A Few Things to Write Home About

Nigerian authors make some strides but face more challenges

During an interview in 1983, Chinua Achebe, Nigeria's foremost novelist, recounted the factors which informed his initiation of the formation of the Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA, "I thought we should bring together as many creative writers as possible to form an association because writers everywhere do have problems which they cannot solve well individually. I felt that an association which is a kind of trade union, to put it crudely, would help in dealing with publishers as a group, in dealing with issues of copyright, piracy which is a serious threat in our country now, and the question of the writer's basic freedom to write as he sees things and not be harassed," he said then.

Five years after its inception, ANA is gradually coming to terms with these considerations for which it exists. The association's fifth convention in Abuja during the first week of December was basically a business meeting which produced a communiqué with far reaching implications. But it was also an occasion for the award of prizes to excelling authors in the genres of drama, poetry and prose, an innovation that broke with a two-year old tradition in which just a prize was awarded to writers who died for literary supremacy using generic forms that were stylistically and technically contradi

When during the third convention at the University of Benin in 1983, Femi Osofsy's play Morountodu, was adjudged the best entry and winner of the first annual literary prize, Emmanuel Obiechina, a professor of English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, who was chairman of the awards committee, said it was with difficulty that they arrived at the decision. There was not a common set of criteria for assessing poetry, prose and plays.

Still, at the University of Maiduguri in 1984, during the fourth convention only a winner, Ifeoma Okoye, emerged. With Men Without Ears, a second novel, which chastised the wanton submergence of Nigerian ethos in materialism, she beat all comers to win the N1,000 prize.

But this year's announcement of three prizes has set a new pattern which writers at the Abuja convention welcomed with unanimity. Zaynab Aikali, a lecturer at the University of Maiduguri, won the fiction award with her seminal novel The Stillborn. It was chosen best from a list of 12 other fictional works authored mostly by unknown writers. An exception, though, was Ossie Onuora Enekwe of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, a noted poet and critic, whose entry Come Thunder borrowed its title from a movement in Christopher Okigbo's Path of Thunder.

Another woman, Tess Onwume, who teaches English at the University of Technology, Owerri, won the drama award with Desert Encroaches — one of her two entries. Avid followers of Nigeria's literary process will recall that Mrs. Onwume gained considerable critical attention in the wake of the 1983 publication and subsequent public performances of her play A Hen Too Soon.

A total of 15 plays were submitted for the category. Again, the only established playwright who entered for the competition was Tunde Fatunde of the University of Benin.

Chinweizu, a columnist of The Guardian, floored 17 other contestants to win the poetry award with a yet to be published manuscript titled Invocations and Admonitions. Mostly known for his historical work, The West and the Rest of Us, Chinweizu has also earned large-scale reputation as a man of letters. He has published poems extensively in scholarly journals particularly Okike. And his first published volume of poetry is Energy Crisis and Other Poems.

He, Onwuchekwa Jimie and Ihechukwu Madubiuke constitute the troika of polemists, the self-confessed "boleka-ja" critics, who published Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature, a book which irreverently sought to knock off the halo of poetic quiescence long hung over the heads of Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark. For Chinweizu, poetry is something else once it is obscurantist and "incomprehensible."

It was a good thing that both the writers who agree with Chinweizu and all others who hold divergent opinions converged in Abuja for the convention. Writers like Cyprian Ekwenwi and Timothy Aluko, of the One Man, One Wife fame, were there, attending for the first time. So also were Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose episodic series Basi and Co is getting increased popularity ratings in Nigerian Television Authority, NTAs, drama presentations, and Segun Olusola. "It is the greatest assemblage of Nigerian writers since the formation of ANA," enthused T.C. Nwosu, an author and chairman of Cross Continent Press, Lagos.

All these writers had a lot to be happy...
Abuja from where its committees will co-ordinate plans for the exhibition of 200 years of Nigerian literature in 1986, and tackle other problems.

One of these problems is "the inadequacy of the existing copyright procedures in the country, a situation which has led to extensive piracy of creative works and which has caused considerable distress to Nigerian artists." ANA viewed this state of affairs with such "grave concern" that it set up a committee to deliberate on the issue and provide guidelines for a panacea.

Further, the association noted the inadequate publishing facilities in the country which it said had led to over dependence on foreign publishers. ANA's communiqué expressed worry over the inavailability of books whether published abroad or locally and called for the establishment of a national publishing house. Asked an observer at the convention, "can't ANA set up a publishing concern? If the National Council for Museums and Monuments can produce the volume titled 2,000 Years of Nigerian Art, is it too much for ANA to publish 200 years of Nigerian Literature after the 1986 exhibition planned on that theme?"

However, what perhaps struck observers most is the writers' radical pronouncement on the state of the nation: "ANA feels concerned about the depressing state of the economy and its consequent hardships on the Nigerian people. The association believes that the fundamental cause of this state of affairs is the perpetuation of the foreign control and the domination of the national economy and its organisation in a way to benefit only a tiny minority of the population. Of particular significance in this regard is the detrimental effects on the development of a truly national, democratic and humanistic culture."

It was the most stentorian portion of ANA's two and a half page communiqué. But for all of its ring, it must hold something of a hollow sound to dispassionate observers. The issue involved here is largely that of uses, a situation that cannot be remedied by panache-ridden declamations or the praxis of once every twelve months released books. Indeed, it was somewhat deluding authors, most of whom have spurned their more creative and productive years denouncing dialectical materialism and championing the triumph of formalistic celebrations of metaphysically inspired literature, come out to complain about a tiny local minority and their foreign collaborators expropriating the nation's wealth. At least, a half of ANA's membership is made up of teachers. The primary and more effective fora for the ventilation of their new-found progressivism, if they are serious, are the classrooms and the works they produce.

Also, in pursuing its desire "to forge meaningful and mutually beneficial links between ANA, fraternal writers' organisations throughout the world, with special regard for African national associations of writers and similar bodies throughout the black world" one consideration may prove invaluable. In establishing and fostering such international fraternities as ANA seeks, notions and practices removed from the large attendance and camaraderie that informed the Abuja convention must come up for mutual experience.

It is important to stress this point because the convention a lot of commentators have been indexing its success on the large turnout and attendant cocktails as if "size is worth" and as though they never read the ANA aims and objectives in the first place.

But in all, ANA has taken some remarkable strides. Writers like Vatsa and Achebe deserve all the praise they get for promoting the association's interest. When the writers meet again toward the end of 1986, they must tackle the inescapable complaints by their younger members who blame a conspiracy between the establishment authorities and publishing houses for this "literary coup" to prevent the emergence of new authors.

More disturbing is the future of ANA itself. Perhaps, it was the more radical writers who have secured a berth in ANA's executive that drafted the words of its communiqué. But it raises the question of how far along the line of realism the association will march before the forces of the status quo feel threatened and try to rock the boat. The story of how the civil war shattered the fraternity of the first crop of Nigerian writers is still fresh for anyone not to draw an analogy. Achebe had said two years ago: "If you try to streamrode all the writers in one country to think alike, you will never have an association."

Thus, the new challenge of the ANA is how it will preserve its integrity even in the face of the inevitability of heightened radicalism.

— By Chuks Iloegbunam