Fashioning the Modern African Poet

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Book Title: Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature
Publisher: Cambridge University Press
Publication Place: New York, NY
Publication Date: 2017-07-31
Type of Work: Chapter | Final Publisher PDF
Permanent URL: https://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/s9wnq

Final published version: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/9781316711422

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Accessed August 16, 2019 9:21 AM EDT
So began the first issue of *Black Orpheus* to appear after the departure of its founding editor, Ulli Beier, from Nigeria. Half a year had passed since the start of the civil war between Biafran and federal Nigerian forces, and this brief notice bears signs of the time’s polarized politics. The editors, J. P. Clark and Abiola Irele, proceed to announce “the poem opening on the opposite page” – more accurately, the sequence of poems, *Path of Thunder* – as “the ‘last testament’ known of this truly Nigerian character,” reclaiming Christopher Okigbo from Biafra for Nigeria at the same time as they honor his writing. The editors’ wording, such as “the war in Nigeria” and “the secessionist side,” displays their estrangement from the Biafran cause. Even as this obituary casts doubt on the legitimacy of Okigbo’s dedication to Biafra, however, it usefully defamiliarizes a legendary figure of African letters by describing him first as a participant in literary institutions (the Mbari Club, *Black Orpheus*), then as a publisher, and only finally as a poet.

Taking a cue from this unconventional perspective, this chapter looks closely at Okigbo’s complex entanglement with print – examining the pages on which his poetry appeared, exploring his role as an actor in publishing enterprises. In part because of his career’s brevity, it is tempting to treat Okigbo primarily as an exceptional and tragic individual. By paying attention to the material lives of Okigbo’s texts and to material texts as constitutive of Okigbo’s life, I aim instead to analyze him as an instructive instance of how midcentury Nigerian writers fashioned themselves as “modern” while holding forth a vision of the present that would route their decolonizing nation – and its neighbors on the continent – in emancipatory directions. Okigbo’s creative work became a provocative
example for his better-known contemporaries Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, whose own writing of poetry, including poems commemorating Okigbo, has been overshadowed in critical discussion by their literary work in other genres. All of these writers pursued an emancipatory vision for postcolonial Nigeria through aesthetic strategies embedded in midcentury literary institutions.

Along with Achebe, Soyinka, and J. P. Clark, Okigbo is often considered one of “the Mbari generation” of writers. Each of these writers attended University College, Ibadan, although Soyinka also studied in Leeds, and each became intimately involved, after graduation, with the Mbari Artists’ and Writers’ Club in Ibadan, discussed in the first chapter. As university graduates in the era of decolonization, the writers of “the Mbari generation” were among the elite of Nigerian society. When Okigbo, for instance, graduated in 1956, “there were less than three thousand Nigerians with a university education,” although there were at least thirty million Nigerians. These writers quickly assumed leadership roles in the academy, broadcasting, and journalism, as well as literary production. Okigbo himself served as Acting Librarian for the new University of Nigeria at Nsukka, then returned to Ibadan as representative for Cambridge University Press. In the era of decolonization, print literature in English largely functioned, I suggest, as a metonym of the modern; by writing for publication in English, the Mbari writers took advantage of “the cultural meaning of printedness” in their historical moment so as to position themselves as symbolic brokers of “modernity.”

Until the mid-1960s, the writers of the Mbari generation tended to see the development of an independent, democratic, multiethnic nation-state as the main vehicle for building a modern future. In Achebe’s memorable phrasing, “Nigerian nationality was for me and my generation an acquired taste – like cheese. Or better still, like ballroom dancing.” Both as food to be ingested and as practice to learn, nationality is figured by Achebe as something initially foreign that becomes, once the taste has been acquired, part of the repertoire of the modern African. As Benedict Anderson’s well-known thesis in Imagined Communities would lead us to expect, the link between literature and modernizing nationalism in Nigeria developed partly through “print-capitalism,” more specifically through Nnamdi Azikiwe’s West African Pilot. His newspaper “shaped the political and cultural consciousness of the generation of Mbari writers and artists”; a venue for nationalist critique of the colonial government, it also “regularly published verse and sustained a poetry column” that included work by poets of the Harlem Renaissance. After Nigerian independence,
Achebe and his contemporaries contributed, in turn, to the making of a national public sphere both in their day jobs and in the more rarefied realm of literary writing. In this respect, the publication of poetry should be seen as a mode not just of artistic creation, but also of self-fashioning as a modern, nationally oriented Nigerian intellectual — a mode that came under severe strain with the coups and ensuing civil war of the late 1960s.

**Okigbo and the Trope of “Modernity”**

To call attention to material texts, the institutions undergirding literary culture, and “the cultural meaning of printedness” is to move beyond the longstanding critical narrative that divides Okigbo’s career into an earlier, modernist-influenced phase of difficult, private poetry, presided over by Eurocentric ideals of the literary, and a later, authentically African phase of comprehensible, public poetry, inspired by oral African resources. Since the *bolekaja* critics’ sharp Afro-nationalist critique of Clark’s, Okigbo’s, and Soyinka’s modernist leanings, many African critics have followed suit in considering these writers “Captives of Empire,” with Okigbo redeemed only by his near-deathbed conversion to a more “oral” poetics in *Path of Thunder*. Their critical narrative pivots on the intense political changes that Nigeria underwent in the mid-1960s: the fiercely disputed western regional election of 1965, the military coup and counter-coup of 1966, the 1966 pogroms against Igbos and others from eastern Nigeria living in northern and western Nigeria, the formation in 1967 of the secessionist Republic of Biafra from what had been eastern Nigeria, and the thirty-month-long civil war, which ended in 1970 with Biafra’s surrender to the federal Nigerian government. In this telling, national crisis turned Okigbo from an irresponsible aesthete into a socially engaged patriot and turned his poetry, in Chukwuma Azuonye’s words, “from mythopoetic symbolism to a revolutionary aesthetic.”

Dissenting from such critics’ negative appraisal of Okigbo’s earlier work, other critics have instead appreciated Okigbo’s appropriation and indigenization of Euro-modernist techniques. Still others have convincingly reframed the debate by deconstructing the implied opposition of obscure and apolitical literary modernism to transparent and politically committed oral African poetics.

Even the most promising critical work, however, largely continues to take for granted the texts of Okigbo’s oeuvre. There is some precedent for examining the printed texts and publication history of Okigbo’s poetry. Modupe Olaogun, in particular, provides a keen critique of entrenched tendencies in Okigbo criticism: to ignore poetry on the page, to regard...
later versions of poems as finally authoritative, to de-emphasize continuities between the poet’s earlier and later work, and to treat him as essentially Igbo. Olaogun’s critique is valuable, as is her constructive attention to the page, which proceeds from an interest in how the “graphology” of Okigbo’s poetry, “the physical appearance of the text on the page,” produces meaning. Despite Olaogun’s invocation of Edward Said’s “worldliness,” however, she has little interest in treating the historical Okigbo or his poetry as contestants in cultural and political struggles.  

The salience of print for such struggles does not obviate anglophone poetry’s relation to oral performances in African languages. Recent work on the interplay of orality and literacy has challenged the purity of both concepts, arriving at a new consensus within which the oral is no longer seen as a sphere wholly prior to or autonomous from written and printed texts. On the one hand, then, it makes little sense to view poetry in print as the latter-day version of an originary, authentic “oral tradition.” On the other hand, print can be viewed as a dynamic medium that permits multiple instantiations of a poem in ways analogous to and sometimes indebted to oral “repertoires.”  

Still, print literature in English has a particular status relative to oral forms in African languages, with processes of literary consecration both relying on and reinforcing hierarchies of value. The Mbari generation achieved such consecration with extraordinary speed: when the newly independent University of Ibadan offered its first classes in African literature around 1963, the syllabus consisted of texts by Achebe, Clark, Okigbo, and Soyinka (CO, 180). These university-educated writers entered a literary field already populated by writers educated otherwise, notably Yoruba-language novelist D. O. Fagunwa, pioneering English-language novelists Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi, and Gabriel Okara, the elder statesman of Nigerian poetry. The published literary texts of all these writers existed, in turn, in a wider field of newspapers, pamphlets, and popular and religious literatures, as well as oral repertoires. That field is vividly literalized in Sunday Anozie’s memory of meeting Okigbo in his Nsukka home, surrounded by technologies of literacy, “with papers and books scattered all over the table and the floor; there was also a small typewriter in a leather case.”  

Papers, books, a typewriter: I suggest that what is at stake in naming postwar African literature “modern” is not just a set of formal strategies adapted from earlier literary modernisms or a social transformation portrayed in literature, but also conditions of production and circulation for
twentieth-century African literature. I aim, therefore, to shift the locus of
debate away from the detriment of modernist poetics or value of indigen-
ous oral poetics for Okigbo and his contemporaries. Although the deploy-
ment of a certain style has been taken to signal a writer’s allegiance either
to the local and national or to the cosmopolitan and transnational, I stress
that the transcultural aesthetics of Okigbo and the other Mbari writers –
and their skepticism of what Okigbo once called “the black mystique” –
did not preclude committed engagement with their society. At the same
time, their growing fascination with oral poetics remained mediated by
new “social imaginaries” stemming from “processes initiated by the colo-
nial encounter,” as well as by technologies of print introduced during that
encounter.

The work of the Mbari generation can thus be situated at a crossroads of
ways of thinking about the relation of text to audience in Africa, as a mode
of oral textuality that valued the “segmentation and distribution of knowl-
edge” across distinct social groups rubbed up against the “modern”
assumption “that a literary text is ‘public’ in the sense that it is in principle
equally accessible to all readers equipped with a knowledge of the relevant
language and genre conventions.” A review of Okigbo’s first book by an
anonymous local critic keeps both modes in play, comparing the esoteric
poetry of Heavensgate to “the incantations of a ‘BABALAWO’” or practi-
tioner of Ifá divination, while also claiming that the book “far transcends
local interest” and “can claim to be a contribution to modern poetry in
English.” Although the print medium goes unmentioned in this review, it
seems to underpin the critic’s sense that the book ought to command not
only a local audience within “hearing” of the poet’s incantations, but also
a transnational public. Most critics have overlooked how publication
makes “socially available” even “genuinely esoteric poetry” and Okigbo’s
early work, in particular, “insists on the search for an audience as an
essential stage in the making of poetry.” Indeed, Achebe turns in
“Publishing in Africa” to a line from Okigbo’s Limits to exemplify his
point that “as long as writers take the trouble . . . to get themselves
published, they do want to be heard and are reaching out to
a community, ‘straining thin among the echoes’ to quote Christopher
Okigbo.” Negative criticism of the Mbari generation’s poetry has tended
to assume that it does not aspire to the right kind of public: one that would
be equally accessible to all “the people,” defined as Nigerian or perhaps
African. This poetry might better be thought of, however, as negotiating
the possibility of creative work in print that retains strategies of audience
segmentation and anticipates differently educated or located publics.
While it would be possible to position the Mbari writers in relation either to a specifically African modernity (in the case of Ibadan, “Yorùbá modernity”) or to a shared “capitalist modernity,” I treat “the language of modernity” less as a description of a phenomenon than “as a claim-making device.” Doing so offers a way to sidestep the recent impasse between proponents of alternative modernities, on the one hand, or a singular modernity, on the other, in order to emphasize writers’ historically situated agency. What poets in Okigbo’s time stood to gain from “the language of modernity” was, among other things, a reversal of the received symbolic hierarchy of elders over newcomers. The editors of the 1963 Penguin anthology Modern Poetry from Africa, Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, exclude the older “pioneer poets of English-speaking Africa,” whose prosody had been shaped by hymns and Victorian verse, “because they cannot be classified as ‘modern’ in the sense that they do not represent a fresh exploration of language.” While Moore and Beier show a clear preference for university-educated poets including Okigbo and J. P. Clark, they acknowledge finding their “concept of the modern” difficult to define. “In part,” they write, “it is simply a matter of quality” – a claim that Derek Walcott quotes in his review of the anthology for the Trinidad Guardian. Their usage indicates that “modern” has the potential to become just as vague a term of approbation as “authentic.” Recognizing this pitfall, Fredric Jameson has argued that modernity tends to function as a “narrative category,” a “trope” serving to elicit “a unique kind of intellectual excitement.” For Jameson, “the trope of ‘modernity’” generates excitement by asserting a break with the old. Hence Moore and Beier’s claim that “modern” African poetry can be defined by a break with “the rather tractarian verse of the West African pioneers.” In this case, the trope of “modernity” helps to legitimate younger writers’ experimentation with modernist poetics. That trope could encompass literature’s material as well as linguistic forms. Gail Low suggests that “modernity” often has less to do with describing a condition than with assigning value. In Publishing the Postcolonial, Low asks readers to discover with her “how value, as such, is generated through the identification of modernity and social mobility with authorship, print and books.” As Achebe wrote in 1972 of his days as a schoolboy in the 1940s, “In our time literature was just another marvel that came with all the other wondrous things of civilisation, like motor cars and aeroplanes, from far away.” In this account, the very notion of “literature” was a new, even exotic, sign of the modern. Such “literature,” by which Achebe seems to mean canonical English literature, was
positioned in the colonial cultural field as something largely possessed and consumed by mission-educated, Christian elites literate in English. Indeed, Achebe’s and Soyinka’s parents were devout Anglicans, Okigbo’s were among the earliest Catholic converts in Igboland, and each writer’s father made his living as an educator.31 For these families, reading books, being Christian, and becoming “modern” were bound up together.

Even the most overt signs of the “modern” – literature, motor vehicles, airplanes – should not be cast in simple opposition, however, to “tradition.” Funded by a Rockefeller Foundation grant upon his return to Nigeria from Britain late in 1959, Soyinka drove a Land Rover around the country to study traditional drama. By drawing on Yoruba knowledge systems and religious practices in his own drama, Soyinka exemplifies a view of traditional African thought, shared by his friends, less dismissive than that of many forms of mission Christianity. The Mbari writers’ interest in cultural resources originating before colonialism indicates their desire to direct an apparently inevitable process of modernization toward the development of an “autonomous African polis” and “an autonomous African culture” – autonomous in the sense not of separation from the world but of primary control by Africans over political and cultural representation.32 At the same time, their deployment of indigenous forms of knowledge to critique what they saw as philistine materialism in the postcolony testifies to their sense that they had a distinct role to play as intellectuals.

Taken together, two essays by Achebe illustrate a major contradiction faced by Nigerian writers throughout the postindependence period. In “What Do African Intellectuals Read?” (1972) – Achebe admits that he is tempted to answer “nothing” – he is keen to promote a literary culture modeled on British readers’ devotion to “fiction, poetry, drama, etc.”33 In “Africa and Her Writers” (1973), Achebe adduces a Yoruba story about Èṣù, “god of fate and lover of confusion,” to lampoon “[t]he recrimination between capitalist and communist aesthetics” outside Africa. Instead he offers mbari as a traditional African model for aesthetics. In Achebe’s reckoning, the epitome of a writer who has returned from Eurocentric to African aesthetics, for whom “poetry becomes ... an anguished journey back from alienation to resumption of ritual and priestly functions,” is his late friend Christopher Okigbo.34 In these essays can be seen Achebe’s desire, on the one hand, for a vibrant, “modern” literary culture that he sees modeled by Europeans and, on the other hand, for distinctively African aesthetic and social forms that would depart from European strictures.
Although each of these twinned desires has generally been associated with a different school of African literary criticism – Europhone literary culture with “intrinsic” formalist criticism, distinctively African aesthetics with “extrinsic” nationalist and Marxist criticism – Olakunle George contends that both the “intrinsic” and the “extrinsic” schools of the late 1950s to early 1980s partake of a teleological “ideology of modernity,” an aspiration “to catch up with cultural modernity by having a discursive tradition centered on Africa and its problems.” George then makes a surprising claim about African literary criticism that remains applicable to the writers of the Mbari generation who participated in the same “sociopolitical and intellectual problematic” of this period: “African literary criticism took a crucial leap at the outset: it gave inadequate scrutiny to categories inherited from European letters. Yet, it is in this leap that the agency of African letters can be located.” In light of George’s account, Okigbo’s contingent adoption of English and of print – a language and a medium “inherited from European letters” – can be identified as a trace of his agency as an African poet. Whether or not he acceded to a teleological “ideology of modernity,” as did African literary criticism in George’s account, Okigbo’s “creative rearticulation of the given” eventually demonstrated that neither the English language nor the print medium – nor, by extension, the trope of “modernity” – was Europe’s to claim.

The Cambridge House Years in Transition: “Lament of the Drums”

Having developed a relationship with a number of international publishing companies while university librarian at Nsukka, Okigbo turned down a postgraduate fellowship in the United States in order to take a job as Cambridge University Press’s representative in Ibadan from 1962 to 1966. In those same years, the components of what would become his book-length Labyrinths sequence were published. Living in Cambridge House, an elegant split-level residence in the Onireke Government Reservation Area, he inhabited an exclusive space that had been set up by the colonial government and inherited by the new postcolonial elite. Okigbo, a devotee of the good life, hosted well-provisioned gatherings and collected cars, including a small Jaguar and a Rolls Royce–like Armstrong Siddeley. His fellow Ibadan publishers included T. T. Solarun at Oxford University Press, Aig Higo at Heinemann, and Isidore Okpewho and Julian Rea at Longman (CO, 184–86). Rea, who lived next door, remembers Okigbo as “Very, very sharp,” a man who disliked hard work but “liked poking fun at
serious young white men like me.”

Apart from brokering the publication of Achebe’s first children’s book, *Chike and the River*, Okigbo seems to have been uninterested in leading Cambridge to vie with Oxford, Heinemann, or Longman for new literature by Nigerians.

While images of Okigbo as a sophisticated man of leisure are fairly familiar, both from friends’ accounts and from critiques of his purported “art for art’s sake” attitude, Okigbo was simultaneously engaged with the political struggles of his day. Ibadan had become, by the time Okigbo returned there from eastern Nigeria, a site of open political conflict between the premier of Nigeria’s western region, S. L. Akintola, and the leader of Akintola’s party, Obafemi Awolowo, who was jailed late in 1962 and controversially convicted of plotting to overthrow the federal government. “Then following turbulent elections in 1964 and 1965, the smoldering fire ignited into street riots, jail breaks, assassinations, and the setting ablaze of political opponents in the streets” – events that contributed to changing Okigbo and his friends “from mandarins into militants.”

Soyinka, in particular, remained active among the radical faction loyal to Awolowo who opposed Akintola’s government. According to Bola Ige, another leader of the opposition to Akintola, who became Federal Minister of Justice three decades later, Cambridge House with Okigbo in residence was a “refuge for progressive politics” (*CO*, 201). The geography of the Government Reservation Area, which had been inaugurated to separate British colonial administrators from the African populace, instead came to provide breathing space in which Nigerian intellectuals could endeavor to chart the course of their nation.

Okigbo’s devotion to the poetic craft evinced a kind of aestheticism, but he was not the politically unconscious aesthete of some critics’ caricature. Obi Nwakanma’s biography shows that Okigbo was politically active as early as his second year at university, where he served on the Students’ Representative Council from 1951 to 1953 before becoming involved with the Dynamic Party (*CO*, 84–93). A fringe movement led by Chike Obi, a Cambridge-educated mathematician, the Dynamic Party attracted mostly intellectuals to its modernizing Kemalism, a “totalitarianism of the left” indebted to Kemal Atatürk for its willingness to resort to “force . . . in order to quicken the pace of progress.” Okigbo also found himself drawn together with a number of politically radical young men, including Emmanuel Ifeajuna, in the new Kuti Hall residence. “Okigbo’s group,” writes Nwakanma, “saw themselves principally as nationalist revolutionaries” (*CO*, 91). A decade later, this same group found themselves disenchanted with the political conservatism and corruption of their
recently independent country. Chike Obi had been jailed alongside Awolowo by Akintola, and as Awolowo endured imprisonment, his “political stance began increasingly to reflect the ideal for the younger generation of post-colonial nationalist intellectuals of Okigbo’s mould” (CO, 202). Consequently, Okigbo’s close friend Ben Obumselu has observed of the poems he wrote at this time that, “far from being merely technical and musical compositions, they grapple with the realities of the poet’s life.”

His first poem to grapple directly with those political realities, “Lament of the Drums,” was written in 1964 and published early in 1965 in Transition magazine. Okigbo had served since the start of 1963 as Transition’s editor for West Africa and was part of discussions about publishing a West African edition, which proved too expensive to implement. Reading “Lament of the Drums” in Transition points both to Okigbo’s intense identification with fellow Nigerians’ political aspirations and to his involvement in wider pan-African intellectual networks.

“Lament of the Drums” began as a “Lament of the Mariner” centering on the figure of Palinurus from Virgil’s Aeneid. Okigbo was reportedly so taken with Virgil as an undergraduate that he inscribed passages of Latin poetry on his dorm room wall (CO, 80–81). In the Aeneid, Palinurus acts as ship’s helmsman for Aeneas and his fleet on their way to Italy before being lost overboard and dying. Depicted by the epic’s narrator as a sacrifice to Neptune to ensure that the fleet reaches Italy safely, Palinurus denies the involvement of any gods in his death when he re-emerges as a shade in the underworld; this ambivalence between natural and supernatural explanations likely appealed to Okigbo’s own sense that the ordinary events of history could take on mythic resonances. As Dan Izevbaye notes, “the mythical figure of Palinurus brings out the problem of reading symbolic poems.” In my reading, which fleshes out a statement by Okigbo in his introduction to Labyrinths, Palinurus signifies the imprisoned Obafemi Awolowo and his son Segun, who died in a 1963 car accident, but even this fairly direct correspondence involves slippage between two historical figures and a single mythical one.

“Lament of the Drums” consists of five sections, with Palinurus appearing as “the mariner” in the third and middle section:

they are fishing today in the dark waters
Where the mariner is finishing his rest.

alone, Palinurus,
In your hot prison,
You will keep the dead sea
Awake with nightsong . . .

Okigbo alternates longer- and shorter-lined stanzas; in the later *Labyrinths* edition, the shorter-lined quatrains are rearranged into couplets, emphasizing their faint hints of end rhyme.

**NAKED, Palinurus,**
In your empty catacomb,
You will wear away
Through age alone . . .

**NOTHING REMAINS, only smoke after storm—**
Some strange Celaeno and her harpy crew,
Laden with night and their belly’s excrement,
Profane all things with hooked feet and foul teeth—

As in the *Aeneid*, where Palinurus appears first above ground and later as a shade in the underworld, Okigbo alternates between the vision of Palinurus as a body “in the dark waters . . . finishing his rest” and as an imprisoned shade. Either way, the ship of state is left adrift without its helmsman. The small caps with which these lines open in *Transition* emphasizes the direness of the situation: “ALONE, Palinurus,” “NAKED, Palinurus,” “NOTHING REMAINS,” etc. This last line – “NOTHING REMAINS, only smoke after storm” – evokes a storm in Virgil, but the smoke is also a topical reference to the fires and street riots of political struggles in Ibadan; Celaeno, the harpy Aeneas and his men meet in Book 3, stands in here for the corrupt political establishment. The poet addresses Palinurus in the second person, resembling Aeneas as he speaks to Palinurus in the underworld: “IT IS OVER, Palinurus, at least for you, / In your tarmac of night and fever-dew.” These valedictory lines imply that it is not yet over for the poet and his generation, who will emerge from the underworld in order to pursue their political future.

Politically topical though it may be, “Lament of the Drums” exemplifies what has irked some critics about Okigbo’s poetry. Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* in the time of Augustus Caesar, and his epic can be read as a defense of the Roman Empire; a certain British tradition figured the British Empire as the successor to the Roman Empire, a tradition that doubtless colored the way Virgil was taught in University College, Ibadan. Why not turn, like Soyinka or Derek Walcott, to Greek classical texts with less overtly imperial associations? One could note, in the poet’s defense, that “Lament of the Drums” opens in the voice of indigenous West African drums and that Okigbo revised this opening into an address to the drums’ bodies, heads,
and sticks based on an Akan drum dirge described by a Ghanaian musicologist in *Black Orpheus*.\(^5^3\) Indeed, Ghanaian writer Kofi Awoonor, who deprecated “an element of alienation” in Okigbo’s poetry, saw the appearance of the drums, and the independence of their voice, as a high point of the poet’s work.\(^5^4\) To pursue this line of defense much further, though, would lead require me to tally up the number of “European” versus “oral African” allusions in order to place Okigbo on the “authenticity” spectrum.

More helpful, perhaps, is the consideration that Okigbo may have been drawn to Virgil because of his epic’s drive toward the founding of a new state – a drive that emerged from Virgil’s own experiences with civil war and embrace of the Pax Romana brought by Augustus. In Virgil’s narrative, Palinurus represents what is lost or sacrificed in that transition to a new state. By transmuting the Awolowos into Palinurus, Okigbo emphasizes Obafemi Awolowo’s sacrificial part in the quest to build a new kind of state. At the same time, the overdetermined accident of Segun’s death comes to mirror Palinurus’s death – an accident on one level that becomes part of a larger historical pattern on another.\(^5^5\) Readers of *Transition*, which interwove debates about culture and about government, would have been primed to see these shades of political meaning. “Lament of the Drums” headlined the Contents page of its eighteenth issue, dramatizing the high value accorded to poetry. Within the issue, the poem appeared between a Nadine Gordimer story about the sacrifices made by those in the antiapartheid struggle, on the one hand, and a liberal diagnosis of post-colonial Africa’s “anarchy and chaos” by Dahomeyan writer Olympe Bhély-Quénum, on the other.\(^5^6\) The periodical medium thus inserted a poem thematizing national renovation into a transnational circuit of contributors, readers, and texts.

Soon after “Lament of the Drums” appeared in *Transition*, it was reprinted in *Black Orpheus*; Okigbo then incorporated it into the manuscript of *Labyrinths*.\(^5^7\) “Lament of the Drums” forms the second of two sections making up *Silences*, the third part of *Labyrinths*. The title *Labyrinths* gives some hint of the bewildering poetic maze awaiting the first-time reader, and critics have tended to make sense of the maze by following the crumbs that Okigbo drops in his introduction. He places himself in a tradition of quest narratives, describing his work as “a fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfillment.” He points readers toward a “poet-protagonist . . . like the Fisher King of Eliot’s *Waste Land*” in pursuit of a presence who might be Robert Graves’s White Goddess.\(^5^8\) Fittingly for an author who so brashly appropriated English literary tradition, *Labyrinths*
was published in London. Having been first submitted to Eliot’s own firm of Faber and Faber, the book was accepted by Heinemann Educational Books, Okigbo’s relation to the London publishing scene mediated by the Heinemann African Writers Series, for which Achebe served as editorial advisor. Thus, the back cover of Labyrinths lists both a UK and a slightly lower African price, while the title page lists Ibadan and Nairobi after London, as well as stating that the book has been published “in association with mbari publications · ibadan” – a nod to the fact that it incorporated work previously published by Mbari as Heavensgate and Limits. To read “Lament of the Drums” in Labyrinths, as nearly every critic has done, is to encounter the poem in a certain transnational frame that emphasizes the “African” writer’s fraught relationship to “Europe.” Reading the poem in Transition provides a different frame, one that helps to keep in view Okigbo’s investment in crafting not only modernist poetics, but also the meaning of “modernity” in postcolonial Nigeria. In this magazine it is perhaps easier to see that even as Okigbo appropriated literary models from his colonial education, he was identifying with Awolowo’s opposition to a Nigerian government closely – many charged neocolonially – in league with British interests.

Okigbo’s “Last Testament”: Path of Thunder as Transcultural Poetics

Okigbo’s best-known poetic skirmish with politics is the sequence Path of Thunder. If the original print contexts of “Lament of the Drums” help to show Okigbo’s deployment of his colonial education as an engagement with Nigeria’s political direction as much as a display of modernist poetics, then the print history of Path of Thunder, which is usually read as an engagement only with Nigeria’s political direction, helps to show how it also takes up questions about the social position of the “modern” African writer. Kole Omotoso reports that Okigbo planned to publish the sequence in Transition, but it first appeared in Black Orpheus in February 1968, two years after its composition and several months after the poet’s death. It was introduced by the editors as “the ‘last testament’” – a phrase from Okigbo’s poem “Elegy for Alto” – “known of this truly Nigerian character.” As presented in the journal, each of the sequence’s six poems has an individual title, and five of them have dates appended, ranging from December 1965 to May 1966. Given that the poems are often read through the scrim of Okigbo’s commitment to Biafra as a return not only to the oral, but also to his “people,” these
dates highlight the fact that the sequence was not only published in a journal based outside Biafra, but actually composed before Biafra existed. A handwritten draft of *Path of Thunder* that included “Lament of the Drums” bears a dedication to “the legendary heroes of the January 15 revolution.” One of those “heroes” was Emmanuel Ifeajuna, a member of Okigbo’s university circle who went on to become Brigade Major of the Lagos Garrison Command. In Lagos early in January 1966, Okigbo attended a launch party for Achebe’s fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, which ends by imagining a coup against the corrupt government of the unnamed West African country in which it is set; in Lagos, Okigbo also may have participated in meetings to discuss the actual coup that Ifeajuna and other officers then launched on January 15, 1966 (*CO*, 214–15). Regardless of whether Okigbo joined in the planning, the character of Ifeajuna’s and Okigbo’s shared student radicalism remarkably prefigures the coup: the willingness to exercise “force” – the death toll, in this case, included the federal prime minister and finance minister, as well as the premiers of the western and northern regions – in order to ensure “progress” as defined by self-identified “nationalist revolutionaries.” The January Boys, as the initiators of the coup became known, thought they were setting off a socialist revolution along the lines laid out in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. They planned to release Awolowo, create “a mass political movement,” curb capitalism, and form new states, doing away with Nigeria’s division into three rival regions.

Okigbo’s attitude to his friends’ actions can be gauged by a telegraph he dispatched to the Transcription Centre in London: “HURRAH FOR REVOLUTION LET THE CANNON SHOOT.” At first blush, the poet shares the popular view of the coup as a welcome release from political deadlock, a decisive, if bloody, step toward allowing ordinary Nigerians to reclaim the promises of modernization. The pithy poem by W. B. Yeats to which Okigbo is alluding, however, questions the value of revolutionary upheaval. He had encountered these lines in the *Times Literary Supplement* early in 1965, the year during which he helped to mark the centenary of Yeats’s birth by writing “Lament of the Masks”:

Hurrah for revolution! Let the cannon shoot,  
The beggar upon horseback lashes the beggar on foot.  
Hurrah for revolution! Cannon once again.  
The beggars have changed places but the lash goes on.

Whether or not Okigbo could see it at the time, such Yeatsian skepticism was called for: the January Boys paved the way for a military government
led by the relatively conservative Igbo commanding officer of the army, General Aguiyi-Ironsi. Many northern Nigerians came to see the coup as an Igbo plot to dominate the country. When northern officers struck in a countercoup on July 29, 1966, killing Aguiyi-Ironsi in Ibadan, Okigbo’s close association with Ifeajuna made the poet a target. Narrowly escaping from Lagos to Ibadan on August 1, he left a week later for the east (CO, 223–24).

*Path of Thunder* may strike some present-day readers as abstruse, but it has seemed virtually transparent to readers familiar with the events to which the poems respond. Ulli Beier reports that although Okigbo showed the sequence to him before the countercoup, he “decided not to publish it at that time for fear it might be inflammatory.” Arranged in nonchronological order, the sequence opens with one of the poems dated May 1966: “Thunder Can Break.” The word “thunder” appears in two more titles, “Come Thunder” and “Hurrah for Thunder,” representing a force of apocalyptic change: divine judgment (associated in Yorubaland with the ṥarìṣà Ọ̀ṣàgbó) and that judgment’s instantiation in the revolutionary violence of the January 1966 coup. For many critics, *Path of Thunder* has come to stand as evidence of Okigbo’s belated conversion to oral, African, and specifically Igbo poetics, even though its “Thunder” titles echo “What the Thunder Said,” the final section of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Okigbo did make remarkable use of indigenous poetics in the sequence, but intriguingly, he drew less on Igbo poetry than on Yoruba poetry that he encountered in print, especially in *Black Orpheus* and in books such as Ulli Beier and Bakare Gbadamosi’s *Yoruba Poetry* (1959) or E. A. Olunlade’s *Ede* (1961). Ben Obumselu reports of Okigbo that “as the texts of ọdụ Ifá, ijala, and iuw began to appear in the 1960s, he put himself to school, as we all did, under Yoruba indigenous poetry,” Obumselu’s use of the word “school” underscoring the fact that the poet’s turn to local African-language poetry was thoroughly mediated by institutions of education and publishing coded as modern.

Take, for instance, “Hurrah for Thunder,” dated “17 Jan, 1966.” It begins as a fairly straightforward celebration of the January 15 coup with diction that seems to be translated from a Yoruba poem: “whatever happened to the elephant / Hurrah for thunder” (the elephant here signifying the Nigerian authorities). Although the poet does offer a brief “Alas!” acknowledging the deaths involved in toppling the government, his repetition of the title phrase, itself adapted from Yeats’s “Hurrah for revolution,” hails the possibilities opened up by the coup. He then cautions that those whom the coup will propel into power should not install themselves as
a new kleptocracy, lest revolutionary “thunder” topple them, too: “But already the hunters are talking about pumpkins: / If they share the meat let them remember thunder.” The poem ends, though, with a sardonic swerve: “If I don’t learn to shut my mouth I’ll soon go to hell, / I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron bell” (8; 67). Self-reflexive about the address of his textual voice, the poet figures himself as the traditional town crier of Yorubaland or Igboland, whose willingness to speak publicly may get him into the same “hell” inhabited by Awolowo, imprisonment, or worse. The masculine rhyme of “hell” and “bell” – the only rhymed ending in *Path of Thunder* and one of only two endings in the sequence without an ellipsis – at once models this fate and mocks it. Kwame Anthony Appiah has written of Wole Soyinka’s struggle to reconcile his belief in African communalism with “the new kind of literary self that comes with print,” a self individuated in print yet replicated before any number of unknown readers. The last line of “Hurrah for Thunder” – “I, Okigbo, town-crier,” – indicates how Okigbo navigates this dilemma. The poet moves from his inhabitation of a “literary self” in English (“I”), through a name belonging both to him and to an extended family (“Okigbo”), toward a communal role (“town-crier”), registering his distance from that role even as he draws on it.

The only poem that Okigbo wrote before the January coup, “Come Thunder,” is dated December 1965 and enjoins the “dancers” of a “triumphant march” to remember “thunder” and “lightning” (7; 66). Addressing Ibadan late in 1965, the poet implies that force and fraud cannot keep S. L. Akintola’s NNDP party in power forever; thunder and lightning will strike. Thunder and lightning are associated with the displeasure of Olódùmarè, the supreme God of Yoruba traditional religion, manifested through Sàngó. At the same time, the poem recalls the “anarchy” preceding the apocalypse of an unknown “rough beast” in Yeats’s “The Second Coming.” Like Yeats, Okigbo sees in violent political conflicts signs of a new dispensation. Critics of the current order, both poets herald its replacement while recognizing the great terror that this entails:

> The smell of blood already floats in the lavender-mist of the afternoon.  
> The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power;  
> And a great fearful thing already tugs at the cables of the open air,  
> A nebula immense and immeasurable, a night of deep waters –  
> An iron dream unnamed and unprintable, a path of stone. (7; 66)

The repetition of “already” suggests that the poet greets the coming “great fearful thing” as the necessary consequence of the disputed election; he sees
these political events “as omens of a more radical crisis which nothing can now avert.”74 The “cables of the open air” and “night of deep waters” call to mind a ferry crossing, the “nebula immense and immeasurable” a vast expanse of space, as if Nigeria or history itself were shuttling precariously across an abyss. Having embraced a modernizing nationalism in which print journalism and literature were gradually going to build a national community, Okigbo seems to question this progressive model. The “iron dream” that awaits Nigeria here is “unprintable” – obscene rather than civil, enacted suddenly by force rather than advanced through public discussion.

The poem’s rhetoric becomes increasingly intense and dire in its second half, as ensuing references to “pods in barren farmlands,” “homesteads abandoned in this century’s brush fire,” and “deserted corn cobs in burning barns” place into an apocalyptic register the postelection peasant revolt over a drop in cocoa prices that Akintola’s government had delayed until after the election.75 The poem concludes,

And the secret thing in its heaving
Threatens with iron mask
The last lighted torch of the century . . .

(7; 66)

It is difficult to square the doom of this poetic image with the revolutionary sympathies of Okigbo the man. If the “last lighted torch of the century” can be read as a metaphor for Nigeria as postcolonial democracy, the poem may embody the prescient worry that the “heaving” of revolution will too quickly turn into the “iron mask” of repression. In this respect, it would foreshadow “Elegy for Slit-Drum,” dated May 1966. The choral voice of this poem offers “condolences quivering before the iron throne of a new conqueror” and proclaims, “the General is near the throne / an iron mask covers his face,” evoking General Aguiyi-Ironsi’s ascension as Nigeria’s head of state in a military government as problematic as its democratic predecessor (9; 69).

Signs of the severe strain under which the military government put the Mbarn generation’s nationalism appear, too, in the last poem in Okigbo’s “last testament.” “Elegy for Alto” is scored “With drum accompaniment.” The drum gestures toward a traditional performance, yet the “Alto” of the title is the alto saxophone or alto clarinet – a modern instrument. Himself a jazz clarinetist, Okigbo opens his poem with an instrumental solo that also alludes to the poetry magazine in which he first published: “AND THE HORN may now paw the air howling goodbye . . .” (10; 71). Its “howling” marks the return of “THE ROBBERS,” “THE EAGLES,” “POLITICIANS” – those
whom the January coup had been intended to banish. In *Black Orpheus*, “Elegy for Alto” is dated “Ibadan, / May, 1966.” The poet seems to have heard about the first anti-Igbo pogroms, which the government failed to prevent, and the sax or clarinet is playing goodbye to the dream of a new political dispensation. The poem’s jazzlike riff incorporates the less pleasing sounds of modern traffic:

**FOR BEYOND** the blare of sirened afternoons, beyond the motorcades;  
Beyond the voices and days, the echoing highways; beyond the latescence  
Of our dissonant airs; through our curtained eyeballs,  
through our shuttered sleep,  
Onto our forgotten selves, onto our broken images; beyond the barricades  
Commandments and edicts, beyond the iron tables,  
Legendary patience, beyond his inviolable bronze bust; beyond our crumbling towers –  
BEYOND the iron path careering along the same beaten track –  

**THE GLIMPSE** of a dream lies smouldering in a cave,  
 together with the mortally wounded birds.  
Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let this be  
the ram’s ultimate prayer to the tether . . .

(II; 72)

That “iron path careering along the same beaten track” sounds like a railroad following an older road, as if projects of modernization cannot escape from their history. Rather than invoking a healing past, “the same beaten track” disappoints. The “mortally wounded birds” can be identified with those killed in anti-Igbo violence. In contrast to the founding sacrifice of Palinurus taken up by “Lament of the Drums,” these deaths are not redemptive and in fact have imperiled the flickering dream of a hopeful national future. The poet’s own death does not seem to be far from his mind, given his identification with “the ram” and apostrophe to “Earth,” the second of the poem, imploring her to “unbind” him. According to Culler, “apostrophe works as a mark of poetic vocation.” In the end, the poet avoids equating that vocation with self-sacrifice by making himself and his compatriots into observers “on the shore / Gazing heavenward” as new stars replace old “Before a going and coming that goes on forever . . .” (II; 72). Entering a cyclical temporality, the elegy’s final lines leave readers with a figure for Nigeria as a “born-to-die figure implicated in multiple cycles of hope and despair.”
Here Okigbo translates his enchantment with Yoruba poetics and his disenchantment with the failures of modernization in Nigeria into what he presents as a jazz lament, jazz being an aesthetic form strongly identified both with West African roots and with the modern. Jazz provides for Okigbo a model of a transcultural aesthetic with less overwhelmingly imperial connotations than Latin classics such as the *Aeneid*, an aesthetic born out of the traumas of the slave trade, as his poetry arises from those of the colonial encounter. Jazz had also been important to Eliot, so that Okigbo can continue to rework that modernist example at the same time as he affiliates himself with African American music. As Tsitsi Jaji notes, extending Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, “it was specifically the ‘counterculture of modernity’ as performed in black music that made it so appealing” to African culture producers.\(^78\) Jazz was, of course, not only theoretically attractive, but also a feature of the urban life he led in Lagos in the late 1950s. If he had not been a university graduate, Okigbo might well have become like Amusa Sango, the main character of Cyprian Ekwensi’s novel *People of the City* – a former teacher who works in a large West African city, based on Lagos, as a newspaper reporter by day and a jazz trumpeter by night.\(^79\) As print literature in English and jazz are conjoined in Sango’s life, they become related aspects of Okigbo’s own self-fashioning as modern. Like Yoruba poetics, West African jazz could be claimed by Okigbo as part of an African inheritance. Due to printing and recording technologies, both Yoruba poetry and West African jazz traveled along local performance circuits and out to worldwide audiences. Okigbo’s “last testament” shows him allying himself, amid Nigeria’s breakdown, with paradigms of cultural circulation that bring together rather than oppose the traditional with the modern, the local with the transcultural.

Okigbo’s Late Style: Citadel Books and “Lament of the Deer”

*Path of Thunder* is not, strictly speaking, Okigbo’s last poetic production, but his penultimate one. Curwen Best contends that the differences of style between *Labyrinths* and this sequence have “less to do with total abandonment of an old self for a new self and more to do with adapting one’s craft in response to perceived demands. His people needed him. Had he lived longer, and were he to feel again that his audience had changed, then Christopher Okigbo would have assumed another mask.”\(^80\) He did, in fact, live for more than a year after composing *Path of Thunder* and has left us a final poem of yet another temper.
After eluding capture during the July 1966 countercoup and returning to eastern Nigeria, Okigbo became near-neighbors with Chinua Achebe and his family in the regional capital of Enugu (CO, 230). Both Okigbo and Achebe also became affiliated with the University of Nigeria at Nsukka’s Institute of African Studies (CO, 232). Believing that Achebe’s portrayal of a coup in *A Man of the People* was evidence of his involvement in planning the January coup, soldiers had hunted for him in Lagos, where he was working as Director of External Broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. The July coup and pogroms proved painfully disillusioning for Chinua and Christie Achebe, who, by deciding to marry in Ibadan and live outside IgboLand, had prioritized their nation over ethnic or extended family loyalties.  

Having given up their jobs with national broadcasting and international publishing, Achebe and Okigbo turned toward locally run publishing. In October 1966, the two men started a new publishing house in Enugu: Citadel Books. As Achebe told *Transition*, “We felt we wanted to develop literature for children based on local thought.”  

“Achebe’s biographer adds, “was to publish relevant works by Africans for children, thereby encouraging the exploration of the oral traditions of the people.”  

Okigbo was himself cultivating a serious interest in Igbo-language poetry. He invited Achebe to hear some Ikwerre griots perform in his lodgings and concluded the performance, as Achebe remembered it, by declaring, “We are just wasting our time. These are the real poets!” (CO, 238). Even before his return to the east, Okigbo had proposed a book on “Ibo Oral Traditions,” with dual critical and anthropological aims “to ascertain whether these art-forms attain a condition of poetry, and to establish their status and significance within their culture context.”  

Along with promoting local expressive forms, Citadel was to be under local African control, its shares initially divided among Achebe, Okigbo, and two others, although a letter from Okigbo to the Transcription Centre aired his hope that the Farfield Foundation would subsidize a Citadel African Poets series. (He must not yet have heard that Farfield was a CIA front.) This letter, written the day before the Republic of Biafra came into existence, outlines an ambitious publishing program, including a monthly *Mbari* arts magazine, which would constitute “our own modest contribution to the survival of Africa” (Figure 5).  

The only Citadel project actually brought to completion, however, was a children’s book entitled *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, published in Enugu after the civil war by Nwamife Publishers instead of then-defunct Citadel. Highlighting the often-collaborative nature of authorship, the book’s title page lists three authors,
with Achebe and John Iroaganachi as co-authors – Iroaganachi submitted a manuscript that Achebe reworked – and Okigbo as contributor of a poem embedded in the narrative, “The Lament of the Deer.”

Adapted from an oral Igbo story, the narrative of *How the Leopard Got His Claws* describes the leopard, who does not yet possess teeth or claws, as the king of the animals, a kind leader who inspires the animals to join together and build a village hall. Likely a metaphor for the Nigerian nation, in which the Igbo had been strongly invested, this hall becomes a site of conflict, as the toothed dog, who had not participated in building the hall,ousts the leopard from it during a rainstorm. Okigbo’s poem is then spoken by the deer:

O Leopard our noble king,  
Where are you?  
Spotted king of the forest,  
Where are you?  
Even if you are far away  
Come, hurry home:  
The worst has happened to us  
The worst has happened to us . . .  
The house the animals built  
The cruel dog keeps us from it,  
The common shelter we built  
The cruel dog keeps us from it,  
The worst has happened to us  
The worst has happened to us . . .

Although “The Lament of the Deer” shares a similar name with “Lament of the Silent Sisters” and “Lament of the Drums” (both incorporated into *Labyrinths*), as well as “Lament of the Masks,” it is less demanding than Okigbo’s earlier work. This short poem nonetheless displays Okigbo’s characteristic virtuosity. As Achebe said of his friend, “while other poets wrote good poems Okigbo conjured up for us an amazing, haunting poetic firmament of a wild and violent beauty.” The apostrophe to the leopard swiftly elevates it into this poetic firmament. Refrains then create a haunting effect, as does the alternation of a slightly varied line – “The house the animals built,” “The common shelter we built” – with the refrain “The cruel dog keeps us from it.” Imagining one plausible alternative – “The cruel dog keeps us from / The house the animal built. / The cruel dog keeps us from / The common shelter we built.” – allows us to see that the poet has avoided both awkward enjambment and a relentlessly end-stressed rhythm. Even without any classical allusions or traces of modernist
“difficulty,” the flexible, free-verse rhythm through which he voices the deer has arguably been made possible by Pound and Eliot. Exemplifying anglophone African poets’ ability to “modernize the indigenous and indigenize the modern,” Okigbo commands a repertoire that now includes forms of Igbo storytelling alongside classical, modernist, and Yoruba poetics.89

The story, which Achebe has said was “clearly influenced” by the Biafran war, ends as a parable about divisions in the face of neocolonialism: “Today the animals are no longer friends, but enemies. . . . Perhaps the animals will make peace among themselves some day and live together again. Then they can keep away the hunter who is their common enemy.”90 How the Leopard Got His Claws remediates Igbo oral forms, then, into print and into English, presuming a school-educated readership. Publishing the book in English would have made it accessible to speakers of minority languages within what soon became Biafra, but the book’s authors must also have imagined other African and overseas readers. As Achebe told an interviewer a decade after the war ended, “I like to see [my readers] in concentric circles: closest to me are my own people in Nigeria; other people in Africa; and then it goes on – the Commonwealth and the World.”91 Although the project of building a unified Nigerian public sphere no longer seemed viable during the war, Citadel Books could aim at more local and more diffuse audiences. The Ikwerre griots may have been “the real poets,” but tellingly, Okigbo sought to follow in their footsteps by way of an English-language publishing enterprise, a sign of his commitment to a way of being modern that he and Achebe evidently thought compatible with turning children toward local traditions of storytelling and a decolonizing political lesson.

Okigbo did not, however, live to see the peace forecast in this book. He showed as much enthusiasm for political adventurism, in fact, as for aesthetic experimentalism. In September and October 1966, Okigbo participated in a secret gunrunning mission that took him to France, the Netherlands, and England in order to procure arms for what would become Biafra (CO, 233–37). On May 30, 1967, the military governor of Eastern Nigeria, Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, declared Biafra’s independence from Nigeria, and on July 6, 1967, the federal Nigerian army entered Biafran territory. The next day, according to one witness, Okigbo signed up to fight for Biafra, operating as part of a guerrilla unit alongside one of the January Boys, Major Nzeogwu (CO, 242–43). Achebe did not seek out the front, but the front found him; during that summer, his house was bombed, killing no one but destroying most of his papers.92 Although he
did not join the fighting either, Soyinka threw himself into the political ring by visiting Biafra two weeks after the war started, seeking to prevent the war and perhaps to forge an alliance between eastern and western Nigerians in opposition to the north.\(^93\) Okigbo and Soyinka met for the last time on July 21, before Soyinka returned to federal Nigeria to face imprisonment (\(CO, 248–49\)). On September 18, 1967, Okigbo died while trying to stop the advance of an armored federal military vehicle (\(CO, 255–57\)).

**Posthumous Okigbo**

Okigbo’s poetry remained bound up with political dreams after his death. His work was soon drawn into contests over his life and legacy that reveal not only the political fault lines of the time, but also the mediation of poetry by literary institutions and the micropolitics involved in literary consecration. For the year between the countercoup and the outbreak of war, geographic separation had not prevented Nigerian literary intellectuals from communicating with each other across hardening borders. J. P. Clark was based at the University of Lagos, and one of the only key players of the Nigerian literary scene to remain in Ibadan was Aig Higo at Heinemann.\(^94\) With the start of the war, Clark would replace Ulli Beier as co-editor of *Black Orpheus* along with Abiola Irele, then teaching in Ghana. “Even in the midst of the crisis,” relates Peter Benson, “Okigbo continued to keep in touch with Clark, Higo, and Irele by telephone from Enugu, as did Achebe.”\(^95\) With the outbreak of war, however, these connections became impossible to maintain.

In the wake of Okigbo’s death, Clark’s continuing support for the federal side alienated him from Achebe and Soyinka.\(^96\) At one point during the war, Achebe and Clark saw each other at Heinemann’s London headquarters and quarreled. Clark later told the *Guardian* (Nigeria) that “Achebe felt that I had betrayed him, and Chris [Okigbo].”\(^97\) In this context, Clark and Irele’s choice to open their first issue of *Black Orpheus* with a section consisting both of Okigbo’s *Path of Thunder* and of poems by Ken Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni from eastern Nigeria who strongly supported the federal side, looks like an attempt to restitch in print the social bonds frayed by the conflict.\(^98\) This issue’s masthead maintained intact an Advisory Committee that consisted of Achebe, Ulli Beier (departed from Nigeria but sympathetic to Biafra), Gabriel Okara (Biafran), and Soyinka (imprisoned for his visit to Biafra), among others. In *Black Orpheus*, the editors created a version of the print public sphere where Okigbo’s writing
could coexist, even if only posthumously, with that of figures on the other side of the conflict, including themselves: a substantial essay by Clark, “The Legacy of Caliban,” appeared later in their inaugural issue.

Clark and Irele continued to position *Black Orpheus* as custodian of Okigbo’s legacy. Their third issue, appearing later in 1968, opened with a section entitled “Three Laments for Christopher Okigbo,” featuring poems by Peter Thomas, a Welshman who had become close to Okigbo while teaching at Nsukka; Femi Osofisan, today one of Nigeria’s best-known writers; and Onwuchekwa Jemie, a graduate student at Columbia University in New York who later became one of the *bolekaja* critics.99 The “prevailing theme” of Clark’s own poetry of the period, published in 1970 as *Casualties*, “is the destructive impact of war on intricate social ties.”100 As it memorializes the many victims of the January coup, the July countercoup, and the civil war, *Casualties* exhibits an investment similar to that of *Black Orpheus* in reconstructing in print a social world that could no longer exist in a Nigeria divided by the memory of the war even after its conclusion.

Within Biafra, meanwhile, a group of writers who had converged on Nsukka during the 1966 crises began to hold weekly poetry readings and became known as the Odunke Community of Artists. According to one of the group’s members, Okigbo was “the idol of our community,” and at one of the first readings after his death, “most of the poems presented smelt heavily of Okigbo.”101 The archives of Heinemann Educational Books (HEB) reveal a further, less literal casualty of these years, a planned anthology edited by Ulli Beier that foundered amid the uncharted political tensions of the civil war. Beier, who had moved from Nigeria to Papua New Guinea, proposed to include Okigbo’s *Path of Thunder* alongside poetry by other writers associated with Biafra, and HEB settled on the politic title *Nsukka: An Anthology of Poetry Dedicated to Christopher Okigbo*.102 Aig Higo at HEB Ibadan protested to the London office, nonetheless, that titling one of its three parts “Biafra” would endanger the very existence of Heinemann in federal Nigeria, while Beier and the Biafran poets insisted on the inclusion of this part.103 Eventually HEB abandoned the anthology.

Even the publication of *Labyrinths* was postponed during a dispute over who controlled the copyright to Okigbo’s poems after his death: Okigbo’s former wife, Sesi; the Okigbo family, represented most often by his brother Pius; or the Mbari Club, represented by J. P. Clark. “It became impossible to get agreement during the civil war as to whether the royalties should be paid to [Okigbo’s] daughter through the Mbari Club in the West or
through Pius Okigbo in the East” (CO, 218). HEB also debated whether or not to include Path of Thunder alongside Labyrinths, eventually doing so despite the objections of Okigbo’s protegé Sunday Anozie, who felt that the poet had wished Labyrinths to stand on its own. Finally, in September 1971, Labyrinths with Path of Thunder appeared as No. 62 in the African Writers Series. The texts for the Path of Thunder poems in this edition were taken from Black Orpheus, but the HEB editors omitted the notations of location and date (e.g., “Ibadan, May 1966”). They also changed what had been the Black Orpheus editors’ overarching title for Okigbo’s and Saro-Wiwa’s sequences – Poems Prophecying War – into a subtitle for Path of Thunder. The result is to abstract Okigbo’s poems from the specific political context of the January coup so that they might be about Nigeria at any time leading up the civil war – or indeed, about a number of postcolonial African states facing political violence. The back cover copy of Labyrinths with Path of Thunder fineses the question of how to describe the war by stating simply that Okigbo “died on the Nsukka battlefront in 1967.”

As HEB was bringing into being Okigbo’s posthumous textual persona, poems by Achebe and Soyinka solidified his reputation as the central poet of the Mbari generation – and represented his death as a sign of what had gone wrong with modernization in Africa. During the civil war, Achebe turned to writing poetry. That turn was partly pragmatic; he only had time for writing tasks that did not demand the extended dedication of a novel. But he had other reasons, as well. In 1969, with the conflict still ongoing, he told interviewers at the University of Texas at Austin, “I do a lot of writing, but not fiction, something more concrete, more directly related to what’s going on.” Whereas poetry is often seen as less “directly related” to the social world than fiction or drama, especially in their more realist modes, Achebe valued the poet’s capacity to respond in pointed fashion to recent events. One of those events was Okigbo’s death. According to Achebe’s dating, he wrote the poem “Mango Seedling” in 1968 at Aba in Biafra. In 1969, it appeared in the New York Review of Books within an article by Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Biafra Revisited.” O’Brien, an Irish statesman and writer, described his recent visit to Biafra and his support for its survival, calling it “the clearest case of a country where Africans, and only Africans, are in charge.” Achebe’s poem, dedicated in the NYRB “To the memory of Christopher Okigbo,” dramatizes Biafra’s struggle against the odds in a parable of Okigbo’s life.

The poem tells the story of a plant that the poet has seen growing on a ledge or roof:
Through glass window pane
Up a modern office block
I saw, two floors below, on wide-jutting
Concrete canopy a mango seedling newly sprouted
Purple, two-leafed, standing on its burst
Black yolk.

While the syntax is not perfectly clear, the poet appears to be a few floors up inside the building, so that he can only watch the seedling’s struggle outside through “glass window pane.” Given the dedication, it is hard not to read the seedling as Okigbo, whom the poet witnessed

Poised in courageous impartiality
Between the primordial quarrel of Earth
And Sky striving bravely to sink roots
Into objectivity, mid-air in stone.

Trapped on the “rainswept sarcophagus” (a word with ramifications in Okigbo’s *Limits*, where the poet-protagonist finds himself “ON AN empty sarcophagus / hewn out of alabaster”), the seedling “went from purple to sickly green / Before it died.” With the history of *mbari* in mind, “the primordial quarrel of Earth / And Sky” recalls the struggle between Ala the earth goddess and Amadioha the sky god, the latter sometimes associated with colonial incursion. The seedling seems to be “striving” to remain true to Ala while suspended in Amadioha’s domain. Crucially, the setting for this “quarrel” is a “modern office block.” Even as Achebe-the-poet translates his friend into the natural world, as elegies are wont to do, the poet remains within a structure built of the same concrete elements that threaten the seedling. The office block makes possible new forms of socialization and of work, but Achebe suggests that the drive for modernization that it signifies has also prevented Okigbo from flourishing.

The breakdown of Nigeria had led Achebe and Okigbo to conceive of publics for Citadel Books at both subnational and transnational levels before the war; the circulation of “Mango Seedling” indicates the multiple publics that Achebe’s poetry addressed during and just after the war. That Achebe placed the poem in a prominent American periodical signals the importance of the American public for Biafran writers who could not publish in federal Nigeria and remained critical of the British government for providing military aid to the federal side. Immediately after the war, Achebe decided to help to rebuild indigenous publishing by placing his collection of war poetry with the new
Enugu-based firm of Arthur Nwankwo and Samuel Ifejika known as Nwankwo-Ifejika or Nwamife (later re-born as Fourth Dimension, the publisher of the bolekaja critics’ Toward the Decolonization of African Literature). Achebe’s poems appeared in 1971 as Beware, Soul Brother, and Other Poems. In 1972, an expanded, reorganized, and revised collection was published by HEB as Beware, Soul Brother: Poems, No. 120 in the African Writers Series. Although the text of “Mango Seedling” remains unchanged between the 1971 and 1972 editions, a small change in the paratext registers the different publics that each edition convokes: the poem “dedicated to the memory of Christopher Okigbo” in 1971 is “dedicated to the memory of the poet, Christopher Okigbo” in 1972, suggesting that the African Writers Series aimed to reach at least some readers unfamiliar with Okigbo.\textsuperscript{111} In 1972, the Nigerian edition of Achebe’s book became one of two inaugural winners of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the “first book of poetry” (excluding translation) by a writer from the Commonwealth outside of Britain, making it of interest to readers of English-language poetry around the world – and making it epitomize Commonwealth literature. (Initially on the list of books nominated for the same prize, Okigbo’s Labyrinths was later crossed off as the judges realized that he had already published books with Mbari.)\textsuperscript{112} Finally, Achebe’s poems returned to the United States in an American edition titled Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems. Memorializing his friend, representing wartime Biafra, and addressing postwar Nigeria – these were fairly local engagements, but they also played to audiences far beyond West Africa, with Achebe’s authority to speak so widely derived in part from his firsthand experience with Biafra and his authority to speak closer to home derived in part from his international prestige.

Soyinka, incarcerated for most of the war, joined the chorus of poets commemorating Okigbo with the London publication of his second poetry collection in 1972. Biodun Jeyifo calls A Shuttle in the Crypt at once “Soyinka’s most accomplished collection of poetry” and the “volume of poems containing Soyinka’s bleakest poetic vision.”\textsuperscript{113} This bleak vision memorably crystallizes in the volume’s final poem, “For Christopher Okigbo,” an elegy offering the pessimistic consolation that for Okigbo to have died prematurely is “kinder” – the word echoes in the poem five times – than for him to have lived through disillusion with the war and the postcolony. Rather than trying to resuscitate Okigbo poetically, Soyinka lays him to rest in rhymed tetrameter couplets that aspire to a greater stateliness than does Achebe’s free verse:
Soyinka presents Okigbo’s death as an alternative to him becoming a postcolonial Prometheus. It is better, the poem’s persona argues, that “torch-bearers” such as Okigbo should die and be picked clean by vultures than face the living death of a daily visit by “eagles” eating their “live entrails.” Okigbo may be a torch-bearer because he has stolen the divine fire of poetry from the gods, but the torch also has a sociopolitical referent in the “last lighted torch of the century” threatened by “the secret thing in its heaving” at the end of Okigbo’s own “Come Thunder” (7; 66). Okigbo fought for a progressive politics, Soyinka’s poem implies, before he himself became a “burnt offering on the heights.”155 (What precisely makes it progressive is left implicit.) Soyinka and other survivors of the war remain bound, by implication, like Prometheus. Soyinka does not mention Biafra, which he supported only insofar as he opposed the federal military government, but the remainder of Soyinka’s career might be thought of as carrying forward Okigbo’s torch, honoring the late poet through the living writer’s “unique combination of aesthetic innovativeness and political radicalism.”156 With the consolidation of military rule after the civil war, Soyinka’s— and Achebe’s— energies would increasingly turn from building an African-directed “modern” public sphere to critiquing the government of the postcolony.

The war effected changes both in the cultural institutions undergirding Nigerian literature and in how writers thought about the publics they solicited through their literary work. Even so, it is at best a partial truth that political conflict shifted Okigbo himself from alienated cosmopolitan to authentic nativist. Okigbo’s work was primarily circulated by African-based institutions from the start— one reason, perhaps, for his relatively low profile in the European and North American academy today. While anthologized in Modern Poetry from Africa and invited to perform in London at the Commonwealth Poetry Today festival, Okigbo achieved his reputation by publishing poetry in print venues produced in Africa, albeit funded more often than not by the Congress for Cultural Freedom: The Horn, Transition magazine, the art-books of Mbari Publications, and, of course, Black Orpheus.
The stance to be discerned from Okigbo’s final work is not, I contend, a refutation of transnational resources in favor of the indigenous but rather an affirmation that such resources were compatible with more consciously indigenized literary techniques and more local control in publishing. He redirected his political aspirations from the national project of Nigeria to that of Biafra, his publishing operations from Ibadan to Enugu. Yet he continued to fashion poetry – and fashion himself – out of a unique conjuncture of classical, modernist, Yoruba, Igbo, and jazz aesthetics with the English language and print medium, making the contradictions of life as an avowedly modern African writer into an enabling condition for his remarkable work.

The reasons behind Okigbo’s decision to take up arms and seemingly court his premature death have been much debated, beginning with Ali Mazrui’s 1971 novel *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* and continuing to Internet discussions today. To his evident outrage at the killing of Easterners in 1966 and his dedication to the ideal of a Biafran republic must be added an imaginative, even aesthetic, rationale. More than one critic has found in his poems a “fascination with death.” This poetic fascination was compounded, according to his biographer, by a personal fascination with the wartime death of García Lorca and the possibility of “intense experience” to feed his poetry (*CO*, 265). It is worth noting, too, that Okigbo died in a campaign to retake the university town, Nsukka, where five years earlier he had worked to build up the university’s collection as its first librarian. He is reported to have been especially incensed by news that federal soldiers had burned and destroyed books when they first overran the town, news that led him to repeat the refrain “vandals at the gate . . . at the tower” (*CO*, 265). Okigbo’s commitment to books is clear across his career, from his service as librarian at Nsukka, when the young Sunday Anozie met him surrounded by papers and books, to his founding of Citadel Books, not to mention the slim poetry volumes for which he is remembered. Even as Okigbo’s choice to take up arms was overdetermined both by political conditions and by the example of martyr-poets, it may be that he was also fighting for an ideal of how to be modern, an ideal that would keep print literature at the center of Africans’ efforts to determine their future.

**Chapter 3**

2. In what follows, I use the language of a literary “generation” advisedly. This biological metaphor implies kinship among these writers and linear descent from literary precursors in a way that obscures the realities of the literary field’s contested processes (the welding together of these writers by an institution of higher education and a club), as well as their coexistence and competition with older anglophone Nigerian writers. This “generation” is, moreover, conspicuously male. What Biodun Jeyifo calls the “highly gendered postcolonial national-masculine tradition of the patrimonial ‘big man’” has tended to occlude the presence at University College, Ibadan, of talented female writers such as Minji Karibo (later Ateli) and Mabel Aig-Imoukhuede (later Segun) (Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, xx). The latter was a founding member of the Mbari Club, according to Gene Ulansky, “Mbari – The Missing Link,” *Phylon* 26, no. 3 (1965): 252. My thanks to Claire Seiler for making clear to me the implications of “generation” as a term for literary periodization. Harry Garuba offers further analysis of the term’s instability in “The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-Figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry,” *English in Africa* 32, no. 1 (May 2005): 52.
3. Philip Zachernuk usefully delineates three main strata of the Nigerian intelligentsia during this period in *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 133–40. As university graduates who did not hail from old elite families, the Mbari writers fit best in the middle of this schema.
can the meanings of printedness be shared” (Paper Knowledge, 9)? While appreciating Gitelman’s caution, I emphasize a significant overlap in the “meanings” ascribed to print by Nigerians educated under colonialism.


12. See, for instance, Fraser, West African Poetry, 87–89, 96–137; and Ramazani, A Transnational Poetics, 95–115.


16. Fraser, *Book History through Postcolonial Eyes*, 50 (cf. 82).


21. Critic, “‘Heavensgate’ Is Exciting,” Newscuttings, Box 24, Folder 8, TCC, HRC.


as “that phenomenon of European aggressive self-propagation worldwide described so well by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto.*” On “the language of modernity,” I follow Frederick Cooper, who in turn takes a leaf from James Ferguson’s *Expectations of Modernity* (Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 146).


34. Ibid., 20, 21, 28.


36. Ibid., 85.


38. Okigbo to Philip Harris, July 6, 1961, Okigbo Papers, Brussels. His letter of employment stated, “As the Press’ representative you will use your best endeavours to promote the sale of the Press’ publications in all parts of Nigeria, and for that purpose will personally visit university colleges, schools, teachers’ training colleges, education departments, missionary
organisations, and booksellers of good repute” (R. W. David to Okigbo, September 29, 1961, Okigbo Papers).


42. For a stylized account of his actions, see Soyinka, Ibadan, 198–362.


46. A typescript draft of “Lament of the Mariner” is dated “Ibadan, May, 1964” (Okigbo Papers).

47. At the end of the Aeneid’s fifth book, Palinurus is rendered unconscious by the god of sleep, Somnus, who then pushes him overboard to drown. In the sixth book, however, Palinurus’s shade tells Aeneas, “no god drowned me in open waters. No, the rudder / I clung to, holding us all on course—my charge— / some powerful force ripped it away by chance / and I dragged it down as I dropped headlong too.” He swims to shore but is murdered by thieves. Virgil, The Aeneid, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 2006), 180–81, 193–94. Interpreters of Virgil have variously seen this discrepancy as evidence of the poem’s unfinished state or as an alternation between levels of explanation, perhaps ironizing Palinurus’s lack of insight into the divine level. See, e.g., David Quint, Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 87.


49. Okigbo wrote that “Lament of the Drums” was “inspired . . . by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo and the tragic death of his eldest son” (Labyrinths with Path of Thunder, xii). Yet Okigbo also told an interviewer that “later the theme grew in me,” and the mariner became “a vegetation God – Tammuz,” evoked in the latter sections of the poem (Pieterse and Duerden, African Writers Talking, 146).
51. Fraser, West African Poetry, 125.
52. Mentioning Victorian instantiations of this tradition, Phiroze Vasunia also points out that anti-imperialist British writers sometimes invoked the history of the Roman Empire as a cautionary tale. “Greater Rome and Greater Britain,” in Classics and Colonialism, ed. Barbara Goff (London: Duckworth, 2005), 38–64.
54. Pieterse and Duerden, African Writers Talking, 36, 49.
55. My thanks to Emily Greenwood for a conversation about Virgil and Okigbo that undergirds this reading of “Lament of the Drums.” Although Modupe Olaogun makes no reference to Obafemi and Segun Awolowo, she does note that “[t]he major part of Palinurus’s and Tammuz’s identity is that their death constituted an aperture for society’s new beginning” (“Graphology and Meaning,” 125).
56. Essays by J. P. Clark and Chinua Achebe followed Bhêly-Quénum’s, making for a strong presence of the Mbari generation in this issue.
57. For Black Orpheus Okigbo substantially revised the poem’s first section, but the third section in which Palinurus appears remained nearly the same as in Transition. See Black Orpheus, no. 17 (June 1965): 13–17.
58. Okigbo, Labyrinths with Path of Thunder, xiv.
59. The African Writers Series started with a paperback edition of Things Fall Apart and involved Achebe as editorial advisor for its first decade. It has been seen both as a metropolitan profiteer exerting undue influence over African writing and as a pioneering partnership among African writers, African editors, and metropolitan publishing resources. See, for instance, the critique of Camille Lizarríbar, “Something Else Will Stand Beside It: The African Writers Series and the Development of African Literature” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1998) and the positive account of James Currey in Africa Writes Back. Measured evaluations can be found in Low, Publishing the Postcolonial, 58–92; and Kalliney, Commonwealth of Letters, 178–217. On Okigbo’s submission to Faber, see Okigbo to Dennis Duerden, January 14, 1966, Box 17, TCC, HRC.
60. This political alignment did not last: when Awolowo was released from prison by the military government of Yakubu Gowon, he joined the Federal Executive Council as commissioner for finance, putting him on the opposite side of the civil war from Okigbo and Achebe.

62. “Obituary,” Black Orpheus 2, no. 1 (February 1968): 4. Okigbo left a copy of Path of Thunder with J. P. Clark and/or Aig Higo before leaving for the east (Wren, Those Magical Years, 111; Benson, Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa, 72).

63. Okigbo Papers.


65. Okigbo to Dennis Duerden, n.d., Box 17, TCC, HRC. Amidst this political ferment, Okigbo neglected his duties for Cambridge University Press, which then threatened to withhold his salary (Joan Bunting to Okigbo, January 27, 1966, Okigbo Papers).


69. Obumselu, “Christopher Okigbo,” 70.

70. Black Orpheus 2, no. 1 (February 1968): 8; Okigbo, Labyrinths with Path of Thunder, 67. Subsequent in-text citations for Path of Thunder refer to the Black Orpheus and Labyrinths versions, respectively.


76. Culler, Theory of the Lyric, 216.
77. Okeke-Agulu, Postcolonial Modernism, 271. For more on Okigbo and the figure of the àbíkú or ògbánje, see the Conclusion.


79. Ekwensi’s novel was first published in London by Andrew Dakers in 1954 and revised for publication in Heinemann’s African Writers Series in 1963.


83. Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Chinua Achebe, 123.


85. Okigbo to Dennis Duerden, May 29, 1967, Box 17, TCC, HRC; Citadel Books Limited minutes, April 2, 1967, Okigbo Papers. Okigbo also had plans to publish poetry including Gabriel Okara’s, critical work including Ben Obumselu’s, and Ifeajuna’s account of the 1966 coup (cf. CO, 237).

86. The story Iroaganachi submitted was entitled How the Dog Was Domesticated (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Chinua Achebe, 125). I am grateful to Marah Gubar for pointing out to me that the new title was likely meant to play off that of Kipling’s well-known story, “How the Leopard Got His Spots.”


88. Achebe, Morning Yet, 28.

89. Ramazani, A Transnational Poetics, 130.

90. Achebe, There Was a Country, 177.


94. A contemporary of Clark and Okigbo at University College, Ibadan, Higo had replaced D. O. Fagunwa at Heinemann after earning an MA from Leeds
under the supervision of A. Norman Jeffares (Currey, *Africa Writes Back*, xvi).


96. For an overview of the strains in their relationships, see Maja-Pearce, *A Peculiar Tragedy*, 35–45.


98. Clark and Saro-Wiwa were both part of a group in Lagos that lobbied the federal government for a separate Rivers State in order to counter what they saw as Igbo political domination of Niger Delta peoples. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On A Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Saros, 1989), 147.


102. Ulli Beier to Keith Sambrook, November 2, and December 8, 1968, HEB 25/7: Nsukka – an anthology, Heinemann Educational Archives, University of Reading, Special Collections (hereafter abbreviated as HEB Archives).

103. Higo to Keith Sambrook and James Currey, March 26, 1969, HEB 25/7, HEB Archives.


105. I have found no evidence in the Okigbo Papers that the phrase Poems *Propheseyng War* originated with Okigbo.


