

## INTERVIEW WITH EZENWA-OHAETO ON THE PUBLICATION OF THE BIOGRAPHY OF CHINUA ACHEBE

Paul Onyemechi Onovoh

About Ezenwa-Ohaeto: Ezenwa is an engaged literary critic, poet, columnist and biographer. He has taught in different capacities at different times in Universities in Nigeria and Germany. He has been a visiting Professor at various times in Germany, particularly at the universities of Mainz and Bayreuth. At the time of doing this interview he was a distinguished visiting Professor at the University of Bayreuth. He has authored several volumes of poetry, short stories and critical works. This interview has been compiled on the occasion of the publication of the biography of Chinua Achebe written by Ezenwa-Ohaeto. This interview was done on 9th October 1997 in Bayreuth. The biography of Chinua Achebe was published in London by James Currey under the title: *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*.

**Paul:** Ezenwa, you are a poet, a short story writer, a newspaper columnist, a literary critic and a biographer. How did you begin this journey?

**Ezenwa:** Well, I think it is a journey that started quite sometime ago. I remember that while I was about to complete my primary school education, sometime in 1970-71, my sisters who were in the secondary school, had this habit of reading out some of the memorable passages they had learnt in their literature classes. The way they read out those passages and narrated the stories in Igbo attracted me to what one could really find in literary works. I was quite interested in listening to stories, not just folktales, I remember that my father narrated one or two stories on certain evenings when he had the time. I think the most important factor that affected my interest in literature and literary activities was the fact that I had people around me who were interested in stories - not in listening to stories but in narrating stories. I had an uncle from my mother's side who is so clever, so good at coining stories that even an ordinary incident that happened in the home, this fellow would turn into something that would be unbelievable. Once or twice, you could say that his stories bordered on some kind of flimsy lies, or rather harmless lies, but generally they were quite interesting. I was really amazed that somebody could make up stories out of even ordinary incidents.

Then I entered secondary school and that was also a very important stage in my life. At that time, novels written by Nigerians, by Africans had become so common that one could lay hands on them. Many of the novels I read at that time were so interesting that they made me very much interested in literature.

I can't really put a finger on the exact time that I started writing. You could say that it is something that came unconsciously. I started writing poetry in secondary school and I contributed to the school magazine called HIPO. Some of my poems in secondary school were published in the newspaper that was then available in East Central State. The major impetus now occurred in the University (of Nigeria, Nsukka). It was no longer a question of reading people, but also of associating with them. Chinua Achebe was one of our lecturers. Donatus Nwoga was another. We had used his book *West African Verse* in the secondary school for the School Certificate examination. There were some other well-known writers there too. It became clear to me that these were human beings and that one could relate to them. Therefore I started writing.

Actually the works that really made me a little well known at that time were short stories and plays. At the university, I had a nickname. My friends called me "short story!" These stories were published in *Drum*, *Trust* and *Spear* magazines respectively in Lagos as well as the notorious *Lagos Weekend*. I was not writing as if I was going to earn anything. And so I was surprised when I got some postal orders in payment for what I had done.

In the university, I produced two of my plays. The first one was as an undergraduate. It was called "A Cup Of Common Sense" produced in 1977-78. It was also shown on the National Television Network through Enugu and Port Harcourt stations. And then I started writing poetry. I became interested in poetry when I came back for my MA programme. Professor Donatus Nwoga was my supervisor. Since Nwoga is a specialist in the critical analysis of poetry, he influenced me to devote more attention to poetry. These were the factors that affected my interest. But then the issue of writing poetry, short stories, plays, critical essays and now of course biography...there is really no boundary between those literary areas or genres depending on how you look at them. There is really no difference. One is doing the same thing from several angles. That is actually what I have been doing most of my life.

**Paul:** You have been influenced from home, from your immediate sisters and your maternal uncle. I forgot to ask you the name of this uncle of yours who churns out stories from thin air. Do you still remember his name? Is he still alive?

**Ezenwa:** No he is not alive. He died actually too early and without an offspring. His name is Chibuzo.

**Paul:** Well the influence continued, you took it up from home, you learnt a lot from your father. Was your father also a writer?

**Ezenwa:** Well, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle said in one of the Sherlock Holmes stories and I quote him: "art in the blood takes strange forms." In a family where there is talent in art, this gift could come out in several forms. One thing that I remember distinctly was the fact that I saw some paintings in our

house when I was about five. I remember asking my father who made those paintings. One particular one was the painting of a woman carrying a child on her back. He told me that he did that. Well it was just an incident that I noted. Perhaps he had the same talent, but he used it in several other ways. My father was a priest. He was an Archdeacon of the Anglican Communion in Owerri Diocese. Somebody, who is gifted in terms of narrating stories or in terms of using words, can equally function very effectively as a preacher. Some of these things go hand in hand. I think it is a question of what he used his talents to do. I remember the painting and I also heard one or two people acknowledging one or two sermons. I did not really study whether his sermons were particularly different from those of his peers, but I know that he must have had a bit of a talent or he wouldn't have risen to the post of an Archdeacon.

**Paul:** You actually matured in writing at the university. Were there other influences apart from the fact that you got in contact with these “gods of the written words”, Achebe and Nwoga? What other things sparked your interest in writing at the university?

**Ezenwa:** The fact is that when you have the desire to tell a story. or to create something, you may not find a particularly mundane reason for it. The urge to create or to write is something that is much more internal than external. These things I mentioned earlier were some of the factors that really helped. If somebody does not have the talent or perhaps the interest to write, there is really nothing you can do to that person to make him or her create anything. The lecturers or the teachers were part of the influence. The fact that you interacted with a living writer was also part of what sparked the interest. But I think that the other factor, which perhaps we intend to ignore most of the time, is the general environment in which one lives. It was possible at that time [in Nigeria] to write something and send it to a magazine or to a newspaper, or to a journal, or even just to give it to somebody to read and people would appreciate it. Let's say you created the first story accidentally, you then make a conscious effort to create the second. If you do not receive the kind of encouraging response that would help you to progress, you are likely to stop. So when you combine these other factors, including the fact that one is in the university where one has the freedom to think whether to be anarchical or positive, and the fact that you have access to well- known writers, these things help a lot.

Then of course there are the books that you read. I read many things, from comics to very serious works of literature. I can't really say that there is one book that was so influential. I think all the books I read were quite influential. Even now I read science fiction although I don't write science fiction. I read comics although it might sound a bit strange saying that somebody who teaches literature at the university still reads comics. But I find these things interesting. I am eclectic in my choice of reading. If I pick up a book and it is interesting, I go through it. It could be a travel book, it could be poetry, it could be fiction, novels, drama, or even essays or scholarly works. I find them very interesting

and I read them.

**Paul:** When one goes through your works, it is very fascinating how you tackle issues of the Nigerian society in your theatre pieces, in your poems and the short stories. Can one actually say that your primary audience is the immediate Nigerian society? And how would you interpret the reaction you received from your public especially as an undergraduate artist?

**Ezenwa:** Whether we like it or not, if you live in a particular society and you start writing while living in that society, the audience you have in mind will definitely be members of that society. Of course Nigerians were the audience that I had in mind. Those who pick up any of my works and read them would find something interesting in them. The thing is that as time goes on and your intellectual horizon widens, and your area of association widens too, you discover that you have to make more effort to talk to people across cultures. This is also what has happened not just in my own case, but in the case of other Nigerian writers who have written works in Nigeria and have interacted with people outside Nigeria. You discover that you have to create works that have to cross cultures. But that does not mean that when you create these works that you will put your own culture to question or that you will put the inspirational influence from your society aside. No. The basic inspiration will be there. The basic elements, which probably you derived from your society, will still be there. But you would make conscious efforts to transform (in terms of presenting it to a wider group) them so that somebody from a different part of the world could look at it and say: “Oh, here is something that touches me.”

In terms of reactions to my works, I have been pretty fortunate. There was a story that got published in *Spear Magazine* in 1978. I called it “And Ben died.” It was a story that occurred to me because, at that time, the government was executing armed robbers publicly. It occurred to me that somebody could be unjustly killed for armed robbery. I know that critics might look at the story now and point out one or two weaknesses here and there. But that didn’t bother me much at the time. I narrated the story of somebody, who after leaving office for home, went back to the same office to pick up something and got caught with a group of armed robbers, who had come to rob the same establishment in which he was working. He kept denying the fact that he was one of them. The robbers didn’t help matters. They never confessed, they never said anything. They simply stood trial. It was when they were about to be killed that one of them said that the man actually wasn’t one of them. But as a result of some circumstantial evidence, this man was killed. This story was published in *Spear Magazine*. The very next month, *Spear Magazine* had a deluge of letters from readers many of whom thought that it was a real life story. Some were in praise of the author who narrated the story. I think a lawyer even responded saying that the aspect of law that was used there wouldn’t stand up in a court of law or something like that. But the point I want to make is that I started getting positive responses quite early. Of course I became much more conscious

of what I was doing in terms of how to manipulate an audience positively. I mean how to evoke a response from an audience. When I became confident and knowledgeable in terms of that kind of ability to evoke a response from an audience, I discovered that some of these responses you can equally generate them too depending on what you have in mind.

**Paul:** Let us talk about your most recent work. You wrote, the biography of Chinua Achebe. Were you commissioned or is it a part of your literary creativity and your deep sense of documenting your society and its people that made you write it? How did you come about writing the biography of Chinua Achebe, which I heard, will soon be in the market?

**Ezenwa:** Well, I wasn't commissioned to write Chinua Achebe's biography. The thing is that when I came across the works of Chinua Achebe and, of course just like any other student of African literature, you realise that the writer — that is Chinua Achebe — has certain talents and a peculiar manner of presenting his ideas. A peculiarity that is unique. That is why his novels have affected people all over the world, not just in Nigeria, in Africa, the black world, but all over the world. Writers from Australia, particularly writers from Asia and some other places claimed that they found themselves for the first time in his novels. Many writers have made this acknowledgement — well-known writers in the world: Nadine Gordimer, Margaret Atwood of Canada, Michael Ondaatje of New Zealand, and of course, many writers from India, not to talk of writers from Britain, America, and Europe who have made similar acknowledgement. It struck me that it would be really useful to know what motivated such an influential writer. He must have been inspired by a particular thing. These were some of the issues that were going around in my mind. Equally, I felt that even if you can't put your finger on a particular thing that inspired him, it was important that this kind of writer emerged from Africa to tell the world that African literature is something worthy of attention. Now, that is one aspect.

Then I met Chinua Achebe for the first time as an undergraduate. I was one of his students and as I said in the preface to the biography, you discover that he hasn't got the kind of flamboyance one associates with Hollywood stars. He doesn't have those exaggerated mannerisms that you associate with writers. He seemed quite a decent human being. And when you read his works, you discover that these works make such a fundamental impact. Thinking about some of these issues, looking at the individual, looking at the society even, and ruminating generally, it struck me that the story of this particular writer ought to be told. If nothing else, it will help us in getting to a situation in which we can have a comprehensive and true assessment of the writer, Chinua Achebe. In fact you can go beyond the writer, beyond the man himself to the society. What were those factors that moulded him? What were those factors — socially, politically, economically and culturally — that combined to present the kind of inspiration that was translated into those novels. Those were the things that really struck me, and of course, when I started doing the work and

talking to several people, I discovered that they saw exactly the same thing that Chinua Achebe saw but they didn't react to them in exactly the same way. Of course, this is the basic difference between one person and another. This is the basic difference between people with talents and a genius, if we may put it that way. These were some of the things that really made me get into writing this biography. I think, I really learnt more. I even understood more.

People talk about Chinua Achebe's novels a lot, but many of the things he had said, in interviews, in discussions, or in his essays, are equally as timeless as those novels. Chinua Achebe is somebody, who in a traditional society, could have been one of those elders who keeps minting proverbs and generating ideas. In other societies in the western world, especially the ancient Greek societies, he would have been somebody like Aristotle or Plato or Cicero or any of those original thinkers. That is what he is if you consider some of the statements he has made, some of the activities he has been involved in, and some of the interventions he has made. I think these things are really very important. There are other writers too, who have made such interventions and we have to look at their lives much more closely.

**Paul:** Yes, writing the biography of a writer and philosopher like Chinua Achebe must not have been an easy work. How long did it take you to write it?

**Ezenwa:** Well, the thing is that Chinua Achebe did not ask me to start work on his biography. In fact at the time that I made the move to write this biography, I was one of the youngest people around him. There were some other much more distinguished people who could have attracted many grants and financial assistance if they had thought of doing this kind of thing. He never really asked me to do it. Nobody asked me to do it. It's just something that I felt ought to be done. Besides I discovered that nobody has done this kind of thing so I decided to do it.

I started collecting the material about 1983. I did this for about ten years, till about 1993. The actual writing started in 1993. I must add that I was a witness to part of Chinua Achebe's life. While he was the President of the Association of Nigerian Authors, an office he occupied from about 1981 or 1982 when the association was formed, till about 1986, I was also a member of the executive from 1985 till the time he ceased to be President. So I was quite close to him. I was also his student. I was an undergraduate while he was teaching at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. I knew the general location of his hometown and, of course, there were several other ways through which I had come to know, not only Chinua Achebe, but other Nigerian writers.

At that time, literary activities in Nigeria were quite at its peak. If you compare it with the sixties, it was not up to that standard but all the same it was quite high. I knew a lot of things and I kept gathering materials, putting them in order, and interviewing so many people. Fortunately, there were those who came into the country that I interviewed before they decided not to come home

again. There were some I talked to just before they died. And there were others who communicated by writing and who sent me memories of their association with Achebe before they died too. I lost one or two items: a cassette sent to me in Germany from Australia got lost in Germany, and another one sent from London to Nigeria got lost in Nigeria. You could say that the thieves were quite democratic. They not only stole things that were meant for this research in Nigeria, they also did so in Europe. The actual writing took place from about 1993 till about 1996. Although there were several drafts, when it was time to put things in order, it was almost as if the whole thing was in my mind and it started flowing and then coming out.

**Paul:** Has Achebe written or started writing parts of his own autobiography before you began your writing of his biography, and if yes, did you have access at all to such materials at the time of writing which you may have incorporated in this biography?

**Ezenwa:** Well, when I approached Chinua Achebe and told him I wanted to start work on his biography, he told me that he wasn't working on something like that at the moment and that it is something that so many people could take up and approach from different angles. He didn't see anything wrong with that. I asked him specifically if he was involved in that kind of writing. Now, in terms of having access to his biographical details, you see Achebe didn't do the kind of thing that Wole Soyinka has done. Soyinka has written about his early childhood in *Ake: Years of Childhood*, he has written about his early adulthood, closer to his middle age in *Ibadan: The Penkelemesi Years*, and also in *The Man Died*, his prison diary. But Achebe didn't do that.

What I discovered was that Achebe did what the Indian writer, R. K. Narayan, said sometime ago, that he wrote personal essays, essays in which you find autobiographical insights if you look closely. Of course Achebe granted interviews to so many people. Right from 1954 when he started working in the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, he has been in the limelight. He has been a public figure. And so people have interacted with him and they know him. Some of these people who interacted with him have stated their relationships with Achebe. They have narrated their experiences in several ways. I talked to them, but as I said, I went beyond Achebe, and also beyond his immediate family. I talked to those who admire him and those who don't. I talked to a lot of people. So what I did was a kind of synthesis of these narratives, so to say, from people. But one other thing is that Chinua Achebe is not noted for being a great letter writer. I mean he is not somebody who writes letters regularly. You may find him reacting to one or two official things but not necessarily frequently. I remember that when I was interviewing his elder brother, Reverend John Achebe, he told me that at a particular time when Chinua Achebe was at Government College Umuahia, he went home and his father kept asking about Chinua because Chinua never wrote. For a long time now, this has been his habit. I came across one or two letters, accidentally. There was one he wrote during the Nigerian civil war to

Northwestern University in USA. When I came across such letters I made use of them. But as I said, Achebe's essays, interviews, interactions, and of course the memories of all those people who have associated with him in one way or the other, all helped in giving me ideas. They widened my horizon, enabled me to synthesise the work very well, and create something that one might regard as a kind of reasonable assessment of Chinua Achebe, the man.

**Paul:** Writing the biography of Chinua Achebe has had its difficulties and its rewards. Has the search for a publisher been equally as rewarding or was it very hard?

**Ezenwa:** I didn't really have any problem getting a publisher. I contacted James Currey publishers of Oxford and they accepted in principle. I mean, they told me they were interested in seeing the manuscript. I gave them at least one version of the manuscript, which they gave to someone regarded as an authority in African literature based in Canada. He gave them a very positive report. I also remember that the publishers in the USA [Indiana University Press] sent the manuscript for assessment to one other distinguished professor who wrote a personal letter to me, telling me that it is a path-breaking biography, and that it is very well done. I am not recalling all these things in order to praise myself. I am just trying to put the issue in proper perspective.

My Oxford publisher, James Currey, has acted as my agent more or less. They are the ones who put me in contact with Indiana University Press of Indianapolis and Bloomington, one of the most important university presses in the USA. Of course they were interested in the manuscript and they decided to publish it. So in terms of publication, I don't think I had any problems getting publishers and getting people interested in it. I am only very grateful that the assessors turned in positive reports. Even the typesetters in West Indies sent a personal letter to me, telling me that they enjoyed the experience of working on the manuscript. I only hope that this book will engender the same reaction from readers at the Frankfurt book-fair. That will be a very rewarding experience.

**Paul:** In 1990 the late Professor Edith Ihekweazu and her colleagues organized an international conference called "Eagle On Iroko" for Achebe on his 60th birthday. I remember seeing you there. Tell me, what has happened to the papers collected at the conference, because till date they have not been published?

**Ezenwa:** The factor that is probably responsible for the non- publication of that book is the ethnic politics in Nigeria and perhaps the inefficiency of Heinemann Nigeria and whoever is in charge of the Nigerian branch of Heinemann. Those who were involved in collecting and editing that work, claimed that they even went through the page proofs long ago. And of course Heinemann Nigeria cannot claim that anything on Achebe will not sell. In fact if there is any book that Heinemann Nigeria needs to resuscitate, it is the book on Chinua Achebe. It is a grave mistake for Heinemann Nigeria not to have published this book either

as a result of ethnic politics, financial incompetence or publishing ineptitude. The earlier they publish that collection, the better for them, the better for the reputation of the publishing house and the better for the reputation of whoever is interested in literary activities in Nigeria.

**Paul:** Do you think “Eagle On Iroko” constitutes an important part of the biography of Chinua Achebe?

**Ezenwa:** Yes, the “Eagle On Iroko” Celebration certainly did. In fact long before I did the final version of this biography, I wrote an essay on the “Eagle on Iroko” celebration which was published in the African Literature Association Bulletin in the USA. There I captured the stunning and the marvellous activities that went into celebrating Chinua Achebe as a writer who has made the greatest impact on modern African literature. It is certainly a part of it [the biography]. You know the biography is a very big work. And there are so many activities that are important in Chinua Achebe’s life and you have to give them reasonable attention. The “Eagle on Iroko” is discussed to a reasonable extent.

**Paul:** Thank you very much. Presently you are being hosted by Professor Eckhard Breitingner as a visiting professor of African literature in the Department of African Studies of the University of Bayreuth. What is your present literary activity here like and how long are you going to stay here?

**Ezenwa:** Well, I am in Germany for a few months. My position here is a research position. I am completing a book which is going to be published in the African Studies Series of the University of Bayreuth. I hope the book comes out before the end of this year. In fact that is the arrangement. And this is the book that I have come to complete. It is something that I have been doing for quite sometime. In fact the chapters of the book were almost complete early this year but my bag got stolen in Nigeria and I lost several chapters. I am reworking those chapters that I lost.

It has been a good experience working at the University of Bayreuth because the library here is very well stocked. This is the kind of thing that makes one so angry at the situation back home. In as much as the country has problems, it still has enough money to at least meet its intellectual obligations. You find that the Federal Government is not interested in giving enough money for stocking the libraries in most of the institutions in Nigeria. You know there is a different problem with the exchange rate. At what it is, the amount that would have been used to purchase two or three books will not even be enough now to purchase one book. We know that kind of problem exists.

The time at Bayreuth has been however a rewarding experience. You come across recent journals and books that you need in your discipline and of course you use the opportunity to update yourself and not just to produce the book which is the original reason for coming here.

**Paul:** Thank you very much.

**Ezenwa:** You are welcome.

---

**Citation Format**

HASH(0x8321c10). (2000) INTERVIEW WITH EZENWA-OHAETO ON THE  
PUBLICATION OF THE BIOGRAPHY OF CHINUA ACHEBE. *West Africa Review*: 2, 1.  
<http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?101.2.1.13>