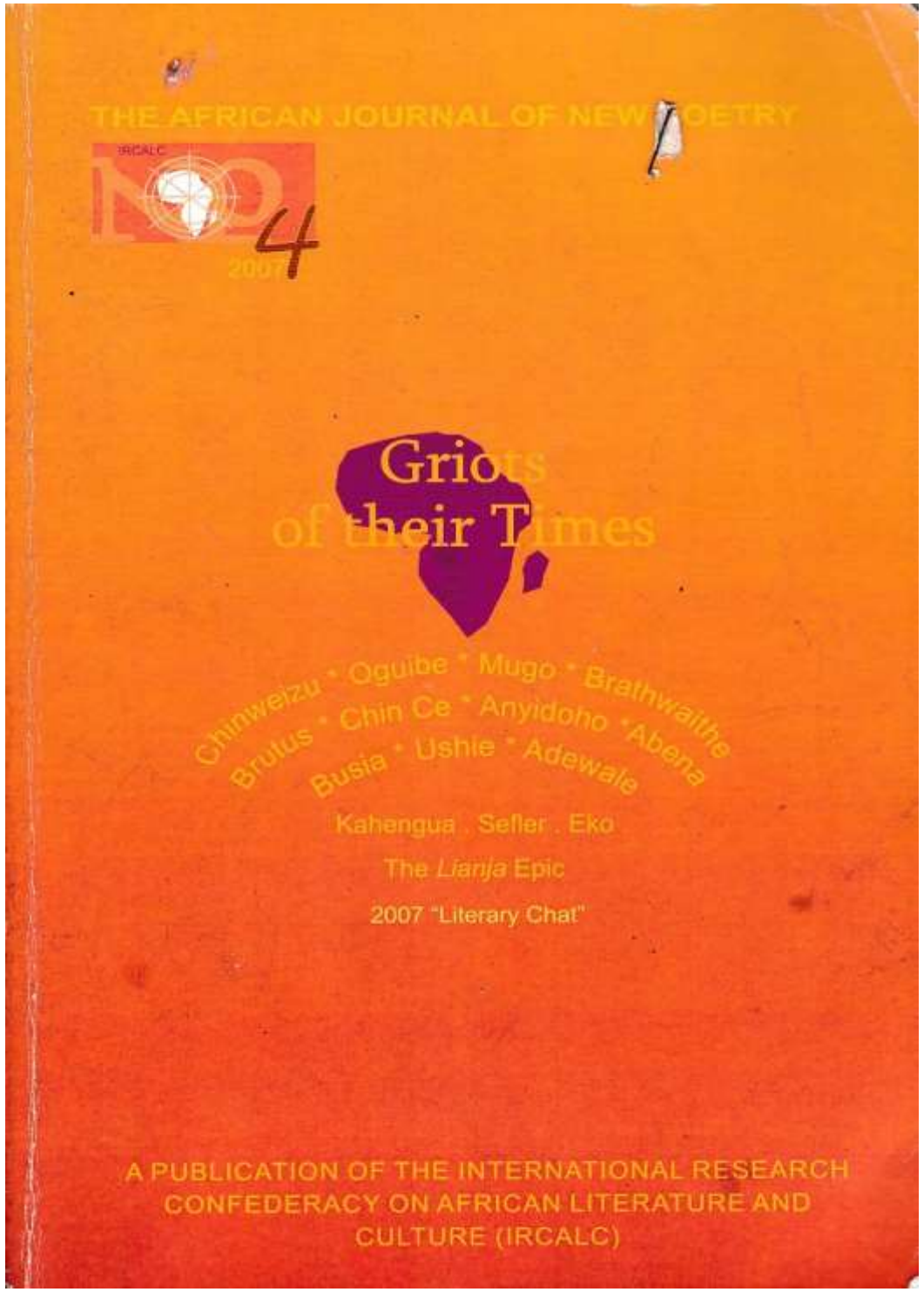

AMA AMOAH & MARK LILLET

After our 'Obliterature'

GUEST: JOE USHIE (Nigerian Poet and Scholar)

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JOSEPH Ushie was born in Bendi, Nigeria. He attended Calabar and Ibadan universities and now teaches at Uyo University near his home state in Nigeria. Ushie has written, and continues to write, several books of poetry: *Popular Stand* (1992), *Lambs at the Shrine* (1995), *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998), *Hill Songs* (2000) and *A Reign of Locusts* (2004). His oeuvres clearly belong in the literary tradition of the Calabar school that has produced many writer-scholars – Ce, Onwudinjo and Ugah inclusive – for whom the continent is the cornerstone of their creative and visionary impetus.

Ushie's poetry is replete with linguistic puns and myriad experimentations and has been praised for its wide range of metaphorical allusions. Often pitching the local environment against wider public issues and other contemporary events of his days, poetry (or what has been tagged 'obliterature') is thus his own reaction to social, political and personal experiences which, even when not directly involving him, are brought to impact profoundly on our minds because the poet is able to stake a part of himself in the lives and experiences which he describes. This alignment to the conditions of the ordinary people of his world and the trenchant interrogation of power and corruption in Africa and the world would rate him as one of the most voluble of Africa's teeming political poets.

Joe Ushie's activism is not limited to poetry and literary scholarship. At the university of Uyo where he teaches, he is a member of the executive council of the academic staff union and perhaps offers his time and energy more to this academic

pressure group than other cultural or political activities of his people.

Coming from one of the tribes called minorities of Nigeria, Ushie often laments the criminal exploitation and neglect of his people. In 2004, he was honoured by the government of his state for outstanding contribution to literature and culture.

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AA:

Welcome to the forum Joe. Anyone reading your Hill Songs *volume of poems today can see your determined veneration of the exploited of your nation (read Africa) represented in the landscape of your nativity which forms the basis of your mournful notes. But given the vibrancy of the new poetry that has emerged from parts of Africa, including my country Ghana, why is there the dearth of appreciation of these writings by local scholars as I am aware of the zeal in reception and appreciation of the recent movement by Western academics?*

USHIE:

Thank you very much, Ama, for this important question. It is necessary to understand this unpleasant development in the context of the environment in which cultural production, especially literary art, takes place in much of Africa today. Most African countries today are experiencing both neo-colonialism and post-colonialism at the same time. Post-colonialism suggests that the era of foreign domination is positively over, and from its ruins the former colonized society is picking the best from both heritage to derive an order better than what obtained in either the colonial or pre-colonial world of the colonized. Examples of this are Britain, following the chain of Roman and Norman rule; the United States, following British rule; India, Malaysia, Singapore following British domination. In all these societies, control of the economy and culture is in the hands of the former colonized. But a neo-colonial society such as Nigeria, for example, has flag independence while control over the economy remains in the

hands of either the foreign masters or some new masters. There can hardly be real growth in such countries, which enjoy only a token of political freedom while the economy is in the hands of foreign interests. As a result of this, there is hardly any deliberate policy by the neo-colonialist regimes to promote cultural production. In Africa, however, many of the cultural producers are post-colonialist in orientation. But they need a viable economy to sustain the publishing sector which would ensure the production and circulation of African books around the world. This was the case in the period before and immediately after the independence of many African countries. Remember the African Writers Series of Heinemann and the great work it did for African literature. Today there is no such outfit to ensure the production and circulation of literary works around Africa and the rest of the world. There is a kind of pariah culture in publishing which restricts the works produced in each African country to that country. I don't know the latest works from our closest fellow Anglophone West African countries, Ghana and the Gambia, for example, let alone having works by Franco-phone African writers in translation, as it used to be. These, now, are luxuries, which can only be found at international conferences and foreign bookstores. So the dearth of publishing and circulation facilities restricts readership of the output from Africa's newest generation of writers. But this is not the case either with Europe, Asia or the Americas. Indeed, within Nigeria, the works of the new writers hardly circulate effectively.

AA:

Which amazed me, reading the NNP Journal 2 *where you, one of the new Nigerian poets, so unabashedly promoted the prejudices of the old guard against the new literary movement in Nigeria in an age when the world revolution in creativity and publishing is going in the direction of clarity of expression and immediacy of communication. Were you merely trying to align your scholarship to the old fellows by repeating their prejudices or did you seem convinced that the poetry of your generation, yourself included, is so poor as to*

have merited very little attention by a literary caucus in your country who seek to demean the younger talents?

USHIE:

Let me confess that I do not understand exactly what the prejudices are.... I do not, however, believe that I listed "clarity of expression and immediacy of communication" among the 'vices' of the new voices, as suggested by your question.... I have also argued that the work of the best of these newest voices approaches that of the older generations of Nigerian writers.... I don't believe in unduly emphasizing the attitude of the older writers and critics to our output. I believe that each generation of writers should produce critics whose sensibilities, sensitivities and circumstances are shared by the authors. Don't the members of this coterie have their contemporaries who are critics? Do these new-generation critics display the kind of fidelity to their art as the older critics did? And, in any case, I must say that my own work has been most promoted by a member of the older generation than by most members of my generation.

AA:

One of the prejudices was your fellow Nigerian poet Tanure Ojaide's dismissal of your group as copycats which I do not think is the case. Anyway in the lit chat of 2005 Chin Ce made good mention of your poetry even as he too harped so much about the engagement in protest of the new Nigerian poets. What has been the general reception and criticism of your poetry from local Nigerian and African audience prior to this time?

USHIE:

I have to first commend your journal for its noble vision of focusing on the new writers. Then I must thank Chin Ce, too, for his kind comments on my humble effort. My poetry has suffered the problem of poor circulation, a problem which

affects almost all African writers of my generation. It is hardly read outside Nigeria; and even here the circulation hasn't been wonderful. However, the works have enjoyed very good reception among the few in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world who have had access to them. For instance, it has been reflected on the syllabus of the Department of English, University of New Orleans, among the very greatest poets of our world. It is being studied in one university in the Philippines. It has been translated into Italian, Spanish and, I believe, also into Finnish. In West Bengal, India, I've been told something like my name is a household word there. And, of course, in Nigeria, it is being studied, so far mainly as a part of African or Nigerian literature or poetry. There have also been some undergraduate and postgraduate works done on the poetry in many universities here and in Hungary. But I really wish the poetry were more available to my African/Nigerian audience whose woes and pains tend to dominate the themes of the writing.

MLL:

It is interesting to note your desire to see your work distributed more widely. I think in general this is a complaint - and a well-founded one - of poets and writers more generally the world over. But you also go on to note what seems to be to be a fairly generous distribution, in terms of the number of countries you know your work to be studied and circulated in. I am wondering what you would consider to be "good" distribution and what you imagine a wider distribution of your works would do. How would you imagine that would shape the readers, the literary scene - either in Nigeria or abroad - and what would be the results for you, as a writer and a person?

USHIE:

Thanks, Mark. It's possible I said "good reception" and not "good distribution". Next, I have noted your suspicion of a contradiction in what I said earlier. I can understand why you couldn't understand the point without further explanation

by me. I've had a few opportunities of travelling outside Nigeria. When I participated in the Fulbright Programme in 2002, for instance, we were 18 in all and came from 17 countries. Nearly all my fellow participants returned to their countries with copies of my works. When I went to Malaysia in 2005 as a plenary speaker at an international conference, many of the participants from different countries also bought or were given complimentary copies of the works. Many of these friends and colleagues and co-participants have been writing to give their impressions about the works. This is outside a few who stumble on the works by sheer coincidence, as Ama did, for example. Also, a few Nigerians, especially Niyi Osundare, have also gone around with the copies and shown them to the world. A poem, "Tropical Neighbours", from my third collection, *Eclipse in Rwanda*, has been on the reading list of the Department of English, University of New Orleans, for example. Stewat Brown of Birmingham University, U.K, asked for copies of my works on seeing them in Osundare's hands. He was later to reflect one of the collections tangentially in his review of Soyinka's poetry and the generations that follow. To that extent, I believe I can be right to say the works haven't done very badly. But this is no good distribution, if I must use your term now, compared to what African creative works enjoyed under the African Writers Series that Achebe founded and edited. Nor can it be compared to what some works enjoy outside Africa even today. All this boils down to the publishing climate in Nigeria, or Africa, which we've always talked about. What I'm saying is that though these works may have become known in these countries where I've had friends, the circulation could have been better if my publishers were in the position to effectively and aggressively market the works. The answer to the second flank of your question is more direct. All authors want to be read; no author is happy if not read. This seems to be true of all cultural producers. Remember the South African (singer) Yvonne Chaka Chaka's track "Thank You Mister DJ"? Similarly, reading creates room for feedback; and feedback further feeds the imagination of the serious artist. Even in African traditional society, dancers and drummers

and other performers cherished being applauded. And even if the critics were to take one's work apart, that too would be advertising the author especially when/if he/she improves in a subsequent outing. This is very necessary in our society where the writer is naturally and inevitably a historian, social critic, the conscience of the society and a voice for the voiceless. If his/her works are not read, then his/her vision must have had a stillbirth, wrapped, as Derek Walcott would describe it, in "swaddling cerements". And, finally, the by-product of good distribution is also not poisonous to a writer. This by-product is the pecuniary benefit for his/her toil. Right now, not many African writers, especially those publishing and circulating in Africa, can survive in their writing. I don't think it would hurt to reverse this trend.

AA:

In "Pendulum" from the Hill Songs *volume which seems to be the most political of your poetry, you clearly stated how your Nigerian nation is sandwiched "between the blood-sucking boots/and the sugar-tongued chameleons". This is the feeling of indeed all younger Nigerian poets of your generation. They have more than the previous poets articulated the leadership problem with such politically non-partisan objectivity that the true assessment of African problems today should include the very important contributions of these African poets to the African discourse. One tends to agree with the opinion that the new poetry should be actively promoted and studied in schools. While you wrote about "a democracy in search of democrats", is this a proposition that the democracy being practised in Africa is a sham and falls far short of the democratic standards which the US regime seems to promote all over the world.*

USHIE:

This seems a very complex question, which must be answered most cautiously. First, I agree with your position that all is not well with Africa. Next, I believe that majority of Africa's problems emanate from inept and mentally

bankrupt political leadership, a leadership that has been murderously treacherous. Indeed, apart from a few exceptions, perhaps such as we had in Congo's Patrice Lumumba, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, South Africa's Nelson Mandela, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, Ethiopia's Haille Sellaisie, Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara and few others, the rest of the leaders that have been sitting on our fragile necks since independence have been cruel and visionless walking lies and traitors to their own people. They have been our political liabilities who have often turned out to be worse than their colonial predecessors. They forbid deep thinking and are hostile to thinkers. They run their countries like farms which harvests are always taken home; and their true homes are outside their own countries, always in the West to where they flee when the people rise against them. This is true of most African leaders; but we must also resist the temptation to always use the United States as an example of the best democracy in the world. I seem to feel that there are today two United States. There is the United States which aspirations are still close to those of the founders of that great country; then there is the hunter-United States; that is, the US which is greed- and gun-governed. This one is a globally poisonous country that is turning upside down all the noble dreams of the founders of the United States. So, if you're talking of other nations copying the US democracy, I would ask, "Which of the US?" Is it the one that would apologize for the crime of the slave trade or the one that can plunder the whole world for the sake of oil? And, of course, there are very many citizens in each of these two United States. Indeed, the adherents of the old dream are far more in number, but far feebler in their voices. And these voices are almost always silenced by the might of the few super-rich. This is the virus being spread round the rest of the world today.

AA:

"The Art of the Younger Poets" by Chin Ce is the clearest and expansive articulation of the merits and aesthetics of the younger generation of poetry

emerging from the Nigerian nation. It echoes much more of what Coleridge and Wordsworth did in their "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" centuries ago. How do you see this tendency for the poet in Africa to take on the challenge of elucidating the aesthetics of their craft where traditional ivory tower critics seem to have abandoned this onus for the easier job of repeating published opinions and familiar literary canons?

USHIE:

I think this question re-echoes my response to your second question. First, we have to admit, using Nigeria as an example, that there has been something wrong with our educational system. The products of our universities in recent times have not been believers in agonizing to break new grounds. Besides, there aren't today as many altruistic critics as there were in the past. This is what has led many an African writer to be both drummer and dancer at the same time. S/he beats the drum for the dancers, and in the absence of dancers, s/he mounts the stage. This is not to say that writing and criticism are mutually exclusive intellectual activities. No. They are related; but it would still have been preferred if the critic took over from the writer, especially in discerning the stylistic predilections of a generation to which one belongs as a writer.

MLL:

This is a fascinating proposition - and an astute one - but I wonder what you mean by "altruistic critics". To my thinking, there are far too many critics willing to look only at the political merits of a work, and, as both the original question and your answer allude, critics looking to slot a poet into a particular canonical or generational tradition. To my mind, however, this is far too altruistic an approach. I personally long for a day when critics evaluate the artistic and aesthetic merits of a work and judge with a critically astute eye. This can't be arrived at on the cheap - for just as the poet needs to work through the history of the poetic form so too must the critic! - but in the process I think the critic

becomes much less generous to any particular writer and far more productive to the literary culture.

USHIE:

I agree perfectly with you, Mark, on what some of the critics do. Most critics tend to rush for the meaning based only on what one linguist has described as the tattered garments of literary criticism. I think we need to return to some level of close reading of texts before sentencing or discharging and acquitting them. This way we can reduce the tendency to smuggle a political meaning into every work, especially where that wasn't the author's destination.

AA:

Can you reconcile James Thurber's idea of "obliterature" quoted in your Lambs at the Shrine *volume as an omen on the positive or otherwise development of literary craft in Nigeria and Africa? How can* Lambs at the Shrine *or the works of members of your generation be considered "obliterature" in Thurber's sense of the word.*

USHIE:

Yes. Remember that *Lambs* was written at the peak of military dictatorship in Nigeria, in the days of the late General Sani Abacha, when it appeared as if the whole country was on the verge of obliteration. Further, education in the country had long been knifed by successive military regimes, and yet in this era most Nigerians became philosophers, economists and writers, especially poets. And, just as very fine Nigerian poets began writing at about this time, the events of the land also galvanized some into writing works of sheer naked expression of anger. In the sense of the physical threat to lives, this was an obliterational period; and in the sense of the quality of some of the works, there was also the evidence of raw yearning, evidence of desperation in the tone of the writing; evidence of haste.... And, of course, a prominent Nigerian writer

and activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, had already joined the clan of the desperadoes by being cruelly hanged on November 10, 1995. So, just like there can be no beauty in a crying mouth, there was not always artistic beauty and finesse in the literature produced at this time.

AA:

In the poem "Lambs at the Shrine" you quoted Niyi Osundare "Money is our new god..." and surmised the craze for wealth and notability and state silencing of voices of dissent as the ruin of the political units of Africa. What creative impetus do the Ingrid, Dele and Wali you mention there hold for the statement by Osundare which you cite?

USHIE:

The violent deaths of the men and woman mentioned in the poem were said to be associated with money. The late Ingrid Essien-Obot was a German woman married to a Nigerian. She was a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of Calabar while I was a student union leader then at the university. She was very concerned about the condition of the poor in Nigeria; she gave many public lectures and published many articles on this issue. As young people then, she was among the lecturers we looked up to as models. Shortly before her body was found in a pool of her own blood in her university quarters. In April 1981 or so, she had written articles that were critical of certain issues of the day. So when her body was found, we the students then boycotted her burial in protest because we felt not enough was done to bring her murderers to book. Of course, we are all familiar with the journalist, Dele Giwa, who was the first Nigerian to be killed by parcel bomb in the days of General Ibrahim Babangida. Obi Wali was said to have been betrayed to his assassins by a wife of his for a certain sum of money. Now, Ingrid had to be killed so that Nigerian looters of the treasury could be at peace. The same went for Dele Giwa, and, possibly, Wali, aside a wife's sell-out to her husband's enemies for money. This

is the connection with the quote from my teacher, friend and mentor, Niyi Osundare.

AA:

Won't your flight to Grecian myths (Prometheus, et al*) seem far-fetched and alien considering that you had the choices of comparison between Ken Saro Wiwa's fate and the fate of others either in your locale or African neighbourhood such as Okigbo of your country or Steve Biko of South Africa?*

USHIE:

This is a good question. There is no doubting the fact that we have enough heroes and martyrs in Africa to use as reference points in writing such as this. I am usually conscious of this. However, I also believe that literature is like a sea, which takes in water from many rivers, rivulets and streams. Once the water from these tributaries enters the sea or ocean, it becomes common property of all men, and all can fish in it.... In this case, I think of the image that is most apt for my immediate need. First, I explore for the African image, if it is not sufficient, I would go for an alternative. I would be concerned with the image that gives me the greatest tellability ratio, not necessarily the most African. This does not make me Eurocentric, I suppose, because I've come to know that my strength, even as a writer, is in my Africanness, and in my African indigenous language.

MLL:

Is there a line that can be drawn somewhere? Over the years, there have been numerous scraps between and among writers and critics over what constitutes properly "African" literary usage; and the borrowing of imagery, "obscure" vocabulary and references, grammatical structure, all of it have often been tagged "Eurocentric" or not African "enough". Are there writers or works that you consider "Eurocentric" in their approach? Is there some measure or usage that you feel like you can identify as "Eurocentric" on the face of it? Or do you

give everyone the benefit of the doubt and see everyone swimming in the same sea, pulling with the same strokes?

USHIE:

Realistically speaking, it is now very difficult, if not impossible to talk of undiluted African writing while we write in the English language, which primarily is a language articulating another culture. Perhaps this degree of "purity" can be attained by those writing in their African indigenous languages. And, as I said elsewhere, cultural renaissance, as most of us African writers would love to have it, cannot come in isolation from the economic well-being of the people. We've just been talking about the difficulties in getting published and circulated; this problem returns us to the publishing firms run by non-Africans whose cultures we would want to replace in our lives. Besides, cultural rebirth, as we yearn for, cannot be pursued vigorously without some financial independence which translates into some pride in the former colonised. This is not only an African problem; it is not only a modern problem. The Englishmen of the European Renaissance and the Augustan eras fought hard against the continued mix of Latin and French terms with the English language, and they referred sarcastically to these as 'Inkhorn terms'. This is just a fact of life in every situation where two languages and civilisations have been in contact for a considerable period of time. And in most cases it is the colonised that always borrows from the coloniser. We can therefore work towards moulting these foreign elements from our writing; but it must only be gradual; and it must grow along with our growth and developments in other spheres of life, especially the economic aspect of our existence as a people.

AA:

There is the opinion which I have formed that Hill Songs *is a better work than* Lambs. *What do you have to say in opposition or agreement to this proposition and would you agree that the writer's craft improves or diminishes with practice*

time, specifically in your case as have been sometimes maintained by critics?

USHIE:

Sorry I can't agree or disagree with you on the question of whether *Hill Songs* or *Lambs* is better. But I can agree with you that, from my personal experience, the writer's craft improves with time if s/he doesn't easily become conceited and knows there is always room for improvement. But some writers easily become victims of praise and then drop. It all depends on the writer.

AA:

What is your relationship with the contemporary poets of your country such as Chin Ce, Adewale and others? Specifically, apart from a forum such as IRCALC's are there other forums of interaction, meeting, or channels of communication by which you promote the movement of cultural reappraisal and criticism imminent in your craft and imposed on the artist by destiny?

USHIE:

I would say I have a very cordial relationship with most members of the new coterie of Nigerian writers. I am yet to meet with Chin Ce in flesh. I really haven't had the opportunity to read much of him. There is the Association of Nigerian Authors, for instance, but I am not exhaustively regular at its annual conventions. I have also been much into the activities of another professional union, the Academic Staff Union of Universities, and its activities have been tapping from the little pool of time I can have left after my teaching assignments. Generally, the channels have been few, I must say.

AA:

So generally you find yourself isolated from most other writers of your generation as the economic downturn also affects your ability to read and appreciate one other. Is that what you are saying?

USHIE:

To a great extent, yes. But I should explain this a little more. Nigerians have generally allowed themselves to be infected by the division foisted on them by the country's self-centered political class. But there had been some healthier degree of harmony among its men of letters. Some had often quarrelled or disagreed, but these disagreements were not necessarily dictated by ethnic lines. This goes especially for the earlier generations. Sadly, I'm beginning to notice the emergence of certain ugly lines such that when a particular writer is being celebrated, one finds a dominance of members of the celebrant's ethnic group even as some of these writers are themselves evidently de-ethnicised. Perhaps this trend had begun longer ago than one could notice. I have often wondered to myself if Ken Saro-Wiwa's works were actually accorded the critical attention they deserved before he was hanged. I have sometimes felt that it was his death - and the way the death came - that begot the attention his works now enjoy. It was not so before he was murdered. People then thought of him more as an activist and environmentalist than as a writer even as he had been the president of the Association of Nigerian Authors. And he had himself been a columnist for some Nigerian newspapers. I come from the same minority axis as Ken, and I am somewhat removed from the hub of Nigeria's media. Perhaps, too, I am not really a regular at ANA annual conventions, not out of spite, though. If my works were published by an outfit that would undertake to circulate them as it was when the economy was better, one would have certainly been read by far more Nigerians and Africans than has been the case.

MLL:

Do you feel this lack of connection with other poets to be something you wished for, in terms of your creative work, or do you feel yourself more of a solitary poet, perhaps even preferring to write in something like isolation?

USHIE:

Certainly not. And, perhaps I should stress that the lack of connection is not total. It's only that I feel my connectedness to other co-wayfarers in this word-juggling business isn't adequate. I actually do write in isolation, as most writers do. But I always love to show the outcome to the next person for his/her comments. Sometimes my students read and make comments. Sometimes I give to colleagues. I don't think it's accurate to see one who does this as a lover of solitary existence. I think it has more to do with the geographical location of Uyo, where my University is. This is on the southern-most tip of the country while the country's media houses and media men and media activities are centered around the western axis. Even then, many of my contemporaries still know me; and many have read my works without ever meeting me in flesh. Chin Ce is one such example. I also did exchange notes and works with the late Ezenwa Ohaeto, but we never really met in flesh until he died. And, of course, two of my works, *Eclipse in Rwanda* and *Hill Songs*, have made the ANA Prize final list on two different occasions. So I wouldn't think I'm that unknown or unconnected to my comrades.

AA:

What and who have been your motivating influences as a poet operating in the Nigerian and West African cultural environment?

USHIE:

This is one question I'm usually most uncomfortable with because the motivating influences have been very many. The first has been the environment of my birth. Singing has been a common trait among many members of my family. This has somewhat helped me. The next has been the criminal neglect of the people of my society by the thieving ogres in power. Sometimes I'm forced to reconsider the atrocious impressions the white man has painted of the African, and see if these are not true, after all. Normally, people who have

survived certain acts of injustice come out to fight those acts of injustice frontally and decidedly. But in my country, we have had a man who was unjustly imprisoned, who was on the verge of being murdered in prison, who survived it all in a most fortuitous manner, who emerged from the prison onto the highest office in the land, but who left unhealable wounds on the citizens and sank into dictatorial tendencies that would make his own jailer something of a saint. How do you reconcile this, especially when this same man thinks the nation's clock will stop if he ceases to direct its affairs? And, funny enough, this same man has still been seeing himself as the champion of democracy, as a saviour of the people, many of whom have been sent to their early graves by hunger or some more of his anti-people policies. Things such as this inspire creative writing. Then, of course, I have had the luck of passing through great teachers and writers. There were many at the earlier levels of my education; but at the tertiary level, I have been lucky to pass through the tutelage of names like Ime Ikiddeh, Nana Wilson-Tagoe, Craig Tapping, the late James Koffi Agovi, Niyi Osundare, Ebele Eko, Isidore Okpewho, Ernest Emenyonu, Biodun Adetugbo, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Eileen Sweeney, and quite many others. These have been great influences in me. In addition, Osundare's preference of the poetry of my generation as the subject of my doctoral work has helped tremendously. Some of these works also became a source of influence on me.

AA:

The Calabar school, for example, is said to have cultivated the early oeuvres of some of your generation's writers. Coming from the same environment, do you consider yourself as part of this literary epoch in Calabar that gives so much credit to Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o for its original vision and inspiration?*

*See Lit Chat: "Critics of the New Poetry" Ed. GMT Emezue *New Nigerian Poetry Journal* NNP (No. 2) 2005.

USHIE:

Certainly yes. Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o surely influenced us much in Calabar; but I don't think they were the only ones. There had been the annual international conference, the well-known International Conference on African Literature and the English Language (ICALEL), which Ernest Emenyonu established in the early 1980s and which is alive till date. This brought to Calabar many African writers including Elechi Amadi, John Munonye (now late), Cyprain Ekwensi, Isidore Okpewho, Bessie Head (late) of South Africa, and I think Dennis Brutus as well. There were also the critics - Charles Nnolim, Chinweizu (and his colleagues who wrote *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*). We also had Buchi Emecheta as writer-in-residence. The presence of these writers and critics also influenced us in addition to Achebe and Ngugi. Of course, I must pay special tribute to the late Bate Besong. We were contemporaries at Calabar although he was in the final year when I was in the first; but his coming out in the final year with his first published poetry collection, *Polyphemus Detainee and Other Skulls*, was a positive influence on those of us coming behind him. There was also in his year Emmanuel Annametemfiok, the late Ishola Dina, Francis Mendie Archibong, all of who published their first poetry collections while still undergraduates. To this extent, I can say that I drew a lot of inspiration from the Calabar environment.

AA:

In A Reign of Locusts, *you started with a quotation from* A Raisin in the Sun *which grimly foreshadows, in 1959 when the work was published, the political brigandage by crooks and thieves and plain idiots under the new nation states of Africa. Similarly in his book* Black Man's Burden, *Davidson also delineates Africa's disappointments with the nation-states and blames colonial British tampering with indigenous cultural and political formations. Would you advocate that restructuring the nation states along pre-colonial federated*

systems might be the panacea to recurrent indices of state economic, social and political bankruptcy in Africa which have so engaged the poets of your generation?

USHIE:

In a very general sense, yes. Re-structuring would help; but this is mainly because of the failure of our politicians to think altruistically. Actually, not all nations that have succeeded today are mono-ethnic, monolingual or even mono-racial. The United States is not. Malaysia is not. Yet these have overcome most of the problems facing Africa today. But in the light of our peculiar experiences as Africans, we may go for re-structuring, provided that such will guarantee that under certain conditions, one state or region or even country may be authorized to intervene in the affairs of another similar political unit. This is because of the fear of new oppressive forces emerging, which would continue to destroy opposition and be anti-people, just as dictators have emerged in supposed independent African states, and have been abusing the concept of sovereignty while suffocating their own people. In short, yes, we need to re-structure; but we must do this most carefully and cautiously so that we do not end up creating new pockets of *murderdoms* as replacements for the failed kingdoms.

AA:

So what do you recommend as a "careful" or "cautious" restructuring that addresses the fear of "new oppressive forces emerging" meaning the domination by any ethnic group over your own in such an event?

USHIE:

We need a real sovereign national conference which would re-define our understanding of federalism. The states need more independence from the

central or federal government, for example. They should be allowed to control most of the resources in their territories. Luckily, no part of Nigeria is without material resources. Each state should then be made to pay taxes to the federal government as agreed, for the running of the entire country. This would make for healthy competition among the federating units while co-operation among them would also be promoted in an atmosphere devoid of the fear of domination and cheating. Beyond this, the ethnic groups structure should be considered in the re-structuring such that none would oppress the other. Each such group should enjoy some relative autonomy.

AA:

Your "Night Still" holds the warning that public optimism with the end of the eight-year-long tyranny of General Abacha and the progress to a new democratic era that ushered in General Obasanjo in 1999 is merely wishful thinking because the same basic structure of oppression of citizens by nation state and exploitation of people's resources will continue unabated. The poem 'May 29, 1999' by Chin Ce had expressed the same sense of foreboding. Do you feel justified by currents events in the Nigerian political scene with the coming to an end of that government on such a bitter note of disappointment for the Nigerian masses?

USHIE:

Ama, my brother, Nigeria and Ghana, your home country, are like twins. We in Nigeria know what is happening in Ghana and we believe Ghanaians are aware of much of what goes on in Nigeria. So, you must know the answer to this question. I am glad, however, that you turned our attention to this poem. At the risk of appearing immodest, any Nigerian who reads these lines today will tell you they were most prophetic, considering what we are going through, except that the poem understated the gravity of the decay and disillusionment. Your question makes me love the lines the more. Thank you.

AA:

Writers in Nigeria have little to commend Nigerian leaderships. Wole Soyinka derides Obasanjo as a person of great inferiority complex. Your references to his reign in "Night Still' underscore the same lack of belief in his regime "Four seasons after the long night/And O, it's night still?" And in "Homage to the Dragon" your vision of ex head of state Babangida seeking to return to power comes out as "a circle /of transitions from whose rings Dele Giwa's loose limbs hang". It does seem as if Nigerian poets and writers castigate the different regimes of their countries in a manner that creates the impression of utter chaos and confusion in the polity. Non Africans are often tempted to wonder if this a realistic portrayal of the depth of the national malaise.

USHIE:

Nigerian writers are quite conscious of what's going on in their world. They try to condemn it; but the atrocities, the real concrete atrocities disgrace any combination of words aimed at describing them. Sometimes I've wondered what else there is to write. The events in Nigeria are making a reality of the Magical reality, such that it is difficult for the writer to invent any likely impossibility for the reader, for the polity. Indeed, the literature now happens on the streets daily. So, rather than talking about exaggeration, we do actually under-state what we see daily, what we hear daily, what we experience daily, and our weeping daily. That is just the truth. And it is because Nigerians can put up with all this and still be able to smile rather commit suicide that some organization declared us the happiest people in the world some few years ago. It was their own way of marvelling at how we can still construct smiles for our lips in the face of all these impossible conditions.

AA:

So you are saying that the conditions that your nation's literati do highlight are

actually understatements of the reality on the ground.

USHIE:

Yes. Or have you had a situation elsewhere in which a few persons come together to steal a whole nation? This is what is being rounded off now in Nigeria now. Quietly and almost noiselessly, the big shots have stolen our country while we clap for them. Almost every venture previously established with public funds has been 'bought' over by these few persons in the name of 'reforms' that are completely deforming the nation. And where do these few persons get the money with which they are buying off these utilities? From the same government treasury! As a result of the scandalous 'privatisation', unemployment is rising with the usual consequences for security to life and property. Schools and universities have continued in decay on account of the imported poisonous formulae from international finance institutions and western governments. Indeed, our leaders have simply been shopping for fresh re-colonisers, going by their complete dependence on foreign countries for solutions to the simplest of our problems.

MLL:

Does this in any way ever compel you to wonder what it is you are doing writing? Or is your writing - perhaps but a poor facsimile of the literature of the street - simply your own constructed smile?

USHIE:

Writing, for me, is cathartic. It is even therapeutic in the sense that it provides me the basket - not a waste basket, perhaps - into which I empty the murderous and treacherous emptiness of the street. It may not be a poor facsimile of the literature of the street because we don't normally empty the raw emptiness of the street onto the prostrate page. We refine it, we try to give it some meaning,

to adorn the chaos in some fine garment of words and sounds so that it doesn't appear rude and nauseating to the eye just about to perch on it. But in trying to dress the rot of the street in such fine cloak, we try to represent some degree of the unpleasant odour, some measure of the rough edges of the street on the printed page so that the text does not betray the conditions that gave birth to it; so that we retain the umbilical cord between the text and the physical world that shaped it, that it should represent.

AA:

I read somewhere in Comparative Studies in African Dirge Poetry, *where Emezue describes Nigerian poets as mourners and dirge singers. This reminds me of your poem "If I Weep" in A Reign where the poet persona confesses melancholy for the "crookedness of our compass" and "ruins of puffing glamour" all which showcase the concern for Nigeria as big for nothing African country. How has the attitude of mourning and lamentation affected the quality and craft of your poetry in the last decades of your writing?*

USHIE:

First, as I said earlier, my family has produced quite a number of singers. My father's late younger brother, Ashiwhobe, was the greatest singer I have ever known. His favourite terrain was funeral songs. But his funeral songs were not always praise songs. They were songs that praised virtue and condemned vice. And if a man died in dishonourable circumstances, the dead would be pilloried at his funeral by our mourner-singers. I do know and can sing quite a good number of our songs. And if the relatives of a noble person failed to give their deceased member an honourable burial, they would be disgraced in song. Coming from this background, I find poetry in English a continuation of this role of the song as a form of social criticism. That is why our people say that there can hardly be beauty in the mouth of a mourner. Even if he is crying over the virtues of the loved one, there can't be beauty in his mouth; and if he is

condemning failure in his song, there still cannot be beauty in his mouth. When some literate members of my community read my poetry, they often remark that I am the heir to my late Uncle in songs. Perhaps this is the connection.

AA:

Does this lack of beauty in the mouth of a mourner affect the quality of his artistic effort; does it constrain it, or lead to the danger of a stereotype as Chin Ce himself warns in the last Lit Chat forum?

USHIE:

Yes, it does sometimes affect it. I have to qualify the statement because it is not with every crying mouth that the outcome is ugly. Some are self-stampeded into writing even as they haven't quite mastered the rubrics. It may constrain the writing in that what comes out onto the page short-changes what's on the writer's mind. Secondly, the absence of admirable expression is capable of insulting the appetite of some readers.

MLL:

Yet at the same time there are poets -and I am thinking of Niyi Osundare in particular here- who recognize no less the plight of the great majority of Nigerians, and who echo this in their songs, and also produce ebullient, erotic, and truly marvellous - and in this I mean verse to marvel at - poetry.

USHIE:

I don't think I ever intended to imply that poetry, or African poetry, is exclusively about criticism or crying or weeping. I'm sorry if my statements inadvertently conduced to that kind of impression. No. I think we've been talking in general terms; that is, in terms of the dominant issues. But this irony is also true: the harsher the conditions in the poet's world, the deeper his/her work is likely to be. And, erotic poetry in this kind of environment becomes such a rarity that

attracts the attention that an only boy or girl enjoys in a family dominated by the opposite sex.

AA:

Joe, would you describe yourself as Marxist revolutionary using poetry as your own contribution towards the liberation of the masses from economic servitude? Your poems "Mobile Caskets" and "Song of a thief" and "Homo Sappers" are full of the revolutionary impulse that identifies and lampoons the class who rise through the sweat and labour of the masses to their cocoon of "sweatless skins" and their "executhief" caskets. If the case, how far has revolutionary rhetoric of "universal brotherhood of pain and suffering" gone in addressing the fundamental problem of African backwardness in the 21st century?

USHIE:

Marxist revolutionary? Not sure. I respect Karl Marx and love his ideas; but I don't subscribe to the idea that Africa must always borrow ideologies from outside to capture their peculiar African experience. An ideology, I believe, should not picked and then have a people's way of life patterned according to it. No. People should first live; then their natural way of living should be studied and described. This can then be named. It would fit their way of living, and it would be easy for them to live and do business according to its tenets because these would be natural to them. But if you import an ideology because it resembles how you live or want to live, there may arise the difficulty of making the people to adjust their ways to its precepts and tenets. I write the way I feel in order to feel relieved. I would not quarrel with anyone who calls me a Marxist or anarchist writer because there is enough in my land of birth to make me an anarchist or Marxist or something worse. But I do not begin from these ideologies when I write. Nigeria, for example, has enough for there not to be

any poor person in the land; but you can also find the poorest man on earth in this same land. This is a place where only those without the time or literacy to read can afford to buy newspapers and own good television sets, while those able and hungry to read or listen to the news can hardly afford these modern means of communication. How do you live in this kind of a place as a thinking being and not lament if you're lucky to have your sanity intact?

MLL:

Your notion of tenets for living emerging from a "natural way of living" is an intriguing one. It is, writ large, the object of the anthropological endeavour. Yet it is also, on the face of it, no less idealistic (in the philosophical sense) than the Marxist perspective. For one thing, in this world we live in, amongst these enmeshed networks of commerce, art, and exchange in which we've always been entwined, what is a "natural way of living"? What is "natural" - the implication of your desire being that it is something apart from a life prescribed by ideology. And yet even if we teased out the tenet of a well-lived life from something that was "natural" how would "do[ing] business according to its tenets" be any less prescriptive? Doesn't any sort of formulation of a lived life not freeze that life in a particular moment and, in some respects, stunt its growth?

USHIE:

I think you might need to read my poem "-isms", in the *Lambs at the Shrine* collection. That's where I have tried to say that I don't subscribe to -isms. I still stand by that view. And all I meant to convey is that I am not a Marxist revolutionary as it was suggested, and that I do not believe in, nor subscribe to the borrowing of ideologies. People can go on living according to certain needs: the need to provide for the hungry in their world, to clothe the ungirded and to shelter the shelterless. Once this is done by us as human beings, it is ideology

enough. This, I suppose, is what the poem I've just referred to tries to argue. But where or if it becomes compulsory for anyone to clothe his/her world's lifeways in an ideology, such an ideology should be autochthonous. I don't think this means that I am asserting any particular ideology -either an existing or new one- as a person.

AA:

One is struck by the creativeness with which you manipulate words and coin new meanings. Osundare seems to be the first to have coined the word "compagriots" while you have given it added impetus in your poetry (referring to fellow poets and creative artistes committed to the chronicle of their heroic progress towards national liberation). One also encounters other words like "softitutes" "hewman' and "hewmanity" "liprousine" (A Reign) "thieftancy", "hurry cain" "Ah-men" and "high-bernate" among others. Would these indicate that the English language is often inadequate to convey the circumstantial and indigenous experience of the non-native user in his local environment? Would writing in your mother tongue have provided a better lexicon to that which the language of English offers?

USHIE:

Thank you, Ama, for observing these devices. You're indeed a very keen reader. However, I think the question of creativity can be universal. Remember e. e. cummings, T. S. Elliot and a host of others who had English as their mother tongue, yet they still often resorted to devices of this kind? Sadly, I speak a Nigerian language known as Bette-Bendi, which is a combination of two closely related dialects, and I come from a place that is humorously believed to be where the biblical Tower of Babel was. It is in this environment that we have a small community, Ubang, where men and women speak different dialects. We were all in one local government until the late 1990s when the two were

separated. Bette-Bendi is a language of minority speakers even among Nigeria's other languages of minority speakers. There is no orthography for the language as of now. I cannot really write in it, though I certainly know and speak it better than I do English. And, above all, it helps my writing in English a lot.

AA:

Writing comes with its price in modern Nigeria and Africa especially for those on the left of the African ideological divide. What has been your experience living and working as a writer and teacher in Nigerian university? Have there been instances where your opinions and works generate the kind of heat that leads to victimization and attacks for which the continent has been notorious for since the so called era of black rule?

USHIE:

Yes and no. I have often received warnings for my writings. Some of these have even come from friends and relatives. But I have not yet been privileged to be arrested on account of this, nor have I had the luck of being imprisoned. I use these terms because arrests and imprisonment have come to serve as yardsticks for measuring a writer's degree of commitment in Nigeria. But I have been on very long suspension from my duties as a lecturer on account of my activities as a member of the patriotic Academic Staff Union of Universities. At the moment, there has been a change in the administration of the University, and the new team is, thus far, union-friendly and seems to be aligning its visions and activities with those of our union, while still obeying its authorities in Abuja. But then, it is just natural, and was always expected.

MLL:

I read a certain ironic edge in your note on the arrests and imprisonment being the yardstick by which commitment is measured. It is easy for those outside Nigeria, and from outside the continent, to look at such abuses as somehow a

measure of the wo/man. But do Nigerians, all too familiar with the often random brutality of successive regimes, really see it as any sort of reliable yardstick? And does the Nigerian literary community - or the public in general - measure the writer against such scales?

USHIE:

I only tried to paint the situation in its extreme colours. There truly have been all kinds of anti-intellectual, anti-writers brutality and oppression and repression in Africa generally. Remember there is now the new genre in African literature known as prison writing. The Malawian Jack Mapanje has done a beautiful book on this. The book is a collection of short stories, poems or excerpts from longer accounts of Africans' prison experiences. Most of these former prisoners have been writers. So, all I meant to say was that the society here has become so bad that not to be harassed, imprisoned or even murdered tends to suggest that either one is one with the state or is negligently silent as a writer. This expression was meant to emphasize the state of the anti-intellectual oppression here and not to be taken on its face value or literal sense. Again, this isn't the first time or place where this kind of attitude is obtaining. It obtained among many of the English Romantic writers, who believed that the world was so wicked that only the wicked and evil men could survive comfortably in it. They then believed it was fashionable for the good people to live fast and die young.

AA:

If Hill Songs *is a better work than* Lambs, *then* A Reign of Locusts *may certainly rate the best of your collections. When should we expect more poetry or any other genres of creative writing from your pen going back the tenet that a writer's craft appears to mature with the passage of time and the sharpening of his vision in the unfolding sequence of events?*