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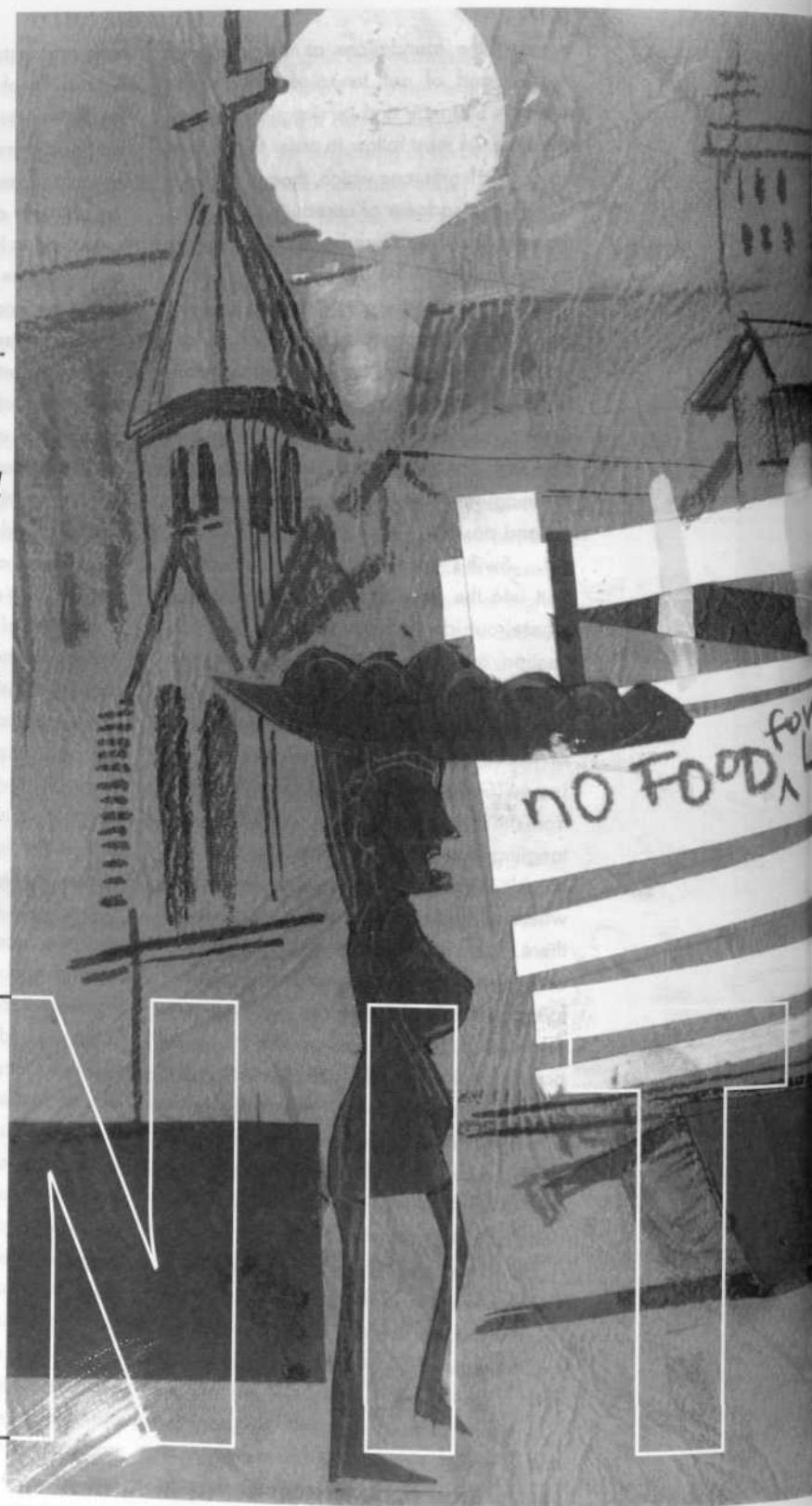
Despite its tragic encounters with the British prior to Colonial pacification, Onitsha remained a strategic, dynamic and regenerative melting pot of peoples and cultures, with an aggressive commercial inclination as well as an eye for the innovative, the progressive, even the eccentric.

- Olu Oguibe¹

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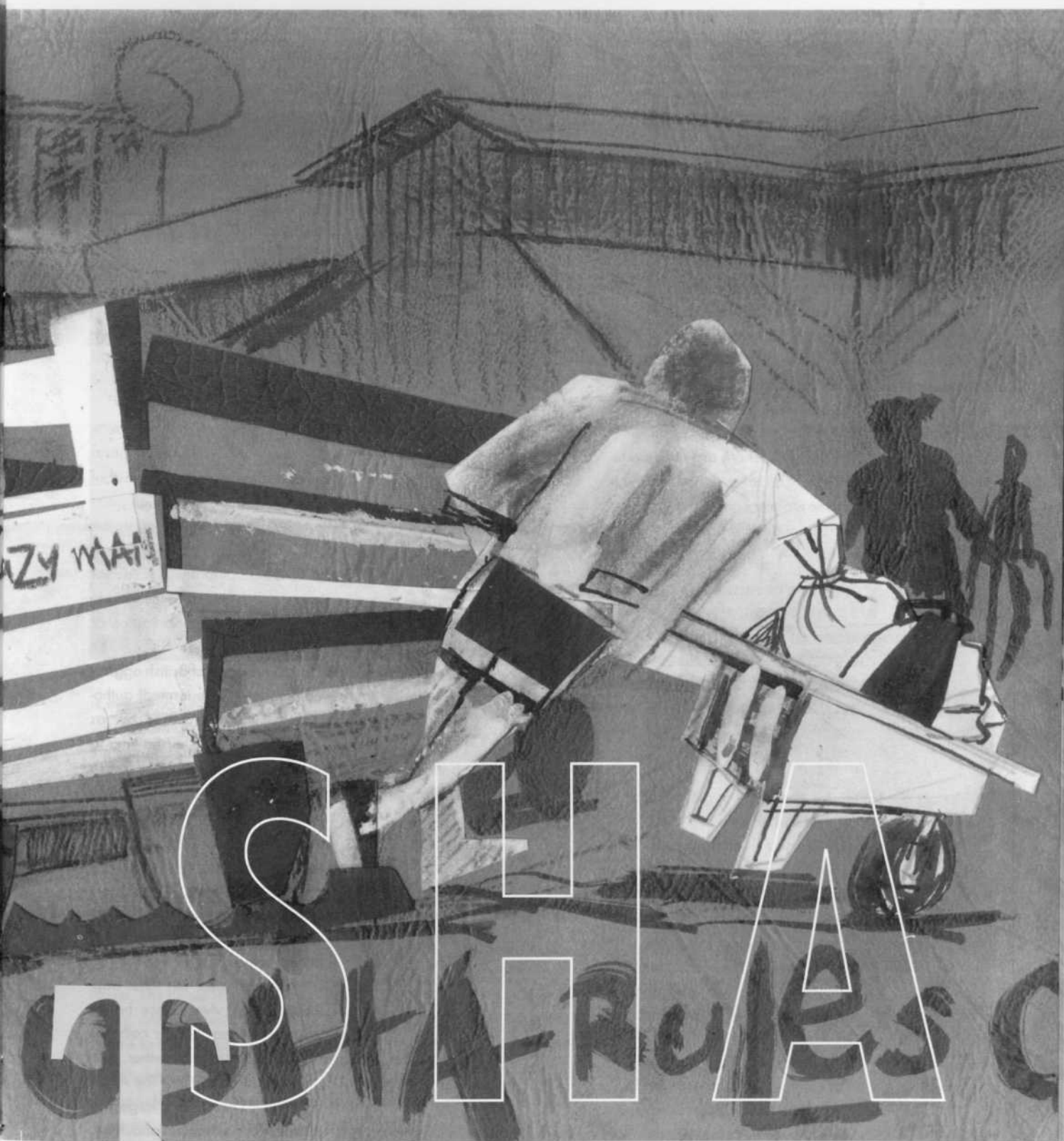
O

N I T S H A



A commercial City & its middle Arts

Chika
Okeke



THE kilometre-long Head Bridge graffiti mural stretching from the spectacular Niger bridge to the precincts of Premier Brewery, is perhaps the first thing anyone coming into Onitsha from the West of Nigeria would notice, apart from the dizzying mass of humanity lost in existential flux. The graffiti is an integral part of

the Head Bridge landscape and has been since the period after the Biafran War. The artist, Stephen Nwokedi, belongs to that class of people who, among the Igbo, are said to be caught in the stranglehold of that powerful creative destructive force, *Agwu*. He is a mystic, sane, mad, artist, and the mural is his sole life work.

The mural has a life of its own which in turn depends on the moods and needs of the property developers in the area, *plus* those of the artist. He is never commissioned to paint his graffiti on the stretch of walls on both sides of the road, but the owners of the graffitied walls do not seem to mind, for Onitsha, among its many other virtues, accommodates even the eccentric. The artist constantly revises the mural by painting over older sections and in this way he updates his work to reflect his current mental preoccupation.

Nwokedi may not be terribly literate but in his work there are quotations, allusions, and direct references to personages, events and ideas from sources as diverse as Greek mythology, the Sudanic empires, Chinese or Japanese history, Twentieth century international politics, contemporary mysticism, and occult philosophies. There are of course scores of countless images. The artist claims that the images he inscribes on the walls are constitutive of the many screams he hears from deep inside his head.²

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So the act of painting for him is a therapeutic affair that defuses explosive tensions within.

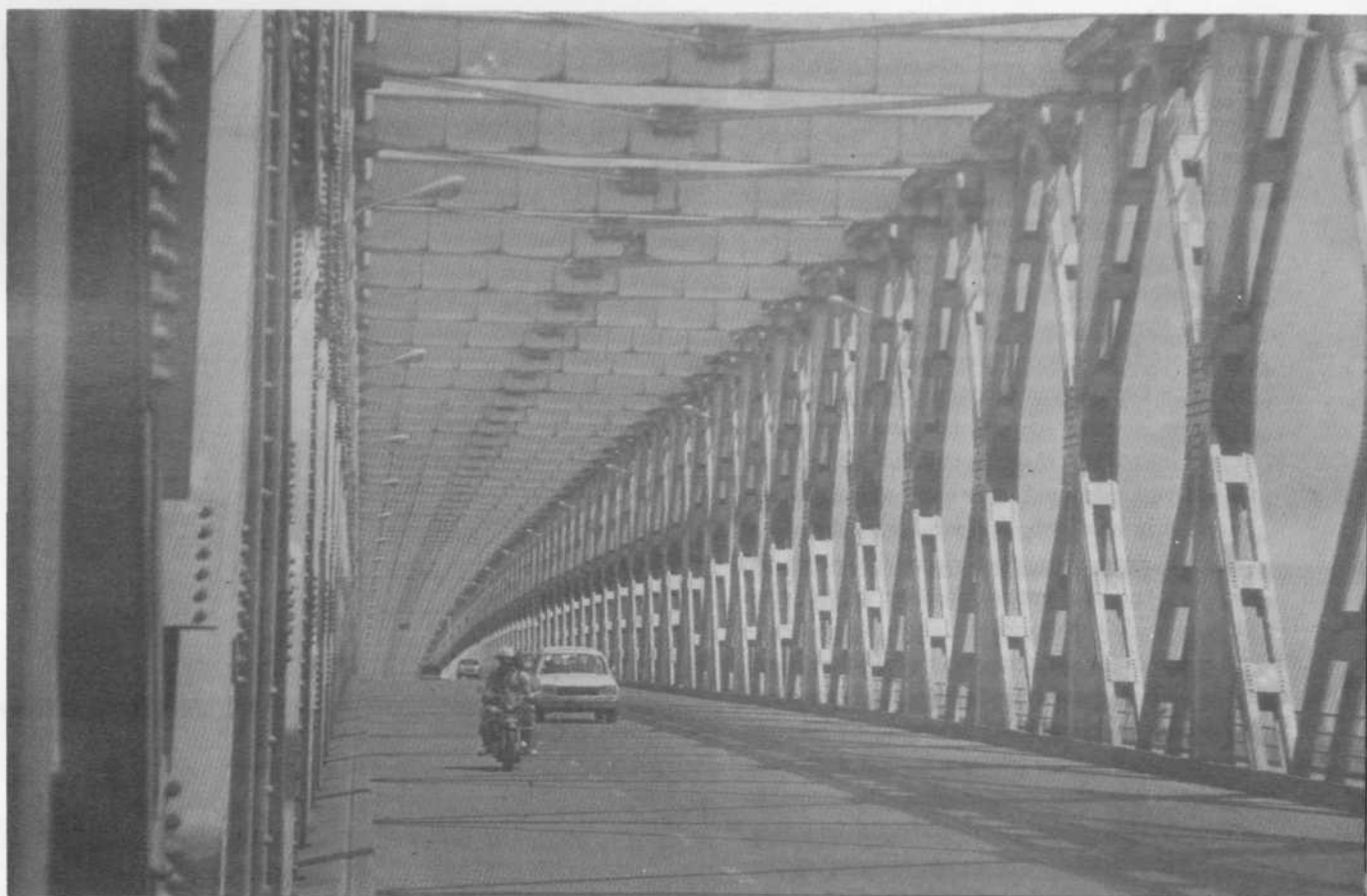
The beauty of the Onitsha Head Bridge graffiti derives from its organic formlessness, its apparent lack of holistic design, its multiplex allusions and references to many literary, historical, and contemporary traditions, its powerful images, its ability to survive countless transgressions from builders, house painters and government agents. In a way it announces to a first-time visitor that Onitsha is doggedly drawn to that which Achebe calls the *uli* that never fades, the written text, but in a manner that defies conventional logic. More importantly, the graffiti mural is a monument to the arts of Onitsha - the literary tradition that once was, and the popular arts that still thrive - in which are encoded the story of the encounter between Onitsha and the European traders and missionaries in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, as well as the cultural dynamics responsible for the evolution of the city from a small trading town

in the last century to the sprawling metropolis it is today.

Onitsha was the place European missionaries in the Nineteenth century began the evangelical proselytization of eastern Nigeria - a business they pursued with as much passion as they had, also, for the commercial exploitation of the native and their environment. The river Niger was very important in the story of Onitsha. It was through the Niger that missionaries and traders from the Delta arrived what was then a small riverine town, and having settled there, began with zeal the binary business of religion and commerce. But the tenuous cordiality between the foreigners and the natives, whom earlier expeditionists had noted for their intelligence and business acumen, did not last long.

Once the British traders established their factories, the struggle between them and the Onitsha commercial and cultural institutions for the control of the purse and soul of the town began. The high point of this struggle was in 1879 when David McIntosh, the General Manager of West African Company (which later became United African Company or UAC for short) in order to silence and subdue the intractable native, carried out the historic naval bombardment of the town. That was on October 26, 1879.³ The 'punitive' expedition (as all such acts of British aggression during the pre-colonial era were termed) authorized by the War Office, was eventuated by, as McIntosh claimed, the failure of the Onitsha king to hand over two people alleged to have robbed British factories in Onitsha. A year later also, the British traders blockaded the town when, to their frustration, the Onitsha people responded to the earlier bombardment in the form of a communally enforced trade embargo against the British companies, rather than a military campaign. In addition, Onitsha embarked on a revanchist programme of de-christianization since to them, there was hardly any difference between British trading and the missionary activities. But if, as happened, Anglican Christianity survived those heady days, it was perhaps due to what Ekechi calls the 'incurable optimism' of Bishop Ajayi Crowther, and the brinkmanship of the church authorities. The Anglican, and later Roman Catholic church got a large part of the soul of Onitsha; the European traders and, later, colonial officers controlled the town's body and purse but never won its confidence.

And the Niger? Onitsha seems to have edited the river out of its psyche. It flows quietly past Onitsha carrying with it only flotsam of a (pre)colonial past. It



is in that past that the Niger was the artery through which the nutrients, and occasional pathogens, reached the town. The days of canoes, steamboats and barges bearing wealth from Igala country and the Delta. The days of gunboats from England bearing scourges. Today, the wealth that sustains Onitsha never touches the vast waters of the Niger. The Niger is history. It bears only memory on its course to the Ocean.

Onitsha was a place of schools - day schools and night schools, mission schools and private schools, grammar schools and commercial institutes, a city of one-room academics and backyard colleges. It had the best, the indifferent and deplorable. Its major industry was retail trading and the next was education,



On top **Niger Bridge, Onitsha**
Above **'A story of Rose and Chukwuma',**
Enamel of board

and the two sometimes got mixed up.
Chinua Achebe.⁴

Onitsha does not have any university or even a reputable tertiary institution (except perhaps, the pioneer St. Charles Teachers Training College) but as Stephen Nwokedi's graffiti mural evidences, the city has a near occult relationship with the written word for which it attained considerable fame by the middle of the Twentieth century. That literary tradition known as Onitsha Market Literature was spawned by the twin factors of Christianity and commerce.

The European missionaries brought Western education, and built schools while they preached the gospel. The schools not only became sites for teaching the natives the ways of Europe and the Enlightenment Project, they were also necessary for the training of catechists, interpreters and clerks for the church and the imperial administration. However, as the urban population of Onitsha grew, its needs became more complex, more schools came up to train more hands for the widening secular and religious institutions and businesses. By the middle of the century, Onitsha had an impressive number of schools, and a growing population of college students whose preoccupation with the mastery and control of the English language, and the display of same to the rest of the population was phenomenal. To these new 'men of letters', the acquisition of the power of the written word yielded limitless freedom of expression, which was necessary for the interrogation of the new, overwhelming urban realities. Besides writing letters for the less or non literate friends and relatives, the emergent literati began to make tentative efforts at creative and didactic literature.

Also at the same time, bookshop owners and printers saw a great investment potential in the growing romance with writing. They imported Second World War-era printing presses in addition to existing ones that published religious literature. By the late 1940s a great number of printers had turned to publishing all manner of literature, especially those from the young men of letters who were still experimenting with the new, powerful language. And Onitsha Market Literature was born.

There is an extent to which this Market Literature was a continuation of the Christian evangelization project, by other means. The scholar Ernest Emenyonu⁵ posits that the work of the first Igbo writer, Equiano's *Travels* (by Olaudah Equiano), was an interrogation of the wanton immorality and corruption that pervaded the slave owning Western societies. Equiano

A picture of a Lagos Boy greeting his bar Lady Friends



"A Highlife man and his Lover"

This man is a womanizer and a smoker. He can finish ten packets of C. G. a day and cannot pass a night without any lady. He does not care for any body. He doesn't know his home town again. He does not care for his parents. What he knows is to take his C. G. and chase girls about.

He hasn't known that C. G. is dangerous to human beings and girls are poisonous to boys. He will one day suffer them.

**N.O. Njoku
and Co.,
'Life Turns
Man Up
and Down'**

did that by using their own very Christian Bible against them. This literary style passed onto the subsequent Igbo writers and as Obiechina writes, these 'Christian attitudes and principles provided one of the major inspirations for the pamphlet literature.'⁶

Much of the Market Literature, which was usually didactic, dwelt on the new phenomena of urban love affairs, prostitution, marriage and the pursuit of wealth. A few discussed pre/post-independence politics in Africa. But it would appear that the popularity of the literature was not so much for its educative, moralizing posturing as its romantic, showy, terribly impressive command of the English language. This reading makes sense for it was also at this period in the national polity that Zik, the enigmatic Onitsha son, in contemporary mythology, was threatening to overthrow the Queen of England with his fantastic English. Even if many of the authors claimed the

LIFE AND MONEY TURN MAN
UP AND DOWN



DON'T LET MUSIC DESTROY YOUR SOUL

"THERE IS A NEW POISON IN AFRICA TODAY! Clashy, trash music and obscene songs in the Streets, in Bars, Hotels and Homes are running a countless number of lives both young and old. Bad music that stirs up animal lust in men and respect is becoming more popular every day.

mastery of the landscape of urban life, and as such ought to educate the underprivileged, less literate masses, their methods of delivery verged on showmanship. However, the entertainment value of the literature was important to an urban population that had little time for the few recreational facilities the city provided. The traders attended their new businesses with so much passion that only such forms of entertainment that did not take them away from their stalls and shops were acceptable, even patronized. The Market Literature also lightened the burdens of those periods of lull in the market. In the same manner too, the primary and college students, who with the traders formed the bulk of the readership, found in the pamphlets an escape route from the drudgery and boredom of their school texts.

The Market Literature was a cultural expression of Onitsha's youth, for as the city matured, as its

**J. O.
Nnadozie,
'Beware of
Harlots and
Many
Friends: the
World is
Hard'**

populace came to terms with its modern/urban realities, it shed off the literature. A few factors account for this. The first is that most of the authors with maturity, developed a more sophisticated craft and thus became involved in other forms of serious writing. For instance Cyprian Ekwensi, who was a pioneer in the pamphlet tradition (his *When Love Whispers* appeared in 1947) evolved into a first generation modern novelist in West Africa. Also Tagbo Nzeakor would later become a major Igbo language novelist. The second factor, which is related to the first is the indifference shown by later generations of traders on the one hand, and the quest for more engaging, better written and more entertaining literature by school students, on the other. The reading traders soon found that their erstwhile pastime did not improve their businesses, nor minds. Nor did it bring them anywhere closer to Zik. On the part of the students, there were such vastly popular books as Ekwensi's *Passport of Mallam Ilya*, *Drummer Boy*, *African Night's Entertainment*, Ene Henshaw's *This is Our Chance*, and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*: all of which also doubled as school texts. The third factor may well be the awareness, on the part of the investor/publishers, of the grossly un lucrative nature of book publishing. As this runs counter to the morals of commerce, the Market Literature soon won for itself the scorn of publishers most of whom returned to printing labels, pirated school texts, and commercially viable designs. Thus, Onitsha Market Literature passed on.

Ulli Beier, in his pioneering work on Onitsha Market Literature⁷ saw a connectivity between the 'Onitsha Writers' and self-taught highlife musicians who played in the bars and night clubs of Onitsha and other major towns in Eastern Nigeria. They were part of the urban culture in which we find also, self-taught artists, usually called 'Sign Writers', who made rubber cut illustrations for the pamphlets. In all, the three art forms were essentially products of a society caught in the gossamer web of change; a society in which its people were grappling, experimenting with new, received media with which to express, internalize, and interrogate realities of modern urban life.

The Nigerian signwriters...are literally pop artists. They have primary school education, that hardly qualifies them for any job. From remote Ibo (sic) villages they often come to are trading centres like Onitsha...here people get rich quickly.

-Ulli Beier⁸



Onitsha is an intensely colourful city and this trait stretches back to the colonial days when it was a melting pot for the sane, the vain, the missionary and visionary. And the ambitious. The colour of Onitsha is both metaphoric and literal. Apart from the dense population of similar, three-storied, multicoloured apartment blocks that is typical of Onitsha architecture, the streets are kept colourfully alive by sign writers and popular painters. These artists, as noted earlier, carried on their trade in tandem with the pamphlet writers, but unlike the latter, they have survived, even thrive in current Onitsha socio-economics. Where the writers left the art and their print/publishers changed the topic due to exigent needs, the popular artists never quite left their trade. This is because the city relies intensely on the artists for advertising signs, billboards, labels and decorative sculptures and paintings for interior/

**N.O. Njoku
and Co.,
'Life Turns
Man Up
and Down'**

exterior spaces.

Many a local manufacturer would be content with labels and packages that clearly announce the name and location of the business, for the products; they bother less about the visual aesthetics of product packaging and presentation. On the other hand the patron of decorative paintings, sculpture and craft items prefer directly humoristic, stress-relieving subject-matter which to a certain extent are visual analogues of the erstwhile chapbooks.

Onitsha needs colourful advertising and directional signs to the myraid of business in the city. This need is stoked by the chaotic layout which turns street numbers and names in the city into useless symbols. So any business outfit that does not come out to the nearest road junction to scream in the din of shouting signs does not exist and may never be located by its customers. At these street corners the advertising signs that seem to elbow each other out of stasis, replicate the pervasive jostling for space by apartment blocks and people. Watch repairers, barbers, publishers, bookshops, retailers, medicinemen, fancy-stores, indeed every other businesses that can not find space inside the world famous Main Market, or Ochanga Relief Market and other specialised markets, fight for advert spaces out in the streets. It is on the basis of all these that the art of Augustine Okoye, and the likes of him find nourishment, in Onitsha.

Before postmodernism unleashed itself on late Twentieth century theory of culture, there was high/fine art. There was craft. Fine artists and art historians treated with scorn, and usually discountenanced, the lowly efforts of craftsmen and craftswomen, especially (as feminist theorists have opened our scaled eyes) the latter. In Western societies, and other societies that have fallen into the snares of the West, fine artists cater(ed) for the rarefied, often decadent whims of the elites; craftspeople produced 'functional art' for the rest of the human society. In Africa everyone who created visual form, whether for the king or the housewife, or the community, was a craftsman, according to Western(ist) art history. There were no 'fine' artists to be found among the natives. Then Postmodernism intervened. It collapsed the boundary between fine art and craft; between 'high art' and 'low art'. It left in its wake a grey middle in which 'high art' intercoured with 'low art'. The 'carver' who makes *Ibeji* figures in Ibadan now defines the frontiers of fine art in a gallery in, say, New York. It is this tribe of artists who thread the middle course that found favour in the eyes of Onitsha.

Augustine Okoye may have anticipated the emergence of this art as far back as the early 1960s, in Onitsha. He reasoned then that his art was neither high, nor low. It belonged in that comfortable space between the two extremes. In the middle. So he took on the professional name, Middle Art. He creates craft-that-is-art or the other way round. From the beginning he painted barber signs as well as allegorical pictures of the politicians of the day. He also painted visual analogues of the Market Literature, such as his masterpiece, *The Story of Rose and Chukwuma*. Even today, due to interminable demands from indigenous and expatriate clients, he paints variants of *The Story of Rose*, or scenes of the Biafran War. He also produces printed labels and packages for local manufacturers, as well as license plates for vehicles which is about all Onitsha expects from any confessed artist.

It is perhaps due to this passionate attraction between Onitsha and the 'middle arts' that the city never attracted nor sustained the creators of the 'high

ment establishments, higher education, or the 'high' arts are at best circuitous routes, at worst diversionary paths to acquisition of wealth which is the *raison d'être* of the city and its people. It is for this reason perhaps, that the city never became a seat of government nor did it attract any respectable tertiary institution that could have stimulated the people to appreciate literature beyond the erstwhile Market Literature, or art that did not strive toward the scope and depth of the middle arts.

In spite of the oppressively dysfunctional infrastructure and public amenities, and the chaotic disposition of Onitsha, there is a contrastive feeling of relative calm and order in the Main Market itself. And this is in spite of the great mass of human traffic, as well as tightly spaced stalls stocked to the rafters with goods. It is within the market that vast amounts of cash change hands. There is also a pervasive sense of security within the perimeters of the Market. Many a first-time visitor would be puzzled, even shocked, by the intense movement of cash here without state security operatives. But there is hardly to be gleaned from the faces of both traders and their customers, any anxieties about robberies which ordinarily are part of the reality of Onitsha. This is mainly due to the confidence everyone involved in the Market reposes in the Onitsha Market Amalgamated Traders Association (OMATA). The power of the OMATA is proportional to the wealth of Onitsha, and its security network is, to say the least, immense. Its reputation for hunting down transgressors is legendary. Also its headquarters, appropriately called 'The Whitehouse', is the place from where the association's president, easily the most powerful man in Onitsha, controls the affairs of the OMATA and its members. More than anything else, it is because of the association's independent means and methods of security enforcement that the Main Market still remains one great, successful commercial 'institution'.

However, Stephen Nwokedi's mural serves as the scenery in front of which the existential drama of the rest of the city is played out. In the intervening spaces between stretches of the mural, are car parks where vehicles leaving Onitsha for the West of the country make their final attempts at filling whatever available spaces they may still have. There is also the 'goat station' where trucks from Northern Nigeria unload their dirty, often emaciated occupants. Here, a mixture of rotten hay, muck, and refuse are flung unceasingly on the face of Nwokedi's mural by animals, men, and vehicles. Elsewhere in the city there is

As this runs counter to the morals of commerce, the Market Literature soon won for itself the scorn of publishers most of whom returned to printing labels, pirated school texts, and commercially viable designs. Thus, Onitsha Market Literature passed on

arts'. Ekwensi published his pamphlets there but moved to Lagos as his art sought high goals. For Ben Enwonwu and Uzo Egonu who were native sons, their careers sought refuge in Lagos and London, respectively. Similarly, Ben Osawe who grew up in Onitsha, practices in Benin.

However, it is surprising reading history and looking at present day Onitsha, that in spite of its being the major foothold of the early missionaries, that education (as an industry) never succeeded in the manner of commerce. (This is without prejudice to H.R. Collins' observation in the 1960s that the city had the largest concentration of secondary and commercial schools in Nigeria).⁹

The reason is simple. Onitsha is a fiercely independent, individualist city. It regards institutions of government or anything that signifies mass control with overt indifference. In this, it would appear that its disdain for the foreign traders-that-became-colonial government which led to the 1879 bombardment is fossilized in the city's memory. To Onitsha, the govern-

an accepted logic that laws are made to be transgressed, especially when they are seen to be unsympathetic to all ways and means of making money.

And yet there is no place that epitomizes more the chaos which the pursuit of money leaves in its wake than the Upper Iwaka area of Onitsha. This is where the central bus and car park is located and the importance of this site is underscored by the absence of railway or air transport services in the city. Luxury bus transport is a multi-billion naira business and is controlled by some of the city's wealthiest businessmen. In any given day or night, scores of luxury buses move traders and their goods between Onitsha and Lagos.

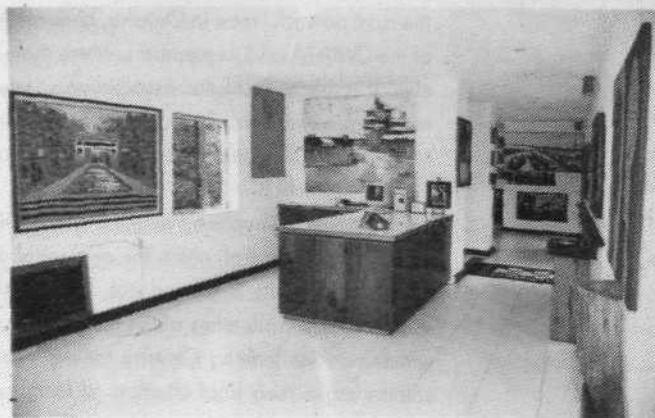
Non resident travellers coming into Onitsha hardly leave the city without tales of their encounter with Onitsha motorpark touts whose personal incomes are directly proportional to the number of travellers they bring into any given bus. And that is where the maddening hustling comes in leaving the intending traveller at the mercy of the touts whose coercive aggression is legendary. Two people that have yet to decide which line to travel on may for instance, soon find that they have been lifted and carried to separate buses by touts in spite of any protestations. Here also, short duration fights are recurrent and provide entertainment to hurriedly assembled spectators. To the non-resident these are

some of Onitsha's existential excesses but to the hundreds who live and believe in the city, the so-called excesses are but a reaffirmation of the two maxims favoured by many authors of the market Literature: *Money is hard, and, Life and money turn man up and down.* **GR**

Notes

1. Olu Oguibe (1995) *Uzo Egonu: An African Artist in the West*, London: Kala Press, p.11
2. See Anthonia Emejulu, (1989) 'The "Bridge-Head" Artist - An Appraisal' B.A. Thesis, University of Nigeria.
3. See Felix Ekechi, (1973) 'Traders, Missionaries & The Bombardment of Onitsha, 1879-80,' *Conch*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 and 2, pp.61-8
4. Chinua Achebe, (1975) 'Onitsha, the Gift of the Niger', *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London: Heinemann, p.92
5. Ernest Emenyeonu, (1973) 'Igbo Literary Backgrounds,' *Conch*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 and 2. pp43-60
- 6 Quoted from Emenyeonu, Op. cit. p.56
7. See Ulli Beier, (1976) 'Public Opinion on Lovers' in *Introduction to African Literature*, Ulli Beier(ed), Essex: Longman.
8. Ulli Beier, (1966) 'Naive Nigerian Art,' *Black Orpheus*, No. 19, pp31-39
9. H.R. Collins, (1968) *The New English of the Onitsha Chapbooks*, Athens (Ohio): Ohio University Centre for International Studies. p.2

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