

A Dictionary of Literary Biography

Isidore Okpewho
(9 November, 1941-)

Emmanuel Obiechina
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- BOOKS: The Victims (London: Longman, 1970; New York: Anchor, 1971);
The Last Duty (London: Longman, 1976);
The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1979);
Myth in Africa: A Study of Its Aesthetic and Cultural
Relevance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983);
A Portrait of the Artist as a Scholar: An Inaugural Lecture
(Ikeja: Longman Nigeria Ltd., 1990);
Oral Literature in Sub-Saharan Africa. *A macropedia project*
(Milan, Italy: Jaca Book, 1991);
African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity.
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992);
Tides (London: Longman, 1993).

MOTION PICTURES: University of Ibadan 1948-1988: The First Forty
Years (Researcher, Interviewer, Script-writer, Video tape editor,
Executive Producer, Director).

RADIO SCRIPTS: "Publishing In Nigeria Today" in The World of Books:
A Western Nigerian Library, Ibadan, Production, 1969. A radio
production.

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OTHER: "Tribalism in Student Politics," a Latin poem in Ibadan Versions,
edited by J. Ferguson (London: Taylor and Francis, 1969);

The Heritage of African Poetry, edited by Okpewho (London:
Longman, 1985);

"Michael Echeruo: The ^Ddignity of Intellectual Labour" in

Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to Present, Vol. 2, edited by Y.

Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Guardian Books, 1986);

"Once Upon a Kingdom: Benin in the Heroic Traditions of
Bendel State, Nigeria," in The Heroic Process, edited by Bo

^{S. C'Carthy and P. C'Heal}
Almqvist ~~et al.~~ (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1987);

"Understanding African Marriage: Towards a Convergence of
Literature and Sociology," Transformations of African

Marriage, edited by D. Parkin (Manchester: Manchester University
Press, 1987), ^{pp.} 331-345;

The Oral Performance in Africa, edited by Okpewho (Ibadan:
Spectrum Books, 1990);

by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo The Ozidi Saga, with an introductory
essay by Okpewho (Washington, D.C.: Howard University
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"The Ozidi Saga: A Critical Introduction," in

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Combine all these references in chronological order

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS-UNCOLLECTED

~~Fiction:~~ "African Fiction: Language Revisited," Journal of African Studies, 5(1978): 414-426;

"Analytical Boundaries in the Oral Narrative," Bulletin

d'Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire, 42(1980): 822-856;

"Rethinking Myth," African Literature Today, ^{11 (1980): 5-23;} ~~55(1981): 28-49;~~

"Myth and Modern Fiction: Armah's Two Thousand Seasons,"

African Literature Today, 13(1983): 3-20;

"The Study of African Oral Literature," Presence Africaine, ^{no 139 (1986): 20-40}

~~Special number on African Literature edited by A. Irele, (Spring 1986);~~

"A Personal Narrative from the Nigerian Civil War: Further Issues in Oral Narrative Representation," Uwa ndi Igbo:

Journal of Igbo Life and Culture, 2(1989): 13-31;

"Comparatism and Separatism in African Literature," World Literature Today, 55(1981): 25-31;

"Firstfruits and Prospects in African Folklore," Journal of African Studies, 6(1979): 171-175.

~~Poetry:~~ "Africa and the Epic: Comparative Thoughts on the Supernatural Machine," Okike, 11(1976): 81-104;

"Does the Epic Exist in Africa? Some Formal Considerations,"

Research in African Literatures, 8(1977): 171-200;

"Poetry and Pattern: Structural Analysis of an Ijo Creation Myth," Journal of American Folklore, 92(1979): 302-325;

"The Anthropologist Looks at the Epic," Research in African Literatures, 11(1980): 429-448;

"Ezemu": A Heroic Narrative from Ubulu-Uno, Bendel State,
Uwa Ndi Igbo: Journal of Igbo Life and Culture, 1(1984): 70-85;
 "African Poetry: The Modern Writer and the Oral Tradition,"
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 "From a Goat Path in Africa: An Approach to the Poetry of
 Jay Wright," Callaloo, 14,3(1991): 692-726.



~~Drama~~: "The Aesthetics of Old African Art." Okike, 8(1975): 38-55.,
 "Principles of Traditional African Art," Journal of Aesthetics
 and Art Criticism, 35(1977): 301-313;
 "The Primacy of Performance in Oral Discourse," Research in
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~~Non-Fiction~~: "Myth and Rationality in Africa," Ibadan Journal of
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 "Cheikh Anta Diop: The Search for a Philosophy of African
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 "Cultural Prejudice and Cultural Scholarship," Higher
 Education and Research in the Netherlands, 26(1982): 39-47;
 "Review of Wole Soyinka's Ake: The Years of Childhood, The
 Wilson Quarterly, 7(1983): 140-41.

Isidore Chukwudozi Oghenerhuele Okpewho is the best example in Africa of the writer who combines steadfast commitment to scholarship with a deep devotion to art, especially the art of fictional narrative which he has taken up and made his creative triumph. Of him could be said what he himself said of J.J.R. Tolkien; that in him "the scholar and the artist enjoy

fruitful coexistence" (Inaugural Lecture, 12). He is an outstanding scholar of African oral traditions, a classicist grounded in comparative literature and comparative folklore, as well as being the most adventurous of the second generation of African novelists who successfully experiment with diverse forms and techniques, often in directions away from their predecessors.

His work is important because of its high quality and the contribution which it makes to the variety, dynamism and vitality of African creative literature. It shows what can be achieved by a writer who consistently strives for excellence and who attempts to evolve formal and narrative structures suited to the content of his fiction. Two of his three published novels have already won major literary prizes: The Last Duty (1976) was awarded the African Arts Prize for Literature (in manuscript) in 1972 and Tides (1993), his latest novel, received the Commonwealth (African Zone) prize for the best fictional work of the year. The most important reason of all why Okpewho's work compels attention is the strong vision of morality which his novels convey, the dogged manner they explore the pathologies and crises of post-colonial African societies and the dilemmas which engulf individual lives in a period of unprecedented change and conflict. His views are reliable, always well considered and anchored in humanity.

Okpewho was born in Agbor, Delta State of Nigeria, on 9 November, 1941. His father, David Omojemitona Okpewho, comes from Oria-Abraka in the Urhobo country of Delta State, and is a retired medical laboratory technologist, while his late mother, Regina Nwanyimgbo Attoh Okpewho, (~~nee Attoh~~), was a native of Asaba in the Igbo-speaking part of the Delta State, and a traditional cloth-maker. That his parents belong to two different ethnic nationalities within the multi-ethnic Nigerian state was a major influence in broadening the consciousness and sympathies of young Okpewho and this

was to reflect on his cultural, literary and scholarly interests in later life. The problem of ethnicity, for the same reason, was to become one of the recurrent themes in his novels.

Okpewho's father's family is large, even by African standards. With ten brothers and half-brothers and nine sisters and half-sisters, it is not surprising that he spent his early life in his maternal homeland and became immersed in its language, culture and values. In his inaugural lecture as professor of Oral Traditional Literature, he paid high tribute to his maternal uncle, Chief S.N.O. Attoh, a veteran schoolmaster, who played a key role in his early upbringing.

He received his primary education at St. Joseph's Catholic School, Asaba, and his high school education from St. Patrick's College, Asaba. Growing up at Asaba was a most auspicious event, for being the first seat of British administration in Nigeria, Asaba was and still remains one of the foremost centers of modern progress, as well as, paradoxically, one of the most tradition-bound communities. The Asaba/Roman Catholic background was also to impact positively on his choice of the Classics for his college specialization and his abiding interest in ~~the~~ oral traditions as a dominant aspect of his scholarly career. The Roman Catholic connection with its liturgical Latin base and actual promotion of Latin as an academic subject at high school prepared the ground for a brilliant career at the University of Ibadan from which Okpewho emerged with a first-class degree in ~~the~~ Classics with academic prizes, while his upbringing within a traditional, story-telling community set the stage in later life for a scholar's career in oral traditional literature that would be distinguished by such major works as The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance (1979), Myth in Africa: A study of its Aesthetic and Cultural Relevance (1983) and African Oral

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Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity (1992), as well as the folktale-permeated novel, The Victims (1970). The fundamental view that man is a story-telling animal by nature (Homo Narrans) which Okpewho shares with such artist-scholars as Tolkien and Umberto Eco has its foundation in Okpewho's formative life in Asaba, where every young person was exposed to a vigorous story-telling tradition.

It is not always realized how close African traditional life and its mores and values are to those of the classical Greeks and Romans and other pre-industrial peoples, but the lesson of their close identities is not lost on Africans who have been exposed to classical education after early nurturing within traditional African environments. The creative and scholarly writings of Léopold Sédar Sⁿg^hor reveal this recognition, and Okpewho's scholarly and imaginative development found the convergences a real asset. ~~His~~ ^{The} concern for order and decorum, abhorrence of naked, irrational violence and distrust of excessive effusions of passion which characterize his fiction could be traced to a life imbedded primarily in its formative stages in a traditional social matrix and secondarily in the study of the Classics.

The rhythm of Okpewho's educational life, up to his graduation from the University of Ibadan, coincided with that of most of his contemporaries. After graduating from ~~the~~ high school with the West African School Certificate in grade one, he worked briefly as a third-class clerk in the Ministry of Education, Ibadan, before entering the University College, Ibadan, as a freshman in Classics. At Ibadan, he was, like many a student of Classics, fed on a diet of Horatian and Juvenalian satires and was impelled into making his first creative outing in a satiric seventy-two-line Latin hexameter attacking tribalism in student politics. The poem was featured in The Phrontisterion, 3(1964) and subsequently ^{was} reproduced by John Ferguson of the

Department of Classics in his collection of Ibadan pieces titled Ibadan Versions (London: Taylor and Francis, 1969). Several years later (1988) Okpewho was to reach another poetic landmark in Ibadan by composing the University of Ibadan Anthem titled "The Fount." It was set to music by Olaolu Omideyi, another alumnus of Ibadan.

That Okpewho is not mentioned in Robert Wren's Those Magical Years: The Making of Nigerian Literature at Ibadan: 1948-1966 (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991) shows that he does not belong with the first generation of Nigerian writers, the majority of whom cut their creative teeth in the very exciting environment of Ibadan between the forties and the early sixties. Okpewho was a student in Ibadan from 1961 to 1964, at a time when the Ibadan "pioneers" of creative literature—Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Flora Nwapa and, by adoption, Wole Soyinka—had already made impressive starts in their writing careers. But young Okpewho was not far away from the beneficent influence of the "elders." He was in the habit of "hanging around the Mbari (Ibadan) circles of Clark, Okigbo, and (the fine artist) Demas Nwoko (who) provided some early inspiration" (Personal Conversation). But most of Okpewho's close friends in Ibadan were actually not of a literary bent of mind. There were Torch Taire, Ayo Amu and Sunny Amuka who later were to become businessmen in Lagos, Nigeria; Brownson Dede, a prominent civil servant, who rose to become deputy secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Frank Ukoli who went into academics and later became vice-chancellor of Delta State University; and George Uteh, a civil servant in Asaba. These are different from the groups of literature enthusiasts that clustered around the Ibadan poetry magazine, The Horn, and formed the Mbari Cultural Center. Thus,

there was no very clear indication that Okpewho was going to become a major writer even though he had put out a some juvenile pieces.

After graduating with first-class honors in Classics, Okpewho went through a phase of uncertainty not uncommon to many Ibadan graduates of those days. With many opportunities before them, the best and the brightest graduates found it hard to determine whether to go into civil service administration or to join the lucrative private sector which was then attracting talented Nigerians into previously foreign-dominated companies and establishments, or to go to a graduate school or to join the professions. Okpewho spent a few months at the Federal Ministry of Education and the Ministry of External Affairs, Lagos, before settling in the Nigerian Subsidiary of the British publishing company, Longman, as editor and publisher. He was there from January, 1965 to August, 1972.

Being a ^{an} ~~publishing~~ editor turned out to be the best decision for Okpewho. It brought him in contact with many manuscripts at a time of great creative ferment, when many Nigerians were looking for outlets for their works. Reading other people's manuscripts was a great stimulus to Okpewho, ^{who found} ~~towards~~ himself becoming interested in writing. His first novel, The Victims, was started, completed and published during this period, and the draft of his second novel, The Last Duty, was completed though not published until many years later.

In 1972 Okpewho decided to go to the University of Denver in Colorado to pursue the graduate program in creative writing. ^{The} Choice of creative writing was almost inevitable, given the fact he had already established interest in creative literature and had become a published author. But mid-way through this program, he switched from creative writing to comparative literature and obtained his doctoral degree in this latter

discipline. He gives his reason for this change of direction as follows in his inaugural statement:

I had originally gone to the United States to do a doctorate in Creative Writing, which would involve submitting in the end something like a full-length novel in lieu of a scholarly thesis. But knowing Nigeria-and especially Ibadan-as I did, I changed my programme midway to Comparative Literature and so pursued a thesis in the good old "respectable" way. (~~Inaugural Lecture, 27~~)

The bias against creative writing and in favor of "respectable" academic disciplines was a residue of ^a nineteenth-century British educational outlook which had taken root in Nigeria during the colonial period and had indeed survived after the British had gone from the scene. British academic planners, unlike their American counterparts, did not believe that creativity could be learned or that creative writing could be elevated to the status of a scholarly discipline. Thus, when confronted with the practical question of earning a living in the academy in Nigeria, Okpewho had no illusions that a doctoral degree in creative writing was the very worst possible route into a career. A change was, therefore, most desirable. Change, like the other details of Okpewho's life, was to be turned into an advantage. Okpewho threw himself single-mindedly into the study of the oral literatures of different peoples, cultures and eras and became a most authoritative voice on African oral traditions. His immersion in the theories of oral poetics, through the ideas of Milman Parry, ^{Albert} ~~Alfred~~ Lord, and Dennis Tedlock, to name but a few, enabled him to correct errors and dispel misrepresentations about African oral literatures. He demonstrated that in addition to performing ritual and social functions, oral literatures in Africa also serve aesthetic and artistic purposes. He summed up his scholarly interest in the matter thus: "My career as a scholar has consisted essentially of explorations

in the principles of art, pursued with the consciousness of an artist, and based on a practical study of the oral traditions of Africa" (Inaugural, 20).

Reading Okpewho's novels, one is struck by how clearly the scholarly views illuminate the creative works. In the novels, the artist is the shaping spirit to a world in which the characters are allowed to act out their destinies: the principle of art as performance, of life as drama, and of interpersonal relationships as so many speech-acts among people drawn together in an embrace of fate summarizes the central constructive idea of Okpewho's fiction. But beyond the oral impulse and the sensibility formed by oral storytelling and ~~the~~ scholarly research^{es}, there is the factor of Okpewho's self-education in the techniques of fictional control through voraciously^c reading into the works of such favorite novelists as Hemingway, Faulkner and James Baldwin. Faulkner is particularly important because Okpewho patterned The Last Day on the use of many narrative voices as in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. (Interlink, 12). The accumulation of these varied influences give Okpewho's novels their peculiar flavor, a combination of simplicity and homeliness, with a high degree of sophistication and innovativeness.

On 3 May/1974, Okpewho married Mary Obiageli ~~Okpewho~~ Chidi^c, a college-educated ^{administrator,} ~~librarian,~~ at the District Court in Denver and, subsequently, the marriage was solemnized at the Newman Catholic Center in Buffalo, New York, on 21 December/1974. They have four children: Ediru Raymond, born in Buffalo, and Ugo Eugene, Afigo Ifeoma Irene, and Onome Ngozi born at Ibadan, Nigeria, where Okpewho took up a university teaching career from 1976 until 1990. Since 1990 the Okpewho's have been living in the United States where their father ^{was first} ~~is~~ a visiting professor ^{at} ~~first in~~ Harvard University and later ^{became} ~~at~~ the State University of New York, Binghamton, where he is Chair of Afro-American and African Studies.

Okpewho's novels, like those of other African writers, are thematically rooted in the post-colonial African world. He uses them to explore concerns pertinent to this world and the many problems that beset it, such issues as the conflicting claims of the individual and the community, ~~of~~^{of} the ethnic nationality and the nation state, of social morality and personal expediency, identity and difference, tradition and change, power and responsibility. In addition to these, Okpewho introduces and emphasizes other themes of his own, like honor, duty, orderliness, peace, reason, dignity, discipline, and the work ethic. Fiction is for Okpewho a mighty anvil upon which to hammer out his philosophical and ideological vision of the good life and the compromises that are very often not made to ensure stability in personal, communal and national life.

Like his contemporaries too, Okpewho assimilates historical themes and events into his fiction, but he attempts to distance and ingest them through his art. At the beginning of his second novel, The Last Duty, he appends a notice that "this story is all fiction" and in his latest novel, Tides, an even more emphatic statement that "This story is entirely fictitious, and is in no way intended as a mirror of any events past, present or future." This ~~overly~~^{overt} insistence on the fictionality of the works is a precautionary disclaimer arising from the works having incorporated a good deal of historical incidents, mediated, no doubt, by the imagination. Erasure of the line separating fictive from historical realities is one way he and the other African novelists use their works to bring "repressed" historical incidents (subjects that would be otherwise taboo) to life within contemporary discourse. Within the fictive mode, no subject is too sacred, sensitive, awkward or vulgar to explore. To further enhance this fictive license, Okpewho gives his characters voice to articulate their aspirations, to tell their own stories, and

the freedom to act out their impulses, while he (the author) withdraws as a narrative persona and assumes the role of recorder.

Okpewho does not introduce the disclaimer in his first novel, The Victims, because its central subject is inspired not by history or politics but by folklore, the folktale motif of the good and wicked co-wives. In the novel, Obanua Ozoma, a weak besotted husband of two co-wives, fails to fulfill his obligations to his family as father and husband, whereupon his wives, Nwabunor and Ogugua, internalize their frustrations and embark upon a war of mutual destruction which finally ends in the poisoned death of Ogugua and her twin daughters and son and Nwabunor's only child and son, while Nwabunor, the procurer of the fatal poison, goes mad. Obanua remains enveloped in a drunken haze from which he never awakes to see the tragedy that has engulfed his family. The novel traces the course of his disintegration and his family's dissolution.

Classical influence is distinct in The Victims. Like a classical epic narrative, the novel opens in medias res, with a never-to-be-forgotten fight that lasts a whole night between Nwabunor and Obanua, heralding and dramatizing the total collapse of their domestic stability. Nwabunor's frustrations have grown over the years and now she explodes into a fury that is only matched by the fury of nature outside, a storm within and a storm without. The casus belli is Obanua's refusal to pay her son's school fees and Nwabunor's attempt (doomed to fail) to "make" him accept responsibility, like a responsible father. From now on we are treated to unremitting violence of all sorts, physical, verbal and elemental, indicative of a household in utter disarray. Obanua takes flight and leaves the battle front to his wives and the ferocious twins who add adolescent fanaticism to natural partisanship on the side of Ogugua, their mother, against the embattled

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Nwabunor. The twins steal Nwabunor's money and goods from her kiosk, driving her further to a point of madness and paranoia. Ubaka, Nwabunor's teenage son, and Ogugua's four-year-old son alone escape the blight: miraculously, they cultivate an attachment too innocent and strong to be broken by their warring mothers.

Two old sisters who live next door to Obanua function as a chorus in the unfolding tragic drama. They observe and comment upon everything going on in Obanua's house, and many useful insights are revealed through their comments. For example, the statement of one of the sisters that the members of Obanua household are "people who are merely the victims of their own fire" (Victims, 200) is the type that clinches the reader's perception of the action, because it comes from someone who has been a consistent, though non-participant, witness. Numerous tropes which reinforce the meaning of the novel, such as personifications, pathetic fallacies, use of heroic similes, apostrophes and the constant reference to the reasonableness of the characters' actions invest the novel with a classical literary quality.

Social and psychological truths are explored in great depth in The Victims. Every action is followed closely and weighed carefully on the scale of probability and possibility, with every shred of evidence adduced to justify its viability. There are no magical interventions, though portents and signs are sprinkled over the landscape of the action. Okpewho makes elaborate use of internal monologues as in many conventional novels. The characters talk to themselves and reason within themselves about the many things that bother them. Very often, as a result of these internal musings and monologues, they bring themselves ~~already~~ to a point of boil before they come face to face with their interlocutors. The effect is, therefore, confrontational; there are no real conversations but accusations or

denunciations or provocations. There is so much heat and passion, because a good part of the individual's communication is with the self, in an inner region of the mind cluttered up with the memory of injuries and suspicions, with no extenuations, no rationalizations, no excuses and no ^{objective observations,} ~~objectivations~~. From this depth bereft of goodwill and filled with ill-will, words emerge like spears aimed at the hearts of confirmed enemies. Verbal and physical violence are thus modes of extending a discourse of aggression already in process within the heated, anti-pathetic chambers of the angry soul.

African writers invoke nature in their exploration of human experience, whether in its metaphysical, metaphorical or physical/literal emanations, but in The Victims, nature is portrayed consistently as a metaphor of evil and violence which dominate the world of the novel. The violence which ^{rules} ~~dominates~~ the hearts of the main characters finds answering chords in the violence and upheavals in nature, which in ~~turn~~ ^{return} prepare the atmosphere for the consummation of a frightful tragedy. The rains of this novel often come as rainstorms; a rainstorm opens the novel and punctuates many of the incidents, though the gentleness of Ubaka's life allows his death to be preceded by a heavy but smooth rain. When he dies, the rain completely stops. Nature, as the sun, clouds or haze, or as birds and insects, usually rounds off each segment of action and responds with sympathy to the specific human condition. For example, after Gwam, the corrupt political agent, has cheated Ubaka of his holiday work pay, we are told that "his heart could hardly bear the weight of the pain. . . It was a very hot afternoon, and again the cicadas chirped so loudly you would think they wanted to die" (Victim, C

160).

The Victims deals with many themes but two of them particularly stand out—the themes of polygamy and reason. ~~To begin with polygamy, it~~

should be noted that the story is not a treatise against polygamy, nor is it an anti-traditional discourse. The main^o lines of the narrative lie in a different direction. The tragedy does not arise from polygamy but from circumstances surrounding an unstable domestic arrangement. There are travesties which cumulatively subvert the domestic stability of Obanua's household. Firstly, Obanua himself is a thoroughly flawed character, an irresponsible husband and unworthy father. Success^{ful} of polygamy depends on the strength of character of the paterfamilias and his economic success. The polygamous husband must be a provider of the family's necessities, including not only food, but also adequate space for the units that constitute the polygamous household. Ideally, each mother and ^{her} child^(ren) must have clearly defined space, which in traditional societies meant a separate house, ~~for a separate~~ ^{unit}. Obanua has neither the character nor the means to be a successful polygamist. There is ^{an} unmistakable feeling of claustrophobia ⁱⁿ Obanua's two bedroom house ^{which is too small} for two volatile women and their children. In a poisoned atmosphere claustrophobia triply reinforces the deadliness of malice. In Obanua's household, nearness exacerbates the potential for hostilities; every slight gesture of antipathy is observed by the children, every whispered obscenity is heard, absorbed and internalized, ^{even} facial expressions, which can be more devastating than wounding words, ^{are} noted by the children. Thus Ogugua's twins are so entrenched in their mother's hatred of her rival that they open up their own front of attack. Spatial closeness facilitates the tragic conclusion of the story; it is a lot easier for Nwabunor to tip ^{lethal} concoction into her co-wife's soup pot in a shared kitchen than if they were living apart. The imagery of "two hostile families of beasts enclosed in a pen" (Victims, 83) very aptly describes the negative effect of the inadequacy of space on the final disintegration of the dysfunctional family.

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Polygamy is a favorite theme among African writers, especially under the overwhelming impulse of the feminist movement. ^{The} Attitude ^{to} it varies from writer to writer, depending on the ideological and philosophical perspective of the author, ~~from attacks on polygamy as an outmoded, outdated system unsuited to modern time in Mariama Ba's Une si longue lettre and Sharif Easmon's Burnt-Out Marriage, as a system that victimizes women in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood, and as a metaphor for the failure of contemporary African leadership to provide adequate moral and social direction in the modern nation states, in Ousmane's Xala.~~ The Victims provides a complex exploration of the theme which absorbs ~~all these~~ ^{many different} perspectives, and ~~more~~ ^{providing} It provides a wider ^{of} range of characterization and psychological insights and introduces ^{in a subtle} ~~more complex~~ narrative techniques, ~~than the others.~~ Unlike the other narratives, the major characters in The Victims share varied degrees of culpability for the making of ^{an} ~~this~~ all-encompassing disaster. Obanua's irresponsibility as a failed polygamist is at the core of the tragedy, but Nwabunor's schizoid paranoia and Ogugua's insensitivity and provocations also contribute. Some minor characters also bring their own disruptive qualities to bear on the action, from the fierce and pernicious twins, through Nwanze, the crippled towncrier who becomes Obanua's Mephistophelean drinking companion, to the diabolic medicine men Akpuko and Ese Nwozomudo who play deuce and lose with Nwabunor. The uniqueness of The Victims is that it gives the theme of polygamy a wider moral-philosophical-psychological base, thereby amplifying its implications beyond a specific village in a specific space and time. This is ~~even more so by~~ ^{the result of} the theme of polygamy being linked to the theme of reason.

Stated simply, the theme of reason ^{discusses} ~~is~~ that human beings are like animals, if they cannot or do not exercise ~~the use of their~~ reason in their

dealings with one another. The many violent eruptions in the novel, whether in Obanua's household or in the local palm-wine bar which Obanua has made his second home, are portrayed as examples of ^{an} absence of reason and an entrenchment of irrationality. The Obanua household is torn apart because no domestic structure will stand when subjected to such relentless violence and such persistent effusion of passion.

The words "reason" and "reasonable" occur frequently in the novel almost like verbal signatures and provide a major leitmotif in the delineation of the action. Knowledgeable people in the community diagnose the crises of Obanua's household as absence of reason and reasonableness, ~~from the~~ ~~conduct of the characters.~~ "Doctor" Nwosisi, the kindly quack who dispenses medicine to the villagers, admonishes Obanua's wives to "learn to be reasonable and live in peace" (*Victims*, 25) and Ma Nwojide complains that her son's family is in disarray because its members are "always. . . quarreling, fighting, cursing, slapping, scratching." She wonders that they are not all living in the forest with the rest of the beasts, which "would have been much better than that you expose yourself to a town of reasonable human beings" (14-15). And when Nwabunor takes her desperate decision to poison her co-wife and her children, we are told that "her mind was blocked to the exercise of reason" (174).

Okpewho underscores this theme by introducing numerous animal and insect images. Members of the quarreling family are likened to "insects flirting around the hurricane lamp until they burned themselves to death" (175) and as "foraging finches [that] hustled for roost and chirped querulously" (83). ^{The} Animals that are mentioned most are rats, cats, goats, owls, vultures, frogs, cows and gorillas. When human beings are likened to animals or insects, the effect is often reductive; they are a little less than

human. For example, Obanua's deterioration due to drinking is given sharp focus by his being ^{depicted} reduced to the level of a beast:

So he began to head homewards. This was not because he thought that home was the logical place to go after a man was through with whatever it was that kept him outside so late. He could not reason now. More than anything else he was being pushed home by the natural instinct that an animal has for its habitat. If he could bring himself to think, he would not want to go home. But now no place of escape could well be contemplated under such giddy circumstances (53).

~~This is only one aspect of the use of animal images, to demonstrate unreason~~
~~and irrationality of characters. The other use of them is really to show that~~

animals in a state of stability are a good deal better than human beings in ^{of disorder. Unlike}
~~their disorderly state.~~ Contrary to the irrationally violent nature of certain

humans, ^{beings,} animals are shown living tolerantly together, as exemplified by the
~~old women's cats, and the frogs that serenade one another and the insects that~~

celebrate life's joys in outpourings of song and sounds. Similarly, Obanua's neglect of his children and wives is sharply contrasted with the old woman's goat's solicitousness for the well-being of her only kid. The orderliness of

animals is shown side by side with the disorderliness of the humans. The most unforgettable animal image is that which brings The Victims to an end:

"Above and beyond the silhouetted trees in the horizon black cloud figures drifted westwards, homeward bound, like the sad profiles of a retreating menagerie" (Victims, 200). ^{In this} It recaptures with great acuteness the underlying sympathy of all creation, as if the tragic disintegration of Obanua's household is felt vicariously by trees, clouds and animals. "The sad profiles of a retreating menagerie" very felicitously describes the state of the doomed household as its members embark upon their final journey to eternity.

The Victims is one of the best known and read African novels, especially since it became a set text for school certificate literature in the West African Examinations Council program in the 1980's. It appeals broadly to young and adult readers alike, first because it contains a good, exciting story, but more importantly because it has elements within it which appeal to young and not-so-young readers. For example, the prominence given to the relationship between Ubaka, Nwabunor's thirteen-year-old son and Bomboy, Ogugua's inquisitive four-year-old, provides young readers with events and situations to identify with. Indeed, the gentleness which pervades this relationship, in the midst of so much adult spite and viciousness, enables young readers to experience a feeling of deserved self-congratulation over their nasty elders. Ubaka's relationship with the other boys in their koso-playing groups provides added points of identification for adolescent readers. For adult readers, the very deep and incisive exploration of serious themes, whether the story is viewed as realist fiction or as a parable, never fails to commend the work. Okpewho's success in establishing a balance between the interests of children and young people and those of adults is one of the major achievements of the novel, its essential democratic perspective.

For the critics, the novel's technical and stylistic experiments coupled with the author's wide frame of reference that encompasses African traditional culture, the classics and the modern technological world provide a real challenge and exciting possibilities for varied readings and interpretations. One such possibility is the reading of the novel as a parable of African post-colonial politics in which the failed polygamist of the story symbolizes the ineffectual post-colonial ruling elites of Africa, the warring co-wives as the fractious ethnic communities and the victims the masses of

African peoples who bear the brunt of the failure of the rulers to fulfill the expectations of independence.

Okpewho's second novel, The Last Duty, was published in 1976, that is seven years after The Victims. Its writing was, however, completed by 1972, just before Okpewho proceeded to graduate school in Denver, and was accepted for publication in 1973. In subject matter, it is different from The Victims, being set against the backdrop of the Nigerian Civil War, which is a historical fact. It also employs different narrative techniques from those of The Victims. In spirit, however, they share certain essential qualities chief of which is what Okpewho calls their interest in "human action and interaction and counteraction" (Interlink, 12). Asked if the civil war itself was the dominant impulse in The Last Duty, he replied negatively: "There is more here an attachment to the lives of people and what happens to them, than to political movements," he said ("Arts in Africa," 3).

The disclaimer is of course quite unnecessary because a novel has to be built on people and what happens to them; a novel written entirely to sustain a cause or document an event outside the intrinsic concern for human beings as living and suffering and self-validating creatures would be very dull indeed. Okpewho's interest in The Last Duty is to uphold the human interest by ^{selecting} ~~sampling out~~ a group of persons caught up in the Nigerian Civil War and ^{exploring} ~~to explore~~ their responses to one another under the overwhelming pressure of the events of war. Each character is allowed to speak for himself or herself, to justify his or her actions, and to validate ^{subjectively} assumed stances. The author functions as a mere recorder rather than as an omniscient narrator of the characters' experiences. The organizational approach known as the "collective evidence" technique was made famous by Wilkie Collins in The Woman in White and in more recent time by William Faulkner in As I

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Lay Dying. It involves the reader more intimately with the characters, since without the mediational intrusion of an author-narrator, characters are summarily endorsed or condemned by the evidence of what they say and do or what others say in response to them; there is no suspension of moral judgment on the part of the reader. The sound principle behind this technique of multivocalism is that people are their own best advocates, especially since the author's main intention was not to "document" the civil war but to use it, ^{as Okpewho explained in a BBC interview,} "as an opportunity to examine and explore the character of people and what happens to them under particular pressures." (*Arts and Africa*, 3).

The novel is set in Urukpe, a small border town caught in the war between the Federals and the Biafrans, fictionalized as Zondans and Simbians. The Simbians occupied the town early in the conflict but were expelled by the Zondan forces. The Simbians thereafter subject ^{ed} the area and its Zondan defenders to incessant guerrilla harassment and periodic bombardment from light fighter aircraft. The external tension of the ongoing war is a major factor in the unfolding of the action, but the internal tensions within and among the people supply an even greater impulse.

Okpewho's judicious choice of characters is the strength of this novel. Every character featured is distinct ^{and impressive.} ~~in having a real potential for explosive propulsion under a stimulus as intransigent as a civil war.~~ In spite of the dispersed structure of the multivocal narrative, the plot is well centralized by the character of Mukoro Oshevire, a good, moral and honorable man whose ^{undeserved} ~~false accusation and~~ incarceration for collaboration with the Simbians during their occupation of Urukpe triggers the series of events that end in tragedy. His wife, Aku, ~~is~~ a loving, loyal spouse put under extreme pressure during his detention, ~~and~~ succumbs to temptation. Caught in the vice of insecurity

and virtually ostracized by the xenophobic Urukpians, she is enslaved by the odious Chief Toje Onovwako, her husband's betrayer and economic rival.

Chief Toje's machinations are given psychological underpinning by ~~its being~~ ^{the revelation} ~~revealed~~ that he has recently lost his potency and is desperately attempting to use Oshevire's beautiful wife as an instrument for curing his sickness. Odibo, Chief Toje's one-handed nephew, is greatly abused by his uncle who makes him his liaison with Aku and uses his house ^{for} ~~as~~ their rendezvous. It is part of the novel's overarching irony that Odibo, whose name means "servant," has his masculine identity restored quite effortlessly through Aku's sexual favors, while Chief Toje's exertions in that direction are totally disappointed. Aku's four-year-old son, Oghenovo, as an infant, perceives life from the margin of innocence and childhood incomprehensibility, thus underlining the pathos in a world shredded by adult passions and deviousness. Major Ali S. Idris is the highly idealized commander of the federal army stationed at Urukpe. He conscientiously and justly carries out his duties of ensuring the security of the people under his command, including Aku and her son who are stigmatized by the local inhabitants. He is somewhat remiss in not suspecting Chief Toje's ulterior motive for assuming the protection of Oshevire's wife and son. This mistake contributes to the loss of his command and ^{to his} ~~recall~~ to headquarters. His foot soldier, Private Akumagba, whom he details to watch over Oshevire's family and home, is a simple man imbued with the prejudices of the ordinary people of his town. The medicine man, Emuakpor, like his counterparts in The Victims, is treated satirically, though his bringing Chief Toje to deserved ridicule ~~will~~ ^{is} a delight ~~to~~ most readers.

In telling their individual stories and sorting out the complexities of their interconnected lives, the characters expose the ^{motives} ~~main springs~~ of their actions and relate them to the themes of the novel, chief of which are the

ideas of honor, duty and betrayal and the realities of ethnic prejudice, destructiveness of war and evils of exploitation. The narrative structure built on multivocalism allows for great flexibility in the unfolding of the ~~various~~ ^{characters' thought.} ~~states of mind~~, especially in so far as each mind is involved in a little civil war of its own, and ~~subscribing to the theme of "the mind as a battlefield."~~ Each ^{state of} mind is explored through the words of its owner, words narrated as a series of explanations, self-validations or self-clarifications, as the character is confronted by other characters or by ~~the~~ events the character is striving to understand, ~~to~~ accommodate or control. The inner tension of the novel results from the diffuse sense of fear and insecurity which characters feel; ^{they are} ~~surmounted by the externalities~~ ^{enmeshed in} of the war situation, ^{and made nervous by} the widespread presence of armed soldiers, a curfew, air-raids and guerrilla attacks. The ordering of the world of the novel is effective in giving the reader ^{a sense} ~~the effect~~ of the destructiveness of war, ~~more than if Okpewho had concentrated alone on~~ what a critic calls "the external realities of our society." (~~The Guardian~~ 18). In fact, ^{Nigerian} ~~the reviewer is~~ ^{critic} plainly wrong when he says that "Okpewho leads us away from the concrete to the conceptual," if by that is implied that that mode of exploring the civil war experience is any less apprehensible than if Okpewho had devoted his effort toward copiously "documenting" the externalities of the war. By concentrating on the states of mind of selected characters, Okpewho is able to ^{particularize} ~~concretize the devastations of war~~, the fears, the neuroses, the blight of previously stable relationships, and the bottomless possibilities for evil which a state of extreme tension generates.

The theme of betrayal is written large in The Last Duty. The word "betrayal" is defined severally as "to hand over a person to the enemy," "to help the enemy to get a foothold in a war situation," "to expose an innocent person treacherously to punishment," "failure to uphold (a duty)" and "to

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seduce and desert a trusting person" (Webster's New World Dictionary, 58).

All these aspects are explored in the novel. Oshevire is falsely accused of collaborating with the enemy and wrongly punished; his secret accuser, Chief Toje, continues the process of betrayal by suborning Rukeme, a townsman, to give false evidence to prevent Oshevire's release from detention. He even tries to seduce Major Ali as he had an earlier brigade major. Chief Toje also entraps Oshevire's wife with gifts, thereby compromising the virtues of an honest but hard-pressed woman. Trusts are disappointed ^{throughout} in many particulars in the novel. Oshevire's belief in the impregnability of Aku's honor is betrayed in the end ("I know what women are, but I also know my woman") (The Last Duty, 156) ^{because he fails to} ~~do not~~ take into account the nature of the temptations to which his woman is exposed and the pressures which break her in her loneliness. Major Ali's trust in the good intentions of Chief Toje, the self-appointed protector and benefactor of Oshevire's wife and son, is also betrayed. Even Chief Toje in his rather perverted way had expected both Aku and his much-abused nephew, Odibo, to be loyal to him and to go on catering to his whims. Discovering that his trust has been betrayed whips him into the insane fury that terminates in mayhem.

The theme of duty is explored deeply through the character of Major Ali who defines for himself very clear obligations of his office as the effective governmental presence in the borderland at war. His resolve is to rule even-handedly and with justice and care, by extending equal protection to both the civilians and the soldiers. His effort to protect Aku and her son miscarries because of the deep deception practiced on him by a thoroughly evil man. His ^{ave} high-mindedness and humanity is sharply contrasted with the utter

selfishness and villainy of Chief Toje. Ironically, both the idealist and the villain suffer defeat in the topsy-turvy world of war.

Some critics and commentators assert that The Last Duty is not concerned with the civil war as a political or historical event but with its impacts on people, (ALT, 64-65, Perspectives on Nigerian Literature, 205). That is not altogether true. Indeed, the theme of politics is there, portrayed in terms of the values by which the characters live and interact with one another. From the words and attitudes of the characters, it is easy to distill two sets of values, two identities and two allegiances which are the ~~spring~~ sources of their actions—those of the small community of tribal, clan or ethnic consciousness and those of the larger, "imagined" community of the nation state and national consciousness. Major Ali represents the values of the nation whereas the people of Urukpe are conditioned by their inward-looking identity and microcosmic allegiances. A major tension within the novel is this ideological divide between those who espouse the values of a common nationhood and the villagers of Urukpe whose ^{want to} ~~views of their~~ solidarities are closed and shut out everyone else, including the non-local wife of a local man. ^{Resolution of this conflict} ~~The closure~~ is, of course, helped by the fact of the civil war which has a direct impact on the emotional life of the people. But the struggle of the civil war itself is predicated on the attempt to bring back a section of the nation which has broken away. The slogan "to keep Zonda one is a task that must be done!" arises from a political vision which animates the best of Major Ali's actions and sense of responsibility. He spells out the realistic implications of the slogan:

If this country really means what it says in its slogan. . . we are all committed to translating that slogan into concrete terms so far as it concerns not only our success on the field against the rebel forces, but indeed the rights and liberties of every single citizen of this country—man, woman or child,

soldier or civilian^M—no matter where they come from or marks
they wear on their faces (The Last Duty, 20). ~~E~~

The truth, however, is that this noble ideal is not shared by everyone. Indeed, Major Ali has not even succeeded in communicating it to his soldiers, including Private Okumagba, the local man in the Zondan army who is nursing the idea of murdering Aku and her son whom he is detailed to protect, because she hails from the hated Simbian side. Apart from Major Ali, the only other character who is imbued with the vision of the nation as a civic society with obligations to guarantee the security of every person is Oshevire who, at considerable risk to himself, helps a Simba fugitive to safety from a murderous mob. Interestingly, Ali's ideological policy statement cited above is made in the context of the execution of a soldier who has killed his sergeant and a civilian woman. The linkage of the idea of justice to that of upholding national identity underline^f the principle that there cannot be true national stability without justice and there cannot be justice without a broad enough vision that transcends the narrow limits of each individual's ethnic loyalties. For Okpewho, justice, stability and national integrity are interconnected and interrelated; they are the bedrock of a national ideology.

Okpewho's experiments with technique and style extend to his use of language in The Last Duty. His strategy is to allow each character to speak in "good standard English," irrespective of whether or not ^{the} characters ~~are~~ ^{are} well-educated or vernacular users. He is, of course, aware that "style of speech, the peculiar flavors of local dialects, the measured gravity or limber wit of gnomes: all these are useful touches in a work of African fiction" (Journal of African Studies, 423), but he prefers to standardize his characters' speech. His argument is that his characters are fluent in their vernaculars and that as a writer, his job is to translate their speeches into standard English,

relying on the integrity of each individual's emotions and the dignity of his or her sensibility as sole guide to linguistic expression. Other writers under similar circumstances have chosen different strategies, including indigenizing or "Africanizing" the English language used by their characters. Okpewho's only concession to some sort of linguistic realism is the peculiar rendering of the monologues of four-year-old Oghenovo. His speeches are put in low^{er} case and are scantily punctuated, while their syntax is somewhat fragmented, giving the monologues a racy, disjointed, childish flavor. For the rest, each character states his or her own case, distinctly and independently, ~~and is the measure of his or her own~~ linguistic success. He ensures that each character is in control of his or her own voice, of his or her own story, and of his or her own feelings. The characters show a great depth of ~~the~~ inner perception of their individual conditions and ^{of} how they are either helped or hindered by the actions and reactions of others. Under these circumstances, use of standard English to tell each story appears to be justified.

Okpewho's third novel Tides continues the experiments with form and technique noted in The Victims and The Last Duty. It is even bolder in its experimentation in the sense that it not only utilizes the epistolary technique but extends it by building the narrative structure upon the exchange of letters between two men. Other novels in the same mode, like Mariama Bâ's Une si longue lettre, use one correspondent who is the essential voice and centering consciousness. In Tides, two voices are schematized to maximally widen the scope of the action, facilitate thematic spread and enlarge perspectives. The possibilities for distilling insights are enhanced by the author's positioning of the two correspondents along contrastive ecological and social poles, one in the urban "jungle" of Nigerian⁵ capital city among governing elites and city denizens and the other in the rural

backwaters of the Niger delta inhabited by fishermen and peasant farmers. The novel has the distinction of being the first to be seriously concerned with oil pollution, ecological and environmental abuse and demographic disaster. It also has the merit of being the first Nigerian novel to be concerned with the theme of what a reviewer calls the "politics of oil" (West Africa 26-31 Jan. 1993, 124).

Tides is set in post-1975 Nigeria, after the installation of the Murtala Muhammed^M-Olusegun Obasanjo's military government that displaced the regime of Yakubu Gowon^G, a Nigeria of rising oil sales and economic boom, of spawning millionaires and pauperized peasants, and of massive purges of the bureaucracies, the public institutions and the professions.

Piriye Dukumo, aged thirty-seven years, and Tonwe Brisibe, fifty-seven, were the editor and editor-in-chief respectively of the government's daily newspaper, the National Chronicle, published in Lagos. They shared the misfortune of having been prematurely retired during the purges and, because they both belong to the same Ijaw ethnic nationality, they also share a common sense of injury, as members of a victimized ethnic group. Tonwe decides to retire to the rural serenity of Seiama, his hometown in the Niger delta and there to become a fisherman as are most of his people, while Piriye decides to continue to seek his fortune in Lagos as a freelance journalist. At Piriye's suggestion, the two men agree to put their skill as investigative journalists to the service of their Beniotu people whose livelihood has first been threatened by the Kwarafa Dam which "reduced the volume of water flowing down the Niger and so curtailed the fishing activity in the Delta" and next, "the spillage of crude petroleum from the oil rigs . . . [which] has proved an absolute menace to agricultural life" (Tides, 2). About this time also a group of Beniotu radicals have mounted a protest organization called the

Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) to champion the cause of the fishermen. The project proposed by Piriye is for the two men to write a book together "that will long remain an authoritative testimony to the plight of our people in these times" (Tides, 3). The strategy is for Lagos-based Piriye to monitor and record the activities of the CCC in Lagos and the government's responses to them, while Tonwe would "monitor the home front" (3). By exchanging notes from those vantage points, they would build up a formidable dossier on the "events in the two sectors which are clearly related to one another" (3). Through the good offices of Priboye Oruama, another clansman whose business takes him constantly between Lagos and the Delta, the two friends conduct their lengthy correspondences that make up the full length of the novel. The promised book does not materialize of course, but the letters give us as full and comprehensive a picture of the situation as any independent book could.

Structurally, the twenty-three letters that constitute the novel are organized in three parts that correspond to the three phases of events or actions of the narrative. To give topographic tuning to those events, the three parts are subsumed under fluvial metaphors. Part One, termed "Ripple," describes the very beginnings of the stirrings of the crusade to deal with the crisis of environmental destruction in the Niger delta by the formation of the Committee of Concerned Citizens, its infiltration by the national security agents, and the detention of its prime mover Noble Ebika Harrison, called Bickerbug for his radical activism. Part Two, designated "Billow," describes the escalation of the crises: the CCC is fractionalized, Piriye's inquiry about Bickerbug at the security department earns him a detention of his own and he is recruited to spy on Bickerbug and inform against the revolutionary. In the Delta, Tonwe is deeply drawn into the defense of the environment and

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protection of the livelihood of the fishermen and peasants. He comes into conflict with the oil business and its corrupt operators and underwriters. Part Three, called "Flood," is the apocalyptic dénouement, the phase of final destruction during which Bickerbug and his revolutionaries (some people call them terrorists) blow up bridges, oil installations and the Kwarafa Dam. Bickerbug is arrested attempting to flee disguised as a priest (a comic coda to a stupendous national tragedy).

As a subplot, Piriye's domestic crisis undergoes a tripartite development. In the first part, his unhappy marital condition is revealed; his marriage to his "bloody Beniotu vixen" is irretrievably damaged. In part two, the professional collaboration between Piriye and Latifat Ogedengbe (the plucky reporter on the Chronicle) in pursuit of Bickerbug blossoms into a love affair, a pregnancy and a projected marriage. In the third part, Latifat and her unborn baby are lost in Bickerbug's inferno that destroys the Kwarafa Dam, and ~~with this loss also the end of a most promising relationship.~~ The epigraphs at the beginning of each part are ballad notes that punctuate the emotional currents running through ~~each segment of~~ the experiences described. ^{Ijaw} ~~to~~ folk songs, ^{Ijaw} ~~to~~ environment and, of course, the life-and-death struggle of ^{Ijaw} ~~to~~ people to preserve their land and livelihood, these are the powerful ingredients of Okpewho's unusual third novel.

Characterization is surprisingly rich in a novel that is neatly structured within the epistolary mode. ^{The} ~~By whatever~~ sleight of hand ^{with which} Okpewho is able to achieve this miracle must be reckoned his great asset as a novelist. True to his preferred linguistic principle, the characters mostly use ~~the~~ standard English and are denied the sort of linguistic realism which typifies characters on the basis of their social class and levels of education. ^{for} Exception is the final letter from Priboye to Piriye which is written in broken English, perhaps to

convey the impression that the writer is very much agitated. Characters ^{begin to use} ~~begin~~ on a common linguistic ^{register} ~~platform~~ to define their inner drives and the qualities of their individual personalities. Their style of personal expression is the key to their ultimate personal identity¹⁷—their words give them shape. Piriye's use of caustic language portrays him as an excitable and violent-tempered man, while Tonwe's language reflects a solid, principled and philosophically-minded person; their collaboration is almost a symbiosis of opposites. Noble Ebika Harrison is a copybook revolutionary, dogged, fanatically devoted to an affirmed cause, unworried about personal safety, contemptuous of those in power, careless of material comforts and ^{the} physical appearance of the body, unpredictable, cunning imbued with charisma and mysteriousness, while Lalifat Ogedengbe is an intelligent, dynamic young professional, with strong emotional balance and warmth.

Other characters are more or less stereotypical denizens of the corrupt state, representing various aspects of the social corruption—the smiling but hard and calculating chief security officer, the brutal wolfish field security men, an assortment of corrupt politicians and soldiers and insensitive power-intoxicated oil executives—all of these are distinguished by varying degrees of venality and dishonesty that underwrite inefficiency, mass suffering, a state of powerlessness among the masses, and national despair.

Thematically, Tides provides a severe critique of modern Nigeria, especially the post-civil war Nigeria. As with The Last Duty, one of the major themes of Tides is the problem of ethnicity. Okpewho sees ethnic consciousness and prejudices arising from it as the greatest obstacle to the building of a vibrant and healthy nation. He shares with many Nigerian writers, old and new, the conviction that a truly great nation cannot emerge when the elites or those in the leadership positions are ensconced in their

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ethnic souls, with no space for liberating national sentiments. The subject is given piquancy by the fact that the two principal characters are victims of ethnic bias; for we are reminded time and time again that Piriye and Tonwe, the editor-in-chief and editor respectively of a government-owned newspaper who are of the same ethnic group, are the only officials of that newspaper forcibly ^{of}restored during the great purges. The younger man inveighs interminably against the "godforsaken tribalists in high places" while his older companion absorbs the pain with greater dignity. In his usually philosophical manner Tonwe acknowledges that "Ethnicity has become the major tragedy in the Nigerian body politic, and has hindered many a fine relationship among Nigerians" (Tides, 5).

This theme is the centerpiece of the novel's construction. The project to document the crisis of the environmental destruction of the Niger Delta is given relevance by the feeling that the inability to do something to stem the degradation of the environment by oil prospecting companies is deliberate and symptomatic of the neglect of the vital interests of the people of the Delta. The deeply ^{of}felt sense of grievance, a feeling of having been deliberately injured by the other (larger) ethnic groups of the country fuels the fire of Beniotu or Ijo micro-nationalism, and gives residual sympathy to a crazy extremist like Bickerbug.

Next ^{in importance} to ~~ethnicity~~ is the theme of environmental destruction. Okpewho is convinced that the destruction of the environment of the Niger delta by the activities of oil exploring companies is a great tragedy, especially for those who have the misfortune of residing and making their living in that part of the country. ^{Add to this} ~~Top this up with~~ the cutting off of much of the waterflow by the Kainji Dam (disguised as Kwarafa Dam) and there exists a situation of very serious ecological and demographic crisis. The true nature

of this crisis is not fully appreciated by the larger Nigerian community most of whom have no idea what life in the Niger delta is like. Tides attempts to fill the gap by describing the damage done to the environment, sometimes cryptically as "deforestation of onshore sites, desecration of traditional shrines, evacuation and tearing up of whole villages and farmlands, vast areas of oil spillage and great quantities of aquatic life destroyed. . ." (Tides, 18) and sometimes more graphically: "The village [of Kuruma] has been completely wiped out by the floating oil, and most of the people have resettled in Burutu," and of another site, "There is practically no fishing life there any more, because the fishes die and float on the black surface of the water in large numbers" (Tides, 27). The first description characteristically is by Bickerbug and the second by Tonwe, but the reality of environmental abuse is indisputable.

Three attitudes are decipherable from the events of the narrative; the revolutionary, the laissez faire, and the rationalistic. In Tides the extreme positions of revolution and laissez faire are rejected in favor of a pragmatic middle road dictated by reason.

The first rejected attitude is the radical one represented by Bickerbug, the schoolmaster-turned-revolutionary. It is a solution based on violence and forcible removal of the structures that cause environmental destruction. His attitude is stated unequivocally: "I believe in confronting a problem by practical means"; and his motivation is just as unequivocal: "I have a mission and that is the salvation of our people from the inhuman devastation which policies formulated by corrupt officials here in Lagos have constantly brought about . . ." (Tides, 21). Bickerbug's "practical means" entails blowing up bridges, oil installations and the Kwarafa Dam that supplies power to the countryⁱⁿ in other words, the obliteration of the very

nascent infrastructure of a country struggling to come into being as a modern nation. That Piriye sees Bickerbug as "a key factor in the unfolding history of the Delta" (Tides, 23) in spite of his association with violence bespeaks his considerable immaturity as a social analyst; the more mature Tonwe regards Bickerbug and his methods as a prescription for disaster. Indeed, he characterizes Bickerbug as "a dangerous man" (Tides, 15) and "a criminal" (Tides, 178). He unequivocally rejects violence as a futile means of protesting social grievances: "I am against violent confrontation in any form and at any level. . . The moment I discover that my name or my efforts are being pressed into the service of violence, I will withdraw my participation. . ." (Tides, 24-25).

The laissez faire attitude of the corrupt and insensitive public officers is also rejected as negative, like revolutionary violence. The sort of corrupt non-challenge shown by the navy commandant to the peasants whose survival is threatened by oil pollution can only exacerbate the illwill of the victims towards the central government. Similarly, the brutality and flagrant human rights abuses by Yelwa and his NSS agents incite rebelliousness, as with Bickerbug. These examples represent different aspects of irrationality in national governance. The soul of the nation is killed by public servants propelled by egotistical drives and primitive irrational impulses.

The third and only viable alternative is recourse to reason and reasoned humane response to national life and problems by constant exploration of "the possibilities of mature and meaningful dialogue" (Tides, 24). Whereas violence undermines every effort to solve problems effectively and sensibly, and whereas laissez faire excites resentment and desperate responses, reason alone leads to resolutions that are adequate, just and durable. As in The Victims and The Last Duty, Okpewho's conclusion in

Tides is that the true measure of a people's exercise of their humanity is determined by how well they are able to bring reason to bear on their personal conducts and public policies. Throughout Tides this simple test reveals that irrationality is entrenched in the very heart of the evolving nation state and is the source of the pervasive sense of oppression and desperation among the threatened Delta people. The straightforward problem of environmental pollution engendered by the failure of the oil producing companies to show consideration for the local people of the Niger delta who inhabit the region where they produce the oil is so badly handled that it evolves into a mighty crisis of apocalyptic proportions that threatens the very life of the nation.

Three conclusions ^{can} ~~could~~ be reached from reading Okpewho's three novels. The first is that they are so significant in ~~their~~ ^{the} themes and subject matters, so successful in their author's experiments with narrative techniques, and so profound in their insights that they rank as major works of fiction. The second conclusion is that even though Okpewho belongs in time to the second generation of African novelists, by the highly eclectic scholarship which deeply informs his writing and his moral-philosophical probings, he really belongs more with the first generation of African novelists than with the second. And, thirdly, independently of both generations, Okpewho is the novelist par excellence of interior explorations whose characters are of interest ^{as much for} in their internal lives, ^{as for} ~~as well, no doubt, as in~~ their external actions and gestures. His bold experiments with form make him a potential source of inspiration to new writers and a ^{leader} ~~growth-point~~ in the constantly expanding field of African fiction.

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