

Chiji Akoma

Chiji Akoma is Associate Professor of African and Black Diaspora Literatures in the department of English at Villanova University, USA.
Email: chiji.akoma@villanova.edu

Tribute

Isidore Okpewho (1941-2016)

Bella Najiia



When Ediru, the elder son of Professor Isidore Okpewho, called to tell me that his father had passed away, I could only sigh in sorrow. The watch was over. His health had taken a sudden turn for the worse a few weeks earlier and we had kept watch as he battled for his life in the ICU. By the time he finally took his last breath on Sunday 4th September 2016, his immediate family and those close to them had been steeling themselves for the moment.

But nothing really prepares you for the passing of a great man, a prodigious scholar, a consummate professional, a loving father, husband and mentor, especially when you know that there was so much more in him that he wanted to share with the world, so much more that, in spite of a stroke that had significantly limited his mobility, he frantically worked to complete *Blood on the Tides: The Ozidi Saga and Oral Epic Narratology* (2014), a project that had preoccupied him for decades, the definitive examination of the narratological dimensions of the Ijo Ozidi epic.

Born in Agbor, in Delta State of Nigeria, to an Urhobo father and Igbo mother, Okpewho devoted much of his fieldwork recording and examining the oral performance traditions of the region. His critically-received books such as *Myth in Africa* (1983), *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity* (1992), and *Once Upon A King: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity* (1998) feature extended dramatic renderings of his field recordings with the view toward capturing the complex intermix of oral poetics, politics, and history. For Okpewho, the scholarly was both personal and political. For example, *Once Upon A Kingdom* investigates the complicated relationship between the powerful monarch of ancient Benin kingdom and his vassal states. Okpewho's analytical scheme privileges the different forms of narratives performed by artists from such states, who are further away from the far-reaching tentacles of Benin's *Oba*. Their stories feature heroes and events that attempt to dislodge Benin's dominance over their communities, thereby undermining the grand narrative of Benin's imperial invincibility. As Okpewho would put it in a broader context in the book's conclusion, the tales "remind us that there is an undercurrent, if not a groundswell, of self-assertion that continues to resist the hegemonist pressures imposed upon communities that

cherish their identities too dearly to see them sacrificed at the altar of grandiloquent but ill-advised agendas.” (190)

That interest in minority texts is not only evident in his oral tradition studies, but finds expression in his novels, as well. For instance, in his second novel, *The Last Duty* (1976), which won the African Arts Prize for Literature award, Okpewho not only pluralizes the narrative viewpoint by having each of the principal characters recount overlapping war-time events in their individual voices; he also sets up a contest of wills between Toje, an oppressive and egotistical chieftain, and his abused servant Odibo—a contest that is resolved in a dramatic tragic ending. His next novel, *Tides* (1993), equally offers different narrative perspectives through the epistolary form.

A few years ago, I interviewed Prof (as his students endearingly called him) and asked him why the interest in these multi-vocal narrative perspectives—what he calls the “collective evidence technique.” He likened the style and effect to listening to music and hearing various instruments. Then he said: “It [his narrative style] is the admission of the fact that no one perspective of the truth should be privileged. People should be allowed to hear, to present their voices to any event and not be subdued. It’s a rather democratic way of looking at life.” It was a belief he held strongly. In 1990, he left his position as chair of the English department at University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and headed back to the United States. This was in the dark days of military dictatorship, at the height of which many intellectuals left the country and headed West.

My path crossed with Prof’s shortly before his self-imposed exile from Nigeria. In 1989 I had proceeded to Ibadan to pursue my Master’s degree in English. Of course, prior to arriving there, I had read and heard so much about him while I was an undergraduate student at University of Calabar. We had studied his first novel, *The Victims* (1970) and *The Last Duty* in different courses on African literature. Our Oral Literature instructor, swore by the brilliant and refreshing arguments of the by now famous Isidore Okpewho at Ibadan who, in addition to his two novels then, had published ground-breaking books on African oral arts such as *The Epic in Africa* (1979), *Myth in Africa* (1983), *The Heritage of African Poetry* (1985), and numerous essays that had appeared in various journals.

Prof’s Oral Literature course was the very first class I took at Ibadan. The class met in his spacious office. He was business-like that first day. He laid out the issues we were going to explore, presented a slate of topics from which we were asked to choose one for our individual presentation, and right after taking care of the administrative bit, he launched into an opening lecture on oral traditions and performance. It was an amazing encounter. The breadth of his knowledge, the warmth and unmistakable confidence in his richly deep voice as he spoke was as compelling as the brilliance of his writings. I would end up writing my thesis under his supervision, hurrying to complete the task before his departure to the W.E.B.

DuBois Institute at Harvard. Then, when he completed his fellowship there and took up appointment at State University of New York in Binghamton, he encouraged me to apply into the doctoral program there, secured my funding, and, naturally, was the director of my dissertation.

It would be difficult to measure the enormity of the loss of Professor Isidore Okpewho. I grieve the passing of my beloved teacher and mentor, but I'm equally grateful for the privilege of coming under his tutelage. He was 74 years old.

Works Cited

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