

# Arts and Africa

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## ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and today, a conversation with the novelist Isidore Okpewho, in "Arts and Africa".

## SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's quite possible that Isidore Okpewho is a name that's new to you. After all, his latest novel, called "The Last Duty" is only his second book. Okpewho is Nigerian and in "The Last Duty" he uses the Nigerian Civil War as the setting for his story, which he stresses is fiction and not a documentary - in fact, on an otherwise blank page before the story begins are the words "This story is all fiction" with the word "all" printed in italics.

For the record I'd better mention that Isidore Okpewho comes from what used to be known as the Mid-West State, now called Bendel. One of his parents is Yoruba and the other Ibo-speaking. At present he is teaching English at the University of Ibadan.

Now back to the book. The title "The Last Duty" refers to Oshevire, whose sense of duty supports him through the tribulations of detention by the Federal Army and separation from his family. We first meet him after a report that he has collaborated with the rebels has led to his arrest. Let me read a few lines.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Reads some extracts from "The Last Duty" by Isidore Okpewho.

1. p. 32-33 That is Oshevire. Toje is the wealthy man of the town who reported Oshevire to the Federal authorities and now lusts after his wife. Here's Toje's line of thought.
2. p. 133 The woman does in the end find a lover, though it isn't Toje, but the affair ends disastrously with the local Federal army commander, Ali, trying to sort out the situation.
3. p. 215-216

What has happened? Well, I won't spoil the story in case you want to read it for yourself. But I think the way the book is written is becoming apparent: a variety of characters, each talking in the first person. The story is chronological but we see it unfolding through the eyes of the characters themselves, and when the author, Isidore Okpewho, came along to the "Arts and Africa" studio recently, Florence Akst wanted to know more about this method of writing a novel.

How would he describe it?

ISIDORE OKPEWHO:

Well I have called it the collective evidence technique. Evidence in the sense that I have allowed each character to express himself with as much self-justification or otherwise as possible, and leave us to judge whether he has been right or wrong in the way he behaved. This is basically why I've called it the collective evidence technique. I did not want to sort of impose my own judgement on the behaviour of the characters as a kind of omniscient third person, looking in from the outside. I wanted to give them the opportunity to explore their own minds and really pour it all out and give us a chance to look at them in the entirety of their different personalities.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well your story has the setting of the Civil War, but in fact it is because of your technique, because you write through the experience of individuals, a very personal story. Was this what you intended?

OKPEWHO:

It's much less a big national traumatic event than a big human traumatic event. I've seen the characters, they're not from the national point of view, even though we cannot escape the fact that this was a big national tragedy, but I was using the event as an opportunity to look at what happens to people's lives when they are subjected to this kind of pressure. It's more of a human story than a political story.

AKST:

And is this what you intended from the start?

OKPEWHO:

Yes

AKST:

So it didn't change its character during the writing?

OKPEWHO:

No, it did not change its character at all, partly because I'm not so politically inclined as I am interested in what happens to people's lives, the essential lives of people.

AKST:

Did you have a personal commitment during the war? I'm not sure which part of Nigeria you come from.

OKPEWHO:

I come from the Mid-West State, what is now the Bendel State. My father comes from Abraka which is in Yoruba country, and my mother from Asaba which is in the Ibo-speaking part of the Mid-West. So in a sense I am partly from the side that was very strongly affected by the war. But I wasn't looking at it from a political point of view at all. It had nothing to do at all with commitment to causes. There is more here an attachment to the lives of people and what happens to them, than to political movements.

AKST:

You make it sound as though the Civil War was only secondary, or was even coincidental with you writing the book. Did you find that the experience of living through the Civil War provided you with a challenge to write something about it and this is what the writing is, or was it a compulsion that you had to put this down?

OKPEWHO:

I had no duty to document the Civil War. I did not feel like I was trying to document the Civil War at all. I was using the Civil War as an opportunity to examine and explore the character of people and what happens to them under particular pressures. Of course I could not have written this book if the Civil War did not happen. What happens to the people to the people in this story is essentially a sort of war, and the peculiar situations that accompany a Civil War. If I was having to talk about city life in Lagos for instance, it would certainly be a different sort of story. But yes, the fact of the Civil War certainly did influence the writing of it, but not in the sense that I was trying to document it or justify any side politically or anything. It was just a fictional story which is set in an actual event.

AKST:

Nevertheless, in the future, as you go on writing, do you feel that you're going to continue to draw on the Civil War as a backdrop for stories, or as an occasion for people living in tension?

OKPEWHO:

I certainly don't hope to beat the Civil War theme to death. Certainly not. In my third novel which I'm writing now, it has nothing to do with the Civil War.

AKST:

You feel you have in fact finished with that experience?

OKPEWHO:

I'm not saying I've finished with it. Sometimes something may suggest itself to me. That's the way creative writing works I think. Something just suggests itself to you. I might come across something tomorrow that comes from the Civil War, that inspires me to do something along Civil War lines. But I cannot say. I just write on the basis of what is suggested to me and if it has to do with the Civil War, great, I won't run away from it for that reason, but I won't go out of my way to dig up Civil War themes just for the fun of it. No, my creative writing doesn't work that way.

AKST:

One of the characters that can have few, if any, of these connotations, is the child. I found it curious really that a child who naturally has very little associations to bring, should be given speech, speeches put into his mouth in the first person. I don't know how old he is...

OKPEWHO:

He's a four year old boy. He's four years old at the point we meet him in the story.

AKST:

He certainly speaks simply and the printing is done to emphasize as your eyes look at it, that it is the voice of a child. What is the reason for him being introduced?

OKPEWHO:

Well he's all the characters involved. He's the child of the man who has been put into detention and he's now left with his mother to cope with a very difficult situation, and it gives me an opportunity to see what happens to a child under those circumstances.

AKST:

Well I can understand us hearing about him, but I was wondering whether you felt that you needed the innocent eye in the book. Is that his role?

OKPEWHO:

Well, as you can see, the burden of describing the fictional world of the society I've created here in this book rests on the shoulders of about six people, six or seven major people, and the child is only just one of them and the part he plays may not be as significant as those of the other people, but he certainly does provide us with some point of view of a child living under these circumstances. His father is away and he knows that people have fathers and he plays with his friends and they're always talking about their fathers and abusing him about his own, whom he has never seen, so he's trying very hard in his mind to form some kind of an image of his father. At one point he's a bad man because he ran away and left his mother, at another he's a good man because he buys him things, or his mother convinces him that his father buys him things and sends them to him. That sort of thing. So that's the kind of image that he's left with, a sort of rather indecisive portrait of a father.

AKST:

So although we would read the book as the temptations that beset a woman when separated from her husband.

OKPEWHO:

That's just one way of looking at the book, from the point of view of the women.

AKST:

Through these fairly few and brief chapters in which we see the story through the child's eyes, we are made aware of a war situation, this is what war is like, not only civil war in Nigeria, but the state of being at war, being without a father?

OKPEWHO:

This is what war can do. I'm not quite sure I'm trying to say that this is what war is like. But this is what war can do to people's lives. When I visited some of these places in the Mid-Western part of Nigeria during the war, and saw the physical damage there and the disruption and trauma in people's lives, it suggested something to me, that I could do something parallel. A story was suggested in my mind that I think can correspond to the sort of atmosphere

of trauma and tragedy. The novel deals with possibilities. Any novelist that sets out to write about actualities is certainly not writing fiction as such. He may be writing a novel but not fiction. Mine I think is more fiction than a portrait of an actual situation.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Isidore Okpewho telling Florence Akst about his latest novel, "The Last Duty". It is published by Longman and costs £1.75 pence in the United Kingdom.

And now some music to round off the programme, some virtuoso drumming from Nigeria. The music which comes from Eastern Nigeria was recorded in the north of the country at a music festival in Kano.

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye, but I'll be back this time next week with more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: Nigerian Music. Drumming from Kano.

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