



Catherine Acholonu (1951-2014)

The Female Writer as a Goddess

Nduka Otiono

The goddess that is everywhere
streams into my veins
that I may live
that you may drink
I am the goddess
Of the market square.

—Catherine Acholonu, "The Market Goddess" (*The Spring's Last Drop*)

By the time she died on March 18, 2014 at the age of 62, Nigerian writer, scholar, and political activist, Catherine Obianuju Olumba-Acholonu had established a reputation as a goddess of the intellectual market square. She achieved this reputation through her enigmatic persona and interest in esoteric ideas, as well as through her provocative and eclectic publications.²⁰ Catherine Acholonu first

²⁰ It should be noted that in one of the earliest critical engagements with Acholonu's work, Obi Maduakor (1989) compares the poet to a "priestess" and a "di-

caused a stir in the Nigerian literary firmament when, in the mid 1980s, she launched eight books at the same time. It was a Nigerian publishing record that only Ken Saro Wiwa, the writer and environmental rights activist who was hung in 1995 by the dictator General Sani Abacha, surpassed. Within the same decade, Acholonu sparked another literary squall when she queried some winning entries for the literary prizes of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), especially one awarded to another female writer. But it was in the political terrain, where she doggedly earned considerable recognition in a field dominated by male gladiators and chauvinists, that she proved her mettle as a fearless fighter and promoted her irrepressible spirit of a goddess. People still tell stories of her controversial bids for Presidential and Gubernatorial tickets in the past, and on one occasion squaring off with her then husband who had been the Deputy Governor of Imo State. Her activism fetched her appointment as Senior Special Adviser on Arts and Culture to President Olusegun Obasanjo. Not surprisingly, she resigned the position at a critical stage to contest the senatorial election against one of Nigeria's dreaded politicians, Senator Arthur Nzeribe. Feeling short-changed when she didn't get the ticket, she resigned her membership of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and joined the National Democratic Party (NDP) to challenge the dominant politician. She lost the election and later told journalists that her rival had sent her death threats via her ageing mother. Afterwards, Acholonu was appointed Nigeria's Cultural Ambassador to the United Nations.

Between her audacious political activism, perhaps the best known example of a Nigerian female intellectual who has dared to

viner" (p. 78). For a more detailed list of her intellectual achievements see the Igbo Hall of Fame web site: [http://igbohalloffame.org/people/details.php?id=17&name=Prof.-\(Mrs\)-Catherine-Obianuju-Acholonu&cat=Education,-Research-and-Literature](http://igbohalloffame.org/people/details.php?id=17&name=Prof.-(Mrs)-Catherine-Obianuju-Acholonu&cat=Education,-Research-and-Literature) Accessed January 13, 2015.

wade into Nigeria's male-dominated treacherous political waters²¹, Acholonu sustained her passion for scholarship, and remained prolific throughout her productive life. This is understandable for a writer whom *The Guardian* of June 14, 1985, awkwardly described as "The most notable woman poet among the new additions to Nigerian poetry ..., a very gifted ... poet". At the 2002 International Convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in Asaba, her academic background served her well. Her Keynote Address, published as a monograph, was an impressive intellectual output on the theme Literature and National Development. She earned a standing ovation for her presentation entitled *Africa, the New Frontier: A truly Global Literary Theory for the 21st Century*.

Born in Orlu, Imo State, as the first of four children, Catherine Acholonu obtained her Doctorate degree in English and African Literatures from the University of Dusseldorf, Germany. She is the "author of over 16 books, many of which are used in secondary schools and universities in Nigeria, and in African Studies Departments in USA and Europe."²² Her first monograph was a seminal study, *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano* (1989), which investigated the origins of the great slave autobiographer Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa). Although University of Benin Professor of English, Steve Ogude, has challenged her thesis, the study served notice about Acholonu's radical intellectual ambitions, and opened fresh insights into our understanding of the narrative on slavery.²³ She soon fol-

²¹ Although some gains have been made with regard to women representation in Nigerian politics, Udodinma Okoronkwo-Chukwu offers more revealing critical insight into the situation. See "Female Representation In Nigeria: The Case Of The 2011 General Elections And The Fallacy Of 35% Affirmative Action" published in *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, No.2, 2013, 39-46, is very revealing. See <http://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/RHSS/article/viewFile/4407/4475> Accessed Jan 15, 2015.

²² See catherineacholonu.wordpress.com/about.

²³ The book sparked debates on the roots of Equiano, with Vincent Caretta (1999, 2003, 2005) and Steve Ogude (1989) being some of the most strident critics, and Paul E. Lovejoy (2007) supporting Acholonu. Acholonu evidently took the

lowed with her most influential work in Women Studies, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995), rightly described as “Africa’s alternative to Western feminism” (Nayer 2008:135). The book originated as her Fulbright Scholar project, and an early draft was delivered as a Hitachi Public Lecture at Manhattanville College, New York on April 23 1991.

With a remarkable appetite for intellectual storms, Acholonu earned a special commendation letter from U.S. President Bill Clinton not long after she interrogated former Vice President Al Gore’s views on the search for alternative options for development. Restating her position in an interview with me, Acholonu said that Al Gore was not courageous enough to identify the Third World as the missing link in the world’s search for solutions to further development. Hence, she undertook a holistic research to rediscover Africa’s “lost knowledge” in her book, *The Earth Unchained, a Quantum Leap in Consciousness: A Reply to Al Gore* (1995). This perhaps accounts for her intellectual interest in the provenance and significance of the South-Eastern Nigeria stone monoliths at Ikom.²⁴ The research provided a more spiritual framework for her thesis in the book *The Earth Unchained*. At the ANA-Enugu conference and first Eastern Nigeria Book Fair in 2003, during which she was presented with an award

challenge seriously that in an email to me on February 5, 2008, she revisited the controversy: “You might wish to check the Internet for ongoing controversy on Equiano. I made a response in a public lecture delivered last year at the Community College of Southern Nevada and at our Equiano Conference in IMSU [Imo State University] also last year. It’s all on the Net. Ogude has retracted his position on an Edo-born Equiano and now favours an Igbo origin, which nullifies him as a voice to be reckoned with in that discourse. I attach a copy of the paper.” The lengthy paper entitled “Caretta-Gate and Igbo-phobia: The Facts, the Fallacies and the Grand Conspiracy to Deface Olaudah Equiano” is published in Acholonu’s blog: <http://catherineacholonu.blogspot.ca/2007/09/caretta-gate-and-igbo-phobia-facts.html>

²⁴ For a brief expose on the monoliths see Apollon Ibeabuchi Oziogwu’s easily accessible article, “The Mystery Called Ikom Monoliths...” Vanguard Online, on March 08, 2012. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/03/the-mystery-called-ikom-monoliths/>. Also see Keith Ray’s “The Ikom Monoliths.” In Andrew M. Reid, and Paul J. Lane, Eds. *African Historical Archaeologies*. New York: Kluwer Academics/Plenum Publishers, 2004. 192-194.

for outstanding contributions to humanity, Acholonu gave a two-hour presentation on the Ikom monoliths, and afterwards conducted collaborative projects with the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.²⁵

Acholonu's intellectual interest in the Ikom stone monoliths evokes the mystical overtones of *The Spring's Last Drops*, her poetry collection which I shall closely examine here. Her other creative works include *Nigeria in the Year 1999* (poems); *Abu Umu Praimari and Children's verses*, and the plays: *Trial of the Beautiful Ones*, *The Deal*, *Into the Heart of Biafara* and *Who is the Head of State?* Her poems are included in the Heinemann Book of African Female Writers. The volume also features her as a short story writer with her often anthologized story with the arresting title, "Mother was a Great Man." Acholonu's provocative, non-fictional works include the oft-cited radical feminist study, *Motherism: the Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, and *The Earth Unchained*, which argues that positive thinking can unchain the earth.

Acholonu's creative works evince her versatility and restless spirit as she boldly explores her themes and engages in stylistic experimentation. *The Spring's Last Drop* has been rightly introduced as "a collection of poems that glow from the depths of the soul. The theme of cultural awareness is spiced with mystical profundity and social criticism"²⁶. Indeed, the epigraph to this article excerpted from one of my favorite poems of hers, "The Market Goddess," immerses us at once into the world of the writer. The metaphor of the goddess, served up early in the collection, conjoins with the two opening poems, "life's head" and "the way" to read like an Introit. The metaphor reminds one of the opening lines of Christopher Okigbo's collection of poems, *Labyrinths*, with its tribute to the goddess, Mother

²⁵ Acholonu's work with the University culminated in the Catherine Acholonu International Conference, November 17th – 19th, 2012, hosted by the University of Nigeria Institute for Africa Studies, Nsukka, Nigeria.

²⁶ From the book's blurb.

Idoto. But here, Acholonu's ritualistic evocation is not purely spiritual or votive, but also both "womanist" and sociological. Interestingly, in the preceding poem, she prepares the reader for this domestication of the spiritual: After introducing the reader to "The way/that is the tree" from which the poet-persona can climb and pluck cotton seeds, she notes: "these beads of coral/drag me down/take off this regalia/ these ivory anklets/ cripple me with weight" (p.12). In the final, stanza she laments that she be set free "to paddle/my astral canoe". Evident at the outset, therefore, is the tension between the astral (spiritual) and the physical planes. Hence, "the market goddess" reigns over a recognizable place, a most 'common' place which in stereotypical and traditional perspectives are seen as the domain of the African woman, and which is a source of survival for humanity. For what is life without the marketplace!

Significantly, Acholonu humanizes the market goddess in a manner that some devotees may consider sacrilegious or profane:

Listen to the stirring
Of her limbs
Listen to the heaving
Of her chest
Eke the market goddess
Squats at the village square
Breast resplendent with milk...

Beyond the enchanting lyricism which overlaces Acholonu's poetry, the poet here sows the seeds of her theory of "Motherism" which celebrates matriarchal powers:

Market deity squats in readiness
Immense thighs thrown
Wide apart
Come my children
Come to the one
That brings life
Food
Your daily needs... (p.14)

Apparently, cultured irreverence is permissible in Acholonu's poetry. The image of thighs thrown apart with its amorous connotation is transformed into an enduring metaphor "that brings life/food/.....daily needs." In another poem from her book *Nigeria in The year 1999*, she speaks of forms of slaughter occurring during the Biafran War "when rods of aggression / rip through sealed valves/ of flutes of reed (p.32). This image has become somewhat a recurring trope in our literature. Those familiar with the performance of the polemical poet, Odia Ofemum, would better appreciate the point being made here by recalling his refrain in the memorable poem "Thighs fall apart, the General (dis)appears". In the same vein, the popular columnist and publisher of *Classique* magazine in Nigeria, MEE Mofe -Damijo of blessed memory, had written a searing satire on men under the title "Thighs Fall Apart", deliberately parodying Chinua Achebe's celebrate novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

For Acholonu, naming the private aspects of her femininity is a celebration of the distinct features of womanhood. In "lost virtue", she speaks of painting the "breasts/with red camwood", polishing the "ivory fingernails" and "ebony face/which soon shall be corroded/by modern cosmetics". Thus then, a poem that seems to delight in the physical appearance and beautifying routines of women, is finally translated into a neo-negritude intervention: "you may be happy/ with a colour/neither white nor black" (p.21).

Throughout the three sections of *The Spring's Last Drop*, the poet establishes her familiarity with African and Western civilizations. Perhaps the poem that best exemplifies this is "the dying godhead" (pp 44-47). One could hear a skilled "speaking voice" rich in traditional resources and Western allusions to food and drinks. Like a priestess, the voice is oracular: "he who eats without defecating/gets the belly swelling" (p.11). There are also strong evocations of the African intermingling of the living and the dead: "The souls of the dead/dwelt on my branches/ at nights" (p.52).

Although no pantheon of gods as one may find in the works of other African writers such as Okigbo and Soyinka is identifiable in this collection of poems, the collection ripples with ritual elements, and is occasionally processional in rendition. In the long poem "*the message*", Acholonu writes:

You have completed
My midday offering
Freeing me from the gods of air
Now the gods of light
Receive my offering (p.57)

There is a muted obsession with the gods in this collection. Far from the seeming Christian influence identifiable with a monotheist belief, the poet-persona proves to be at home with Africa's many gods. This is in tandem with the poet's philosophical musings in some of her non-fictional works. Nevertheless, the use of local expressions for words with easy English translation is sometimes distracting. In spite of the use of italics and footnotes, one comes away with the impression that the poet was a victim of the anxiety of early modern African writers to localize their works through such vernacular referencing. Fortunately, this is not the case with her other collection of poems, *Nigeria in the Year 1999*. A searing, poetic exploration of the ravages of war, the urgency of the theme of conflict doesn't seem to offer the poet the space for such indulgence.²⁷

Taken together, Acholonu's poetry, accentuated by her gifts as a fine artist and the cover illustrator of the collections, draws attention to her artistic temperament. Her drawing on the cover of *The Spring*

²⁷ Ogaga Okuyade offers a more detailed contextual analysis of the poem in his essay, "The Re-Articulation of Hope from Grief: Nigerian Civil War Poetry as Ledger, published in *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language)*, 2010, 4 (2), 201-215. See especially pages 211=212. Remarkably, Okuyade evokes another useful study, Funso Aiyejina's "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alternative Tradition". In *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*, Ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi. Vol. I, Lagos: Guardian Books Ltd., 1988. 112 - 128.

suggests an influence of the Igbo Uli art form. At the time of her death, Acholonu was the founder and Director of the Catherine Acholonu Research Center, Abuja (CARC). The Centre focused on “research into Africa’s pre-history, stone inscriptions, cave art, and linguistic analyses of ancient symbols and communication mediums from the continent.”²⁸ The Centre published most of her later works between 2005 and the time of her death. The significant titles included: *The Gram Code of African Adam*, *Stone Books and Cave Libraries*, *Reconstructing 450,000 Years of Africa’s Lost Civilizations* (2005); *They Lived Before Adam: Pre-historic Origins of the Igbo*, *The Never Been Ruled* (2009) which won the International Book Awards, USA, and two Harlem Book Fair Awards; and *The Lost Testament of the Ancestors of Adam* (2010). Thus, the recipient of numerous awards and honours, including the Africa Renaissance Ambassador by the Pan African arm of African Union, gravitated more from her creative writing stream to largely esoteric scholarship in History, Archeology, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, and Geophysics. This much is evident in the following interview which she granted me in October 2005 while she was the Senior Special Adviser on Arts and Culture to President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2002). The interview took place in her office in Abuja, Nigeria.

The Interview

OTIONO: What, really, is the driving force behind your intellectual project in African Studies?

ACHOLONU: I’m into Fundamental Studies. There is a new discipline that is called Fundamental Studies and this is an area where you think deeply about the origin of things. You don’t deal with effects; you deal with causes. I am a humanist, and as a humanist, anything concerning the human condition, the progress of man, civilisation, the human thinking, knowledge especially, are some of the things that I take very personally.

²⁸ See <https://catherineacholonu.wordpress.com/about/>

What are the circumstances surrounding the letter President Bill Clinton of the US, sent you?

It was sent in by the American Embassy. Actually, I wasn't in town then. I was on leave and when I came back, saw the letter. When I read it, I was very, very pleased and I was wondering how his Presidency had gotten to know me. But then, I remembered that my works have been in circulation, especially after my book, *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano* was published in 1989; it was distributed to libraries in the U.S., including the Library of Congress. After the publication of the book, I was sponsored to visit the U.S. as part of the international visitors program. The USIS (United States Information Service) in Nigeria organised for me to travel to several U.S. universities to give lectures and do readings from my work.

Your works demonstrate considerable commitment to thinking about humanity and the environment...

Yes of course. But mine is an environmental philosophy. And my suggestion is that we should have a holistic approach, that all sectors should come together and work together for the progress of humanity. And I am essentially a thinker. I think all the time. I'm always trying to work out solutions to problems. Once I see a problem I don't leave it there. No matter what aspect of life, I analyse it. Even if it's in science, religion, philosophy, theology, the arts, culture, you name it. Whether it touches youths, children, parenting, education, any problem I see goes home with me and I don't rest until I find a solution to that problem, including political issues. I take them home with me and I keep thinking, brain-storming with myself, working it out: thinking, dwelling on it. So these things have a way of getting right into my soul and I continue to seek for answers and I'm always researching. I was doing my doctorate degree and the topic was the clash of culture/civilization in African Literature. I took the Igbo example. I studied in Germany. It was when I came back to Nigeria and I decided to go into African studies that I stumbled upon Equiano, and the moment I read about him and the materials he gave and the story he wrote, I started having a suspicion of you know...I thought that with the instances of culture and language he gave, it shouldn't be difficult to trace him. So I said I was going to do something about it. I finished my doctorate and then attended a conference, the Ibadan conference on Pan Africanism. It was the first conference I had ever attended in my life. I presented four papers! [Laughs] I was hungry to learn and to get knowledge. One of the papers was tracing the pioneer of Igbo literature. The Equiano thing, I can't remember. So I gave some instances and added my own voice to the debate. I knew there was a debate. Then I sent the paper to the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in London. They read it and said I should go and do more research on that because I was suggesting that archaeologist should do it. They said, no, no, you go and do it... [Laughs]. So I now decided to go further. That was how I got into this [the Equiano book]. Then, the *Motherism* work

was... you know... I'm not a feminist, I'm a humanist. Being in Women Studies and being in African Studies and being a woman, you often find this discussion coming to you.

Looking back several years after, and in relation to the way Gender Studies have evolved, how do you feel about your central thesis in your often cited book, *Motherism*?

The thing I always do in any field I go into—any topic I pick—I give it my all. I never give halfheartedly and I find that when I say it, people don't fully appreciate it when I say it. Years after, I always have a way of saying things long before time. Because thinkers are those people who are able to pierce into the future and catch glimpses of light and bring it down. Many people do not often see what you are seeing until years and years later. Every year it opens, some aspects opens from year to year, decade to decade, until it fully blossoms. But the joy in it is that you challenge people to think, open up to see, and it's a gradual process. The thing is that any work of art that has something in it will always challenge people: Some, in one respect; the others, in another respect. But you will find out that people keep on going back to that work because there is always something challenging in it. That's the thing with Christopher Okigbo's work. It is a bud, you go in there to take any part you think you can digest, you go with it. But the real thing is still unopened. The poetry of Okigbo is yet unopened and that poetry is a process of initiation which the poet went through himself and until you go through what initiation that he went through and hit what he hit, you can't open it all.

Okay, in proposing the idea of "Motherism," was there an immediate dominant idea or scholar-- say Alice Walker or Elaine Showalter-- that you thought you had to challenge while promoting your own African perspective of feminism?

Well, you see, I went through the different perspectives [on Feminism] we had at that time. The person who appealed to me more among black women feminist would be Philomena Steady. I don't think she has a book but I know I read her essay; I appreciated her work, her perspective, I thought she was objective enough but Alice Walker....

What about Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi?

She hadn't written her book then. But we had Alice Walker, we had Amata Aidoo. Those were the people making a lot of waves at that time. Amata Aidoo was okay but she was too extreme.

And Buchi Emecheta...

[Laughs]...And Flora Nwapa...She was really very bitter, but we can't train our daughters hating men. We just can't do it. Give them the opportunity to love, let them have their own experience. Don't tell them men are dis-

tasteful or evil; don't do that. I can't do that to my children. I want my children to know that the world is full of love, even if there is lots of hate around. The light is there and invariably, the light will overcome darkness. And if you arm your children with love, love conquers evil all the time. If you arm them with hate, you've already defeated them—you destroy them.

In other words, through *Motherism* you are operating both as a scholar and as a mother?

Oh yes, oh yes, I'm a mother to the core. If you see my children, you will know I'm a mother to the core. I give my all to child upbringing. I give every minute of my life because I don't have a social life. All I have is a family life and a working life. I don't have time for social life because if I should have time for social life, I won't have time for my children. I work a lot, I write a lot, I think a lot. The remaining part of the time I sit with my children: we chat, talk, laugh, I lie on their bed. If they have questions, they ask me. I give them my time and it's not wasted, because when they grow up anybody seeing them will know you planted a seed in them. More so because you know they won't have you all the time. You have to plant all the seed, give them all the knowledge you have, and all the love you can give; make sure that they know love from you so that they can extend it to others in their life.

Now, how correct would it be to describe you as a restless scholar because you are always moving on to new areas? Apart from being engaged with Fundamental Studies, I am thinking about your current research into the Cross River State stone carvings, and so on.

Yes, I'm very restless [*Laughs*] because I move from field to field. The reason being that I know there is a lot of work to be done in African Studies. There are so many untouched areas. And one thing that makes me unhappy: African scholars don't research these untapped areas especially in the arts. There are very few people doing deep research. When our people get a professorship, they relax. How many of our professors are working? They are all gone to gone rest, once they get Professorship, they now go to rest. I don't feel that, that is right. Years ago I said it when I was still in the university. I was saying we have a lot of need for new materials. Nobody is giving it to us because our professors are no longer working. They will go and rest. But fortunately we still have scholars like Ernest Emenyonu. But you won't hear [*Romanus*] Egudu, I don't know where he is now, and a number of them. It's really worrisome because I know they have a lot to offer, and I feel that they should still come out there and start working, give us what they have so that our children can grow with it.

Couldn't it also be attributed to the parlous state of the country and the deterioration in the Ivory Tower?

Many of them live outside the country as I'm talking to you. I experienced

this during my two-three years lecturing in the university. I started publishing a journal, using my paltry pay as Lecturer 1 to finance the journal.

What was the name of the journal?

Afa: Journal of Creative Writing. I started it so that my colleagues could publish. I have that knack to find solution to problems. I'm restless with academics. Now you find me in History, Environmental Studies this moment, the next moment you find me in Women Studies, Language Studies--I am a linguist also--you find me in Education. We have just brought out a book on "Youths and Non Violence in Nigeria" towards a culture of non violence for youths.

How did you get into this new direction with regard to the stone monoliths you're now researching?

I went to Lagos for one program and I used that opportunity to visit our installations at our Ministry's parastatal in Lagos. I was at the museum. I had been seeing the monoliths in pictures for years but I always said to myself, there is something there. I felt this whenever I looked at the monoliths, it blows my mind. I would ask myself how did these things come here? What are these things? So when I saw them face-to-face, I was like trapped. I touched them for the first time. I looked, and went from one to the other, looking at the symbols. I took some pictures. I went home and couldn't get them out of my mind. I would go to bed dreaming of them. It was like an obsession. I kept asking myself what are they? When it kept worrying me, I called the museum and told them to send more pictures. They did. I looked at the photographs and saw some things which began to give me some messages. I saw a symbol like a multi-cross. What is the multi-cross doing on the monolith? If by archaeological results/explanations we are told that the monoliths go back at least to 1200 BC, can you tell me what the multi-cross was doing on the monoliths. Christ was not born yet. You see, you have million dollar questions on these monoliths. I went into deep meditation and then I began to see the light, it started opening for me and I began to study it. It was as if old women who were no longer bearing children or seeing me would go along with a virgin, they would go and take their different colors of chalk and trace those symbols on the monoliths. They are dressing them for the new yam festival. And on the D-day, they will bring food and feed them and pray for progress and protection. I kept asking, they told me "Madam, since the history of Ejagham, no foreigner has ever dressed the monoliths. I was the first foreigner to dress the monoliths.

Also, they said nobody ever dressed the monoliths on any day other than the 14th of September; it's never done. So as they said so I was tracing the monoliths by myself and taking the pictures. There was one they called the Wisdom Stone. They all have names, e.g. Queen Stone, King Stone, etc. with various significance. As I was tracing the Wisdom stone they told me I

was imbibing wisdom. The monolith gives people wisdom. People come from far and wide to touch the Wisdom stone to obtain wisdom. They told me a story of a British commissioner who had gone to Ikom. He was leaving Nigeria and he wanted to visit Ikom before leaving. He went with a former British army colonel. They said when the colonel saw the Wisdom Stone, he said this is Israel in Africa. He went and embraced it three times, saying, I have obtained wisdom before people know the meaning of this thing and the whole world will be coming here. That was what they told me the British Colonel said. I said to the monoliths: "Give me wisdom..." [Laughs] But I understood better the significance before then because I already connected with the monoliths even before visiting there.

Having established these foundational ideas, how long would it take you to complete the research?

I started about four months ago. I finished before presenting it at that event. I went to Ikom after seeing the monoliths in the museum in Lagos. I decided to go deeper. Initially I wanted to do the interpretations only. But after visiting Ikom, I thought of going deeper. I started looking for similarities between those symbols and others in other parts of the world. And nobody had ever studied the monoliths in detail. Artists mention them but nobody had ever gone into it. When I found out this was the place of origin, I said I have to go deeper to find out what more we could know about the stones and the people. I already suspected that the Olmec (of Mexico) were from there. I asked them [the Olmec] to give me some of their words. And I was seeing this stool, it kept on coming and that is one truth that you find in almost 90% of the words, among the Olmec, it surpassed Mayan language. All their names ended with TL. I see a connection because the TL I encountered in South [Central] America and here, I see a connection. The man was surprised that I knew so much about it. There are things they know and don't tell people. I lectured him about the monoliths, who made the monoliths, when they were made, what they stand for and so on and so forth.

Are you concluding the research now?

I'm about to. But when I came back from my trip to Ikom, I went into meditation again, I had questions. I said, God, open it for me, because I'm very religious.

How religious—orthodox or African?

I told God. So I was led...I gave a friend my book *The Earth Unchained* to read. After reading the book, he brought another book and said, Madam have you read this book, it was the Hebrew Kabala. He said, Madam have you read this book, I said no. He said, it looks like you are breaking into some fundamental secrets of life. I said to him, the book *The Earth Unchained* came to me in a dream and I wrote it in two weeks. And it was at a

time when I was going through excruciating difficulties in my life. I couldn't even have done anything but the book kept pouring and would not be stopped. I had to give two weeks of my life: It was pouring and pouring. I wrote it in a stretch, no correction, no revision. I sent it raw to the publisher. I have my publishing company, if I have to subject what I have to institutional publishers, politics would come in, and anybody who does not want Africa to make progress, will not publish me. So I publish myself. I don't subject my creativity to any politics, definitely not international politics of knowledge production. The book was a revelation from God. So the man went home-- and brought me a book titled "Kabala". I was afraid to open it but I kept it. One day when I was meditating on this, I was led to go and bring that book. I opened it, and behold, I could see how the monoliths jammed with some elements of the Kabala. After I saw more, when King Solomon came and he prayed to God to give him wisdom. These were in the monoliths, and also in the Kabala. I saw the Kabala signs in that place. You can now see that these things go further than we think.

How much longer would we have to wait to see this book in print?

The second part will be on the Ejagham people [of northern Cross River region], the place of origin of the monoliths and Nsibidi symbols... Maybe by December [2001], the first book will be out. The second one will come out around February [2002].

There is a connection here between the work you are doing as a scholar and your present public appointment. In what official ways have you been able to use your position as a Senior Special Adviser to the President to advance arts and culture in Nigeria?

I do design projects for different ministries and for the parastatals. I give them ideas. I don't want to talk about my advice to the president.

What has been your essential vision?

The new thing I want to add to knowledge is: I want to connect culture and education, science and technology. I have seen the link between culture and science, culture and education, culture and technology, and that's what I think I can establish.

Could you please open up more on your research findings?

My research goes in two parts. The first part of it was that after seeing the monoliths, I said I'm going to zero in on them based on what I see. I do Fundamental research all the time wherever I find literature that can help me. Fundamental Studies take me to the root of things; to the origin. But I've been seeking for answers to Blackness, to Africa: Who are we? There was once I was in the U.S., I think it was in Boston. It was at an exhibition of African masks but it was done by an American, raffia and all that. All the masks were black. It was a masquerade, whole masquerade regalia. About

four or six people, all of them were Black. The whole raffia was black, but there was no human being inside, they position it as if someone was inside. I looked at these things; I saw some of our works there. Those things like Ikenka, like the ones they get from the shrine. I saw those things in the museum. And when I looked at them, each of them commanded presence as if they would take you back in time if you could let yourself go, you would see them in their original setting with the whole village surrounding them, playing music. There was such presence, such silence you would cut with a knife; such presence, such power in each of those things especially the Egungun [masquerade] man. That thing kept haunting me. I said these things are not just pieces of wood. There and then, it dawned on me that these people were just taking away our soul. These are things that were taken away from here; they took everything. These were all we had. This was us. Our ancestors had put in so much energy into these symbols. They had put in so much collective energy into it and somebody came and took it away and we are left with nothing. No wonder our people are wandering. So when I saw those masks, I had this feeling. At that moment I said there is... in blackness. Blackness goes beyond light. Blackness was before light. I felt that it was too deep, it's indescribable. There was such awesome power, I could feel, even in the silence, it was too much. It went beyond time and light. You could feel the statement: In the beginning, there was Blackness, Blackness belonged to time before the beginning...So these things make you want to know who you are, want to know what is the meaning of Blackness, why we are dark and who we are, why we are talented. And I know also that the intelligence we have that is in-built is beyond the knowledge that you see being valued about right now. Our knowledge is beyond the technology that we study. It is higher than that. If we were to expose what is in us, there would be no comparison between this science and that science. The science that we embody, we carry it, you see it on the dresses we wear, the way we move, the way we speak, the way we dance, smile, everything we do! If you take a Kente or an Adire cloth, or whichever, you will appreciate it.

You are beginning to sound like a neo-Negritudist...

When you look at all those things, you will know there is something overwhelmingly powerful than anything we can imagine. And if could translate what we have into portable technology what we are seeing here would be nothing.

So by the time you see all these monoliths, you'll establish a reconnection.

I could see that the monoliths go beyond our time. They don't belong to our time. There is nothing anywhere that has the appearance of the monoliths. If you look all over Africa, all African art, people will always make cubic kind of structures, if you see the statues our ancestors made, you will

see a human kind of figure. The anthropomorphic head, neck, etc, even if they look geometric... With the monoliths, you have the eyes, the mouth, you see something that looks like a hand, but none of them has a leg.

Have you been able to establish any connection with either the Adinkra or the Nsibidi symbols?

Yes, I have now found out that the Nsibidi symbols originated from the monoliths. Many of the Nsibidi symbols are on the monoliths but many are not on the monoliths. But one could see the Nsibidi connection with the monoliths that they originated from the same source. Whoever carried the monoliths gave the Nsibidi signs. And also, I found out that the community, the clan, the tribe where we have—geographically—where we find these is the Ejagham clan, and it is the original home of Bantu language. Many words in Ejagham language have this tone. You don't find it anywhere else.

What is the phonetic symbol?

It is TL. It sounds like "eti". Nobody else speaks like that in Africa: That you have two consonants and no vowel in-between. Even the Bantu have lost that, but we still find it in South [Central] America...

What does it mean?

It is in my notebook. So I found this similarity and also find the connection to "red Indians" [indigenous peoples in the Americas].²⁹ The major thing you find in their attire is the feather. That's almost the first and last thing. It's unique to them. It is also the same with the Ejagham people. If you make one achievement, you wear one; if you make two, you wear two.

The Igbo have that also?

If you kill 10 people in battle, you wear ten feathers. If you are portraying leadership, you wear a different kind of feather, e.g. eagle feather to prove leadership in battle or that you are a business magnate. They clothe themselves with feather. Also in South America.

How has this fashion diffused over time?

Originally, the Ejagham people were well travelled, to Guinea, Angola, etc. There is some place where you have very strong ocean currents, that easily lifts a boat and throw it within a matter of days into South America. It has

²⁹ Many Africans in former British and French colonies continue to use this term innocently, without awareness of the derogatory connotations that have inspired opposition to the term in North America.

been reported a number of times by geographers and oceanographers. When you read these things you find out how people migrate. Christopher Columbus was travelling to India and landed in America, before he was diverted somehow. It was Ejagham people that populated South America. They brought civilisation there. Olmec were the first, and it has been proved by writers and scholars that the Olmec were West Africans from the Delta part of Nigeria... Language is a weapon for connecting culture and people. How did scholars know that the Bantu language is spoken all over Western to Southern Africa? South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Kenya Congo, Angola, Sudan, name it, they speak Bantu. It was the Ejagham people that populated the whole place. They made the other tribe become small. They rendered them redundant. These people have always been migrating from time to time because the place is small and does not contain them, and they are very enterprising people. They introduced agriculture to different parts of Africa today. The iron culture came from Ejagham. If you go there today, you will still find pieces of iron or metal that shows that there must have been a prehistoric melting and mining centre there.

How much of archeological work have been done that you've been able to utilize?

Some have been done. I know that Ekpo Eyo have done some, but not much have been done. I knew that there was iron there before I went there, and I could tell.

How?

By looking at the monoliths, I knew it was not done by human hands. There was some sort of technology that was able to melt the rock like volcanoes do and remould it or use a tool to bore through the rock. A tool that melts the rock as it is moving and gives specific symbols that are very sharp, and the circles are perfect. No human hand created by God can ever make a perfect circle.

How have you been able to establish that they are perfect circles?

Oh you can see it. You find concentric circles that are perfect. I use my compass and math set to measure it. I approach it from a very scientific point of view: equilateral triangles, squares are perfect. What human hand makes that, especially for a rock that is very demanding? Only a sophisticated tool and mind can make that. And I find that sophisticated tool among the Olmec.

You could see some image holding something that looks like equipment and you would see fire coming out of it. At the Olmec week in South America in 3000BC they made perfect heads, giant heads. I also found that in the olden days they had dens, so everything is...in place.

Would you consider these preliminary findings or do you have enough authority based on your research to say that these findings can be put up to any kind of test?

Like I said, I had finished writing my book before I went there for the first time. I wrote based on what I saw at the museum. And I presented it at the UNESCO (Badagry) meeting. After that I went Ikom. But it was like I just went there to prove myself right. I was telling the curator that my thesis is that they were made with some sort of sophisticated technology. He told me that they had iron which he showed me. He told me that it has been there scattered all over the place and nobody knows. And also, the very notion that there was no connection between the people who made the monoliths and the present people living there and their ancestors speak volumes. If ancestors hand down tech from age to age, then it means that there was a major interruption. No, break in transmission. That interruption can only happen with a major event like the "deluge" which destroyed history and mankind started afresh. These are things I'm trying to trace. I go as far as I can and leave it for others to continue from where I stopped. I don't make sweeping statements unless I have to.

What is the next level for your research in this area?

I finished the first phase of my book and went to Ikom and found more things. Something interesting happened; I prayed for sunshine when I was going because it was in the rainy season and I know that it rains a lot there. When we got there, just as we were approaching Ikom we had sunshine and we were there for four hours. At the first location, cameras could not snap the images very well so I requested for native chalk so that I can trace the line. They seem not to understand what I asked them. They said nobody does it. It's a taboo, only our people do it and only on the 14th of September before the New Yam festival.

How has it been like, advising the President on Arts and Culture?

Not easy, because the President [Olusegun Obasanjo] is a person with very strong ideas... [*Laughs*] But he has respect for good ideas. And he will respect you if you know what you are talking about, and you have to convince him. He is a good listener. I've been able to get quite a number of ideas across to him. The priority is trying to organise the national cultural program. If you operate everything in an ad-hoc manner you achieve nothing, waste time, opportunities, etc. You must have a long-term programme. We want to set up a national cultural programme on a 4-5 year plan in Culture. It will involve every aspect of culture. I have this program on the table and UNESCO is cooperating with us.

Being an artist and a scholar, haven't there been times when you've been embarrassed by some of the President's acts, for example the sale of a national artifact which was reported by *TELL* magazine?

That is where some of the frustrations come in, some of the things that can't change immediately. You need time. All African countries have been robbed. As an adviser, I can only advise. And the museum, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments has also been working. They've travelled all over the world trying to identify those Nigerian artifacts that were stolen. They brought some back. And are still working to get more...Recently, *Time* magazine published a report on that. The problem we have here is that our people are not aware of the significance of culture. That's why people like me are here. It's a slow process but we'll get there.

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The Ikom stone monoliths. Photo: Ikechi Uko, *African Travel Quarterly*.

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