The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at: http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with

Scroll down to read the article.
Fiditi Grammar School, to which I, as principal had invited Christopher Okigbo provided the turning point in his life and was the launching pad from which his poetic soul leapt, liberated and unbound into the freedom of the muse’s and the prolific productivity of the avant garde he became.

Christopher and myself had met and become friends in March, 1955 when I took temporary residence in Mellanby Hall, University College, Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) while I was doing some post-graduate research work on Keats and Tennyson in the Africana section of the University Library. Our friendship flourished everlastingly and may be that is why I have not yet been able to gather myself together to write on him. Christopher left the Federal Civil Service in 1958 because of the hypocrisy of the colonial system of those times. He had worked as a Marketing Manager in the Nigerian Tobacco Company in charge of vast areas of the then Western Region before joining the administrative service of the Federal Government. As a staff in the private sector he had incorporated a company, Kitson and Co. ever before joining the government. On joining the Federal Government, however, the company had not been dissolved and some finicky colleagues made mountains out of this and he had to leave the civil service.

This was the most depressed and I would say the only depressed period of his life. In the ’50s, government were the all-powerful employers, the private sector was still very diminished, a reversal of the present day dispensation. I had been invited from Ijebu-Ode Grammar School at Christmas 1956 to Fiditi Grammar School to be Principal be Chief A. O. Adeyi who had just been appointed a Minister of Local Government by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Christopher had visited me at Ijebu-Ode on several occasions and once with his wife, Princess Judith Sefi Attah.

As soon as news reached me of his plight and knowing the likely opprobrium this will generate in the limited circle of elites in colonial Lagos, I drove to his residence at Igboere (Lagos) and stayed for a week with him and convinced him to come with me to Fiditi Grammar School at Fiditi near Oyo. He agreed and I got the Board of Governors of the school to appoint him as my Vice-Principal. I put him in charge of Arts Department and he taught Latin and Greek. The one student presented in 1959 WASC had an ‘A’. An indigence of Fiditi on the staff protested in Greek the status I accorded him but I stood my grounds and the gentleman and I let go.

The highest class at Fiditi Grammar School when he joined in 1958 was form five and the first set of students for the WASCE were yet to be presented in December 1959. He therefore had two years of a new lease of life.

Using the advantage that the school was a community institution, we provided more that he would have earned in government and other emoluments as inducement. I put him in charge of sports and football, got him to celebrate Taslim Balogun to coach our school football team.

I had been writing poems since 1955 and I continued more in 1958 and I showed him my own poems at which he expressed great pleasure. We used to read these and other poems together. T. S. Elliot’s Ash Wednesday was the greatest source of inspiration and he used to point out the magical imageries such as ‘the smoke from the chimneys rubbing its muscles on the wall’ or such idiomatic phraseology as ‘one night cheap sawdust restaurant’. He would then burst into peals of infectious and electric laughter.

Such was his popularity with students and staff and the success of all endeavours on which he put his hand that this succeeded in bringing him from the depths of despair to the brilliant daylight of creativity. I invited in turns academic members of Classics Department of University College, Ibadan to give lectures to the boys of Fiditi Grammar School on classical times and literature including Professor Ferguson, Head of Department, Dr. Classen, Professor Esan, Dr. Thompson, Mr H. F. Guite, etc. I made him play host to them all.

His football team included the elder Odegbami, a.k.a. ‘Key to Soccer’, who was mentor to Nigeria’s Segun Odegbami. His team beat all schools around including the 1959 winners of Thermogene Cup, Ahmadiya College, Agege. This was an all-Nigeria cup competition for full-fledged grammar schools which Fiditi was yet to be. To crown it all, that self same team beat the University College, Ibadan first eleven twelve (12) goals to nil (0). The UCI team included Professor David Oke (a senator during the Second Republic in Nigeria), Dr. Edozien, former Economic Adviser to President Shagari, the Second Republic civilian president.

With his versatility, he was able to participate at the highest level in sporting, poetic, intellectual and social activities fully at Fiditi without the pretensions or inhibitions of civil
service or marketing distractions or boisterous Lagos.

Christopher Okigbo after six months stay and returning to an academic career soon found his life to begin again, he and myself would go to join his brother, the world renowned economist, Dr. Pius Okigbo who had just returned from teaching and research in Oxford. Whenever we came to Ibadan, Dr. Okigbo would read passages from modern American poets to us till the little hours of the morning while we drank strong coffee and whiskey.

In those years, I invited young academics from the University College, Ibadan to teach the boys of Fiditi. Such academics included Professor Alex Boyo who taught Biology, Dr. Patrick Amenechi who had just obtained a first class degree in Chemistry and was working on his Masters. All the boys who offered Chemistry scored distinction. We had invited Emmanuel Ifeajuna to the staff, but he later joined the army.

This constant flow of intellectuals through Fiditi provided a most desirable and profitable interaction for an intellectual companionship for Christopher.

J. P. Clark used to spend nights with us and we would read aloud some attempts at budding Black Orpheus. It was indeed a great transport of delight to watch Christopher evolve out of the turbulent past into the spiritual refreshment which he received from the auspicious circumstances and sylvan tranquility of Fiditi. His faculties were fully satisfied, his interest well supplied in all facets. His return to academia at Fiditi had served its inimitable purpose and provided the required leverage for his genius.

Little wonder therefore that at Fiditi, Christopher had burst into numbers and into poesy. Little wonder that he began writing his poem, Debtor’s Lane at Fiditi. Little wonder that he dedicated his first efforts in poetry to the boys at Fiditi Grammar School to whom it would have been a permanent injury if I had allowed Obi Nwakamma’s left-handed compliment to pass uncorrected both for rime and eternity and indeed the immortal soul of Christopher Okigbo.

During the Easter holidays of 1959, I requested Okigbo to accompany me on a grand tour of Eastern Nigeria to enable me know my country more and to meet Chinua Achebe, who was then at the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, Enugu, writing his second novel, No Longer at Ease the draft of which he showed us. I was at the time doing a write-up on the Beginning of Novel Writing in West Africa for the University of Durham, with the guidance of Professor M. Mahood, then Head of English Department, University College, Ibadan.

This tour was a follow-up to a previous visit I had made with Okigbo to George Laming the West Indian novelist who had just published his novel Of Age and Innocence. That meeting had been arranged for me by Professor Alex Boyo of University College, Ibadan where Laming was giving a series of lectures. The journey to the East afforded Okigbo the opportunity to meet many of his friends and relations at Onitsha, Ojoto, Ogidi, Enugu, Orlu, Mgbidi, Owerri, Aba and Port-Harcourt where we anchored for days. The trip buoyed up his spirit and gave his friends and relations renewed confidence in his future. GR

Little wonder that he dedicated his first efforts in poetry to the boys at Fiditi Grammar School to whom it would have been a permanent injury if I had allowed Obi Nwakamma’s left-handed compliment to pass uncorrected both for rime and eternity and indeed the immortal soul of Christopher Okigbo.

The Fiditi Grammar School staff with the principal, Chief Alex Olu Ajayi in the middle front row and Christopher Okigbo to his left.
Eleven months since. And yet their pictures would not leave me. And not merely pictures but the thoughts, sometimes disturbing thoughts which they arouse, thoughts given birth to by the many impressions of the cultural environment of a society that we had all known so well, at least theoretically; and speaking for myself, never really in the flesh.

Encountering Britain's cultural world, and a slice of its cultural bureaucracy presented an opportunity too good to miss, to corroborate and correct long-held impressions acquired from such a lengthy cross-Atlantic distance as Nigeria. What was anticipated the least however was the sheer volume of impressions that needed to be corrected, and far too less, comparatively speaking, to corroborate. But first shall we look at the pictures before we return to the impressions?

The setting was first and foremost Downing College, Cambridge, where I was serving a short term as a fellow, spilling to down-town Cambridge which in the summertime of July was a beehive of activities, cultural activities, fliers and banners hanging overhead everywhere announcing festivals ranging from musicals to a celebration of William Shakespeare. Open-roofed and storeyed tourist trucks poured in, through and out of town, the whole visage crowded with pleasure-seekers and tourists from far and near, squinting their inquisitive eyes through sun-lit streets to learn something about the grand, centuries-old architectures of the ancient academic town. But quite aside from the bustling atmosphere of the streets, you bumped into occasional street musicians, more often on string instruments and a mouth-organ, their output resonated through miniature electric combos, amazingly melodious. No, 'bumped into' might serve more like an exaggeration; the sound of their music would often trail far to welcome the pedestrian long before he came within their eye-view.

Within the walls of Downing itself, even if quieter and restrained, there was so much to provide insight into the workings of the British Theatre. At the very least, we had the cherished company of great British playwrights like David Edgar and Arnold Wesker. We also had younger dramatists like Charlotte Keatley, Terry Eagleton and Caryl Phillips. These (excepting Phillips) performed bits and pieces from their plays, Edgar and