

10 OUTSTANDING NIGERIAN POETS



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Wole Soyinka



Akinwande Oluwole "Wole" Soyinka (Yoruba: *Oluwoḽé Ṣóyinká*, pronounced "Shoyinka") (born 13 July 1934) is a Nigerian writer, notable especially as a playwright and poet; he was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first person in Africa to be so honoured.

Soyinka was born into a Yoruba family in Abeokuta. After study in Nigeria and the UK, he worked with the Royal Court Theatre in London. He went on to write plays that were produced in both countries, in theatres and on radio. He took an active role in Nigeria's political history and its struggle for independence from Great Britain. In 1965, he seized the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service studio and broadcast a demand for the cancellation of the Western Nigeria Regional Elections. In 1967 during the Nigerian Civil War, he was arrested by the federal government of General Yakubu Gowon and put in solitary confinement for two years.^[2]

Soyinka has strongly criticised many Nigerian military dictators, especially late General Sanni Abacha, as well as other political tyrannies, including the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. Much of his writing has been concerned with "the oppressive boot and the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it". During the regime of General Sani Abacha (1993–98), Soyinka escaped from Nigeria via the "Nadeco Route" on a motorcycle. Living abroad, mainly in the United States, he was a professor

first at Cornell University and then at Emory University in Atlanta, where in 1996 he was appointed Robert W. Woodruff Professor of the Arts. Abacha proclaimed a death sentence against him "in absentia". With civilian rule restored to Nigeria in 1999, Soyinka returned to his nation. He has also taught at the universities of Oxford, Harvard and Yale.

From 1975 to 1999, he was a Professor of Comparative Literature at the Obafemi Awolowo University, then called the University of Ife. With civilian rule restored in 1999, he was made professor emeritus. Soyinka has been a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In the fall of 2007 he was appointed Professor in Residence at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, US.

Life and work

Early life and education

A descendant of a Remo family of Isara-Remo, Soyinka was born the second of six children, in the city of

Abẹokuta, Ogun State in Nigeria, at that time a British dominion. His father, Samuel Ayodele Soyinka (whom he called S.A. or "Essay"), was an Anglican minister and the headmaster of St. Peters School in Abẹokuta. Soyinka's mother, Grace Eniola Soyinka (whom he dubbed the "Wild Christian"), owned a shop in the nearby market. She was a political activist within the women's movement in the local community. She was also Anglican. As much of the community followed indigenous Yorùbá religious tradition, Soyinka grew up in an atmosphere of religious syncretism, with influences from both cultures. While he was raised in a religious family; attending church services and singing in the choir from an early age; Soyinka himself became an atheist. His father's position enabled him to get electricity and radio at home.

His mother was one of the most prominent members of the influential Ransome-Kuti family: she was the daughter of Rev. Canon J. J. Ransome-Kuti, and sister to Olusegun Azariah Ransome-Kuti, Oludotun Ransome-Kuti and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. Among Soyinka's

cousins were the musician Fela Kuti, the human rights activist Beko Ransome-Kuti, politician Olikoye Ransome-Kuti and activist Yemisi Ransome-Kuti.

In 1940, after attending St. Peters Primary School in Abeokuta, Soyinka went to Abeokuta Grammar School, where he won several prizes for literary composition. In 1946 he was accepted by Government College in Ibadan, at that time one of Nigeria's elite secondary schools.

After finishing his course at Government College in 1952, he began studies at University College in Ibadan (1952–54), affiliated with the University of London. He studied English literature, Greek, and Western history. In the year 1953–54, his second and last at University College, Ibadan, Soyinka began work on "Keffi's Birthday Threat," a short radio play for Nigerian Broadcasting Service. It was broadcast in July 1954. While at university, Soyinka and six others founded the Pyrates Confraternity, an anti-corruption and justice-seeking student organisation, the first confraternity in

Nigeria. Soyinka gives a detailed account of his early life in his memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood*.

Later in 1954, Soyinka relocated to England, where he continued his studies in English literature, under the supervision of his mentor Wilson Knight at the University of Leeds (1954–57). He met numerous young, gifted British writers. Before defending his B.A., Soyinka began publishing and worked as an editor for the satirical magazine *The Eagle*. He wrote a column on academic life, often criticising his university peers.

Early career

After graduating, he remained in Leeds with the intention of earning an M.A. Soyinka intended to write new work combining European theatrical traditions with those of his Yorùbá cultural heritage. His first major play, *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958), was followed a year later by *The Lion and the Jewel*, a comedy that attracted interest from several members of London's Royal Court Theatre. Encouraged, Soyinka moved to London, where he worked as a play reader for the Royal Court Theatre.

During the same period, both of his plays were performed in Ibadan. They dealt with the uneasy relationship between progress and tradition in Nigeria.

In 1957 his play *The Invention* was the first of his works to be produced at the Royal Court Theatre. At that time his only published works were poems such as "The Immigrant" and "My Next Door Neighbour", which were published in the Nigerian magazine *Black Orpheus*. This was founded in 1957 by the German scholar Ulli Beier, who had been teaching at the University of Ibadan since 1950.

Soyinka received a Rockefeller Research Fellowship from University College in Ibadan, his alma mater, for research on African theatre, and he returned to Nigeria. He produced his new satire, *The Trials of Brother Jero*. His work *A Dance of The Forest* (1960), a biting criticism of Nigeria's political elites, won a contest that year as the official play for Nigerian Independence Day. On 1 October 1960, it premiered in Lagos as Nigeria celebrated its sovereignty. The play satirizes the

fledgling nation by showing that the present is no more a golden age than was the past. Also in 1960, Soyinka established the "Nineteen-Sixty Masks", an amateur acting ensemble to which he devoted considerable time over the next few years.

Soyinka wrote the first full-length play produced on Nigerian television. The Play, titled *My Father's Burden*, directed by Segun Olusola was featured on the Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) on 6 August 1960. Soyinka published works satirising the "Emergency" in the Western Region of Nigeria, as his Yorùbá homeland was increasingly occupied and controlled by the federal government. The political tensions arising from recent post-colonial independence eventually led to a military coup and civil war (1967–70).

With the Rockefeller grant, Soyinka bought a Land Rover. He began travelling throughout the country as a researcher with the Department of English Language of the University College in Ibadan. In an essay of the time, he criticised Leopold Senghor's Négritude movement as

a nostalgic and indiscriminate glorification of the black African past that ignores the potential benefits of modernisation. "A tiger does not shout its tigritude," he declared, "it acts." In *In Death and the King Horsemen* he states: "The elephant trails no tethering-rope; that king is not yet crowned who will peg an elephant."

In December 1962, his essay "Towards a True Theater" was published. He began teaching with the Department of English Language at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife. Soyinka discussed current affairs with "négrophiles," and on several occasions openly condemned government censorship. At the end of 1963, his first feature-length movie, *Culture in Transition*, was released. In April 1964 *The Interpreters*, "a complex but also vividly documentary novel", was published in London.

That December, together with scientists and men of theatre, Soyinka founded the Drama Association of Nigeria. In 1964 he also resigned his university post, as a protest against imposed pro-government behaviour by authorities. A few months later, he was arrested for the

first time, accused of underlying tapes during reproduction of recorded speech of the winner of Nigerian elections.¹ He was released after a few months of confinement, as a result of protests by the international community of writers. This same year he wrote two more dramatic pieces: *Before the Blackout* and the comedy *Kongi's Harvest*. He also wrote *The Detainee*, a radio play for the BBC in London. His play *The Road* premiered in London at the Commonwealth Arts Festival, opening on 14 September 1965 at the Theatre Royal. At the end of the year, he was promoted to headmaster and senior lecturer in the Department of English Language at University of Lagos.

Soyinka's political speeches at that time criticised the cult of personality and government corruption in African dictatorships. In April 1966 his play *Kongi's Harvest* was produced in revival at the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. *The Road* was awarded the Grand Prix. In June 1965, Soyinka produced his play *The Lion and The Jewel* for Hampstead Theatre Club in London.

Civil war and imprisonment

After becoming chief of the Cathedral of Drama at the University of Ibadan, Soyinka became more politically active. Following the military coup of January 1966, he secretly and unofficially met with the military governor Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu in the Southeastern town of Enugu (August 1967), to try to avert civil war. As a result, he had to go into hiding.

He was imprisoned for 22 months as civil war ensued between the federal government and the Biafrans. Though refused materials such as books, pens, and paper, he still wrote a significant body of poems and notes criticising the Nigerian government.

Despite his imprisonment, in September 1967, his play *The Lion and The Jewel* was produced in Accra. In November *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Strong Breed* were produced in the Greenwich Mews Theatre in New York. He also published a collection of his poetry, *Idanre and Other Poems*. It was inspired by Soyinka's visit to the sanctuary of the Yorùbá deity Ogun, whom

he regards as his "companion" deity, kindred spirit, and protector.

In 1968, the Negro Ensemble Company in New York produced *Kongi's Harvest*. While still imprisoned, Soyinka translated from Yoruba a fantastical novel by his compatriot D. O. Fagunwa, called *The Forest of a Thousand Demons: A Hunter's Saga*.

Release and literary production

In October 1969, when the civil war came to an end, amnesty was proclaimed, and Soyinka and other political prisoners were freed. For the first few months after his release, Soyinka stayed at a friend's farm in southern France, where he sought solitude. He wrote *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1969), a reworking of the Pentheus myth. He soon published in London a book of poetry, *Poems from Prison*. At the end of the year, he returned to his office as Headmaster of Cathedral of Drama in Ibadan, and cooperated in the founding of the literary periodical *Black Orpheus* (likely named after the 1959 film directed

by Marcel Camus and set in the favela of Rio de Janeiro.)

In 1970 he produced the play *Kongi's Harvest*, while simultaneously adapting it as a film by the same title. In June 1970, he finished another play, called *Madman and Specialists*. Together with the group of fifteen actors of Ibadan University Theatre Art Company, he went on a trip to the United States, to the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut, where his latest play premiered. It gave them all experience with theatrical production in another English-speaking country.

In 1971, his poetry collection *A Shuttle in the Crypt* was published. *Madmen and Specialists* was produced in Ibadan that year. Soyinka travelled to Paris to take the lead role as Patrice Lumumba, the murdered first Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo, in the production of his *Murderous Angels*. His powerful autobiographical work *The Man Died* (1971), a collection of notes from prison, was also published.

In April 1971, concerned about the political situation in Nigeria, Soyinka resigned from his duties at the University in Ibadan, and began years of voluntary exile. In July in Paris, excerpts from his well-known play *The Dance of The Forests* were performed.

In 1972, he was awarded an Honoris Causa doctorate by the University of Leeds. Soon thereafter, his novel *Season of Anomy* (1972) and his *Collected Plays* (1972) were both published by Oxford University Press. In 1973 the National Theatre, London, commissioned and premiered the play *The Bacchae of Euripides*. In 1973 his plays *Camwood on the Leaves* and *Jero's Metamorphosis* were first published. From 1973 to 1975, Soyinka spent time on scientific studies.¹ He spent a year as a visiting fellow at Churchill College Cambridge University¹1973-74 and wrote *Death and the King's Horseman*, which had its first reading at Churchill College (which Dapo Ladimeji and Skip Gates attended), and gave a series of lectures at a number of European universities.

In 1974 his *Collected Plays, Volume II* was issued by Oxford University Press. In 1975 Soyinka was promoted to the position of editor for *Transition*, a magazine based in the Ghanaian capital of Accra, where he moved for some time. He used his columns in *Transition* to criticise the "negrophiles" (for instance, his article "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Transition") and military regimes. He protested against the military junta of Idi Amin in Uganda. After the political turnover in Nigeria and the subversion of Gowon's military regime in 1975, Soyinka returned to his homeland and resumed his position at the Cathedral of Comparative Literature at the University of Ife.

In 1976 he published his poetry collection *Ogun Abibiman*, as well as a collection of essays entitled *Myth, Literature and the African World*. In these, Soyinka explores the genesis of mysticism in African theatre and, using examples from both European and African literature, compares and contrasts the cultures. He delivered a series of guest lectures at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana in Legon. In

October, the French version of *The Dance of The Forests* was performed in Dakar, while in Ife, his *Death and The King's Horseman* premiered.

In 1977 *Opera Wonyosi*, his adaptation of Bertold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, was staged in Ibadan. In 1979 he both directed and acted in Jon Blair and Norman Fenton's drama *The Biko Inquest*, a work based on the life of Steve Biko, a South African student and human rights activist who was beaten to death by apartheid police forces. In 1981 Soyinka published his autobiographical work *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, which won a 1983 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

Soyinka founded another theatrical group called the Guerrilla Unit. Its goal was to work with local communities in analyzing their problems and to express some of their grievances in dramatic sketches. In 1983 his play *Requiem for a Futurologist* had its first performance at the University of Ife. In July, one of Soyinka's musical projects, the Unlimited Liability Company, issued a long-playing record entitled *I Love*

My Country, on which several prominent Nigerian musicians played songs composed by Soyinka. In 1984, he directed the film *Blues for a Prodigal*; his new play *A Play of Giants* was produced the same year.

During the years 1975–84, Soyinka was also more politically active. At the University of Ife, his administrative duties included the security of public roads. He criticized the corruption in the government of the democratically elected President Shehu Shagari. When he was replaced by the general Muhammadu Buhari, Soyinka was often at odds with the military. In 1984, a Nigerian court banned his 1971 book *The Man Died*. In 1985, his play *Requiem for a Futurologist* was published in London.

Since 1986

Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, becoming the first African laureate. He was described as one "who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence". Reed Way Dasenbrock writes that the award of the

Nobel Prize in Literature to Soyinka is "likely to prove quite controversial and thoroughly deserved." He also notes that "it is the first Nobel Prize awarded to an African writer or to any writer from the 'new literatures' in English that have emerged in the former colonies of the British Empire." His Nobel acceptance speech, "This Past Must Address Its Present", was devoted to South African freedom-fighter Nelson Mandela. Soyinka's speech was an outspoken criticism of apartheid and the politics of racial segregation imposed on the majority by the Nationalist South African government. In 1986, he received the Agip Prize for Literature.

In 1988, his collection of poems *Mandela's Earth, and Other Poems* was published, while in Nigeria another collection of essays entitled *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* appeared. In the same year, Soyinka accepted the position of Professor of African Studies and Theatre at Cornell University. In 1990, the second portion of his memoir *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* appeared. In July 1991 the BBC African Service transmitted his radio play *A Scourge of*

Hyacinths, and the next year (1992) in Sienna (Italy), his play *From Zia with Love* had its premiere. Both works are very bitter political parodies, based on events that took place in Nigeria in the 1980s. In 1993 Soyinka was awarded an honorary doctorate from Harvard University. The next year another part of his autobiography appeared: *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years (A Memoir: 1946–1965)*. The following year his play *The Beatification of Area Boy* was published. In October 1994, he was appointed UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for the Promotion of African culture, human rights, freedom of expression, media and communication.

In November 1994, Soyinka fled from Nigeria through the border with Benin and then to the United States. In 1996 his book *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* was first published. In 1997 he was charged with treason by the government of General Sani Abacha. The International Parliament of Writers (IPW) was established in 1993 to provide support for writers victimized by persecution. Soyinka

became the organization's second president from 1997 to 2000. In 1999 a new volume of poems by Soyinka, entitled *Outsiders*, was released. His play *King Baabu*, premiered in Lagos in 2001, a political satire on the theme of African dictatorship. In 2002 a collection of his poems, *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*, was published by Methuen. In April 2006, his memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* was published by Random House. In 2006 he cancelled his keynote speech for the annual S.E.A. Write Awards Ceremony in Bangkok to protest the Thai military's successful coup against the government.

In April 2007 Soyinka called for the cancellation of the Nigerian presidential elections held two weeks earlier, beset by widespread fraud and violence. In the wake of the Christmas Day (2009) bombing attempt on a flight to the US by a Nigerian student who had become radicalised in Britain, Soyinka questioned the United Kingdom's social logic that allows every religion to openly proselytise their faith, asserting that it is being abused by religious fundamentalists thereby turning

England into a cesspit for the breeding of extremism. He supported the freedom of worship but warned against the consequence of the illogic of allowing religions to preach apocalyptic violence.

Legacy and honours

- In 2011, the African Heritage Research Library and Cultural Centre built a writers' enclave in his honour. It is located in Adeyipo Village, Lagelu Local Government Area, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The enclave includes a Writer-in-Residence Programme that enables writers to stay for a period of two, three or six months, engaging in serious creative writing.
- 1973: Honorary PhD, University of Leeds
- 1973–74: Overseas Fellow, Churchill College, Cambridge
- 1983: Elected an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature
- 1983: Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, United States.

- 1986: Nobel Prize for Literature
- 1986 Agip Prize for Literature
- 1986 Commander of the Federal Republic, CFR.
- 1990: Benson Medal from Royal Society of Literature
- 1993: Honorary doctorate, Harvard University
- 2005: Honorary doctorate degree, Princeton University.
- 2005: Conferred with the chieftaincy title of the Akinlatun of Egbaland by the Oba Alake of the Egba clan of Yorubaland. He was made a tribal aristocrat with the right to use the Yoruba title **Oloye**.
- 2009: Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award
- 2013, Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, Lifetime Achievement, United States.

Works

Plays

- *The Invention* (1957)

- *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958)
- *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959)
- *The Trials of Brother Jero*
- *A Dance of the Forests* (1960)
- *My Father's Burden* (1960)
- *The Strong Breed* (1964)
- *Before the Blackout* (1964)
- *Kongi's Harvest* (1964)
- *The Road* (1965)
- *Madmen and Specialists* (1970)
- *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973)
- *Camwood on the Leaves* (1973)
- *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973)
- *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975)
- *Opera Wonyosi* (1977)
- *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1983)
- *Sixty Six* (short piece) (1984)
- *A Play of Giants* (1984)
- *From Zia with Love* (1992)
- *The Detainee* (radio play)
- *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (radio play)
- *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1996)

- *King Baabu* (2001)
- *Etiki Revu Wetin*

Novels

- *The Interpreters (novel)* (1964)
- *Season of Anomy* (1972)

Short stories

- *A Tale of Two* (1958)
- *Egbe's Sworn enemy* (1960)
- *Madame Etienne's Establishment* (1960)

Memoirs

- *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1971)
- *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981)
- *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: a memoir 1946-65* (1989)
- *Isara: A Voyage around Essay* (1990)
- *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006)

Poetry collections

- *Idanre and other poems* (1967)
- *A Big Airplane Crashed Into The Earth* (original title *Poems from Prison*) (1969)
- *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1971)
- *Ogun Abibiman* (1976)
- *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976)
- *Mandela's Earth and other poems* (1988)
- *Early Poems* (1997)
- *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002)

Essays

- *Towards a True Theater* (1962)
- *Culture in Transition* (1963)
- *Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Transition*
- *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (1988)
- *From Drama and the African World View* (1976)
- *The Credo of Being and Nothingness* (1991)

- *The Burden of Memory – The Muse of Forgiveness* (1999)
- *A Climate of Fear* (originally held as the BBC Reid Lectures 2004, audio and transcripts)

Movies

- *Kongi's Harvest*
- *Culture in Transition*
- *Blues for a Prodigal*

Translations

- *Forest of a Thousand Daemons. [a translation of D O Fagunwa's OGBOJU ODE NINU IGBO IRUNMALE]*
- *In the Forest of Olodumare. [a translation of D O Fagunwa's IGBO OLODUMARE]*

Gabriel Okara

Gabriel jibaba Okara (born 24 April 1921) is a Nigerian poet and novelist who was born in Bomoundi in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. In 1979, he was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

Biography

Gabriel Imomtimi Gbaingbain Okara, the son of an Ijaw chief, was born in Bomoundi in the Niger delta in 1921. He was educated at Government College, Umuahia, and later at Yaba Higher College. He studied journalism at Northwestern University in 1949, and before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War worked as Information Officer for the Eastern Nigerian Government Service.

Writing

His most famous poem is "Piano and Drums". Another popular poem, "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed", is a frequent feature of anthologies. Okara is

very concerned with what happens when the ancient culture of Africa is faced with modern Western culture, as in his poem "Once Upon a Time". He pursues that theme in his novel *The Voice* (Africana Publishing: ISBN 0-8419-0015-9) Its protagonist Okolo, like countless post-colonial Africans, is hunted by society and haunted by his own ideals.

In addition to his poetry and fiction, Okara has also written plays and features for broadcasting.

Many of his manuscripts were destroyed during the Nigerian Civil War.

Bibliography

- 1970 *The Voice* - novel
- 1978 *The Fisherman's Invocation* doodoo

Dennis Chukude Osadebay



Dennis Chukude Osadebay (June 29, 1911—December 26, 1994) was a Nigerian politician, poet, journalist and former premier of the now defunct Mid-Western Region of Nigeria, which now comprises Edo and Delta State. He was one of the pioneering Nigerian poets who wrote in English.

As a politician, he detested party politics and tried to form unbiased opinions on important matters of the period. He was also a leader of the movement to create a Mid-Western region during the Nigerian First Republic.

Biography

Early life and poems

He was born in Asaba, Delta State to parents of mixed cultural backgrounds. He attended Asaba Government School at Asaba, the Sacred Heart School in Calabar and Hope Waddell Training Institute. He joined the labor force in 1930 as a custom officer working in Lagos, Port Harcourt and Calabar. He subsequently went to England to study Law during the 1940s. It was while studying that he started publishing poetic verses. He was then known as a newspaper poet, as most of his writings were published in the West African Pilot and a few other newspapers. In his writings, Osadebay used both his personal life and public events as inspiration. In *Africa Sings*, a collection of poems, he delved with themes from a personal point of view, such as a sullen poem written about his twenty fifth birthday and the coming of middle age. However, his best work in the volume, were poems written from an impersonal view point. In his adventurous poem, *black man troubles*, he used Pidgin English to lament the status of black Africans in colonial

Africa and injustice in the society. His poems were also notable for faithfully representing modern poetic rhythm.

Political career

Osadebay was one of the founding members of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons in 1944. He left the country to read law a few years later. After, completing his studies, he returned to Nigeria and established a law practice in Aba and was also made the legal adviser of the N.C.N.C. In 1951, he contested and won a seat on the Western Region House of Assembly which was dominated by the rival Action Group (AG). He soon became the leader of opposition in the region from 1954-1956 but gave the mantle to Adegoke Adelabu in 1956. After the death of Adegoke Adelabu, he took on his familiar oppositional role in 1958. In 1960, he became the president of the Nigerian Senate and upon the creation of the Mid-Western Region in 1963, became the pioneer premier of the newly created region.

Christopher Okigbo

Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo (1930–1967) was a Nigerian poet, who died fighting for the independence of Biafra. He is today widely acknowledged as the outstanding postcolonial English-language African poet and one of the major modernist writers of the twentieth century.

Early life

Okigbo was born on August 16, 1930, in the town of Ojoto, about ten miles from the city of Onitsha in Anambra State. His father was a teacher in Catholic missionary schools during the heyday of British colonial rule in Nigeria, and Okigbo spent his early years moving from station to station. Despite his father's devout Christianity, Okigbo felt a special affinity to his maternal grandfather, a priest of Idoto, an Igbo deity personified in the river of the same name that flowed through his village. Later in life, Okigbo came to believe that his grandfather's soul was reincarnated in him, and the

"water goddess" figures prominently in his work. *Heavensgate* (1962) opens with the compelling lines:

*Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand,*

while in "Distances" (1964) he celebrates his final aesthetic and psychic return to his indigenous religious roots:

I am the sole witness to my homecoming.

Another influential figure in Okigbo's early years was his older brother Pius Okigbo, who would later become the renowned economist and first Nigerian Ambassador to the European Economic Commission (EU).

Days at Umuahia and Ibadan

Okigbo graduated from Government College Umuahia (in present Abia State, Nigeria) two years after Chinua Achebe, another noted Nigerian writer, having earned himself a reputation as both a voracious reader and a versatile athlete. The following year, he was accepted to

University College in Ibadan. Originally intending to study Medicine, he switched to Classics in his second year. In college, he also earned a reputation as a gifted pianist, accompanying Wole Soyinka in his first public appearance as a singer. It is believed that Okigbo also wrote original music at that time, though none of this has survived.

Work and art

Upon graduating in 1956, he held a succession of jobs in various locations throughout the country, while making his first forays into poetry. He worked at the Nigerian Tobacco Company, United Africa Company, the Fiditi Grammar School (where he taught Latin), and finally as Assistant Librarian at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, where he helped to found the African Authors Association.

During those years, he began publishing his work in various journals, notably *Black Orpheus*, a literary journal intended to bring together the best works of African and African American writers. While his poetry

can be read in part as powerful expression of postcolonial African nationalism, he was adamantly opposed to Negritude, which he denounced as a romantic pursuit of the "mystique of blackness" for its own sake; he similarly rejected the conception of a commonality of experience between Africans and black Americans, a stark philosophical contrast to the editorial policy of *Black Orpheus*. It was on precisely these grounds that he rejected the first prize in African poetry awarded to him at the 1965 Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, declaring that there is no such thing as a Negro or black poet.

In 1963, he left Nsukka to assume the position of West African Representative of Cambridge University Press at Ibadan, a position affording the opportunity to travel frequently to the United Kingdom, where he attracted further attention. At Ibadan, he became an active member of the Mbari literary club, and completed, composed or published the works of his mature years, including "Limits" (1964), "Silences" (1962–65), "Lament of the Masks" (commemorating the centenary of the birth of W. B. Yeats in the forms of a Yoruba

praise poem, 1964), "Dance of the Painted Maidens" (commemorating the 1964 birth of his daughter, Obiageli or Ibrahimat, whom he regarded as a reincarnation of his mother) and his final highly prophetic sequence, "Path of Thunder" (1965–67), which was published posthumously in 1971 with his magnum opus, *Labyrinths*, which incorporates the poems from the earlier collections.

War and legacy

In 1966 the Nigerian crisis came to a head. Okigbo, living in Ibadan at the time, relocated to eastern Nigeria to await the outcome of the turn of events which culminated in the secession of the eastern provinces as independent Biafra on May 30, 1967. Living in Enugu, he worked together with Achebe to establish a new publishing house, Citadel Press.

With the secession of Biafra, Okigbo immediately joined the new state's military as a volunteer, field-commissioned major. An accomplished soldier, he was killed in action during a major push by Nigerian troops against Nsukka, the university town where he found his

voice as a poet, and which he vowed to defend with his life. Earlier, in July, his hilltop house at Enugu, where several of his unpublished writings (perhaps including the beginnings of a novel) were, was destroyed in a bombing raid by the Nigerian air force. Also destroyed was *Pointed Arches*, an autobiography in verse which he describes in a letter to his friend and biographer, Sunday Anozie, as an account of the experiences of life and letters which conspired to sharpen his creative imagination.

Several of his unpublished papers are, however, known to have survived the war. Inherited by his daughter, Obiageli, who established the Christopher Okigbo Foundation in 2005 to perpetuate his legacy, the papers were catalogued in January 2006 by Chukwuma Azuonye, Professor of African Literature at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Boston, who assisted the foundation in nominating them for the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. Azuonye's preliminary studies of the papers indicate that, apart from new poems in English, including drafts of an

Anthem for Biafra, Okigbo's unpublished papers include poems written in Igbo. The Igbo poems are fascinating in that they open up new vistas in the study of Okigbo's poetry, countering the views of some critics, especially the troika (Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike) in their 1980 *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, that he sacrificed his indigenous African sensibility in pursuit of obscurantist Euro-modernism.

"Elegy for Alto", the final poem in *Path of Thunder*, is today widely read as the poet's "last testament" embodying a prophecy of his own death as a sacrificial lamb for human freedom:

*Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let this
be
the ram's ultimate prayer to the tether...
AN OLD STAR departs, leaves us here on the
shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new star appears, foreshadows its going*

*Before a going and coming that goes on
forever....*

Niyi Osundare

Niyi Osundare (born in 1947 in Ikere-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria) is a prolific poet, dramatist and literary critic. He gained degrees at the University of Ibadan (BA), the University of Leeds (MA) and York University, Canada (PhD, 1979). Previously professor (from 1989) and Head of English (1993–97) at the University of Ibadan, he became professor of English at the University of New Orleans in 1997. Niyi has a wife, Kimi, and three children, two girls and a son who still lives in Nigeria. His deaf daughter is the real reason Niyi settled in the United States. She could not go to school in Nigeria so they found a school in the U.S. for her. They moved with her so Niyi and Kimi could be closer to her.

He has always been a vehement champion of the right to free speech and is a strong believer in the power of words, saying, "to utter is to alter". Osundare is renowned for his commitment to socially relevant art and artistic activism and has written several open letters to

the former President of Nigeria (Olusegun Obasanjo), whom Osundare has often publicly criticised.

Osundare believes that there is no choice for the African poet but to be political:

"You cannot keep quiet about the situation in the kind of countries we find ourselves in, in Africa. When you wake up and there is no running water, when you have a massive power outage for days and nights, no food on the table, no hospital for the sick, no peace of mind; when the image of the ruler you see everywhere is that of a dictator with a gun in his hand; and, on the international level, when you live in a world in which your continent is consigned to the margin, a world in which the colour of your skin is a constant disadvantage, everywhere you go – then there is no other way than to write about this, in an attempt to change the situation for the better."

Under the rule of the dictator General Sani Abacha (1993–1998), Osundare regularly contributed poems to a Nigerian national newspaper (now part of the collection

Songs of the Season) that criticised the regime and commented upon the lives of people in Nigeria. As a result he was frequently visited by Security Agents and asked to explain his poems and to whom they referred:

"By that time I realized that the Nigerian security apparatus had become quite 'sophisticated', quite 'literate' indeed!"

"A couple of my students at the University of Ibadan had become informers; a few even came to my classes wired. And when I was reading abroad, someone trailed me from city to city. At home, my letters were frequently intercepted."

In 1997, he accepted a teaching and research post at the University of New Orleans. In 2005 Osundare was caught in Hurricane Katrina, and he and his wife were stuck in their attic for 26 hours. Their neighbor, who at the time was driving by in his boat, heard their shouts for help. They were rescued and bounced around from rescue shelters till they ended up in Ringe, New Hampshire, where Osundare could get a teaching job as

a professor at Franklin Pierce Collage till things settled down.

He is a holder of numerous awards for his poetry, as well as the Fonlon/Nichols award for "excellence in literary creativity combined with significant contributions to Human Rights in Africa".

His 60th Birthday Literary Fete took place at venues in Ikere-Ekiti, Ibadan and Lagos state of Nigeria in March 2007.

His poem "Not My Business" is compulsory study in the AQA A syllabus for GCSE English Language.

Publications

- *Songs from the Marketplace* (1983)
- *Village Voices* (1984)
- *The Eye of the Earth* (1986, winner of a Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the poetry prize of the Association of Nigerian Authors)
- *Moonsongs* (1988)

- *Songs of the Season* (1999)
- *Waiting Laughters* (1990, winner of the Noma Award)
- *Selected Poems* (1992)
- *Midlife* (1993)
- *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature and Culture* (2002)
- *The Word is an Egg* (2002)
- *The State Visit* (2002, play)
- *Pages from the Book of the Sun: New and Selected Poems* (2002)
- *Early Birds* (2004)
- *Two Plays* (2005)
- *The Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare* (2003)
- *Not My Business* (2005)
- *Tender Moments: Love Poems* (2006)

Tanure Ojaide

Tanure Ojaide (born 1948) is a prolific Nigerian poet and writer. He is noted for his unique stylistic vision and for his intense criticism of imperialism, religion, and other issues.

Ojaide, a Ph.D., has won major national and international poetry awards, including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Africa Region (1987), the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award (1988), the All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Poetry (1988 and 1997), and also the Association of Nigerian Authors' Poetry Prize (1988 and 1994).

Poems

- Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008)
- The Tale of the Harmattan (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2007)
- In the House of Words (Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 2005)

- I Want to Dance and Other Poems (San Francisco: African Heritage Press, 2003)
- In the Kingdom of Songs (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002).
- Invoking the Warrior Spirit: New and Selected Poems (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000).
- When It No Longer Matters Where You Live (Calabar, Nig.: U of Calabar Press, 1999).
- Invoking the Warrior Spirit (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1999).
- Delta Blues and Home Songs (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1998).
- Daydream of Ants (Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 1997).
- The Blood of Peace (Oxford, UK: Heinemann, 1991).
- The Fate of Vultures (Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 1990).
- Poems (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Poetry International, 1988).
- The Endless Song (Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 1988).

- The Eagle's Vision (Detroit: Lotus, 1987).
- Labyrinths of the Delta (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1986).
- Children of Iroko & Other Poems (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1973).

Fiction

- Matters of the Moment (Lagos: Malthouse, 2009).
- The Debt-Collector and Other Stories (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2009).
- The Activist (A Novel) (Lagos: Farafina Publications, 2006).
- Sovereign Body (A Novel) (Spring, TX: Panther Creek Press, 2004). Tanure Ojaide
- God's Medicine Men and Other Stories (Lagos, Nigeria: Malthouse Ltd., 2004)

Non-fiction

- Great Boys: An African Childhood (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998). (a memoir)

Remi Raji

Aderemi Raji-Oyelade is a Nigerian poet, writing in English. He is popularly known by his pen name, **Remi Raji**.

A Salzburg Fellow and visiting professor and writer to a number of institutions, among them Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, the Universities of California at Riverside and Irvine, University of Cape Town, South Africa, and Cambridge University, UK, Raji has had scholarly essays published in journals including *Research in African Literatures* and *African Literature Today*. He has read his poems widely in Africa, Europe and America. In 2005, he served as the Guest Writer to the City of Stockholm, Sweden.

His volumes of poetry include *Webs of Remembrance* (2001), *Shuttlesongs America: A poetic guided tour* (2003), *Lovesong for My Wasteland* (2005), *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song* (2009) and "Sea of My Mind" (2013). Raji's works have been translated into French, German, Catalan, Swedish, Ukrainian, Latvian, Croatian

and Hungarian. He has been an Alexander von Humboldt Scholar to Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany.

Remi Raji was elected as the Publicity Secretary of the Oyo State chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors in 1989. His second elective position was as Vice Chair of the Association in 1997. He became the substantive Chairman of the Association from 1998 to 2000, at the election of Dr. Wale Okediran to the national executive committee of ANA. Raji served as the Year 2000 Editor of the ANA REVIEW, the official journal of the association. On December 3, 2011, during the thirtieth anniversary celebration of the founding of the Association of Nigerian Authors, Remi Raji was elected as the eleventh President of ANA.

Raji was the National Coordinator of the resuscitated Nigerian PEN Centre in 1999 before he was elected as the Secretary of the Centre, a position he held till February, 2010. During this period, Raji facilitated international workshops and strategic meetings of

African PEN Centres within Africa and in Europe. He was unanimously elected as the first Coordinating Secretary of PAN, the Congress of PEN African Centres, at a special meeting of the group on November 22, 2003 in Mexico City.

At his university, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, the Professor of English and African Literatures and Creative Writing has served in many administrative capacities which culminated in his appointment as the Head of the Department of English in 2011. Over a year after that substantive position, he was elected as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts.

Bibliography

- *A Harvest of Laughters*, 1997, joint-winner of the Association of Nigerian Authors/Cadbury Poetry Prize and winner of the Association of West African Young Writers' VOCA Award for Best First Published Book
- *Webs of Remembrance*, 2001

- *Shuttlesongs America: A Poetic Guided Tour*, 2001–2003
- *Lovesong for My Wasteland*, 2005
- *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*, 2009.
- "Sea of My Mind", 2013.