

J. P. Clark

~~(6 April 1935 --)~~

Robert M. Wren

University of Houston

BIRTH: Kiagbodo, Warri Province, Western Region (the Province is now in Bendel State), Nigeria, April 6) 1935, to Chief Clark Fuludu Bekederemo and his wife, Poro, daughter of Amakashe Adomi.

EDUCATION: B.A. (Honours) in English, University College, Ibadan (University of London), 1960.

MARRIAGE: Married Egun Odutola, 1964; children: Ebiere, Tamara, Imoyadue, Ambakederemo.

BOOKS:

Poems (Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1962); some poems republished as *A*

Reed in the Tide (London: Longman, 1965); poems from both

reprinted, along with *Casualties* (see below) in *A Decade of Tongues*

(London: Longman, 1981);

more by David a Scott see next page.

Song of a Goat (Ibadan: Mbari, 1961); reprinted with *The Masquerade* and

The Raft in Three Plays (London: Oxford University Press, 1964);

A Night in the Tropics (London: Longman, 1962); London:

America, Their America (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964; Heinemann, 1968);

Ozidi (London: Oxford University Press, 1966);

Casualties (London: Longman, 1970); reprinted in *A Decade of Tongues* (1981);

(see above).

The Example of Shakespeare (London: Longman, 1970);

The Ozidi Saga (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press with Oxford University

Press, 1977):

A Decade of Tongues; Selected Poems 1958-1968 (London: Longman, 1981)

The Hero as a Villain (Lagos: Lagos University Press, 1978);

The State of the Union (London: Longman, 1985);

The Bikoora

The Bikoora Plays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); includes *The*

Boat, *The Return Home*, and *Full Circle*;

Mandala and Other Poems (Ikeja: Longman Nigeria, 1988).

FILM:

by Colour Film Services, London

Tides of the Delta (with Frank Speed), released 1975; text of commentary

printed in *The Ozidi Saga* (see above).

PLAY PRODUCTION

The Wives' Revolt, Lagos, PEC Repertory Theatre, March 1984.

Poet and playwright J.P. Clark is one of Nigeria's foremost literary artists. Along with two other Nigerians, the novelist Chinua Achebe and the playwright Wole Soyinka, Clark is generally accorded a place in the first rank among the writers of the British Commonwealth. His *A Reed in the Tide* was the first collection of poems by a writer in black Africa to be issued by a major overseas publisher. While some of his work has produced some controversy (in particular, his poems Casualties), his poetic diction is unrivalled for precision and rhythmic control while retaining the patterns of common speech.

He was one of many sons of the ^{Ijaw} ~~the~~ Chief Clark Bekederemo of Kiagbodo in the western Niger delta region of Nigeria. Perhaps due to the influence of his mother, Clark and two elder full brothers (Edwin Kiagbodo Clark and B. Akporode Clark) had educational opportunities unusual for Kiagbodo, which did not have a local grammar school. All three have had distinguished careers. Clark was christened as Johnson Pepper Clark, but upon the publication of Poems this was shortened to John Pepper Clark, by the designer of the cover, as part of a pleasing design. Subsequent

publications used John Pepper and J.P. somewhat indiscriminately, until publication of State of the Union, by J.P. Clark Bekederemo in 1985. In his Preface to that volume, Clark wrote, "these works mark for me my assumption of my full family name, after waiting several years to do so jointly with my elder brothers. It is time to identify the man behind the mask so often misunderstood and speculated about." Clark's first school was the Native Administration School, Okrika (Ofonibengha, on the Forcados River), Burutu Local Government Area. He continued there until 1948, then attended the Native Administration School, Jeremi (Otu-Ughienvwen), Ughelli Local Government Area. Later that year ^{he} entered Government College, Ughelli, receiving the Cambridge School Leaving Certificate in 1954. He worked for a year as Clerk for the Chief Secretary to the Government of Nigeria, a post close to the center of power in colonial Nigeria, and then he matriculated at University College, Ibadan. U.C.I. was then part of the University of London, which awarded him his degree in 1960. His inclinations led him back toward the center of power, and he became a feature writer and editor for the Express newspapers in Lagos. This work led to his being awarded a Parvin Fellowship at Princeton University, which was designed to teach young and promising

leaders of third world countries about American democracy. He was unresponsive, and was required to leave the Parvin program ^{early.} before it was complete. He did not return to journalism, but instead began research into the traditions of his ^{Ijaw} people of the western Niger delta, and wrote a book about his experience in America. Then he accepted an academic position at the University of Lagos, where he became Professor of English and head of department, until his retirement in 1980.

Since his undergraduate years at U.C.I., a dominant theme ⁱⁿ Clark's work has been the vitality of traditional life and art, which he has devoted many years to recording, translating, adapting, and celebrating, while at the same time he has persisted as a critic of colonial and post-colonial circumstances and influences in Nigerian politics and affairs. Throughout, however, his has been an acutely personal art, expressive of a personal pain. His apparent detachment ^h arises from an ironic poetic mode. In his earliest, most naive poetry, the personal was often obvious, leading Romanus N. Egudu to call "Grief, chaos, insecurity, and irredeemable loss" Clark's "hallmarks." In his later work, those nouns continue to be meaningful, although their relevance is often more difficult to see.

Intellectually, a central concern of his art has been the use of an alien

Four modern
West African
Poets 1972
p-25

language, English, product of an alien culture, as a means of expressing indigenous African speech and thought. Like others of his generation, he has found himself constricted by his education in English. While still an undergraduate, he characterized himself in his poem "Ivbie" the "bastard child" of two cultures. To write as he and others similarly situated have done has required adaptation, a reconceptualization of the function of the artist. In an essay called "The Legacy of Caliban," he defined the issue for the African writer abstractly. First asking if "Caliban [has] acquired just the right dose of language and technique to cope with his trade, to practise the art of Prospero?" he has replied, "Fidelity towards the demands of a particular experience being ordered anew by the artist means that he must recognize immediately, indeed instinctively, the true nature and substance of the material and subject at his disposal. As the erector or assembler of an outfit that should act upon the reader as a catalyst, is [the artist] himself serving as the medium to the experiment, or should he merely describe the process, or wholly leave the exercise to independent demonstrators to carry out? The first course entails the projection of the subject upon the screen of himself and consequently the production of a lyric piece. The second makes of him something of a commentary man

A Decade of
Tongues
p. 32

The Example
of Shakespeare
p. 19

supplying a narrative. And the third leaves him completely out of the show, for then, having formulated what may be called a theoretical truth, the artist makes way for other experts to put it to the test, and the result is drama." As Clark goes on to imply, he has opted for all three courses, which are by no means discrete: "No work," he says, "is so impersonal that it does not at some point carry upon it the pressure of the personality of the author and none is so personal that it does not possess an independent life of its own." More personally, in "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," he has written of playwriting that "the task for the ^[Ijaw]~~poet~~ [Clark's ancestral language] ... artist, writing in ... English, is one of finding the verbal equivalent for his characters created in their original and native context."

Example
p.92

The same principle, quite obviously, applies when Clark's poetry aims to reproduce the ^{Ijaw}~~poet's~~ voice, as in the exquisite little lyric "Streamside Exchange":

Child: River bird, river bird,
Sitting all day long
On hook over grass
River bird, river bird,
Sing me a song

Of all that pass
And say,
Will mother come back today?

Bird: You cannot know
And should not bother;
Tide and market come and go
And so has your mother.

The poem recalls the songs that children of the Niger delta sing to the objects of their attention, whether the ships that ply the Forcados River or, as here, the birds that visit and pass on. Because of their range they, ships and birds, seem to know the world closed beyond the boundaries of the child's experience.

Of the notable Nigerian authors, Clark was surely the most precocious. Both his first volume, *Poems* (in which "Streamside Exchange" appeared; it was reprinted in *A Reed in the Tide*) and his first play, *Song of a Goat*, were written while he was an undergraduate. The poems were published in Ibadan, and the play performed there, the latter produced and performed (in the lead role) by the playwright Wole Soyinka. A novel he wrote while

still in secondary school has never been published, and some undergraduate fiction he wrote for newspaper publication has proved ephemeral. He abandoned fiction, not apparently because of a lack of talent, but rather because of an intellectual belief that that the novel, unlike poetry and drama, is alien to the African experience, as is the Western short story; only the folk tale, perhaps, may be called indigenous "fiction." So poetry and drama have been his arts, and it is these forms that have earned him high critical distinction.

In this article, I will first examine his poetry (and incidentally his *America, Their America*), and then his drama, and finally his other work, as translator from the ^{Ijau} ~~Ido~~ and as critic.

His earliest serious publication was in a journal called *The Horn*, which he and a small group of fellow students began in late 1957. Clark was the first editor. In the poems that Clark has chosen to preserve from this early period (he has declined to republish many), three factors recur: a structure based upon occasion (as, for example, the illness of his grandmother, or a photograph in a magazine), imagery drawn from his home country on the eastern Forcados branch of the Niger River or from a traditional story or belief, and some intense fear or dissatisfaction. The

imagery, of course, is not limited the river or mythology, nor is each occasion of each poem equally clear. But the dissatisfaction is virtually omnipresent, sometimes as an anxiety, sometimes as anger. His early, extended major poem, *Ivbie*, is at times an outright cry of rage. It appeared in *Poems*, was excerpted in *A Reed in the Tide*, and then reappeared complete in *A Decade of Tongues*.

"Ivbie" is an Urhobo word. Clark's grandmother was Urhobo; Kiagbodo is an ^{Ijaw}~~Ur~~ town which lies at the ^{Ijaw/}~~Ur~~ Urhobo borderland, and many of its people are bilingual from childhood. The title, ~~means~~, Clark has said, alludes to the "hands above head" gesture of women lamenting the "great loss or wrong for which there can be no remedy or justice." The poem is a negritudist attack on the colonial past, and an equally negritudist appreciation of the African identity. Negritude is a literary philosophy, which Clark himself called (in the first issue of his undergraduate journal) "perhaps ... sentimental and moonish." It celebrates the special characteristics that Africans (and blacks of the diaspora) share as a racial heritage. The idea, according to Clark, is one of "the dark Africa, careless of sputniks and missiles, and enjoying the ... wise direction of her ancient rulers, teachers, and prophets." Further, Clark has written, Westernization

is killing "that sense of deep calm and flow, mystery and rhythm which for ages has been [Africa's] peculiar grace." To him, at that time, the founding of The Horn was a blow against the "subtle imperialism" of European intellect.

Clark was writing Ivbie virtually on the eve of Nigeria's independence from British colonial rule, and, by analogy, from British cultural rule.

"Pass on," he wrote to the West:

in mad headlong flight
O pass on, your ears right
Full of throttle sound,
So winding up your kaleidoscope
Leave behind unhaunted
An innocent in sleep of the ages.

The poems has five movements. The first shows colonial ignorance and arrogance, tempered by the discovery of the glorious African art unearthed in such places as Benin, revealing that "Cellini/ Dwelt among cannibals." The second movement compares the exploitation of Africa to the (quite literal) rape of African women. The third movement points to the paradox of European civilization in Africa, marked by "Austin Herefords" (British

automobiles) going "toot" and "Blazing wide trails of gold/ Through the forests of the night." When the indictment is complete, he uses the fourth movement to look inward, asking the "communal gods at the gate/ Has that whiff of carrion crept/ Past your bars as you slept?" Oyin, the supreme deity and mother, gives the poem's key warning:

Fear him, children, O fear the stranger
That comes upon you
When fowls have gone to roost.

And

O fear the dragon smoke cloud
That hangs bloated, floating over
Roof-thatch mangoes and lime.

She was not heeded. Rather (in a voice recalling Eliot's Tiresias in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* -- clearly Clark's model) she (in the form of an owl) regrets the failure of the first generation of Africans:

I the white bearded woman
Of night fame saw all
But men heeded not my hooting
Placed instead penalty in warning

And finality in brief omen.

The succeeding generation, Clark warns in the final movement, may be already "more white than white," and all too ready, "well-fed on sweet quotations and wine," to say that forgiveness is "divine." No, the poet says, he cannot sleep in the ancestral house; the present generation must not rest though drugged with colonial comfort just as their fathers were drunk on colonial gin. Worse, after thought of suicide, of faith, of simple indecision, the speaker ~~himself~~ senses that he is himself Oyin's enemy, against whom her children should be warned. He is without certainty or place:

I cannot sleep or act

And here I pace her bastard child

A top twirling out of complexity ...

The "bastard child" is no one's child, and if he is to have an identity it will be something new, ambiguous, and doubtful. Still, the poem does not end in total pessimism. Some may find that the romantic hope is a serious flaw, unworthy of the rest. Yet it is not unique in Clark's poetry. An odd optimism mars several of Clark's better political poems, but on occasion the hopefulness is very personal and, consequently, deeply felt.

One of Clark's best poems from the undergraduate period is a good example and has been frequently anthologized. "Night Rain" might be a companion piece to *Ivbie*, so striking is the contrast. The locale, in time and place, is Clark's childhood, an evocation of the purity preceding the deculturation of the bastard child. The home is, by European standards, impoverished, but the poem shows no regret. The rain is idealized, not threatening. It falls

through sheaves slit open
to lightning and rafters
I cannot quite make out overhead
Great water drops are dribbling
Falling like orange or mango
Fruits showered forth in the wind

The child seems to take comfortably the fact that the rain is being caught "in wooden bowls and earthenware/ Mother is busy now deploying/ About our roomlet and floor," and, with "practised step" she moves stored goods to dry safety. With quiet economy Clark then elevates the circumstance to a universalizing calm, telling his "brothers"

We have drunk tonight of a spell

Deeper than the owl's or bat's
That wet of wings may not fly.

.....
So let us roll to the beat
Of drumming all over the land
And under its ample soothing hand
Joined to that of the sea

We will settle to our sleep of the innocent and free.

Romantic, certainly, but the rhythms are unfailing and life is precisely observed, to create the ideal negritudist poem, an allegory of traditional life. No other poem by Clark matches its tenderness, for tenderness is generally alien to Clark's poetry, the exceptions (like "Night Rain" and the also-popular "Abiku") peculiarly successful aberrations.

There is a heartlessness to "Streamside Exchange," quoted above, in which the bird shows no sympathy for human loss, and to "Fulani Cattle," who may welcome the slaughter awaiting them at the end of their "drunken journey/ From desert, through grass and forest,/ To the hungry towns by the sea ..." Romantic, but hardly tender, is "Agbor Dancer," imaged from a photograph in Nigeria magazine: she dances in "trance ... rippling crest

after crest/ To meet the green clouds of the forest." She evokes from the young poet the regret of the bastard child:

Could I, early sequestered from my tribe,
Free a lead-tethered scribe
I should answer her communal call
Lose myself in her warm caress
Intervolving earth, sky and flesh.

Faems was a volume of highly uneven quality, as might be expected. Much of the work is experimental and imitative, and Clark, wisely, declined to republish much ^{of it} when he had the opportunity in A Reed in the Tide. It includes seventeen pieces from Faems (including those already mentioned here) and sixteen new poems. The new poems were largely written in the United States, and several of them were printed as occasional pieces in his one work of prose journalism, America, Their America, to be discussed below. In "A Personal Note" to A Reed in the Tide, Clark says, "What to cut, and what to save out of a body of poems that has come to represent more or less part of my own self, will always remain with me an unsettled issue." He cut all of what might be called "love poems," thus depriving the volume of the autobiographical

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completeness it might otherwise have had, but he may justly be said to have preserved the poems whose richness best transcends the personal. The range can be indicated by the first and last poems. "To Granny (from Hospital)" opens the collection. Awaiting "the ferryman's return" (evoking both Clark's delta and the Greek myth of death), the poet's fear recalls a night "fifteen floods" ago

When upon a dugout

Mid pilgrim lettuce on the Niger,

You with a start strained me to breast ...

Was the cause "the loud note of quarrels / And endless dark nights of intrigue" among the many wives?

Or was it wonder at those footless stars

Who in their long translucent fall,

Make shallow silten floors

Beyond the pale of muddy waters

Appear more plumless than the skies?

The evocation of his lost childhood world in that poem is a profound contrast to the political anger motivating "The Leader," the final poem. Unnamed, but certainly identified, is Chief Obafemi Awolowo, whom "They

have felled ... to the ground." Awolowo had been tried and convicted for treason from November 1962 to June 1963; the accusation and the evidence were certainly questionable, and the case aroused grave partisan emotions. When Clark republished the poem in *A Decade of Tongues*, he placed it between two other poems that appeared earlier in *A Reed in the Tide*, "Emergency Commission" and "His Excellency the Masquerader." In the latter, Awolowo's old rival, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was the ceremonial President of Nigeria, is seen behind the "masks": "What wind! What straw!" "The Leader" is said to have been so strong that

No iguana during a decade of tongues

Could throw or twist him round

While he rallied the race and clan.

Yet now

like an alligator he lies

Trussed up in a house without eyes

And ears ...

Clark's poetry would never resume the naive passion of the undergraduate verse, relatively free of the bitterness of ^{partisan} politics.

Yet it would not be wise to say that the early poetry was

non-political. Clark in a personal communication has said, "When you wrote about a girl bathing in a stream, you were making a statement. They were all political poems. You were asserting what you have. We didn't cry about it. How else could we speak to our ancestors? Or to the workers? If we spoke to them again, how could we communicate, if we didn't take this kind of stance? So we have been political from the beginning, I would say, in saying what we want, and what we don't like."

Perhaps the American experience had a great deal to do with the change of content, if not of character. Clark himself has said that America, Their America was, perhaps, "the jaundiced and unsavoury account of the responses and reactions of one difficult, hypercritical character and palate, who, presented with unusually rich grapes in a dish of silver and gold, took deprecatory bites, and churlishly spat everything out and in the face of all." Certainly the book tells at least as much about the author (in his youth) as it does about the United States where he was lavishly cared for at Princeton University on a fellowship designed to illuminate American democratic institutions in a no doubt overly idealistic way. He may have wished to keep an open mind about America, but he has said that "I must have felt and probably shall remain bitter at and jealous of all that passes

and sells so loudly as western and white civilization, achieved as likely as not at the expense of the dark." Certainly no reader of the book would guess that Clark had a happy time in the United States, though he probably did. The book hardly allows any except the dreadful experiences to show. Yet, in an artlessness that gives the book an odd charm, he reveals again and again that whatever unpleasantness occurred was as much his own doing as any one else's. Clark simply refused to play by any of the rules and as a result alienated many highly well-disposed people. On one occasion he abused a host for inability to find an African text on his own bookshelf -- only to hear ~~A~~ week afterwards ... that my professor friend had gone stone-blind ... and that short day of our meeting had been the tail end of a twilight fast fading into complete darkness. And I had taunted him for trying to be smart with me. I felt rotten for days ..."

p. 11

p. 144-5

The primary interest of the book is not likely to be the prevailing unpleasantness (though, at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, it was long remembered with extreme distaste and often anger), but rather the changes America worked. The Cuban missile crisis (the United States threatened a blockade of Cuba unless Soviet nuclear missiles were removed from that island) made Clark sharply aware of the dimensions of

world conflicts. In the third of "Three Moods of Princeton" (first published in *America, Their America*, then in *A Reed in the Tide*), he links the novelty of life in north America with the danger of nuclear catastrophe:

Snow,
 Away
From my window
By time of waking,
 What deft, gentle hands spread
 You over this bed
Of bile, while we slept? And say,
Nurse, when shall the corpse lie?
 There, ding, dong, ding --
When all the world is a mushroom pie.

Clark returned to Nigeria, after being dismissed from the Princeton program, to a nation sliding into a protracted political crisis. He began work as a one-year Research Fellow at the University of Ibadan's Institute for African Studies. The product of that research eventually appeared in several forms, all relating to the legend of Ozidi, a tale that he had first heard while still a schoolboy. If he wrote poetry (other than "The Leader"),

it has not been published. After his research year, and a year writing his book about America, he began his twenty-year service in the English department of the University of Lagos. Nigeria's political crises intensified until, in January 1966, a group of young military officers brought the civilian government to an end, assassinating most of the national political leadership. One of the young officers was Clark's classmate and friend, Major Emmanuel A. Ifeajuna. In the aftermath of the coup, Ifeajuna became a fugitive, and was assisted in his escape to Ghana by the poet Christopher Okigbo. Later, Clark and Okigbo together went to Ghana and escorted Ifeajuna back to Lagos and, unexpectedly, to jail. Later in the same year, a counter-coup led to further crises, climaxing in a civil war (1967-70) in which Okigbo was killed. Clark, responding to the anguish of the period, wrote a new book, Casualties: Poems 1966-68. The volume includes twenty-eight numbered poems; they are the poems to which the title refers. Eleven "Incidental Poems for Several Persons" are appended.

The twenty-eight numbered poems are the lyric expression of an *unstated* ~~partially stated~~ narrative. ~~Notes at the end of the volume are a partial statement of the narrative which is beyond the scope of the present~~





article. The lyrics themselves are simple, for the most part. Their simplicity, which has deceived some critics, is made possible through symbolic representations of persons and events. For example, the second poem, "Skulls and Cups," was said by Kolawole Ogungbesan to be "tepid poetry" in which Clark is "singing (one can hardly say lamenting) the death of his most intimate friends." The critic is correct in only one point: three of the characters are Clark's friends who died in during the civil war, two by execution (Sam Agbam and Emmanuel Ifeajuna) for treason against the rebel Biafran government, and the fourth the poet Christopher Okigbo, killed earlier in action, fighting for that same government, at the start of the civil war. In the poem, ^{a speaker named} "Obi" -- ~~Obi~~ Obiajuna Wali, who defected from the Biafran cause -- asks,

"Look, J. P.

How do you tell a skull

From another?"

That is frigid, not "tepid." And so it continues, Obi comparing the skulls of "Chris," "Sam," and "Emman" to cups:

"How does one tell a cup on the floor

From another, when the spirit is emptied?"

Alhassan
p. 27
(see ref)

Far from lamenting, Clark is distancing the poet from the horror:

And the goblets are legion,
Broken upon the fields after Nsukka.

The poem -- as do all the poems -- demands that the war and its waste of lives be seen in context. Each participant has a history, each event ~~an~~ a circumstance, each decision a conflict. If Okigbo, Agbam, and Ifeajuna had all died in the same way, the poem would have no point; if Clark's feelings were less intimate, he might (like Milton about Edward King) have composed a lament. The twenty-eight poems, read with a sympathy often denied them, become cumulative experience, a single work of art.

The experience is not precisely Clark's. The poems are the public expression of private emotion, and they were doubtless shaped in part by the poet's perception of the public for which he wrote. They were surely also shaped by the time in which they were written, a time when uncertainty and death were large in the land. It is likely that the "friends" in the opening poem, "Song," and the "faces" in the closing poem, "Night Song," are the collective dead, including those friends who were or might be dead. "Song" begins,

I can look the sun in the face

But the friends that I have lost

I dare not look at any.

It is a kind of confession. Clark is not innocent, and the state of mind that produced the poems is not innocence. The poems are an apologia. In the patterned structure of Casualties, the friends of "Song" are joined in "Night Song" by "The strange and young I never met" who "intercept the faces I loved" and blot out the sun "that I / believe should ripen the land anew." This expansion shows the transformation of experience that lies between the two poems, inherent in the submerged narrative. The poems between tell why the poet dares not look, and they imaginatively widen the scope of the poetry beyond the poet's own predicament, to the circumstances of the whole state.

In Casualties Clark greatly expanded his use of ~~of~~ the animal folk tale as metaphor. Most of the poems, in one way or another, use animals as representations or symbols for actual persons. The contents of the poems are folk tales or fabulous stories which, like the main narrative, are often *unstated or* only partially stated. In the tales the animals are the active participants in political conflict. In this use of the tale, Clark expanded folk tradition, in which satirical application of tale themes to current village affairs is

ancient custom. That the form is naturally ironic suited Clark's purpose well.

The interconnection of Clark, Okigbo, and Ifeajuna -- suggested earlier -- is central to the poems. Clark has said, "I got so close to a number of the actors after the curtain rose ... that I came to be indentified by some as playing in the show." In the nineteenth poem, "The Flood," Clark expresses his relationship to the others:

I flounder in my nest, a kingfisher,
Whose flockmates would play
At eagles and hawks, but like
Chickens are swept away.

The flockmates have set in motion a chain of events that they were too weak to control. Clark shares in the effects they set in motion, but, still in his nest, has not yet been swept away. The poem is the pivot upon which Casualties turns: it is a poem of disillusion, of failure, of lost hopes. "The rain of events pours down," it begins, suggesting the mindlessness that seemed to govern political change -- and introducing, not for the first time, the water imagery so marked in Clark's poetry. Against this rain, Clark, "Like a million other parakeets," puts on a

brilliant coat, "the finest silver and / Song can acquire." When the coat does not suffice, "I unfurl my umbrella, resplendent as any / That covers a chief / At a durbar." Ogunbesan sees the lines as "narcissistic indulgence in the midst of a national disaster," but the judgment is invalidated by the tone, so ironic as to approach self-satire, and by the lines that follow (which Ogunbesan does not quote): the umbrella "buckles, and will / Fly out of my hand." The point is that art -- surely the meaning of "coat" and "umbrella" here -- has no role in the events; instead there are "grief / Gusts of rain," continuing relentlessly. The anguish here is almost hidden. The punning "grief" disguises its meaning but makes it more poignant, especially as, in the lines that follow, the kingfisher and the "chickens"

*See
References
p. 27*

are swept away

By flood fed from septic tanks, till

Together, we drift and drown,

Who were at home on sea, air, and land.

They are together filthily caught in the flood of events, deprived now of their common freedom of art and imagination. To the reader not a participant in the events, Clark's metaphor of "flockmates" who "play / At eagles and hawks" may be offensive: surely Ifeajuna, Okigbo, and the

others did not "play" at killing and being killed. In context, however, in the ironic distancing and understatement that marks these poems, the tone is appropriate. Clark, who dares "not look at" friends in "Song," does not look at them in "The Flood." Instead, all "drift and drown," a painful litotes for uncertainty and violent death.

The earlier poems had two stages: opening poems in the time after the events, the poet looking back; then an extended series of responses to increasingly dangerous circumstances, experienced during or near the events. From "The Flood," the poems show an acceptance of circumstances, however terrible, beyond the poet's control. The war comes inevitably. Okigbo dies, as do Ifeajuna and other "faces." Clark and others living remain, transformed. The tragedy of Casualties lies not in the fact of death but in the chill isolation that death makes permanent. It is not the living Clark dare not look at, but the dead. The dead are those with whom Clark shared "bath and bed ... dish ... tea ... wine," with whom

When but to think of an ill, made
By God or man, was to find
The cure prophet and physician
Did not have. ("Song")

The "casualties," Clark says in the twenty-seventh poem, "are not only those who are dead; / They are well out of it." No. In the divided Nigeria, where Clark's still living friends are his enemies,

We fall,
All casualties of the war,
Because we cannot hear each other speak
Because eyes have ceased to see the face from the crowd,
Because whether we know or
Do not know the extent of wrong on all sides,
We are characters now other than before
The war began ...

In Casualties, Clark is the protagonist in his own poetic drama; his antagonist is the flood (always his favorite image), ~~from the life of the~~ ⁿdelta), beyond the control of man, poet, or state.

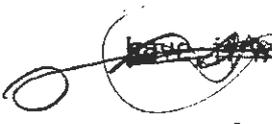
The poem "Casualties" was dedicated "To Chinua Achebe," the most distinguished of Nigeria's novelists and another of Clark's friends who sided with the Biafran enemy. In A Decade of Tongues, which reprints most of the poems in A Reed in the Tide as well as Casualties, Clark added a twenty-ninth poem, "Epilogue ... to Michael Echeruo." It was

written several years after the war, to another friend who had been an enemy in the war. In the poem, Clark revisits places he knew because of friends now dead "or gone to their own homesteads." His central image is of the once-great market town of Onitsha:

Here houses, scalped and scarred past surgery,
Stared at me, sightless in their sockets, like
The relics of shell-shock that they are.
One, so mutilated, it is a miracle
The parts hung together at all,
Called to me in the crush, in it one
Plump woman, careless of her bare breast
And brood, pounding yam up on a balcony,
Tilted in the face of gravity.

Clark evokes the persistence of life in the ruins of war. So too friendships persisted: Clark became reconciled with Achebe and Echeruo, whom he thought "would never forgive, never forget."

However, it must be said that the artistic impulse lacked the persistence of life: Clark entered into a period -- more than a decade -- during which he wrote virtually nothing new at all. He has said (in a



personal communication), "You see, I feel some of us respond better if we ~~have~~ we are together. And when we are scattered, like the war did us, some of us cease to be as active as we should have been. ... I like to believe that the absence of the kind of community that we enjoyed in Ibadan twenty years ago -- no, more -- which the war, the crisis brought to a close violently by separating all of us, was like the scattering atoms that should have collided to make a nuclear charge. It would be quite absurd trying to rebuild today that part of our lives." What Clark was saying was clearly very painful. "I'm not saying that one wrote by committee or conference, but you will not believe -- For a long time, through the war years, so long -- I mean, who did I have to relate to in Lagos? Between Lagos and Ibadan, who could I discuss my poetry with, who would I discuss my plays with? Who would do them? Soyinka, who did, who could have done -- the war split us. Achebe was across there ... Chris was dead."

The long silence was broken when a volume of poems titled State of the Union was given to Longman for publication in 1981 (internal problems delayed publication four years). Although the process of change had already begun, it was accelerated when Clark retired as Professor of

English at the University of Lagos. He said in a poem titled "Out of the Tower," he'd left

That air and light may come again
Clean and free into the chambers
Of my heart ...

The poem, which calls his academic role "standing in the cesspool," shows that Clark's bitter irony, his earthy imagery, and his political interest had not waned during his silence. The collection also, Clark said in a preface, "signals for me a new phase in my career, a phase I regard as my middle period, assuming there is a later one to come." Four new plays were also part of the new phase.

Nothing could be clearer in *State of the Union* than that Clark had abandoned *negritude*. In the opening poem, "Here Nothing Works," he asks,

What is it in ourselves or in our soil
That things which connect so well elsewhere,
Like the telephone, the motorway, the airways,
Dislocate our lives so much that we all
Begin to doubt our own intelligence?

This is no "innocent in sleep of the ages." Rather it is direct, rhythmic

speech; natural, angry, impatient with the African slumber, though not denying something similarly fundamental:

So something there must
Be in ourselves or in our times that all
Things working for good elsewhere do not work
In our expert hands, when introduced
To our soil that is no different from other lands.

~~(It is not the observer's job to question the poet's facts, but I am
constrained to observe that Nigerian "soil" is quite different from, and
much less useful than, soil "from other lands", soil in more temperate
climates, or at higher altitudes, or based upon underlying strata more
forgiving than laterite, can be more consistently productive.)~~ The second
poem, "Progress," metaphorically links the wind to modern technology, and
"sandboats on the lagoon" to Nigerian:

The wind
Stalling in their sails,
Has travelled a thousand miles
Since they set out at dawn.

But the twenty-fifth (and last) poem of the series, "The Sovereign"

(dedicated "to Michael Echeruo"), is, in its way, an explanation: if Nigeria has failed to satisfy Clark's aspirations, the answer to the question, what is the state of the union, is simple: "It never was a union."

Four hundred and twenty-three disparate
Elements by the latest count, all spread
Between desert and sea ...
... how can any smith out
Of fable fashion from such a bundle
An alloy known to man?

This new coin, the "sovereign," he says, is "counterfeit."

Between poems one and twenty-five, he comments upon a wide range of difficulties, choices, shames, faults, crimes in the society, in the nation. He asks, in "Sacrifice" for example, how will he tell his children the sacrifice they must make for "her," when she has sent out so many,

in hope
Though nothing but mounds, weeds
And thorns have sprung up in the field.

In "Election Report" he details the census with its fraud, the registration lies, and the election, which needed no "prophet or fortune-teller to see"

the outcome; he specifies the protections of a "free and fair" process, overseen by "a child of the soil," the "polling officer," who called the numbers "as pleased his purse and people." The result, mathematically formulated, "argued / By lawyers to the last decimal point," eventually

Confirmed the winners, announced by officials

And generals, discreetly out of sight.

It was, by all accounts, a numbers game.

As seen by Clark, Nigeria was not a nation, and the result has been as dismaying as one might expect.

A "Postscript" attaches a twenty-sixth poem, "The Playwright and the Colonels / To Wole Soyinka." The poem alludes back to Casualties, to the civil war, early in which a colonel, Emeka Ojukwu, was head of the Biafran state, and another colonel, V.A. Banjo, led a Biafran invasion of what Clark calls "the bridge state," the Mid-west. Soyinka visited with both colonels briefly, just before the invasion, and some say that he was courier for a plot to displace Ojukwu and the then-Nigerian head of state, Yakubu Gowon. Clark, it seems, accepts that version, in contrast to the one Soyinka himself gives in his autobiography, The Man Died. Clark says,

... the playwright,

When picked up like a rabbit on the road
In daytime, enroute to principals,
All set to proclaim another kingdom,
Swore between tears in the toilet

(where Soyinka got the paper for his writing in prison) that he'd write so
that

"All who read my tale
.
Will forget in our war
Much more than the man died."

The bitter attack, more severe taken in context of the conflict than a brief discussion can show, is vitriolic irony, in Clark's best rhetoric. The rhythms are natural, the diction precise, the tone exactly intended.

Fourteen "Other Songs on Other States" complete the volume. Some, like "Birthday at Welseyan [*sic*], Middletown," are drawn from the year (1976-77) that he spent teaching at Wesleyan College in Connecticut. Several allude to the possibility of new growth, and others to lost opportunities. They are simple and autobiographical, anticipating Clark's new life, as in "Translation (from the Urhobo)"

The orange tree bears fruit,

Bears fruit:

If it does not

Fall, there is food for thought.

Part of the fruit that did fall was in the drama, to examine which it is necessary to return to Clark's undergraduate years. Geoffrey Axworthy, lecturer in theatre arts at University College, Ibadan, when Clark was there, has told Amed. P. Yerimah that he saw Clark acting in "a terrible play called *Man from the Ministry*" in 1956. "We met after the production; I suggested he could write better. He took this challenge and wrote *Rain on the Sea* which he retitled *Song of a Goat* at my suggestion." The latter title has stayed with the play, which was published by the same Ibadan group that published *Poems*, and it was later reprinted, with *The Masquerade* and *The Rafi*, as *Three Plays*.

Song of a Goat, while suggesting the origin of the Greek word for tragedy, at the same time reflects the action of the play in which the climactic moment is the ritual slaughtering of a goat. Structurally, the play is almost a classic tragedy. Zifa is a man of substance who bears the twofold burden of a family curse and sexual impotence. His aunt Orukore

planned, but
not yet
published?
at least
I haven't
seen it
my source
is of
interview

51

anticipates the consequence, but her gift of prophesy (granted by the sea god) has the same limitation as Cassandra's: she is not believed. Zifa's wife Ebiere takes her husband's younger brother Tonye as her lover and the infidelity puts Zifa into a proud rage. The slaughter of the goat (which has cried through the night) exposes the lovers. Tonye hangs himself off stage, Ebiere collapses, and Zifa walks into the sea (a neighbor, as messenger, reports the death). Three Neighbors function as chorus, and the Masseur, adviser and confidant, is like the choral leader in Greek drama. The play's less obvious antecedents are Synge and Yeats, who used dramatic forms to celebrate tradition, or transform it for the modern theater. Like Synge, Clark has placed his rural drama in the present time, into which the modern, industrial, commercial world is incidental, present at the edges. Clark's rhetoric -- always his distinctive mark -- is far from the Irish, as might be expected, but it is also quite different from his lyric poetry. The play (like the other two) is in verse, but the mode is dominated by figures like the parable-aphorism, which is often as well a riddle, as when a Neighbor explains Ebiere's strangeness: "Bring up a chicken among hawks / And if she is not eaten she will eat." Another is a metaphorical use of traditional concepts in a simple prosaic way, as when

the Masseur informs Ebiere that her childlessness is neither rare nor incurable:

Why even leopards go lame.

And let me tell you, my child, for
Every ailment in man there is
A leaf in the forest. If both families
Cherish each other so much, a good proposition
Would be for your husband to make you over
To another in his family.

The verse is justified by both the figures and by the subtle rhythms (the clause beginning "a good proposition" in the lines quoted is an obvious and uncommon exception). The distinction among metaphors, riddles, aphorisms, and parables in Clark's plays is often difficult to draw, as in the Masseur's warning to Ebiere:

An empty house, my daughter, is a thing
Of danger. If men will not live in it
Bats or grass will, and that is enough
Signal for worse things to come in.

The technique allows Clark to preserve a sense of traditional life,

escaping the absurdity that might attach to an audience hearing native speakers of African languages conversing in the Queen's English. He has not translated, but rather he has found the verbal equivalents in speech to represent characters (in Clark's words) "in their original and native context." This is what Clark, in "The Legacy of Caliban," calls "the Shakespearean solution." The technique

p. 23

makes it possible to tell Caliban from Othello simply by comparing the imagery and themes predominant in their language. In the same way it should be possible to tell the Ibo farmer Okonkwo in Mr Achebe's Things Fall Apart from the Ijaw fisherman, Zifa in my Song of a Goat: references of the one naturally incline more to barnyards and harvests as those of the other to fishlines and tides.

The characterizations in the play are generally well defined, but the reader of the play might well overlook that fact that in performance Drukorere is the most powerful single role. This suggests that the principals are not as strongly written as they should be, Zifa rising not to any splendor but only to an almost sullen anger, and Ebiere limited to frustration and a sometimes foolish aggressiveness toward Tonye. Tonye

himself is a cipher, and Dode, the child, serves only to accentuate Orukorere. The Masseur, however, is witty and, in an alternate ending, philosophical, as a choral leader should be -- though some lines are overly literary, derived from Shakespeare or Milton.

A sequel to *Song of a Goat*, which was written, or at least finished, while Clark was in the United States, borrows from the Nigerian folk novelist Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard*, in which a girl who rejects her suitors follows a "complete gentleman" to his home, where he becomes quite incomplete -- a "skull" -- and holds her captive. It is a warning to

young women that they should accept appropriate suitors and not go shopping for strangers, however beautiful they may be. *The Masquerade*

only alludes to *Song of a Goat* indirectly, but it is clear that ~~the dangerous young man~~ Tufa, is the son of Ebieré and Tonye, reared by Orukorere after his mother's death in childbirth. He does not know that he has inherited the curse, but gossipy Neighbors (again as Chorus) find out and expose him. Titi is the beauty he innocently entices and marries, enraging her jealous father, Diribi. Diribi kills both his daughter and her husband, the latter by accident in a struggle.

Although *The Masquerade* has received less attention (and fewer

In Clark's play the monster is simply a handsome young man Tufa.



performances) than *Song of a Goat*, it is in several respects the better play. Less of the play's tragic force depends on the young; Clark gives the lovers a bright, delicate courtship scene; thereafter they are largely passive, save for Titi's refusal to give up Tufa and Tufa's bitter and fatal quest for revenge at the end of the play. Umuko, Titi's mother, is slightly comic until the events are beyond her understanding, and she becomes a simple, mad market woman. The splendid character is Diribi, and though he lives on at the play's end, his death can be foreseen. He asks who can take him

to him at Forcados? They say

He has stitches so strong

They still and staunch the worst breach

In the dam.

(The "him" is government; the "stitches" rope.) His character is complex. He is a great man, easily greater than Zifa in *Song*, and his anger upon discovery of the danger that the cursed Tufa presents is both understandable and excessive. It is all the more affecting since his passion for Titi verges on the incestuous. In killing her he is fully in character, since he is shown to be quick to wrath and to action, while

kinglike in his defense of his family line. Caught among fear of the gods,
his pride in family, his love for Titi, ^{and} his hatred of her seducer, he offends
the gods, wrecks the family, kills his daughter, and is so overcome by self
hatred that only by accident does his second victim die by the gun brought
for the killing. In the end he is helpless. The second chorus ^{of} three Priests
conclude the play:

The hand of thunder, so sudden not even
The double-visioned saw it, has battered
Him down, boughs, bole and straight past pith.
Let us help to pick up his scattered
Scotched pieces, and oh, hurry, hurry
For before the tide turns again we must
For Forcados.

The language of the play is admirable. The verse is more certain and
the rhetoric less self-conscious, the music harsher, while Clark fully
exploits the imagery and riddling quality developed in his first play. The
Neighbors' song by which they hint of the curse on Tufa is remarkable in
that it is a celebration, a warning, and a prophesy:

SECOND NEIGHBOR: Oh, wasn't that splendid, the glorious man

Who on the way home was set
Upon by hill, fig tree and others, and before
Bride could regain breath, her sun-figure
Had turned scare-crow!

THIRD NEIGHBOR: Not so! The transformation
Was into a python later shot down
By one who loved her all her virgin
Life. Oh, toss up the song!
A jolly old song, oh!

The song angers Diribi, who attempts to evict the uninvited guests and gets in response an attack on Tufa's parentage. In this way, a more mature Clark interlinks his drama with Aristotelian craft.

The Masquerade in little space shows variety and style in Niger delta life: the hard labor of fishing ^{seen} (in the Neighbors), the rites of marriage, the taboos and gods of family life, the role of wives and women in the compound of a great man. It reveals the reverence and duty of such men as those who serve as priests, as well as the comic irreverence of poor townsmen in a great house. And it shows the ^{aberration} ~~celebration~~ that romantic love is in such a society, and the consequences it may have. These factors

are present too, in part, in *Song of a Goat* so that the two plays together are a celebration and validation of traditional life, its emotions, its dignity, its suffering. Clark's use of operative, valid concerns in present-day delta life and his transformation of them into an English-language medium brought together his image of Africa and a vast potential audience. Properly seen, or read, the plays can bridge the cultural gap that divides the worlds of the delta and the people beyond.

The second play that Clark wrote in America was a radical change from its predecessors. The characters are laborers rather than people of significance; they are neither cursed nor responsible. Although they are doomed, their end lacks tragic significance. While the play has dramatic energy, it lacks a plot in the conventional sense, derived as it is from absurdist conceptions of the world as an indefinite, problematic realm, without guiding fate or justice. In *The Raft* four men are adrift, after starting out with logs being floated by them to market downriver. One of the men is lost when the raft divides; another seeks safety from a passing ship and dies under its stern wheel. The remaining two drift out to sea. Here is no celebration of traditional life, but rather a pessimistic, unheroic, negative parable of modern civilization, European and African, in

a time of disillusion and collapsing faith. In particular, it is more than a hint of Clark's sense of the disintegration of post-independence Nigeria.

The play can be understood only through its characters, ^{or} representatives and victims of their society. Kengide, dominant, condemns the corruption he practices, a zero-sum game: "In this game / Of getting rich, it is eat me or I eat / You." He derides the illusions of others. Olotu, the nominal leader, says he "hired" Kengide, but Kengide replies,

Slime and entrails!

And every fool that ever set foot on this raft

Are on the same payroll, and the man

With the purse is wining away at Warri.

To him government and business are "two faces to one counterfeit coin." And women are no better: his own wife is both barren and promiscuous, "A reed in the tide," he calls her (invoking the name Clark soon gave to his collection of poems). Olotu is more sophisticated, a "townsman," who knows great cities (Lagos, Kaduna, Onitsha) -- but he cannot swim, and he is too loyal to his masters to leave the logs when the raft splits, and he is not wise enough to lower his sail. Ogro, the most attractive, a man of good will, is a "blundering bullock," though the best sailor who knows the

river best. His death is pathetic, because he remembers how, as a boy, he'd played games with the ships, climbing on and jumping off again, for cheers and gifts: in a bitter irony sailors on a passing ship beat off his grasping hands, and the stern wheel of the boat captures his body. Ibobo is the play's priest; "the boy from the bush full of taboos, Kengide calls him (for doubting that male homosexuality exists)" Ibobo fruitlessly promises the sacrifice of a goat for their successful landing. Fog binds the two survivors, who are "adrift and lost" as their craft floats out to sea. If the play is allegorical (and to some extent it undoubtedly is), the allegory is unobtrusive. Clark has said that he "was trying to create a human condition which I knew existed not only in Nigeria but elsewhere."

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The play *Ozidi* was the first published product of the research that Clark undertook upon his return from America. That he wrote the play at all, rather than only the translation he originally projected and did publish much later, may be the result of one of his American experiences. As part of the Parvin program, the Fellows were taken to Washington, and a special arrangement permitted Clark, whose interests were different from most of the other Fellows, to visit that city's new Arena Stage. The experience was a very exciting one. He wrote that the picture-frame stage

had "become the one image of the theatre fixed in my mind." At the Arena, he recognized that the arrangement was similar to his childhood experience of village "festivals and performances at the town square or market place." One such village performance was part of the research, and Clark made a film of it, with Frank Speed and others, titled Tides of the Delta: The Sage of Ozidi (As Recreated by the Ijo People of Taro-Orua and Bulau-Orua in the Bendel State of Nigeria, and Recorded by J. P. Clark and Frank Speed). The film helps to clarify Clark's intent in the play.

It opens with several minutes of introduction to the people of the River and their environment. Then the Ozidi performance begins. As in Clark's play, the action starts with a ritual procession to the river with gifts for the water spirits. Throughout the film, the spectator sees the narrator, who is also the protagonist (as in the play), speaking, moving, and acting, often to the accompaniment of music, song, and chant. He wears (as described in the play's stage direction) "a white flowing shirt and tunic," and he is assisted in the performance by a great variety of men and women, often spectacularly costumed, who in dance and pantomime augment the narrator's performance. An audience is always present in the film, as in the play, surrounding the action on three sides, with the river

AVIT
p 93

as a backdrop on the fourth. It is clear to the viewer of the film that the stage directions in the play text are not to be taken literally (which very often would be impossible, involving magic of various sorts) but rather are to be danced or mimed, and indicated with costume and music (and perhaps, I think, narration). In the second act, the stage directions say ^{that} the monster Bouakarakarabiri is seen asleep, standing on his head, feet in the air. When spoken to by Ozidi he somersaults and grabs Ozidi by the neck, using feet to throttle the boy. Later he puts into pots three huge animals, a lizard, an eagle hornbill, and a monkey, from which he makes a charm that Ozidi drinks. Productions of the play have been, understandably, few.

The Ozidi story is one that is very old in the creeks and rivers, concerning a prince of "Ado," the legendary name for the great city of Benin. In the play, Clark substitutes ^{Ijaw} Orua, the ~~big~~ town for Ado. Ozidi defies his fellow warriors for their failure to do homage to Ozidi's idiot brother, whom they have named their king. Using magic, they kill Ozidi, whereupon his grandmother, the witch Dreame, takes her daughter, who is pregnant, home. There, the new Ozidi is reared with one objective, revenge. He achieves the revenge, and proceeds on to other terrible deeds.

Making the legend available to the great world audience was clearly Clark's motive in writing the play in English, again using the techniques of English rhetoric to give the language a quality equivalent to the ^{Ijaw} ~~the~~. The technique of indirect speech, riddling or aphoristic, intensifies the reader's sense of place and culture, as in a citizen's fearful remark about making the idiot king:

You all know a god is
A god once you make him so. After
The ceremony, he ceases to be mere wood. Give him
Palm oil then, and he'll insist on blood.

At one point, Clark ingeniously introduces pidgin English: while Ozidi and the other characters speak standard English (rhetorically modified), Ozidi's servant Omoni does not, but shows the difference in class and origin through the lingua franca of the modern Nigerian markets, as in the question, "Massa, papa kuku leaf shed for market sef?" -- meaning, "Master, did your father leave you a market shed?" It is less important that the reader understand perfectly than that the relationship, and its understated comedy, should be clear. Another of Clark's inventions is the introduction of an old fable character, Ewiri the trickster Tortoise, into

the play, as the Amananaowei (or Mayor) of Orua. He lightheartedly brings to the murderers of the elder Ozidi riddling news that the avenging Ozidi has come:

Many years ago several

Of you here present planted a champion yam.

Well, that yam you sowed several seasons gone by,

Has now grown beyond arm's span.

(When the killers figure out what he means, they answer with a similar riddle: "Did you say the cock has laid an egg?") Later he falsely reports to Ozidi that Tebesonoma of the Seven Heads has challenged him, and takes a similar message to Tebesonoma, just as in a common folk tale.

That battle leads to Ozidi's worst excess. The dying Tebesonoma warns Ozidi that his sister's son will seek revenge, so Ozidi must kill the mother and child. Clark's Ozidi resists murdering the innocent, but his grandmother, relentless, forces the crime. That justifies the death of Dreame at the end of Act 4, when Ozidi, berserk, slaughters both his enemy Odogu and his grandmother. Act 5 is a kind of reconciliation, when the ~~Smallpox King~~ ^{Smallpox King} visits, strikes down Ozidi, whose mother treats him for the childhood disease, yaws. The Smallpox King, indignant, declares he will

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^

never return to such an insult,

let no member of our train

Set foot again on this shore where men see

A royal python and call it worm of the earth, where

They hold a goblet of wine between their hands

And think it rainwater.

Upon his departure, a procession begins, with all the performers, Ozidi at the head, leading the spectators in a dance.

The play is somewhat forced and awkward, an intractable blending of dramatic action, special effects, ^{Ijaw}~~the~~ concepts, and English language. It does not lend itself to the stage. Yet it is nevertheless marvelously good reading.

After Ozidi, Clark did not write again for the stage, apparently, for many years. Then, April 29, 1981, the University of Lagos Centre for Cultural Studies and the Nigerian National Council for Arts and Culture jointly presented a new play, The Boat, at the University of Lagos Auditorium (with additional performances there and at the National Theatre, Lagos), directed by Bode Osanyin. Four years later, April 6, a second new play opened, The Return Home. This production was under

Clark's own direction (in association with Jab Adu), at the PEC [for Pepper and Egun Clark] Repertory Theatre, which Clark and his wife Egun had created in 1982, at J.K. Randle Hall, Onikan, Lagos. Both plays were published by Oxford in 1985, along with Full Circle, which completes the trilogy under the overall title of The Bikoro Plays. A fourth play, a comedy titled The Wives' Revolt, was produced ~~the previous season~~ ^{in 1984 and again} ~~(1984), but has not at this writing been published.~~ ^{in 1986.} Thus the new creative period that was first marked by his poems in State of the Union has meant a return to the theatre as well.

The Bikoro Plays embrace a half century of Niger delta history, along the eastern arm of the River Forcados, below Kiagbodo. The opening play, the most substantial of the three, is set at the turn of the century. It concerns brothers who share ownership of a boat. The younger, Biowa, uses his time of possession to trade in the lagoon markets to the west, all the way to Lagos. The elder, Bradide, trades along the more traditional waterpaths, north on the Niger to Aboh, Onitsha and Lokoja. When they dispute, as with their mother's encouragement they often do, bitter feelings arise, leading to ~~driving apart~~ Biowa's rash decision to cut the boat in half, and, at last, to homicide: Biowa kills Bradide. This

Bikoro

astounding fratricide is adjudicated by a panel that includes, among the judges, Ambakaderemo of Kiagbodo, Clark's great-grandfather, who died in 1926.

While lacking in suspense, the play moves through the energy of the family and the townsmen, ~~their~~ enthusiasm and concern. It is not written in verse, but the rhetoric is imagistic, keeping to Clark's concern for creating in English the quality of ^{Ijaw} ~~the~~ culture. However, it rarely rises to the figurative energy of the early Clark plays. One passage of three speeches anticipates the third play of the trilogy; citizens comment on the evil favoritism of the mother in more than usually energetic language:

ESENI: The witch, has she got the teeth to sample anything except the brains of new-born babies?

PELETUA: Oh, she is the fierce mother-hen who'll fight owner and hawk alike, protecting her brood, while trampling on the chicks in the process.

BURUBO: I hear Bradide was brought into the world as a result of forceful entry by his father. She has never forgiven him for that.

The conclusion of The Boat sends the murderer to death at the urging of his sister, Emonemua. The trial itself is something of a spectacle, well

beyond the indications of the text -- though the text itself is at least momentarily sensational. It is most of all so when Biowa, the favorite son, bites off his mother's ear, an act of poetic justice. Ambakederemo justifies the act: "By mouth she fed him the poison of her pap, and by ear she poured the venom of her tongue against his brother."

In the contemporary Western theatre tradition, The Boat must be seen as conservative, and it further lacks the mystery of Clark's youthful productions. *The same can be said of* ~~So too are~~ the other plays of the trilogy, though the mysticism of The Return Home permits two splendid shows. One of these is a consultation with a "ladder," Obebe, which has mystic suffering and knowledge. Asked to identify the guilty, it searches on stage and, in a kind of desperation, invades the audience, only at last to conclude that no guilt is to be found among those present. The other is a celebration, at the end of the play, of the "return home" of Biowa and Bradide, in the form of effigies created by sacrifice and ritual. The action of the play is otherwise rather trivial: Egbeibo, the son of Biowa, accuses Fregene, son of Bradide, slaps him twice, and is restrained from a third slap only by fierce wrestling. The accusation is, as it turns out, mistaken, and the quarrel quickly resolved. It is, however, the pretext for calling home the

dead and for the associated performances. Clark finds an occasion as well to set the play in time by an allusion to ^{the} death of Bekederemo and the assumption of authority at Kiagbodo by Clark's grandfather, Fuludu, who "could barely walk for the strings of coral beads round his neck, hands and feet. They say it was more than you ever saw on the Oba of Benin."

Full Circle is a short play, in which again a brother kills his brother; both are grandsons of Bradide. The younger, Kari, has had ill fortune in his work as a seaman out of Lagos. False "prophets" have convinced him that his loving and affectionate mother Tibo is the witch who has troubled him. The elder, Ojoboro, comes home just as Kari is beating Tibo; Ojoboro hurls Kari aside, causing his death more by accident than intent. Once again, Bikora^o must decide the case, but this time no great council is assembled. The family decide the case, recognizing that the earlier decision, designed to end the trouble, was evidently a failure. They call upon Tibo's brother, who is not of Bikora^o, to take responsibility, since ~~the~~^g Tibo^g was a "free-born daughter" of another place, to which she returns, and responsibility lies in the parent. The "fine" however is only a token: five shillings, and the case is closed.

In Full Circle the most expressive speech is directed against the police.

Eferemua, a cousin, for a full page of text, warns against calling in the police.

Oh, yes, they will insist on eating fried eggs with boiled yam in the morning, and if there are not hens laying in the town, then goodbye to all the brood In the afternoon ... the fattest pig ... for the masters to feast on, and what they don't tuck into those pot-bellies of theirs must be penned or pickled for them to take home. ... Oh, yes, you cannot cope with police palaver and wahala, for after they have stripped you of all you possess, they will drive you like common goats ... to their station out there in Forcados or Warri.

Police intervention is more briefly rejected in The Boat:

Good fellow, shall we also ask the white man permission before we sleep with our wives tonight? ... Oh, tell me how did we live before he came among us? And how shall we live when he leaves us, for leave he must, considering how he yellows all over and dies on our shores like a mango leaf even when not touched by anybody.

Both speeches reflect ironically on the external changes over the half

century which, except for Biowa's trade and Kari's seaman life, seem to affect the internal life of Bikoroa very little. The lesson of The Return Home might seem to be that danger lies in travelling too far, since in that play the dispute is easily settled among cousins who have stayed at home.

The Wives' Revolt is an economical comedy, with only three characters: Okoro, his wife Koko, and Idama, his friend. At issue is money paid to the town Erhuwaren by "the oil company operating our land." One third has been paid to the town elders, one third to the men in their age groups, and one third similarly to the women. The women object that the elders are all male; the women desert the town. Okoro tries comically to contend with all the problems Koko has left behind, until she returns suffering from some sort of venereal infection. Okoro will not hear any explanation while he assumes the worst. As hard as Idama tries to intervene, Okoro will not stop talking long enough to hear, while Koko infuriates him with comments from the side. At last he swears to be silent:

There, I won't talk again. Yes; see I have stitched my lips from end to end. From now on, I'm the eunuch in service at the palace of the Oba of Benin -- tongue pulled out by the root, eardrums punctured to the base, and therefore deaf, dumb from birth, and

as the women will have it, completely without pestle.

He is not silent of course, no more so than a character in a medieval English interlude, or Hotspur. The interest of the play is not the novelty of the situation but Clark's witty display of ~~the~~^{Ijaw} family and communal life through the old plot.

~~The~~^{Ijaw} life had long been Clark's great interest. In personal communication, Clark remarked that he didn't know an uncle of his was a great poet until he began researching Urhobo poetry. "The point is that the poetry was already there. It was being sung and danced all around us. But we didn't know!"

Partly to correct this ignorance, Clark undertook to preserve the Ozidi Saga, a hero tale that he first published in dramatic form, and then translated at length, in a volume that reproduced a transcription of the ~~the~~^{Ijaw} with Clark's translation in parallel columns. His research had found three versions, the festival performance that Clark and Frank Speed filmed, a hero tale recited by Afoluwa, and a full epic recited by Okabu. That third was the version that Clark translated and published as The Ozidi Saga.

The saga was recorded in the sitting room of a lady in Ibadan, with an audience of enthusiastic listener-participants, mostly women, and a drum

or two as instrumental support. The saga is marked by repetition, prolixity, lapses of memory and, in Clark's words from the introduction, "faults crying aloud in the frequent paratactic constructions." These very faults certify that the saga is, in the highest oral tradition, a unique thing, derived but not identical with, its predecessor renditions. Okabou learned the story from one Atazi, for whom Okabou worked, apparently as servant to the professional storyteller. That was many years earlier than the mid-1960s, when Okabou was already over seventy years old. The Ozidi Sage is a tale of Ado, the legendary city of Benin (not the real imperial city), although under prompting Okabou frequently identified the place as Orua. In that too the saga is an adaptation to the circumstances and memory of the teller.

The water imagery shows that the saga is an indigenous work, though set in Ado. In the canon of Clark's work The Ozidi Sage is unique in that it is so purely ^{Ijaw} ~~the~~ ^{Ijaw} Clark labored to re-^ycreate, so far as the English language permitted, the ^{Ijaw} ~~the~~ text. There is no verbal trickery, no oblique or ~~cryptic~~ ^{cryptic} allusion, no use of surprising rhythm, no flamboyant imagery. Even Clark's wit and irony are reserved for the preface, the introductory essay, and the notes. The reader of the English text senses that he is as near the

performance as print is likely to bring him.

The saga is told in seven "nights," each representing several hours of recitation, interspersed with songs, chants, comments and responses. The spontaneity is well illustrated by an example from Night Two, when Ozidi is fighting Azeza. Ozidi declares his intent, repeating "Dau sowe ke emo bigime" five times; Clark gives four alternative translations. When the hero's uncle flees, the narrator urges the spectators to "sing into" the tape recorder. Clark's text reads as follows:

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"Listen, I am Ozidi! I am Ozidi! Vengeance for my father is all I seek!

Restitution for my father is all I am after!

Rest is all I seek for my father. Justice for my father is all I ask."

Now, with all this happening, his father's brother, the moment he heard this, straightaway, Temugedege fled.

(Laughter)

Caller: O Story!

Group: Yes

With Temugedege fled like that, at his flight, shall we sing into it --

Temugedege's song -- and let the master-drum speak:

Song

Solo: Temugedege is coming!

Chorus O shame, Temugedege!

(Repeated seventeen times)

Temugedege on hearing the noise of the whirling sword [cried]:

"This man, this boy will cut me dead today."

(Laughter)

As he fled, [Ozidi] sped through the courtyard, with one flourish his sword clipped all the grass.

p. 24

The alert reader can imagine Okabou's vigor at the start, his miming of Temugedege's cowardice, the spectator's delight and encouragement, the conscious directing of attention to the recorder, then entry of the drum and the mocking antiphonal song, followed by Temugedege's quavering fear and the laughter it provokes, and finally the teller describing and miming Ozidi's hyperbolic sword stroke. It is all compacted onto less than a page of text. What makes this so important is that such liveliness has customarily been edited out of scholarly transcriptions of oral performances, making them more Homeric than alive. Clark's refusal to sanitize is admirable: he is faithful to the tape recorder, not academic tradition. The result is both interesting and demanding -- some would say

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too demanding. It is a work of literature more for study than entertainment.

The reading is most rewarding if one keeps one eye on the ^{Ijaw} ~~the~~ text. This is especially true of onomatopoeic passages, as when Clark translates: "Oh, Azeza's wife rushed out there, all pieces cutting through the air," which in the Ijò reads, "O Azeza ta wan duo para para para para para para pa pa pa pa you you you you you." Other lines defy translation, as the music of "Tamarau laa fe_{ke} bo e ba de yo" is quite lost as "Death that has nothing to do with God is what is killing me."

The saga has much that Clark put into the play Ozidi, including the killing of Dream by Ozidi. But one should not take this as seriously as Clark does; he sees it as retributive justice, but Qkabou has the old witch appear to Ozidi in a dream and advise him how to bring her back to life. Unlike the play's hero, who has an active mother, the saga's Ozidi takes a wife. She may be a water spirit; she "came walking in, like a goddess out of the stream." However, nothing is made of the wife, and it is the grandmother, not the missing mother, who treats the hero for yaws. And the Smallpox King and all his train are slaughtered by the saga's Ozidi -- who then embraces his wife, though she'd vanished in the meantime.

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P. 238
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It would be inappropriate here to develop the saga further. It is an important document, and it is a useful part of any study of ^{Ijaw} ~~the~~ traditions. Taken in conjunction with the film and the play, the whole is a grand, if sometimes ambiguous, achievement. The least one can say is that the variety of forms provides an unprecedented sense of the whole. Nowhere else can the layman, whether African or alien, find so rounded and fully dimensioned a record of what is now a lost experience of epic. Not that Clark has been without his critics here as in his other work. Serious questions regarding the transcription and the translation have been raised by competent critics. Clark, as an anthropologist and as a linguist, is a talented amateur, and the fact shows.

He is more at home in literary criticism, ~~and it is with mention of Clark's criticism that this article will conclude.~~ His major work in this field ^{being} ~~is~~ five essays that collectively were published as The Example of Shakespeare. Reference was made earlier to his "The Legacy of Caliban" and "Aspects of Nigerian Drama." Both essays are, in some measure as has been seen, statements of positions derived from Clark's own poetry and drama. His "Themes of African Poetry of English Expression" is less so, however, being an early (1964) review of the corpus of poetry from West,

East, and South Africa. Quite properly, he takes into account the historical circumstances and the social context of African poets, while seeing the weaknesses of clichéd negritudist and resistance poetry and praising the successes of better poets. His point in the essay, however, is to refute the strictures of committed critics, like one Soviet woman, and anthologizers of bad poetry, like some living in the West. In the "The Communication Line between Poet and Public" (1966) he contrasts the immediate connection between writer and reader in the easy, often bombastic, old poetry celebrating Africa with the more interesting but difficult work of Christopher Okigbo. He sets himself (and Gabriel Okara) between the two extremes, noting however that some of his work gives readers trouble, as does the poetry of Wole Soyinka. A gap, he says rightly, exists between poets and their public, augmented by the training of teachers, which appreciates only traditional English poetry and cannot accommodate modern poetry, whether Nigerian or British.

Clark's inaugural lecture as Professor of English, The Hero as a Villain, was delivered January 19, 1978 -- six years late. In it, Clark examined the great warrior-heroes of classical and English traditions, Achilles, Oedipus, Richard III, Othello, and Macbeth, along with Nigeria's

Ozidi, to make a mild, ironic attack on recent Nigerian leadership. The warrior-hero often falls into error and wickedness, Clark said, and as a result needs cleansing. In Nigeria, "peace and justice" will not be possible, he suggested, until "society and the hero are purified of the villain within."

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