

Some Thoughts on a Teacher, Father Figure, and Mentor

Nwando Achebe

I have often been asked why I made the transition from Theater Arts to History and as many times as I have been asked that question my answer has always remained the same, Dr. Boniface Obichere. From the time that I was a little girl, I always enjoyed the performance arts—specifically theater, music and dance; so much so that I was at various times a member of my primary school band, the church choir and young adult's opera in Nigeria. Majoring in Theater Arts at the college level was therefore a natural progression—a continuation of my calling.

History on the other hand, was a totally different story. I cannot remember a time when I enjoyed history, not as a youngster attending the University Primary School in Nsukka, Nigeria, nor as a teenager at The University Secondary School in Nsukka some years later. As a college student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, History again was a much dreaded subject. I remember sitting at the back of my classrooms and catching up on all of my letter writing.

It was therefore with great trepidation that I entered Professor Obichere's UCLA History class at the beginning of my graduate studies during the fall quarter of 1992. Were the truth to be known, I actually took Boniface Obichere's class as a favor to my dad, who recommended his as a course that I should take. The other reason that I took it was because the only Africanist filmmaker at UCLA was on sabbatical and consequently I would be unable to take any film courses until he came back. The class that I walked into that cool Fall morning was entitled "Africa During the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade." Even though it was 10 long years ago, I remember it as though it were yesterday. From the very first moment that I stepped into his class, Professor Obichere captivated me in a way that no other professor had ever done. There he was, standing in front of this huge auditorium and telling a story—the story of the African people, my people—a story which I could not only relate to, but one in which I was actually one of the actors. That encounter was the beginning of my journey—a journey that is 10 years in the making and will continue until the day that I die—this quest to learn, uncover and docu-

ment the history of my people. I have Professor Obichere to thank for laying the foundation for what has become a passionate love affair with African history.

The relationship between teacher and student blossomed with the passing of years. Professor Obichere would become more than a professor to me. He was someone that I could talk to about almost anything. He was there to listen to my frustrations and my joys. He was much like a "father" to many of us.

Therefore in the winter of 1997, when I stood pregnant with child in the UCLA Fowler to honor my teacher, my mentor, my friend, it seemed only fitting that I read in our shared mother tongue, a poem which my father, Chinua Achebe, had originally written for the fallen Nigerian poet, Chris Okigbo; a poem which Professor Obichere had incidentally loved.

It is with a bittersweet reminiscence that I invite you all to sit back and enjoy the powerful words spoken in tribute to the great man and teacher Professor Boniface Obichere.

Uno-Onwu Okigbi / A Wake for Okigbo

Chinua Achebe

Obu onye k'ayi nacho?
Obu onye k'ayi nacho?
Okigbo k'ayi nacho!
Nzomalizo!

Ojalu nku, nya nata!
Ochul'iyi, nya nata!
Ojel'afia, nya nata!
Okigbo k'ayi nacho!
Nzomalizo!

Obu onye k'ayi nacho?
Obu onye k'ayi nacho?
Okigbo k'ayi nacho!
Nzomalizo!

Ojebe nku, Ugboko elinia!
Ochube mmili, Iyi elinia!
Ojebe afia, uzu-afia soolia
Ojebe agha, Ogbonuke biko chaalia!
Okigbo k'ayi nacho!
Nzomalizo!

Ezite egwu, onye gagbalayi?
Eseta ugu, onye gagbalayi?
Onye anakpo nwel'ife oneme!
Okigbo k'ayi nakpo!
Nzomalizo!

Ngwa, nee egwu k'onabia!
Ifugo na agha awa?
Ogu-egwu choo! Dike n'ogu chaa!!
Ifurozi na onye anakpo nwel'ife oneme!
Okigbo k'ayi nakpo!
Nzomalizo!