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INTERVIEW

A CONVERSATION WITH AN AFRICAN LITERARY ICON, GABRIEL OKARA*

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Ogbowei: **Introduction:** We have with us Dr. Gabriel ImomotimiGbaingbain Okara; our literary icon, our living legend, the man for whom ANA [Association of Nigerian Authors] would be gathering on the 6th of July to celebrate longevity and creativity. Pa Okara turned 91 on 24th April, 2012. We are here to interact with the sage, to ask a few questions, probably 10, 11 or 12 questions. We won't want to . . . over-stretch him. He had a session with us in the morning;; he graciously gave us time at the church to play the piano for us . . . . Daddy . . . you already know Dr. Sunny Abraye, he is a pastor and staff of NDU [Niger Delta University]; you have Stephen Bernard, a doctoral student and also staff of NDU in the Department of English and Literary Studies; and, of course, my humble self, EbinyoOgbowei.

Dr. Abraye, like you know, is the chairman of the Okara @91 Organising Committee. He is the one . . . driving the bus. We are here to interview you . . . . This interview might be a chapter in a festschrift. We want to get as much information as we can. Whatever we don't have, may b, you can't remember, we can fill up with permission—we'll call you again on phone to fill up the gaps. So you won't be tired hearing from us, and, of course I would also not shy away from calling your daughter, Timi, to also supply some missing links, so that we can have as much details as possible. Having said that, sir; let me hand over

to Stephen to fire the first question because he is the man who has drawn up most of the questions for this interview.

STEPHEN: Thank you, sir.

OKARA: Thank you.

STEPHEN: I'll like to begin by, first, referring to your awards. You've been very successful by all standards. In 1952, your story, "Iconoclast" won the first prize of the British Council Short Story Competition. In 1953, "The Call of the (River) Nun" won the Nigerian Festival of Arts Prize for Literature. In 1979, "The Fisherman's Invocation" won the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry. And, of course in 2005, you—together with Ezenwa-Oheato—won the NLNG Nigerian Prize for Literature. Now, the question is: What really makes your works so special that virtually every major work you have produced, has won an award?

OKARA: Well . . . I . . . I don't know. But what . . . er . . . I try to do is, in my writings, I like to be myself. I think what I write is a projection of myself, my attitude, my thinking and so forth. Since I'm physically and otherwise different from others, so are my works, since they are a reflection of me, they become unique, and different. I think that makes the difference. And as I said before, I try to be myself. And I try to express what I think about any subject, any theme, any aspect of life. I think that makes the difference.

STEPHEN: Yes, now what most writers say about what they write is, they try to distinguish between the craft and the message, that is, the form and content. When you write, what do you privilege? Is it the form or the content?

OKARA: I think it's the content …

STEPHEN: That is, the message.

OKARA: The content; yes the content. The form is just like the dressing you have on now, just a dressing up. But the content I think is the message.

STEPHEN: So, you emphasize the message.

OKARA: Yes.

STEPHEN: But if we take that as your priority, then we have to go back to *The Voice* you wrote and published in 1964. Now, that novel has been criticized from various perspectives. And one thing we have realized is that you experimented linguistically, by imposing Izon syntax unto English. And that made a wonderful experiment. And so one would like to ask: was that a deliberate attempt or was it just an accident?

OKARA: No, it was a deliberate attempt to express my message again, and I allowed the message to control what you call the form. And in my writing, I discovered that when you write, what you write out of experience, your cultural experience, and when you want to express this in another language that developed from a foreign culture, part of the message is lost. It would certainly be lost. So what I did with *The Voice* was that I tried to write as closely as possible to the Ijaw context that I thought would bring my message clearer to those who care to read between the lines, sort of, and not just the change in the syntax, the word order and so forth, which I tried to write as closely as possible to the Ijaw syntax, and qualifying adjectives and so forth, names and things like that.

Now, in that book when an Ijaw man says . . . someone is not brave, is a weak fellow, now [it will be] *eriteme fa e-e*.

That means he has no shadow . . . (general laughter). Now a person who has no shadow is not alive. You don't have shadow, you are not alive. You are dead. That brings out the facts or the Ijaw point of view that traditionally you have to work hard to survive. You must be strong. You see, these are the things you have to read behind these expressions, which of course sounded or looked very strange, sometimes even quaint, to those who are not acquainted with our Ijaw culture. So, what I was trying to do is to both bring out our own culture, how we view things, our philosophy.

Now, if I want to use British English or English English, I'll say, "This fellow, you are not strong, you're weak. Why are you afraid?" . . . That doesn't to us mean anything deeper than seeing a weak person, who's not strong, who's weak and probably very fearful or so. So what I tried to do was to bring out our own concepts of a weak person: the concept of a person who doesn't want to work hard for his daily bread; somebody who is weak and afraid. And we say if you are afraid and so you have no shadow. Another way of saying it is you have no chest: *agbobufa e-e*. If you don't have chest, again you are not living. So that's the Ijaw concept of somebody who is weak, who is timid. And that's what I tried to do.

OGBOWEI: Very well, Sir. Following from this, can we say then that *The Voice* itself is immersed in the ethnic philosophy, and the Izon concept of the world?

OKARA: Yes, you can say that.

OGBOWEI: And drawing from that, then the concept of Izon values?

OKARA: Yes, that's what I tried to do as I said before. Ijaw values, our culture, that's what I try to bring out, you know.

OGBOWEI: So, would you then say that the primary audience of *The Voice* is the Izon public, the Izon nation?

OKARA: Enh … yes, that may be right, but I didn't think of that . . . the Ijaw as the primary or the target audience. Just as English . . . English is for the whole wide world. . . .So writing in the way I did is to bring out the Ijaw culture. So let the whole world know our own concept of life, our own concept of living day-to-day in the present . . . eh . . . the current happenings in the world. That's the way we think. So that it is intended not only for the Ijaw audience, but for a world-wide audience.

OGBOWEI: Yes, because, why I'm saying this is that except you are able to penetrate the linguistic universe of *The Voice*; its ethnic philosophy, its concept of man and the universe, you are likely to miss the central message, which in fact is what has happened to most critics. I give you one example. You use the anti-hero, he is called Izongo. Now, if you do some linguistic analysis, you have "Izon" + "go" (study Izon). Of course, Izongo is bastardizing the entire Izon concept of man and world—polluting, corrupting the Izon society. Now, you say Izongo, Izon study, which is what Okolo is doing. Okolo is studying. Izongo is bastarding. Put in the other way, "Izon" + "ngo", if you do deletion . . . if you join it to make one name, one "n" must go. So it becomes "Izongo," that is "the poverty of Izon," . . . I have done a little bit of study of *TheVoice* . . . and a non-native speaker cannot get these concepts. Look at "Amatu": "the end of the town or the town that is last or the town that is at the end of the world," as it were. Amatu and the Izon world that you capture here, the Izon world as we see it today, because of bad leadership; isn't Amatu symbolic?

OKARA: Well, em . . . as I said before, I wrote as I felt, as I saw things at the time then, the contemporary time then, and also the future. And I felt as I said before, that the best way to do this, to fully express my own ideas clearly is to use the Ijaw language. But

I'm not really literate in Ijaw language and most readers are not literate. So the best thing was for me to write in the way I did, try to express my views, my concepts or Ijaw concepts in a language which I could use better than Ijaw language to express these views so that any serious reader . . ., to tickle the sensitivity and the desire to know; to tickle his ability to find out, to make him curious. It is for the serious reader to do that, and I think I've succeeded in making people think, trying to know why he has written in this way. What was the reason, and they begin to make some research and by that way I'm also expressing, popularizing sort of, make people to study our own Ijaw concepts.

ABRAYE: Sir, is there any relationship between the Ijaw belief that they are the bearers of truth? This is because originally the Ijaw man believes he is a truthful person. Has this anything to do with your main character in *The Voice*?

OKARA: Yes, of course. We are the bearers or the banner of truth. That's what I think. And, that was what . . . I said again . . . when people ask me about the truth. You see, the name, the cripple Ukule, was the bearer of the truth for the future, even though Okolo died in that whirlpool. The truth didn't die. It survived Okolo.

OGBOWEI: Can we come back to this now? Why a lame man in a world where you have able-bodied people? Why a lame man, because I'm beginning to see some symbolic meaning. And being a prophetic novel as it were . . . don't you see that in the Izon world as we see it today, the bearers of the truth are not full-bodied people? If Ukule, a lame man would be the future bearer of the truth . . . doesn't this show that the Izon man cannot stand for the truth today, with corruption all over the place?

OTOBOTEKERE [interrupts; the interview took place in the home of His Royal Highness ChristianAtaniOkpofaaOtobotekere, the

Amananaowei of Tombia, an established poet himself]: Listen . . . in his time at Bomoundi, there was a lame man, a very wise man. . . . I saw him. A lame man, wise, a tailor in Bomoundi . . . so it resembles . . .

STEPHEN: Okay sir, could you respond to Ogbowei's question: why give the truth to a lame man to bear?

OKARA: Well, eh. I did that because he's less . . . influenced by . . . his contemporary society, the changes taking place. He's more reserved, he keeps secrets and because of that in most cases he is the reservoir of the history of the settlement, the history of the people, of the town. So I felt that since he is not only wise, but also to keep secrets and tell these secrets that are appropriate, that at that time—to me—he was the best keeper of secrets and to preserve the ideals, which I thought would be better exposed for all time.

OGBOWEI: What, in your view, is the major flaw of Okolo, because from what you are saying, Okolo is not prone to keeping secrets. He is there to speak the truth and dies for speaking out. You think that is a minus?

OKARA: No, no, Okolo came out. He can move anywhere, strong, moves and people would listen to him. He can speak to crowds. But Ukule won't be able to do so. And . . . I didn't say that Okolo was incapable of keeping secrets. If he keeps secrets then the change that he wants to take place wouldn't take place. It won't happen. So he was the preacher, the person exhorting change in the society, and the Ukule man was to keep that secret to tell it to future generations. Even small children gather around him in the villages in those days, then he would tell the stories about tortoise and the rest. So Ukule was to keep this, and as I said, to keep it for the future by telling the children about the story, that to stop corruption we have to start from the nuclear family. So

that was my intention. Ukule, I mean, more or less alone, he'll be able to keep the secret until the appropriate time when he will reveal the truth, by telling the story to the children . . . , may be impacting on the attitudes of the children to grow up with that idea of an incorruptible society.

ABRAYE: Sir, as a young writer, what gave you the kick, the motivation, the drive?

OKARA: Yes, because of the things I found wrong. First of all, as I said in one interview, about how I was brought up, is to speak the truth, do the right thing all the time; be honest. These are things that were the drive. When I see the conflict in the society about these things, somehow in elevating corruption . . . promoting corruption. . . . For example, I was described as a person who doesn't want to be rich. They say, look at him, he doesn't want to be rich. See his fellow workers. So these are the driving . . . forces that made me write the novel, *The Voice*.

ABRAYE: As a follow up, Sir. After writing at that time, publishing these works was a more difficult thing than writing. So how were you able to cope with the stress of writing and being able to publish with a lean purse?

OKARA: Well, let me tell you, there is a difference between publishing at that time and now. At that time you write and then give it to a publisher. If he wants to publish, if he finds it good, you don't spend a kobo. He, the publisher, does everything because he takes it as a business. He wants to make profit. So at that time African writing was a novelty to the outside world. Not quite, probably maybe I'm wrong to say it was a novelty, but it was popular . . . people wanted African stories: African novels, African fiction, African intellectuals expressing themselves about their society, the impact of foreign culture on their own culture like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. So, publishers . . . from abroad were actually really looking for manuscripts,

African writers' manuscripts then. So I didn't publish it. The publishers in the UK said they were going to publish it and they gave me a contract, the royalties and that's all. You don't spend a Kobo. The publisher takes it as a business and so you only sign a contract about royalties and how these royalties are going to be paid and how they are going to account to you yearly about sales. So that was all. But now it is different. . . . [Someone] told me the other day, that he had to spend about three hundred thousand naira to give a publisher to publish his book. Now, how can . . . if you ask for that kind of money from me, I cannot afford it. So publishing in our time was different from publishing now.

STEPHEN: Okay, I have this question for you. You have been writing for about seventy-two years now. You started writing at the age of nineteen in 1940, according to the records, and one just wonders what gives you the greatest satisfaction. Why do you write?

OKARA: Well, you may as well ask somebody: "why do you burst out in singing? . . . why do you sing?" Singing . . . and I don't mean a dirge, but just a happy joyous sound coming from a person who's inwardly happy and joyous. Or, to sing about the conflicts … the challenges of life. The singer is expressing himself in songs and so the writer, faced with these challenges … also wants to express himself in writing, either in poetry, or prose. And so I felt these things . . . the conflicts and how the world could be a better place without these conflicts. In fact, that was the theme of my novel . . . titled *The Making of a Cynic*, which manuscript is lost. I don't know where it is.

In a world where you have to, before you take a step, you look back, left and right before you take a step. Imagine a world where everybody is suspicious of the other. So you look at the person if you are able to talk to him. You look at the person in the face whether he is telling the truth, what has he got behind his mind . . . that was the theme of my book, which I can't find

the manuscripts now. And it isn't for me to start writing all over again . . . I hope I'll find it.

STEPHEN: Now, the critic Michael Echeruo, has described your poetry as, and I quote him, "protest poetry, the poetry of frustration and even failure." Is he right?

OKARA: Well, I don't know. I can't say . . . . it's my belief that what I write . . . should I say . . . I give an example . . . the most used metaphor about the three blind men trying to describe what an elephant is. The three blind men each described the elephant according to his own concept or perception of the elephant. Although their descriptions may be different, they are describing the same thing. So I think when you write, the critics, well, your writing impacts the readers differently. . . . To me, that's a mark of genuine . . . writing, expressing oneself. Because if you describe me according to the light in which you see me; another person would do the same thing, but they are all describing, Okara—Gabriel Okara. And I think that, to me, is real expression of myself in my fiction.

OGBOWEI: Let me follow up from what he has said, the same perspective but putting it differently. There is this pessimism, and this, I don't know if I might call it cynicism also in the work. If you look at *The Voice*, if you look at *The Fisherman's Invocation*, *The Dreamer, His Vision*, you see fading visions, skeptical steps, matching masses with skeptical steps, short steps. So this pervading sense of pessimism over the years, I don't know what you can say about it. Is it fading now? Is there a hope for a better society or do you still see society the way you used to see it before or worse?

OKARA: Well . . .

OGBOWEI: Your vision of society?

OKARA: My vision stems from the leaders we had after our independence. They made many promises. As I said the water taps dried . . . water is coming, I'm going to give you water, I'm going to give you light, I'm going to give you that and so no. So it's quite the opposite of what they promised and pledged to give to the society, to make the society a better one to live in. Instead, this corruption, money, and self-enrichment . . . . You see, it's all about our leaders. Our leaders' promises of improving, making things better for people to live, improve their lives . . . they promised water, but throughout their period of service water is still dry. I mean the pumps are still dry, no water, no light. You see all these are the things that influence my speaking out. In other words, in *The Voice*, Okolo tries to express these things to the public.

STEPHEN: But you seem to have had some level of hope in the leadership of Abiola, as recorded in the lead poem in *The Dreamer, His Vision*.

OKARA: YES, because to me he was coming with a very transparent motive. As I said in the dedication I think, when he said that, "The society made me what I am today but if you make me president I'll give it back to the society." I mean that just rolled me over. So there was much hope in him.

ABRAYE: Sir, let me bring you back home to Bomoundi. There is a lot of local imagery in your writing. And I discovered that somewhere along the line, as Commissioner for Information, you resigned. Does it have anything to do with your integrity as an Izon man?

OKARA: Exactly. Now that was a shock to me. And that was the . . . it informed the theme of the book whose manuscripts I have lost, *The Making of a Cynic*. Now I trusted everybody, my workers, my secretaries, and so on. Then, the enquiries about the

Ministry's revenues…. They instituted a commission of enquiry about civil servants and everything. I was reported to that enquiry that I inflated a contract . . . Yet here was somebody, someone of whom somebody wrote that he was unemployable, he is that, he is this and so forth, that he was sacked from where he worked because of dishonesty and things like that. I called the person [and said to him], look I know you have a family. This is what people have written about you, that you are unemployable, you are disloyal, you are always trying to erode the confidence of people: you are trying to pull people down, but . . . I find you very good. I'm not holding this report against you. Please try to be what you are, I mean how you have been with me, to be good. And then it turned out that it was this person who made the report. And this contract that we are talking about, when the contractor brought his price list and so forth, I asked my secretary . . . he was my secretary . . . to go and verify this before the contract was even signed. Then he went and reported that a contract of two thousand five hundred pounds then, that I made it fourteen thousand something. And this two thousand five hundred pounds was for the contract of flooring which his in-law was given to do. And he went and reported that that was a contract for the whole building, it was for accommodation . . . . And it was this fellow that came and gave evidence that he did the whole contract and was paid two thousand five hundred. I tell you, I was petrified, dumb. They inflated the contract prize. So I was put on the dock, and I said instead of staying there . . . I know the truth will come out . . . but in the interim I better resign. So I resigned. I know the truth will come out. So after they gave their verdict and so on, I went and brought out all the documents, because at a point they didn't even allow you to submit anything, even to ask questions. Anyway later I wrote everything and gave it to the military governor. He read through and said I should go and submit it to [Justice] Alagoa. And I was exonerated.

OGBOWEI: What happened to the man?

OKARA: Ha! They asked somebody to go and take over from me and he wanted to play the same trick, because he wanted to be the secretary of the corporation . . . . He was only the administrative secretary, but he wanted to be the secretary of the—he said he had, in those days, there was the intermediate LLD—so he said he would be the secretary of the corporation, and I said no. That was all. So when my replacement went there he tried to play the same trick and he just sacked him.

ABRAYE: A follow up. Because you felt insulted, you were accused of inflating a contract sum, so you resigned. Sir, the leaders of this day, things like that continue to happen, enquiries are set up, etc. What would you advise, given that people no longer resign from office?

OKARA: Well, eh, my advice has always been: be honest, try to be good. There is innate good in persons. Not all is evil. That we should try to obey and develop that instinct for good, and that instinct for integrity, I must be myself, I must be good, I must look out for the good of others as well as my own good; that we should not put self first. There are restaurants where they say self-service. Those leaders, I am not saying all of them, but most of them practice that slogan in the restaurant: self-service. They serve themselves, instead of selfless service, which Abiola promised . . . and I believe him totally. That, we should as a slogan of this state, Bayelsa State, or Rivers State, that we should think not of what we can take from the state, but what we can give to the state. That's my advice.

OGBOWEI: What is your secret of longevity?

OKARA: Well . . .

OGBOWEI: Most of your contemporaries are gone.

STEPHEN: To follow up on that, I read from the Website of Brown University of the United States where you were described as the oldest living English language writer in Africa. That is quite an honour (general cheering and clapping). So that question is quite apt: what's the secret of your longevity?

OKARA: Well, I don't know of any secret. Try to be good. Try to open your heart, and forgive. Don't keep grudges. Try to forgive one who hurts you. Do unto others what you'll want others to unto you. And, of course, in the Bible it is said we are made in the image and likeness of God, spiritually. If so, God is never sick, and dies. If you are His image and likeness spiritually, if you keep that in your mind it will influence, have impact on your physical self. And be conscious of the fact that God is your strength. God is your life. God is your health. If God is your health, and God is your life, can one destroy God's life? No. If God is my health or your health, how can you be sick? If God is your strength, inexhaustible, you cannot deteriorate. But because of the belief of the generality of the people that we still undergo the process of disease, sickness and death.

STEPHEN: One last question. What's your advice for up-coming writers?

OKARA: Well, up-coming writers, my advice is that try to be yourself. And don't think of making money; if you take making money as your aim of writing, then you'll not succeed. Don't think of money. Just try to express yourself as you think. Don't think of what others have written about, and to write like them. You are a distinct, unique person. Therefore, your writing must be unique as yourself, because what you think, how you think, how you see things may be quite different from others. So you put down, you write according to what you feel about things, what you think about, and be yourself.