

My e-Conversation with Esiaba Irobi

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Esiaba Irobi was born in the Republic of Biafra and lived in exile in Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the USA. He studied at the universities of Nigeria, Sheffield and Leeds and held a B.A. in English/Drama, M.A. Comparative Literature, M.A. Film/Theatre, and a PhD in Theatre Studies. His play, *Cemetery Road*, won the prestigious World Drama Trust Award for playwriting in 1992. *Cemetery Road* also won the NLNG Literature Prize in 2010. His other published plays include *Hangmen Also Die*, *The Colour of Rusting Gold*, *Nwokedi*, *Why the Vulture's Head is Naked*, *What Song Do Mosquitoes Sing?* His poetry collections include *Cotyledons*, *Hand Grenades*, *Inflorescence: Selected Poems 1977 – 1988* and *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*.

Dr Irobi directed numerous plays and productions in Ireland, Hungary, USA, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, England, Nigeria, Portugal and Scotland. He was also one of the most sought after workshop leaders in the world. His other books which will now appear posthumously include *Theorizing the Cinema of Africa and African Diaspora: Ontology, Teleology, Semiology and Narratology* and *Before They Danced in Chains: Performance Theories of Africa and the African Diaspora* and a new adaptation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* entitled '*The Shipwreck*', commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Theatre, USA.

This interview was granted by Dr Esiaba Irobi to Nnorom Azuonye in December 2002 and was first published in Sentinel Poetry (online) in February 2003. Dr Esiaba Irobi died in Berlin, on 3rd May, 2010.

Nnorom: Somebody stands next to you in a bookshop, by a shelf, he is reading aloud from a play *Hangmen Also Die* written by Esiaba Irobi

"...and we do what we do because we know we have no future, because we know, no matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, no matter how high we aspire, there is something waiting in the atmosphere to destroy us...", then the reader thinks aloud, "Who is Esiaba Irobi?" What would you say to him?

Esiaba: He is from the Republic of Biafra and has lived all his life in exile in Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the USA.

Everything he wrote in *Hangmen Also Die* has come to pass, including the hanging of the boys, the killing of the chiefs, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in a prison in Port Harcourt. The recent revolt by riverine women against foreign oil companies in Nigeria reminds us strongly of Tamara in the play and also resonates with the reason for the iconoclastic philosophy of The Suicide Squad.

Hangmen Also Die is the most prophetic of all of Esiaba's works. It is a picture of the future. Our future as a country: Area Boys. Bakassi. Armed Robbery. Anarchy! The worst is yet to come. Nigeria will break apart like a loaf of bread in water; it will capsize like a leaking canoe on the River Niger!

Hangmen Also Die, as an apocalyptic, Nostradamic text, belongs in the same category of intuitive and prophetic insight as *A Dance of the Forests*, *A Man of the People* and *Come Thunder*. It addresses Frantz Fanon's injunction that "Every generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfil or betray it."

Nnorom: Writers like yourself, in one way or the other, have written without ceasing in condemnation of jaundiced political practices, religious bloodletting, academic impoverishment of universities, and the dumbfounding paradox of excessive poverty in a world so well-endowed with human and natural resources which you have also addressed through your plays and poems. Why is nothing changing? Is it perhaps because intellectual terrorists like you are being over-academic about the realities of the simple people of the world? How can writers, especially Nigerian writers, evolve from torrential theorists to practical, real and positive catalysts of change and progress?

Esiaba: A writer or even activist like Noam Chomsky preaches to those who do not know the truth. People like yourself who we believe can change things. Younger generations. There is no point preaching to those in power who already know the truth. Who perpetuate the truth and who, in turn, reap September elevens. Bush and Blair and Obasanjo.

Soyinka, as you know, stayed and tried to be pragmatic in his quest for democracy. What happened? His house, built with his priceless Nobel money, was vandalized. A helicopter hovered above his house twenty-four hours a day. (Soyinka told the military that he had the power to make the helicopter crash!!!) And just before Nemesis got rid of Abacha via Viagra pills, Soyinka had to cross the border by night, ON FOOT, to escape into the West. He could have been dead by now. Does this scenario make sense to you? And Christopher Okigbo, what happened to him? And [John] Ruganda in Uganda? Jack Mapanje in Malawi - for writing *Of Gods and Chameleons*? Ngugi wa Thiong'o? Why is he running from country to country?

My interest now is to tell the story of my people (people of the African Diaspora) and my generation in exile. That is what *The Intellectual Terrorist*, my forth-coming novel, is all about. The three plays that I am presenting in Moscow next year – 2003 - are also about: the bliss and the blisters of our exile.

We are like the Sower's seeds in the Bible.
After we were scattered into the air,
some fell on rocks, some on thorns,
many on shit. Infinite mounds of shit.
A few lucky ones, like Lucifer,
after he was driven out from heaven
fell into the arse of a penal colony
called the British Isles. "inglan is a bitch!"
There we are still wriggling and spawning
like wretched spermatozoa
in the fallopian tube of a barren prostitute.
What will be our fate? Only Amadioha can tell!

Nnorom: It seems to me that the fountain pen is no longer enough. Well, this angle of thought is not new to you, is it? Members of the suicide squad in *Hangmen Also Die* were the best brains and academic products of their time, but then they resorted to violence because they were not being given a chance to contribute their own quota. Achebe, Soyinka, Okigbo, Oguibe, Fatunde, yourself - have spoken so eloquently. You are writers. You have contributed your quota by writing so fearlessly, but the guns of tyrants have always seemed to rule. Perhaps, we, the younger generation must set the music of words aside and try the machine gun. Will this make a difference? Or shall we always end up defecating down our pants, dangling from the hangman's noose if our feet fail with speed to hop into exile? Should this essentially be the lot of African writers?

Esiaba: What we need are methodical and strategic insurrections. Insurrections aimed at change. Permanent change. What the Irgun Stern gang did in Israel to the British. What the Mau Mau did in Kenya. Kami-kaze pilots [in Japan]. Suicide Bombers. Coups. Against Nigerian leaders. What Nzeogwu did. What Sankara did. What Jerry Rawlings did. For example, Obasanjo and all the ministers and senators and local government chairmen and cheerwomen should be shaved upstairs and downstairs and put into a leaking boat and pushed into the Atlantic Ocean. Or members of the top military brass should be invited to meal/feast and fed from a pot laced with generous quantities of cyanide.

All the while, the younger generation should have alternative ethical and moral and progressive and visionary leadership - nobody should be above 40 years of age - to take over and save that country from extinction. As a matter of truth, I don't think that Nigeria as an entity will or can ever survive. It will at some point disintegrate like all good shit in a toilet bowl. That country has never worked. I don't think it will ever work. The British know what they did. Never you under-estimate British intelligence. Look at all the trouble spots in Africa and the world. Can you or can you not see the expertise of the British, their political genius? And never you under-estimate as well, the imbecility of African leaders. Look at the new monkeys on the stool. The new donkeys of democracy. The magnificent arseholes. The pimps of politics. The twats. We are fucked up. Really well-fucked up. Only the young with some vision can save us now.

What is a visionary?

A visionary is someone who sees what is not there.

What is it that is not always there?

The future!!!!

Nnorom: Sorry to take you back just a little bit. When you say that your interest now is to tell the story of your people (people of the African Diaspora) and your generation in exile, what can we expect? Can there be a truly African Diasporic literature and what might its defining features be?

Esiaba: This will need a Ph.D. dissertation. You may have to wait until my book: *Theatre of Elephants: African and African Diasporic Performance Theories and Aesthetics* is published. It puts everything together from both the perspective of performance as well as orature and literature. I have been teaching this course or arguments central to it in the USA since 1997. I am also publishing a book on the subject very soon. It is titled: *Before*

they Danced in Chains: African Meta-languages in African Diasporic Performance Aesthetics. The lecture "THE BLUES AS AN AFFIDAVIT OF AFRICAN - AMERICAN CULTURE: The African Connection and the Menace of Western Appropriation" which I gave at Washington University, St Louis, this year, alongside my great hero, Wole Soyinka, is taken from the book.

Nnorom: Let me re-phrase the question. What is the *core* relationship between literary products of Africa and those of the African Diaspora, and how do these differ from those of other cultures?"

Esiaba: The core elements are similarities or continuities of African ontology, teleology, semiology and narratology. Concepts and notions of creativity and performance, ritual and festive models were trans-located to the new world during slavery and these elements helped our people to negotiate new identities and create new syncretic cultures. We see some of these elements of African orality in the works of Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, the music of blues and jazz musicians and most vividly in the African-American gospel music and worshipping style - a direct echo of our indigenous ritual performance, invocations, chants, ululations, yodeling, etc.

In a sense, Africans in the diaspora have, perhaps, made greater and more creative use of African orature in the New World, than the bone-grawers left behind who only drink Guinness and eat pepper-soup and cannot translate *Things Fall Apart* into Igbo since 1958. Skunks of the intellectual universe!

Nnorom: The art of poetry seems to constantly need redefinition, meaning different things to different people at any one time as people exercise their poetic licenses and experiment with forms. If you were required to propose a definition of poetry, what would it be?

Esiaba: Poetry is the energy that moves the world. It is that inexplicable force that brought the universe into being and which will also destroy it. The ocean has its own poetry. The desert as a well; the forest; crowds; politics; cities; towns; villages; football. basketball; religion; sex; murder; love; food; academics, all have their own poetry. An African market (not supermarket) is the finest example of true poetry.

Poetry is not verse. Verse is the linguistic residue of poetry. Orature is the most valid and most accessible and most universal as well as relevant form of human poetry. Not Verse. Verse is for eggheads, intellectual

runts and middleclass cunts. Orature is what is used to regulate the world from Gregorian chants through Ohafia War Songs to Rap.

Poetry, by definition, is that phenomenal fusion of music and imagery that creates life and propels life forward in the world. It is a regenerative dynamic that is reflected not only in human language/speech and writing, but also in the heave and swell of the ocean, the wind in the trees, the seasons and their verses of leaves with changing colours. Life and death. The child's first cry. The last breath. Life and Death. Metaphysics. Verse is our vain human attempt to capture this force, this magic, this occult force. The best poets in every culture go as near as they can towards this mystery through written and oral crafts. But poetry, real poetry, can only be found in the speech of nature, the power of landscapes, the terror of the dark, the forest and its hallucinations, when Amadioha, the god of thunder, clears his throat and voice, sexual intercourse with its bizarre noises, screams and ridiculous positions. Again, the market. Festival. Ritual. Sacrifice. Communion. (Poetry is a spiritual experience!) Public executions. War. Courtship. Love. Childbirth. The *tatum tatum* or *tiko tiko* of sexual intercourse! Prayer, invocations, perhaps, are the finest exemplars of true human poetry. Farting is also a good example. Anal blasts. Read most of modern American and British verse and you will understand what I am hinting at here. The poets seem to be farting from their mouths and arses with the same frequency and in the same mass producing position. They think poetry is fish "n" chips or McDonald hamburgers or cocaine or beer. They do not understand what poetry is all about. Poetry which is not connected with the metaphysical will always fail.

How Poetry was born.

In the beginning, there was nothing
absolutely nothing, no universe, no cosmos,
no galaxies. Only Amadioha,
the god of thunder, lightning and rain.
Amadioha, playing with himself, with his right hand.
Friction of frenzied hand on nodding penis.
Stroking the piston, titillating the glands.
Hoarse breathing. Orgasmic abracadabra.
The big bang. The universe. The cosmos.
The galaxies. Human beings. Ululations!
Imitations of the language of a god playing with himself.
That's how poetry was born.

Nnorom: You have advocated in several places on the need to see poetry as fundamentally a performative art. Could you shed some light on the relationship between poetry and performance?

Esiaba: Until the tyranny of typography, poetry was fundamentally an oral and aural experience. Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey" were all recited by Greek bards amidst empty bottles of wine. "Gassire's Lute" was recited by Malinke warriors and written down by the women. Children in Egypt recite the Koran from cover to cover. Irish *seanchaithe* (shanachie) recited whole epics as entertainment for their communities at evensong. It has also been discovered by the Irish that piranhas in the Irish Sea do not eat the bodies of drowned poets or fishermen who have memorized huge amounts of poetry. Fish revere such bodies. This means that poetry is a bodily experience, throatal, vocal, gestural, facial, tonal and consistently aspires towards song. This is what T.S. Eliot meant when he said that he wanted his poetry to have the lyricism and musicality of "primitive" poetry. He meant "oral" poetry. (Don't mind the classic arsehole. He was always a retarded political blockhead who mangled verse like an idiot. His initials are an anagram for toilets.) Every modern poet, my mother used to say, is a frustrated musician.

Compare the number of people in the world today who can recite the poetry of Pablo Neruda or Yehuda Amichai with those who can recall lines from T.S. Eliot and you will see the relation between poetry, politics, the vital regulation of a people universe and the FUNCTIONALITY OF AN ARTFORM. Speech, you see, is a performance. Utterance. Incantation. Invocation. Chant. Ululation. Prayer. Even breathing is a performance. (That is why sometimes we snore heavily in a play to indicate - in the context of our make-belief - that we are asleep.) The meaning and subtext of any given word is determined by the inflection of the voice. In the Igbo language, the tone/accent determines whether *utu* is the fruit or the penis. Those who mix up the pronunciation or tonal performance of such a word never go unpunished.

Poetry, primarily, is a mode of communication with the self, other people and God. It is intrinsically a performance. Writing disembodies this process. Writing also weakens the capability of the human memory to retain huge quantities of poetry. I know many poets who cannot remember their own verses. And a thousand lecturers /professors of poetry, especially in England today, who can recall the colours and sizes of their students' underwear and condoms than remember or recite any poem in totality. Writing, alienation, individuality and the valorization of the written word over the spoken word - especially in Western universities where poetry commits suicide daily on the cement floor of the lecturers'

obduracy and desiccated critical sensibilities - have diminished our facility for memorization, recall, recitation and the validity of poetry as code of conversation and human communication. Our brain cells are dying. Together with our spiritual selves which always feed on poetry.

This is a destitute time for poetry, an art form that has always served as currency for the most profound attempts made by human beings to communicate with nature, god, the spirits, deities, or the dead. This is why African-Americans, who are still holding on to the vestiges of their orality before they totally lose it to computers, insist on calling their own definition of poetry SPOKEN WORD to differentiate it from verse.

Personally, I am writing an essay titled: 'Poetry versus the Ivory Tower: The Revenge of African and African-American Orature and Rap on American Literary Poetry'.

Everything I have said above, unfortunately, cannot invalidate the necessity, accessibility and permanence and importance of poetry as written literature or verse. What is crucial is for all of us to realize that the *tatum tatum* of verse, written poetry, is oral device. It is not a written mechanic. When we read: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" (Yeats) or "He clasps the crag with crooked hands, (Coleridge) or "Jack and Jill went up the hill" (Anonymous) or "Twenty froggies went to school" (nursery rhyme), we must always remember that in that very straining for a musicality or memorable lyricism is an attempt to facilitate the power of memory towards remembrance and PERFORMANCE. Any African who thinks of poetry first as a written experience, then a vocal or performative one, is lost. He or she should be put in pond filled with frogs to croak until he or she regains his sanity. The Aim, as Frost put it, was always SONG!!! Derek Walcott puts it beautifully in his poem: "Forests of Europe" when he sings:

What is poetry, if its worth its salt
But the bread that men can pass
from mouth to mouth
From hand to hand, across the centuries,
When systems have decayed...
when the prisoner circles his prison cell
chewing the one leaf whose music will outlast...

Also read Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Episode in Library". It articulates most vividly and dramatically how poetry commits suicide in departments of English Literature all over the world; on the pages of the *New York Book Review* and *Times Literary Supplement*. Happily, there is a rumour going around that departments of English literature will soon be

closed down or submerged under cultural studies. What a happy day that will be. It will teach the academic motherf**kers to ossify a living art in between the pages of a book with notes hanging out like the paragraphs of their own genitalia when they open their thighs like the pages of the books.

Nnorom: Some poems are undeniably attempts by poets to exorcise personal demons. Other poems are just opinions written in a self-conscious, self-important fashion prescribing interactional models for the society. What do you think is the highest motivator of poets? What makes you, for instance, write a poem and what factors influence your choices of subjects and the way you treat them?

Esiaba: If it was not for poetry I would have been in prison, in the asylum or in the grave by now.

The primary mechanism of poetry I believe is that it is a facility that allows you to live out the contradictions of your life, to balm the restlessness of the human spirit through language and imagination. So many things can trigger off the poetic process. The bitterness of exile. Memories. Memories of an ugly place like Nigeria, the only country in the world that has existed since independence without a government. "Maicuntri", the ultimate miracle of the twentieth and the twenty-first century!

Other catalytic factors for great poetry include a cantankerous girlfriend, an unfaithful lover, a stupid or absent-minded penis that refuses to rise to the occasion unless you light a black candle and a stick of *sasarobia* incense. These are all little irritations that can trigger off the mechanism for writing poetry.

There was a time when I wrote my best poems with full erections. That was when I was working on the forthcoming collection, *The Cry of Orgasm*, which as you will see when it is published later this year is full of spunk. Then, at a time I could only write when I was depressed. *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* came that way. I was broken open again by pain in Great Britain where everything rhymes with pain. Friend, the four years I lived in Liverpool were the four saddest years of my entire life.

I have just finished a collection titled, *Hanging out With Dead*. It is about war and death. It also contains the great controversial epic: "I Know Where Osama Bin Laden is Hiding." I think that Tony Blair will like the collection very much.

Finally, a poet's greatest demon is an inherited or inexplicable obsession with language. Language as a communicative and occult force. Language as an incantatory force. Language as verbal magic! And an

important qualification or credential for being a poet is to have that self-destructive perfectionist streak that makes you want to panel-beat language into a shape accurate and broad-shouldered enough to carry the full weight of your experiences. That is the primary similarity between a poet and a mad man. The difference is that the mad man knows that he cannot do this and so escapes into his sophisticated schizophrenics. But the poet keeps trying to tame language until his or her mental ribbon snaps. Think of John Berryman who waved to the people on both sides of the river before he jumped off the bridge to his death by water.

Personally, I have never contemplated suicide. Except once. When I was teaching in Liverpool. But I quickly remembered that Igbo culture does not tolerate such a luxury so I decided to cut off the head of the man who made me think of suicide. He was my HOD i.e. Head of a Donkey. His name? Messiah DePhallus Snodgrass. My plan was to use his head to dance at my father's *okwukwu* i.e, second burial. But the Christian part of me took control and I forgave the arsehole his numerous racist iniquities.

A good number of times, I have forgotten money at cash points after withdrawing them because I was reshaping the stanza of a poem in my head. I will walk away and somebody will call me back and say: "Are you alright? You withdrew 20 pounds and forgot it in the till and walked away. Are you on drugs?"

Poetry, in the end, becomes the pearl the oyster produces by secreting a gel over the itch in its soft sensitive squid-like body. The oyster as you know has no hands.

I see myself as an octopus. An octopus, as you know, has three hearts and eight hands. It is this quality, this gift that allows me to handle my experiences in the way that I do. Like a juggler who performs in water.

Nnorom: Esiaba, thank you very much for this first part of my planned tripartite electronic conversation with you. I truly appreciate that you have taken the time to chat with me on a variety of issues. Goodbye for now, but we will surely talk again.