

BOOK REVIEWS

Poetic Heritage: Igbo Traditional Verse. Compiled and translated with an introduction by Romanus N. Egudu and Donatus I. Nwoga. Enugu, Nigeria: Nwankwo-Ifejika & Co., 1971. Pp. 137.

African languages, from colonial times to the present, have been given very little attention by anthropologists and sociologists in their attempt to understand the cultures of the peoples. Even indigenous scholars, attracted by the so-called 'civilized' cultures of the economically advanced parts of the world, have carried on with the impression that worthwhile knowledge and research can be achieved only through these 'civilized' languages. The result is that whereas great energy and resources have been expended in the attempt to study the environmental background and culture of the continent, very little effort has been devoted to the vehicle which transforms these cultures into a living organism, namely the African languages. Much less effort has been spent in studying the transmutation of these languages into imaginative literature. It is on this basis that I consider the recent publication of *Poetic Heritage*, an anthology of Igbo transitional verse, as a truly welcome and worthy venture. The authors, Romanus Egudu and Donatus Nwoga, both of whom are Igbo lecturers of English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, do not claim to have written Igbo poetry, but only to have recorded and translated the poetry of the Igbo people. It is that kind of poetry which not only is communal in authorship, but gives meaning to the life of the people; it is a story of their cultural life and a statement of its meaning. In a society which claims the highest rate of literacy in black Africa and which has produced specialists in many fields of human endeavor, but which has paid little or no attention to the preservation of its cultural heritage, the efforts of those two men in preserving Igbo poetic heritage for posterity cannot fail to merit commendation.

Poetic Heritage has two particularly interesting qualities which make it not only useful to the foreign student of Igbo literature and culture but also an invaluable source of reference to those Igbo students interested in understanding the varieties of the same poetic expressions within a common cultural background. In the first place, the 'Introduction' deals with a summary of the cultural perspectives without which the poems might not be fully appreciated in their right context. As Dr. Nwoga points

out here, one gets "a more meaningful understanding of the verses by a knowledge of their cultural and ceremonial context," and this knowledge the foreign student of African literature and culture must equip himself with. It becomes necessary for him to understand the rhythmical cultural patterns which find expression in the poems and which govern Igbo philosophy and life. It is on this basis that Dr. Egudu highlights the "wombs to tombs" rhythmical pattern of imagery, stressing further that "each stage of a man's life is marked by one important cultural performance, which turns out a drama of the particular stage." Thus from birth, through life, to death, life is celebrated in poetry which is not just communal property but great art intimately linked with every pulsation of human activity.

The second point of interest in *Poetic Heritage* concerns the translation. For sometime now, the debate has been going on as to whether an official dialect of the Igbo language should be adopted from the various spoken dialects. It is highly interesting that the authors of this collection did not succumb to the temptation of translating the poems first into Central Igbo and then into English. To do this would have created a situation in which these poems would become a translation within a translation. This would not only have falsified their literary validity and matrix (p. 7), but would equally have deprived them of their authentic qualities of rhythm and song which make Igbo poetry a communal event. The variety of dialects represented in the poems, rather than minimize their poetic effectiveness, creates a rich diversity within a single cultural continuum and thus make the anthology an artistic as well as a cultural celebration. Also, the variety of dialects, as Dr. Nwoga correctly remarks, will "increase the sense of reality for those who use the dialects which are represented here," as well as "offer an opportunity for others to appreciate and understand the different dialects of the groups." *Poetic Heritage* will therefore have the effect of enhancing the knowledge of Igbo language and literature in all its variety and richness.

The thematic and subject-matter approach of *Poetic Heritage* has been somewhat arbitrary in the classification. Although it begins with the "Praise Poems" and ends with the "Lamentation Poems," this does not necessarily coincide with the "womb to tomb" approach which these poems represent and whose background has been laid in the introduction. Thus the poems celebrating birth, manhood and death would have been so arranged as to suggest a linear approach which will be not only artistically more ordered but culturally

more valid. Arbitrariness of grouping comes, for instance, with separating the Dance Poem "Igodo" (p. 68) from such others as the Praise Invocation and Incantation poems. Much of what is in the Satirical Poems is as danceable as the Igodo, in the same way as much of what is praiseworthy and invocatory in Igodo can also be seen in the first three classifications. It may be necessary in the future editions of this anthology to streamline and reorder the poems basing them on valid thematic or institutional criteria and pointing out where overlaps occur.

While I commend the authors of *Poetic Heritage* for the good job they have done, I should point out that some of their translations are contextually unjustifiable. For instance, in the short poem on p. 50 'ada nma,' 'agbonma,' and 'nwanyi nma' are translated as 'queen of beauty,' 'fruit of beauty,' and 'lady of beauty.' By the same principle 'ugonma' should be 'eagle of beauty' not 'eagle-like beauty.' 'Eagle-like beauty' not only disrupts the rhythm of the translation which comes close to the original but also falsifies the imagery by turning a metaphor into a simile and so weakening its effect. Moreover, there is no criterion for spelling 'ada nma' and 'nwanyi nma' as double words and 'agbonma' and 'ugonma' as single words. It would have been preferable to leave them consistent to a form or otherwise use the popular and, it seems to me, more acceptable form which is to hyphenate the words—for example, *nwanyi-nma*, *ugo-nma*, etc. Inconsistent spelling also appears in *Ci* (p. 82), *Cukwu* (p. 46), and *Chi* elsewhere. I should think that consistency is necessary to enable the student of Igbo who reads this anthology to get better acquainted with acceptable pronunciations and spellings.

I would also suggest that the omission of lines could lead to wrong line translations for one who is not thoroughly familiar with the Igbo language. On p. 30, for instance, 'Mma na-atu nko' (a knife that is sharp) has on the opposite page 'A rope that drags the elephant along,' which is somewhat absurd. It also seems to me that the use of asterisks as footnote indications where more than one is involved on the same page can be confusing. For the sake of clarity this practice ought to be avoided and substituted with a less vague pattern.

In conclusion, I should like to reiterate my earlier point about the interrelatedness between Igbo poetry and Igbo cultural life. What the poems represent is Igbo life seen through Igbo art, because the traditional poet draws

very heavily from life as the society lives it. In this sense, *Poetic Heritage* is not only a record of a literary tradition, it is also a socio-cultural document; one that has recorded permanently a people's expression of their way of life. Egudu and Nwoga have made a useful contribution to the study of Igbo poetry.

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Christmas in Biafra and other Poems. By Chinua Achebe.
New York: Doubleday & Co., 1973. Pp.92. \$2.50.

Golgotha. By Pol Ndu. Ife, Nigeria: Pan African Pocket Poets, Vol.4, 1971. Pp.34.

With his second published volume of poems (and rumors of a third soon to come) it would seem that Chinua Achebe has made a definite inroad into the realm of poetry. Actually, the present collection is more like an American edition of his first, *Beware Soul Brother*, which was originally published in Nigeria by Nwamife and has since appeared in a British edition as no.120 in the H.E.B. African Writers Series. The twenty-three poems which make up that first collection, including the title poem of the present one, reappear in *Christmas in Biafra*. What is new is the addition of seven new poems (one of which was published in *Okike*, no.2, Dec. 1971) and the fact, pointed out by the author in a Preface, that some of the earlier poems have been revised or re-written. There are two added and helpful features: the inclusion of explanatory end notes, and the grouping of the poems under a number of headings.

Many reviews of *Soul Brother* have acclaimed the simplicity of Achebe's language, a typical one being Donatus Nwoga's observation in *Okike* no.2 that "Achebe's achievement ... has given a stamp of authority ... to poetry of simple language," enthusiastically quoted in the publisher's blurb on the back cover of *Christmas in Biafra*. I think that too much of a virtue should not be made of this simplicity in the poet's language, a danger into which we are likely to fall after the much discussed but often exaggerated obscurity of poets like Okigbo and Soyinka. The point is that there are many instances where Achebe's simple diction (celebrated in his novels) is just not effective poetically. The impression one gets is of an artist still striving to master the craft of a different genre. A