

# ACHEBE AND FRIENDS AT UMUAHIA

## The Making of a Literary Elite

by Terri Ochiagha

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Reviewed by: Olatoun Williams



For her towering achievement “Achebe & Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite”, Terri Ochiagha won the ASAUK Fage & Oliver Prize in 2016. I can think of no better book to introduce the 3rd and 4th generation of African writers – than this great work. Achebe & Friends will remain - I am sure - the definitive biography of 5 distinguished 1st generation writers whose secondary school education took place in the 1940s at Government College Umuahia, South East Nigeria. The school motto: In Unum Luceant. Chinua Achebe, Chukwuemeka Ike, Elechi Amadi, Chike Momah and the irrepressible Christopher Okigbo, are our school boys, the “shining ones” – who grew up to become literary giants, straddling their own peculiar universe at a magical time in Nigerian history and it is on their shoulders that our 21st century literary icons stand.

Without a doubt, this is a scholarly monograph, but Ochiagha establishes intimacy with the reader and her subject quickly. It is her voice we hear as she narrates in the 1st person, walking us through what is not only an historian’s journey but a personal one to chart the individual and collective pilgrimage of 5 Nigerian boys through and beyond their colonial British education. I say personal because Ochiagha, of mixed race parentage, is frank about her indebtedness to 4 of these writers for the “nurturance and solace” their literature provided her “at pivotal moments” in her own “travails at the crossroads of cultures.”

The greater part of Achebe & Friends is devoted to their school days at GCU where in academic and sporting prowess the boys were unmatched. The book progresses into the boys’ years at University College Ibadan where their conquests continue unabated, and advances into an adulthood defined by national and global success. This literary opus is a beautifully lit retrospective, gently disquieting -a stained glass window pieced together meticulously and lovingly from information sourced in literary and historical archives; from photos, school annuals and periodicals; from mementoes sent to her by the authors, and from interviews with them. From conversations with their children, conversations with the children of school principals long deceased, and with teachers. Ochiagha spoke with many of their school friends and publishers also played a role in sharing memories and memorabilia. And later still there were discussions with and photographs sent by historian, Ed Emeka Keazor. Her research is breath taking in scope and detail. 216 pages of erudition

burning with a spirit of quest which ennobles them and a spirit of romance which uplifts the reader and which elicited in me, at moments, frissons of wonder and nostalgia. To classify Ochiagha's opus as an academic work would be to miss a far greater point: *Achebe & Friends* is a great love story.



L - R: Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe, Alex Ajayi



L - R: JP Clark, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka



Chinua Achebe

Terri Ochiagha has written out of admiration and gratitude for the legacies of 5 men of letters who respected and loved one another and who as courageous school boys experienced an evolving commitment to liberate themselves from the tyranny of colonial indoctrination not with weapons of hate but with their pens and their brains. That they were able to do this must be attributed in no small measure to the abundant resources of Government College Umuahia where a succession of principals expressed a deep love and a clear vision for the school, and a sincere conviction about the boys' intellectual capacities. Where, using the arsenal of a remarkably well-stocked library and a Text Book Act, educators waged war against excessive "book work" and promoted wide and recreational reading. They molded the boys' minds with a no-nonsense approach to the use of English and with curricula distinguished as much by their high quality as by their imperial bias. Just 2 of the teachers who adopted imaginative pedagogical approaches were Charles Low, 'Mad Low', renowned for his "triumvirate" of disciplines: cricket, classics and literary creativity; and Nigerian, Saburi Biobaku, the Oxford graduate who liked to flick an imaginary lock of hair and yet dreamt of the restoration of indigenous cultures to their rightful place. We get to spend time with an extraordinary array of educators to whose passion the years between 1940 – 1950 owe their fame as the "magical years" during which GCU evolved into a "literary oasis" -hotbed of writing and editorial talent.

Cultural attitudes at the school also attract Ochiagha's piercing gaze as she crafts her retrospective of the boys' pilgrimage. She is particularly interested in the cultural attitudes of school principals which range from Fisher's paternalistic permission of "cultural alloyage" to Simpson's vision of the school as "The Eton of the East" with "Englishness at its core"; to the frank dismissal by Toll-free and Slater of all that was indigenous in the colony. Ochiagha shows us how these attitudes served as powerful catalysts, producing in the schoolboys a counterforce of ethnic pride and increasing national consciousness which they expressed in subtle acts of subversion of imperial authority. The most "aesthetic" and symbolic act of subversion being the one performed by Chike Momah's fictional student, Obidike, a "thinly veiled" Christopher Okigbo" in his book, "The Shining Ones":

Obidike's brilliant performance on the cricket pitch combined with his dismissal of the conventional rules of the game produce "gasps of wonder and disbelief" in the spectators watching him reinvent it - as though the very English game of cricket did not belong to the English; as though he, Obidike, had seized it, colonised it; and made it his own.

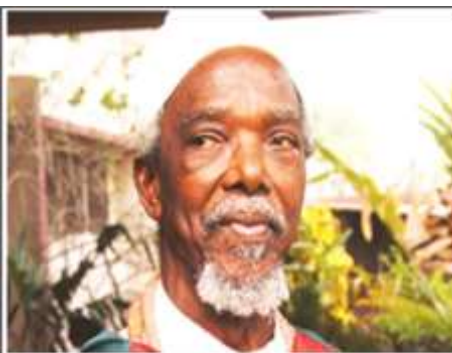
Government College Umuahia was located in the backwaters of South East Nigeria, “far from the madding crowds” of cities like Lagos where journalist turned politician Nnamdi Azikiwe bellowed nationalist propaganda through the foghorn of the West African Pilot. It wasn’t the legend of Azikiwe – though it had reached them - but imperialist forces dominating the “bush” enclave of GCU that made the schoolboys angry enough to begin in their minds the deconstruction of the “colonial hegemonic discourse” with its “epistemic violence”. This work to “deconstruct” would come in later years to define their individual and collective literary production. The pen is mightier than the sword.



*Chike Momah*



*Elechi Amadi*



*Professor Chukwuemeka Ike*

Our protagonists would grow to see themselves as prodigals returning home - not with the intention of glorifying pre-colonial history but to introduce a new discourse with which to heal themselves of the “psychic wounds” inflicted by imperial education. What they sought to do through their writing was to move beyond the “psycho-cultural anguish” they experienced in the “liminal place” they were forced to inhabit. This perilous place, in which warring cultures met, was the wilderness the young men were committed to forge through. Through their literature, they would forge an honest and realistic path of thought that would lead them and their brethren into a modern Africa. An Africa that would pay homage to what was their own by heritage; an Africa which would evolve to meet the demands of the times.

To communicate this vision, our novelists would learn to function as teachers. Christopher Okigbo and Elechi Amadi despite themselves, would come to embrace the didactic mission of their friends Chinua Achebe and Chukwuemeka Ike. Without exception, the men were honest, recognizing that their discourses were best served using resources and mental tools acquired from varied sources in their home cultures and in their very English formal education.

The urgency of Terri Ochiagha’s desire to see the world break out of its prison of binaries: Africa/Europe, black/white, coloniser/colonised, this culture / that culture – reverberates throughout her history of 5 beautiful souls growing up and breaking out of those very binaries in a cry for freedom in an expanding 3rd space – full of light and permission to be what they had become, and were becoming: enriched human beings, great Nigerians and citizens of the world.

They were products of a school which in the first half of the 20th century ranked in Nigeria as Primus Inter Pares- First among equals. Christopher Okigbo, poet turned soldier, died with characteristic drama, at the war front of Biafra. He was in his 30s. He was so young. Chinua Achebe lived into ripe old age but has since passed to Glory. Of our 5 protagonists, only Chukwuemeka Ike, Chike Momah and Elechi Amadi, venerable old men, are still here.

For the important task of documenting sovereign Africa's struggle to liberate herself from whatever shackles remain and from whatever fetters she acquires as she modernizes and globalizes, the baton has passed to the new voices crying in the 21st century wilderness of Africa's hopes, Africa's doubts and her uncertainty.



*Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe*



*Ken Saro Wiwa*

## Author's Biography



*Terri Ochiagha*

Terri Ochiagha is of bi-racial parentage with a Spanish mother and Nigerian father. She holds one of the prestigious British Academy Newton International Fellowships (2014 – 2016) hosted by the School of English, University of Sussex. To conduct preliminary research for the book, the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies awarded her the Patricia Shaw Research Prize.

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*Reviewer, Olatoun Williams*