

Book Review

Charles Nwadike, Molinta Enendu & Canice Nwosu (eds.),
*Metaphors and Climax: Reminiscences on the Drama and Theatre of
Ogonna Agu*. London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd., 2014. 290 pp.
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Sola Adeyemi
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Fifty years ago, in the Bight of Biafra, anger and love created rivulets of blood that coloured the landscape of Igboland crimson and changed the concept of Nigeria as a nation. The Nigeria–Biafra War (also described as the Nigerian Civil War) of 6 July 1967 – 15 January 1970 was significant in Africa for the unfair political negotiations that started – and ended – it, as well as the allegations of genocide and failure of integration of Biafrans into the Nigerian polity after the war. The war also generated unprecedented media attention, dwarfing other conflicts, such as the war in Egypt, occurring around the same time. When the conflict began, the ‘police action’ quickly escalated to war with no formally identified front, involving many factions, including the Third Force, mercenaries and incidental soldier-journalists. It ended in a negotiated peace more noted for confusion and suppression than integration and progress, and for the erosion of cultural and literary heritage. Nonetheless, one of the most important outcomes of the conflict has been the cultural shift in literary production, and leading the vanguard of the new playwrights, with work that poignantly queries the illusions of the war, is Ogonna Anaagudo-Agu, a veteran of the war.

Agu was a student of English and Drama at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka when the war started. He enlisted, saw action [at the Abagana sector] and went back to the university to finish his education. After his undergraduate studies, Agu obtained his Masters at the University of Leeds before submitting a doctorate dissertation to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His scholarship was on the

reality and definition of African theatre. Agu published seven plays, including *The Last of the Biafrans* (1996), *Dance of the Deer* (1998), *The Return of a Night Masquerade* (1998), *I Fear for Kattie* (2000), and *Symbol of a Goddess* (2005); all inspired by the war and informed by Igbo culture. His plays create a cultural metaphor for assessing the effects of the war on the society; he queries the symbol of the nation – is Biafra relevant and was it ever relevant? Is Nigeria a country, and who should belong to it? What is the currency of membership? More urgently, he asks “why Biafra?”

Metaphors and Climax is a collection of essays on the work of this cerebral playwright and philosopher. As noted by Osita Okagbue in the preface, the essays “capture the flavour and spirit of the man and artist that Ogonna Agu was” (p. xi). With an Introduction by Kalu Uka, who was one of Agu’s teachers, the volume contains seventeen essays on theatre, the writing of Agu – in particular, criticisms of his plays – and the philosophy of his beliefs as an existential writer.

Uka, in his introduction to the volume, “Stranger on the Shore: A Personalised Reminiscence Introducing the Life of Ogonna Chibuzo Anaagudo Agu, Teacher, Artist and Explorer”, paints an intimate portrait of Agu as an artist, a poet and dramatist. Nwadigwue in ‘Cultural Promotion and the Economics of Theatre: The Ogonna Agu Perspective’ sees Agu as more than a writer. He was a virtuoso whose range of creative artistry traverses the various media of literary, visual and performing arts, and whose qualities as a practical man of the theatre engaged with the economics of theatre as a professional practice, a business and an industry capable of providing employment and sustaining the economy of a renascent African nation. The other essays in the volume engage with Agu’s writing by interrogating the various aspects of his dramaturgy and complicating the primal quest that pushed Agu in his work – the idea, vision, dream, the imagination and the illusions of Biafra as a nation. Most of the essays look at *Cry of the Maiden* and *Symbol of a Goddess*, with more critical attention devoted to the later, possibly because the play represents the totality of his thinking as a visionary. Though the messages encoded in his plays reflect a vision, anchored on the recognition of past mistakes to help in dealing with the mental and psychological anguish of the Nigeria-Biafra war, *Symbol of a Goddess* most closely employs illusions to test the reality of the post-war identities.

Symbol of a Goddess tells the story of Emenike, a Biafran war veteran, and his attempt at integrating into the new Nigeria. He is portrayed as being still patriotic to the Biafran cause, and he fails to accept that the idea of a Biafran nation had been lost. He therefore struggles to adjust to the reality of a war that had been fought and lost. Emenike pits himself against the society; defying tradition by wearing the *Ozo* anklet, the high-

est and most important magico-religious and social title in Igbo society, despite being a single man who had not yet taken the *Ozo* title. In his mind, he lives in Biafra, a new nation; he refuses to recognise “Nigeria” and this hinders his integration into the post-war society. In his Biafra, traditional institutions such as marriage are obsolete. He spends his days dreaming of an eventual manifestation of Biafra, metaphorised as the masquerade *Egbe Eyi Ugo*.

Etymologically, the hawk/kite (*egbe*) is the archetypal animal associated with the face in Igbo cosmology and mystical thought. The hawk has well-renowned ocular abilities. *Ugo* the eagle or sacred vulture, on the other hand, is the mightiest bird. Here, the motif references a hawk with the sacredness of an eagle, the cosmic vulture, one of several in the pantheon of Igbo deities. *Egbe Eyi Ugo*, on a metaphysical level, represents the female force – *Nne Nwanyi* – as well as the supreme force of eternity and the ruler of everlastingness – the Spirit of Light and of the Rising Sun – which leads us directly to the adopted symbol of Biafra – the Rising Sun.

Symbol of a Goddess presents a situation where reader/spectator is given an insight into the psychological problem of socio-economic integration and cultural adaptation of a “man of flesh and blood”, living in the reality of defeat. The play, like most of Agu’s plays, is about the war and the *post-* of it (in the postcolonial sense). For Emenike (read: Agu), the war has not ended; the battlefield has only shifted to the economic problems in the society, the neglect of the welfare of the “losers”, the psychological trauma of those involved in the war, and the lack of rehabilitation of the entire Biafran region. He refuses to surrender into the reality, preferring instead the “rising sun” of the promised hopes of Biafra. In the end, the dream turns into nightmare: devastation; children with acute malnutrition (*kwashiorkor*) roaming the villages; widows holding homesteads together; men disabled by the war; stalled and terminated education; forfeiture of property to the federal soldiers and their collaborators; “genocide” and ignored war crimes.

Metaphors and Climax represents – and responds to – the cultural activism of Ogonna Agu and explores the versatility of the playwright as an artist who significantly interrogated the values and challenges of the ideology of “Biafra”, the political economy of postcolonial Africa, and immediacy of love and fostering peace and reconciliation.