.”

In this regard, arrangements have virtually been completed for the publication of a compendium of Obumsele's representative works on African literature with the title *The Intellectual Muse: Obumsele on African Literature*. Having some of Obumsele's best work in a volume is bound to be a boon to scholars and students of African literature. Yet *The Intellectual Muse*, when it is published, will only be a telling token of the much that Professor Ben Ebelenna Obumsele accomplished in an eventful life of unusual distinction led as scholar, critic, entrepreneur, soldier, statesman, adventurer, counsellor, journalist, speech writer, orator, intellectual muse, and much more.