

# A Voice in the Wilderness: The Predicament of the Social Reformer in Okara's *The Voice*

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Curious parallels have been drawn between Okolo, the central character in *The Voice*, and a number of other literary characters. For instance, Sunday Anozie sees Okolo in the light of Hamlet seeking to get to the "bottom" of things, but having to run his head against the wall constituted by the usurping King Cladius.<sup>1</sup> He also identifies in *The Voice* thematic echoes from Conrad's *Victory* and claims that the tragedy of Okolo is comparable to that of Axell Heyst.<sup>2</sup> Eustace Palmer likens Okolo to Christian in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and to Man in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* because all these characters in their search for salvation "play symbolic roles, representing forces and ideas much larger than themselves." He goes further to recognize in Okolo's quest something of the search for the Holy Grail in Eliot's "The Waste Land." He then compares Okolo's persecution in Sologa with that of Clarence in Part I of Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King*, and finds in Okolo the picaresque heroic qualities of Don Quixote.<sup>3</sup> In his own study of the novel, Emmanuel Obiechina virtually makes a Christ of Okolo in an attempt to establish the presence of all the main stages of the Passion story in Okolo's life.<sup>4</sup>

Each of these parallels possesses some credibility. What they all seem to lack, however, is the insight into Okolo's mode of operation as Okara's conception of the allegory of the artist as social reformer. Adrian Roscoe comes closest to such an insight when he views Okolo as "a composite character who can be seen either as a particular individual or as representative thinking man; even, perhaps, as the artist in society."<sup>5</sup> In an interview conducted by Bernth Lindfors in 1973, Okara declares that the predicament of Okolo "was the predicament of any intellectual, young or old, who had the courage to speak up. Many of us were forced to merge with the crowd, and if one didn't do that at that time—even now, probably—well, the forces that were raised against you would submerge you just as Okolo was submerged in the river."<sup>6</sup> Given the assertion that *The Voice* is consciously written to reflect this authorial vision, it would seem that one needs to pay close attention to the symbolism of the characters and of their actions and dialogue in order to grasp fully the meaning of Okara's *Voice*. This will facilitate one's appreciation of the novelist's technique of highlighting the predicament of the social reformer in a predominantly corrupt society.

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<sup>1</sup>Sunday O. Anozie, "The Theme of Alienation and Commitment in Okara's *The Voice*," *The Bulletin of the Association for African Literature in English*, No. 3 (Nov. 1965), 54-55.

<sup>2</sup>Anozie, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Eustace Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 157-58.

<sup>4</sup>Emmanuel Obiechina, "Art and Artifice in Okara's *The Voice*," *Okike*, 1, No. 3 (Sept. 1972), 23-33.

<sup>5</sup>Adrian Roscoe, *Mother Is Gold: A Study of West African Literature* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1971), p. 113.

<sup>6</sup>Gabriel Okara, Interviewed by Bernth Lindfors, *Dem-Say: Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers*. Occasional Publications, No. 9 (1974), p. 43.

It is common knowledge that Okolo in Ijaw means "the voice"; but in the world of Okara's novel, it is a voice in the wilderness, the voice of wisdom and of meaningful dissent which is heard by no one except Tuere, the alleged witch, the Ukule, the cripple, both of whom are themselves symbolic extensions of Okolo's identity and predicament in Amatu. Obiechina argues that "*The Voice* is perhaps the sublimation in prose fiction of Okara's poetic visions of his mission through literary creativeness, to reform and purify society."<sup>7</sup> But he sees Okolo more as a poet-reformer than as a Promethean political revolutionary. This is the type of insight that eludes Anozie when he concludes that the "failure of Okara's *The Voice* as an African novel is a failure, on the novelist's part, in art and vision."<sup>8</sup>

Okolo, no doubt, is the summation of the bits and pieces of the alienated personae of Okara's poems; he is, indeed, a transformation of these poetic identities into an almost mystic and visionary "voice" calling out to mankind, but falling on deaf ears. But, contrary to Anozie's contention, Okolo does not emerge as a man of two cultures—the traditional African, and the Western European—who, like the persona in Okara's "Piano and Drums," "is equally lost in the 'labyrinth' and 'complexities' of their musical artefact."<sup>9</sup> We cannot even identify the "central dilemma" of Okolo, if any, as "how to strike a balance between what *is* and what *ought to be*."<sup>10</sup> One would have thought that Okolo is obsessed with the call from his "inside" to transform what *is* (the social and spiritual decadence in his society) into what *ought to be* (moral rectitude which he calls "the straight thing"), and *not* with the mission of striking a balance between the two. The mode of conflict which Anozie's argument suggests has no place in the novel. To identify the predicament of Okolo with culture conflict, as the critic has done, is to misunderstand Okolo's "inside" voice and its function in the novel. The critic's allegation of Okara's poverty of art and vision would seem to be an unfair devaluation of the novelist's skill in creating a highly symbolic character who represents an ideal. This ideal is attainable, but the people of Amatu and Sologa are too preoccupied with their search for the "shadow-devouring trinity of gold, iron, concrete"<sup>11</sup> to bother themselves with the quest for *it*.

The prevalent pattern of social behavior in Amatu fosters a system of government run by traditional elders. In his examination of symbolic persons in primitive societies, F. W. Dillistone regards "elders" as "the obvious links with tradition. They are familiar with the legends which tell of the words and deeds of ancestors, they can transmit the myths which tell of the origins of natural phenomena; in short they carry authority simply because of their age and experience. The whole of existence is viewed as a continuous growth rooted in the past and stretching on into the future and the canons of behavior are always derived from the past."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Obiechina, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup>Anozie, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup>Anozie, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup>Anozie, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup>Gabriel Okara, *The Voice* (London: Heinemann, A. W. S., 1970; orig. publ. by André Deutsch, 1964), p. 89. All quotations and page references are taken from the A. W. S. edition.

<sup>12</sup>F. W. Dillistone, *Christianity and Symbolism* (London: Collins, 1955), p. 107.

In the world of *The Voice*, however, Dillistone's observation applies only in part. The society constituted by Amatu and Sologa is neither primitive nor preliterate, though Amatu continues to be ruled by the Elders under the dictatorial leadership of Chief Izongo. The values in the society have severed the "present" from the "past," and the canons of behavior obviously are no longer derived from the past. It is clear that the moral decay that plagues the society is attributable to the negative influences of modernism and its misplaced values; and Okara's novel is a sad comment on this social ill. Okolo's father was aware of this phenomenal social problem in his lifetime. Accordingly, on his deathbed, he had admonished his son:

"I could have been a big man be," his father had whispered with his last voice, holding Okolo's hand, "if the straight thing I had not spoken, if the straight thing I had not done. But I have a sweet inside and clean as the eye of the sky. The world is changing and engine canoes and whiteman's houses have everybody's inside filled. But open your ears and listen, son. Let the words I am going to speak remain in your inside. I wanted you to know book because of the changing world. But whiteman's book is not everything. Now listen, son, believe in what you believe. Argue with no one about whiteman's god and Woyengi, our goddess. What your inside tells you to believe, you believe and, always the straight thing do and the straight thing talk and your spoken words will have power and you will live in this world even when you are dead. So do not anything fear if it is the straight thing you are doing or talking." (pp. 105-06)

This exhortation, more than anything else in the novel, explains Okolo's obsessive search for "the straight thing" which is missing in everybody else's life in Amatu and Sologa. Okolo's father's dying words have stuck to his "inside" and have fortified him against the swift currents of corruption sweeping through the society.

With his late father's "teaching words" molding his pattern of behavior, Okolo single-handedly embarks upon the arduous task of social reform. His uncompromising vision of man, of life, and of an ideal society free from corrosive materialism and spiritual degeneracy soon earns him disparaging remarks from the townspeople, as witnessed at the opening of the novel:

Some of the townsmen said Okolo's eyes were not right, his head was not correct. . . .

So the town of Amatu talked and whispered; so the world talked and whispered. Okolo had no chest, they said. His chest was not strong and he had no shadow. Everything in this world that spoiled a man's name they said of him, all because he dared to search for *it*. . . .

Okolo started his search when he came out of school and returned home to his people. When he returned home to his people, words of the coming thing, rumours of the coming thing, were in the air flying like birds, swimming like fishes in the river. But Okolo did not join them in their joy because what was there was no longer there and things had no more roots. (p. 23)

If "the coming thing" is Nigeria's political independence, as Okara reveals in the interview cited earlier,<sup>13</sup> then, the last paragraph in the above passage reminds

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<sup>13</sup>See "Interview with Gabriel Okara," *Dem-Say* (1974), p. 43.

one of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*<sup>14</sup> in which the question "What is Nigeria (1960) celebrating?" is implicitly asked. Like Soyinka who creates Aroni to jolt the rulers and the governed in pre-independence Nigeria into the realization that there is more to be sad about than to celebrate, Okara creates Okolo as the only right-thinking man in his society who is bold enough to dissociate himself from the delusive joy of "the coming thing."

From the outset, Okolo emerges as a man of strong convictions, and therefore in Ijaw mode of thinking, as a man with a "strong inside" and a very "prominent shadow," even though his people see him as being "shadowless" because he resolutely refuses to share their materialistic view of life. It is clear to both Okolo and us that Chief Izongo and his enclave of Elders and the entire village of Amatu do know of the existence of the apparently mysterious *it*, but they just do not bother themselves with its whereabouts. Okolo's realization of his people's deliberate rejection of "the straight thing" opens his eyes to the stark reality of his predicament, but he will not give up the struggle midstream.

We have to concede, according to Dillistone, that keeping the life-force of society at its maximum requires "a steady harmony between man and man within the tribe. Thus, as it has been put, it is the 'quintessence of normality' which fits a man for highest office in the tribe. The odd, the novel, the self-assertive, the emotionally unstable, are all separated and even feared."<sup>15</sup> In Amatu, Okolo is the odd, the novel, the self-assertive, but not the emotionally unstable. He is, indeed, a suffering hero, consciously created as a personified extension of Okara's own vision of his society and of life generally. This assertion is borne out by an interview conducted by John Agetua which sheds some light on the function of Okolo as a "megaphone" for Gabriel Okara's voice of dissent against the psychological enslavement of the masses by despotic and exploitative leadership. In his capacity as an artist "called upon by circumstances"<sup>16</sup> to embark upon social reform, Okara joins the rank of other African writers<sup>17</sup> who cannot reconcile themselves to the erosive pattern of behavior in their societies. None of these writers can be said to be "insane" simply because he decries social injustice, corruption, and spiritual degeneracy. Similarly, neither Okara nor his projection, Okolo, can justifiably be described as being mad. Okolo's persistent question "Have you got it?" should not mislead us into naively taking him for a mad man. This important question is a concise summation of his relentless efforts to clean the filth out of the society. Granted, as Dorothy Van Ghent asserts, a person "is sane who is socially adapted in his time and place, in tune with his culture, furnished with the mental and moral means to meet contingencies . . . accepting the values that his society accepts, and collaborating in their preservation."<sup>18</sup> But when the fabric of a society like Amatu or Sologa is made up of soul-eroding materialism virtually deified by the people, it is not madness to engage in a crusade against disgusting public ills, whatever the cost.

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<sup>14</sup>Wole Soyinka, *A Dance of the Forests* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

<sup>15</sup>F. W. Dillistone, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup>*Sunday Observer* (Nigeria), 15 Sept. 1974, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>The names that readily come to mind are Ayi Kwei Armah for *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; Soyinka for *The Interpreters*, *The Man Died* and many of his plays; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o for *Petals of Blood*; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo for *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*; and Alex la Guma and Alan Paton of South Africa.

<sup>18</sup>Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), p. 38.

In *The Voice* the characters representing these ills are Chief Izongo, Dr. Abadi, and the Elders. One of the strong points of Okara's technique which has eluded his critics lies in the ideophonic features of the names of the characters. We have seen Okolo as "the voice," as the lone voice in the wilderness, loud but unheeded. Chief Izongo's name, a contraction of *Zongologo*, suggests "the huge," "the bully." With a name like this, we are not surprised that Chief Izongo bullies practically everybody into submission. He is incisively portrayed as a leader who would do anything to resist new ideas, however progressive they are. He sees in Okolo's search for *it* a big threat to his autocratic leadership of Amatu. It is an understatement, therefore, to say that his name has been carefully chosen to fit his character and behavior.

Abadi, a corruption of *Ambadi*, means "the stomach," or "the belly," with the connotation of "the selfish" in every sense of the word. It should be noted that this is the character trait which Dr. Abadi displays in his ousting of Otutu as Izongo's right hand man (pp. 123-24). When a "deaf," "dumb," and "blind" community is led by the nose by "the bully" and "the belly," the only hope of reform lies in an uncompromising Christlike redemptive crusade, as undertaken by Okolo. Of course, Okolo has to pay the price for being a nonconformist crusader. On his way to Sologa, he has a foretaste of the persecution that awaits him at his destination: "The outboard engine-canoe [in which Okolo traveled to Sologa] laboured against the strong water of the river. It was rain's time. So the river was full up to its brim and the water's power passed power. So the outboard engine's sound was like the sound of an aeroplane as it pushed the canoe against the formidable power of the water" (p. 58). The description of the plight of the outboard engine-canoe offers an interesting parallel to Okolo's struggle against the formidable Chief Izongo and his Elders. Similarly, the storm which threatens the canoe and the lives of its passengers symbolizes the "storm" in which Okolo is soon to be caught. His innocent kind deed of providing shelter for a betrothed virgin in the stormy weather is misconstrued by the querulous prospective mother-in-law. In Sologa, the persecution continues when Okolo falls into the hands of the emissaries of the Big One. Okolo reports his unlawful detention in a room full of human skeletons to a police officer who, of course, is too frightened by the power of the Big One to help him, or even to investigate the case.

Okolo soon learns that the policeman, like the whiteman who advises him to practice moderation in his search for *it*, is not in any way different from the crowd passing him by down the streets of Sologa. Racing through his mind as he stands watching the crowd on the street are thoughts of an absurd world, with "cars honking, people shouting, people dying, women delivering, beggars begging for alms, people feasting, people crying, people laughing, politicians with grins that do not reach their insides begging for votes, priests building houses, people doubting, people marrying, people divorcing, priests turning away worshippers, people hoping, hopes breaking platelike on cement floors" (p. 78). Okolo manages to shake off this ugly vision of the world around him from his mind, and continues his search which takes him to an artist's workshop where he hopes very highly to find *it*. But he ends up being dragged away by "the tall listeners of the Big One" (p. 85) just as he is about to enter the workshop. This is a significant scene. Whether Okolo could have succeeded in finding *it* in the carver's (the creative artist's) world, or not, is hard to tell. But we may presume that since the carver prospers materially in Sologa, he is likely to be, like the people in the eating house, a log in the river that floats and goes wherever the current commands.

Unlike such "thinking-nothing" conformists, Okolo pitches himself against the force of the currents with a well-defined sense of direction, and with high hopes of success. His defiance of Chief Izongo and his confrontation of Dr. Abadi represent the enduring quality of the straight thing in the face of the pervasive crooked thing. The several "teaching words" he receives from a variety of conformists in Amatu and Sologa, urging him to abandon his search for *it* and to liberate himself from his sufferings, may be likened to the temptations of a resolved soul against earthly pleasures. But *The Voice* is far from being an allegory of the temptations of a saint, or of Christ. Okolo emerges as a Christlike figure only insofar as his mission is to redeem his fellowmen. Convinced that the honesty and meaningful pattern of behavior of the ancestors can still be recaptured if only the community will try, Okolo sets about "sweeping the dirt" and calling upon the others "to sweep the dirt out of [their] house" (p. 50). This humble and well-meaning first step toward social reform is vehemently opposed by Izongo and other Elders of the community.

The polarity between Okolo and the Elders demonstrate the dialectic of good and evil, a dialectic which transforms a particular search in a localized area into a universal quest. This quest takes on an epic quality that reminds us of the heroic quest in the traditional Classical epic. Like the grand epic "quests," in which "the finishing point is the starting point renewed and transformed by the hero's quest,"<sup>19</sup> Okolo's search begins in Amatu, and, after his brief sojourn in exile in Sologa, ends once again in Amatu, shortly before his martyric death by drowning.

The circumstances leading to the death of Okolo remind us of the crucifixion of Christ. Despite the ignominious death to which the Redeemer is subjected, his death has not been in vain. The success of his mission on earth lies in its symbolic victory over sin and death at Resurrection and the Ascension. Similarly, Okolo has been subjected to an ignominious death. In Ijaw, death by drowning is an abomination; but paradoxically, there is dignity in Okolo's death<sup>20</sup> since the manner of his death is vindictively designed by his archenemy. The success of his mission as social reformer lies in his symbolic triumph over the forces of evil, represented by Chief Izongo and Dr. Abadi. His "voice," which he has persistently planted in the minds of the people, is already beginning to sprout and to take root by the time he returns to Amatu. Further evidence of this reform may be seen in the behavior of the people which prompts Chief Izongo to pronounce Okolo's banishment and secretly to prescribe his death by drowning. We may conclude, therefore, that Okolo dies leaving behind a community in the process of social reform. He may be physically drowned, but his "voice," though muffled, has not been drowned along with him. His "voice" has begun to infuse into the people of Amatu a new life and a new awareness. It is in the "germination" of his "teaching words" in the minds of the people that his "resurrection" and "ascension" lie. By the time the novel ends, the signs are already there that the ground has begun to slide off from under Izongo's and Abadi's feet, and that Okolo's father's dying words will eventually be vindicated: ". . . always the straight thing do and the straight thing talk and your spoken words will have power and you will live in this world even when you are dead" (p. 106).

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<sup>19</sup>Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 262.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Sunday Anozie's contention that Okolo is denied the dignity and victory that attend the death of both Hamlet and Hyst, in his article, "The Theme of Alienation and Commitment in Okara's *The Voice*," p. 61.

Okolo's search for *it*, like Professor's quest for the mysterious "Word" in Soyinka's *The Road*, may not have been too clearly defined. But, at least, the meaning of *it* is allowed to evolve through the interplay of symbolic characters, symbolic action, and symbolic language, all of which emphasize the identity and the predicament of an honest individual in the midst of the corrupt and misled masses. Whatever the flaws in the narrative technique in the novel, Okara succeeds in getting his message across to his readers. Recent events in various African societies demonstrate that there are still some "Izongos" (or *Zongologos*) and "Abadis" (or *Ambadis*) who will stop at nothing to muffle the voice of legitimate dissent and to stifle the Okolos who are committed to social reform and justice. Okolo may have been drowned, and the river may be flowing "smoothly over [his dead body] as if nothing had happened,"<sup>21</sup> but his soul keeps marching on in Amatu. The Okolos in the Nigerian society may be hunted down as if by falconers, but, as the demonstrated optimism at the end of *The Voice* suggests, the struggle continues.

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<sup>21</sup>*The Voice*, p. 127.