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Professor Boniface I. Obichere: A Tribute and Remembrance

Felix K. Ekechi

"The Iroko has fallen! He was sturdy and majestic, as the Iroko tree. With his death, we have now sustained a heavy loss. Dr. Obichere's death has certainly left a deep void in our midst." (Funeral Oration, 21 March 1997)

Those were expressions of grief at the wake of Dr. Boniface I. Obichere in Los Angeles on 21 March 1997. Because he occupied such a prominent place in the African community, there is no question that his departure has created a painful void in the midst of his compatriots, friends and relatives.

Dr. Boniface I. Obichere passed away on 14 March 1997. I was deeply shocked and saddened by the news of his death. It was quite unexpected, for both he and I had been together in Ohio and in Nigeria in the summer of 1996. Let me at this juncture start with a brief history of our relationship. Professor Obichere and I were boyhood friends. Both of us, for instance, attended the same primary school in Eastern Nigeria—Our Lady's School Emekuku, Owerri. We also went to the Holy Ghost Teacher Training College, Umuahia, now in Abia State. In fact, it was at the Holy Ghost College that our friendship actually began. Just by chance, we were roommates in St. John's Dormitory. From that time on we remained almost inseparable until, unfortunately, Obichere's untimely death on March 14, 1997. But even at death, our friendship remains, for Bon's memory will never be forgotten. And hopefully we will someday be reunited in the "Other" world!

Boniface Obichere was born on 4 November 1932 into a respectable family at Awaka, Owerri, in present Imo State of Nigeria. His father Ogbuagu Obichere was, by local standards of evaluation, an *Ogaranya*. In other words, he was a well-to-do gentleman, blessed with four wives, many children, and plenty of farmlands. Bon, however, was the only child of his mother, Ibari. He was thus what the Owerri Igbo call *ihe uko*, meaning "what had long been desired." This

obviously implies that madam Ibari probably did not have a child early in her marriage. Hence the historical significance of Bon's family name, Ithewunwa (this is a child after all). African names, of course, have symbolic meanings, as Obichere's case clearly illustrates.

When Ithewunwa was young, as the story goes, there seemed to have been concern that this precious boy might not survive, because he was sickly. Consequently, his parents brought him to Ekechi Egekeze, who happened to be my father, for medical care. Ekechi was a first-class traditional doctor (*dibia*), a diviner, and a specialist in infant care. Thus, through Ekechi's medical treatments and spiritual incantations Ithewunwa survived, and ultimately grew into an imposing and majestic figure. Interestingly, for much of his adult life, Boniface was hardly sick, and hence his nickname, "Iron." In fact, Professor Obichere constantly made references to this episode of his life, whether at private conversations or at public gatherings. For instance, at Kent State University (Ohio), where he gave the keynote address on "Pan-Africanism and African Cultural Survivals in the Diaspora," in 1991, he thrilled the audience with the narration of his "rescue" by Ekechi Egekeze. In his dramatic style, Obichere revealed the incisions on his head and body, first, as evidence of the efficacy of traditional medicine that brought him to life, and second, as a demonstration of our deep-rooted connection. "Indeed," he affirmed, "Felix and I go a long way!"

The Making of a Scholar

Boniface Obichere's rise to prominence, indeed to greatness, began at Holy Ghost College Umuahia. It was there that he first distinguished himself as a man of destiny. For Bon, as he was popularly known, was an all-around brilliant student, with a remarkable photographic memory. While most of us spent hours and hours studying, Bon would spend far less time "swatting." Yet, he always came first in his class during examinations! He distinguished himself in such subjects as arithmetic, geography, history, and educational methods. As far as I can recollect, our mathematics tutors often called upon him to solve hard and complex problems in arithmetic. Not surprisingly, Boniface was the darling of most of our teachers, and particularly the Rev. Fr. F. Fullen, Principal of Holy Ghost College. In fact, most students saw Obichere as the favorite "son" of the principal, precisely because of the special treatment he often received from the principal. But Obichere

was not only brilliant or smart, as we said in those days, he was also outgoing, gregarious, and friendly. Hence he was beloved, and his passion for football (soccer) added to his popular image.

Upon graduation from Holy Ghost College, with a Lower Elementary Certificate (Grade Three), Obichere started teaching under the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM).¹ A few years later, he entered Mount St. Mary's Teacher Training College, Azaraegbelu for further training, and finally obtained the Higher Elementary Certificate (Grade Two). Thereafter, he started teaching in his *alma mater*, Mount St. Mary's, under his mentor Father Fullen. While there, he studied for and ultimately passed the London General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations at both the ordinary and advanced levels. This examination, of course, was the prerequisite for entry into the university. Thus, with a Nigerian Federal Scholarship, Obichere proceeded to the University of Minnesota, USA, in 1959. I replaced him as the history teacher, and later joined him at Minnesota, in 1962. Both of us, once again, lived at Centennial Hall.

Obichere graduated with honors in History in 1962, and in the next year, he also obtained the Masters degree (MA) in History. Thereafter, he proceeded to Berkeley, California for the Ph.D. But he had to leave Berkeley for Oxford University, England, where he was awarded the Commonwealth Scholarship. At Oxford, needless to say, he read widely and immersed himself into the careful study of African colonial history. His doctoral dissertation was later published as *West African States and European Expansion; the Dahomey-Niger Hinterland, 1885-1898*.

Upon graduating from Oxford (1967), Dr. Obichere returned to the United States to assume a position of Assistant Professor at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). As he informed me, he had earlier been offered a teaching position at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, and felt strongly of returning back to Africa. But economic and family considerations appeared to have taken precedence over nationalistic inclinations!

Social Leader

In retrospect, Obichere's decision to stay in America proved fortuitous. For life in America, after all, proved exceedingly rewarding, both socially and professionally. Indeed, for the over thirty years that he lived in Los Angeles, he proved to be a valued member and leader

of the Nigerian community. By all accounts, he was a role model. To his Nigerian and particularly Igbo compatriots, Professor Obichere was a symbol of success. He was somebody to look up to, essentially because of his academic and material achievements. He was a role model in many ways. For example, he served his Nigerian and Igbo communities well by officiating at social functions. By the time of his death, Obichere was Chairman of the Owerri Union, and an active member of the Igbo Cultural Association. Ndaa Bon, as many Igbo and Owerri compatriots in Los Angeles endearingly called him, was very much loved and respected as an elder, a position he took very seriously and conducted himself accordingly.

Professor Obichere's social network was, indeed, both elastic and extensive. He was not only popular in the African circles, but also in the African-American community, as well, and especially among the student body. He was truly a very luminescent figure in both the African and African-American communities. His involvement in the many African and African-American social and political events is attested by his numerous presentations in the communities' affairs in Los Angeles. Amazingly, Obichere knew most of the important social and political figures in the city, and often interacted with them. Thus at death, he has been sorely missed, and was accordingly mourned by all. At the wake on 21 March 1997, before the corpse was transported to Nigeria, the Umunna Social Club danced. What featured prominently were customary Igbo and particularly Owerri war songs, dances and ritual ceremonies to illustrate the passing of a great man. It was quite a celebration, which clearly demonstrated that Professor Obichere, who occupied a significant space in the community and in people's hearts, had passed away. Indeed, the funeral banner and the white t-shirts with his picture on them eloquently conjured this image with the inscription: "The Iroko has Fallen!"

The Scholar

On the professional level, Obichere made a remarkable progress at UCLA. Within a few years of teaching, he rose from the rank of an Assistant Professor to the position of Full Professor—a clear evidence of hard work. At UCLA, of course, Obichere trained a host of graduate students. As one of his former students acknowledged,

Dr. Obichere was a 'father,' a role model, and an educator

extraordinaire. His life, career, research, scholarship, and humanitarian spirit touched all that came under his stewardship. Professor Obichere trained a generation of African scholars who now are having a significant impact on the development of African Studies.²

Obichere's legacy is not to be measured only by the number of students he trained at UCLA, or the innovative courses he taught, but also by the energy, commitment and humor he brought into everything he did. The generosity of time and talent that he gave students and to projects was legendary. In addition to being a distinguished professor, Obichere also served as Director of the African Studies Center (1973-1983), a prestigious position, as well as one of influence. As the Director, he promoted research on various aspects of African as well as Diaspora studies. Also as Director, he brought distinguished international scholars to UCLA, and, in the process, promoted international understanding, cooperation, and the advancement of scholarship among American, African, Caribbean and European scholars. On the personal level, of course, he built a network of friends, which invariably enabled him to attend many national and international conferences and seminars, as well as to give lectures in various places, especially in Africa and Latin America. By the time of his death, in fact, Professor Obichere had become well known nationally and internationally. As he himself confirmed, "There is no country in Africa that I have not visited, except, of course, South Africa."³ In the apartheid years, of course, the racist, white South African government prohibited African scholars from entering into the country, and hence Obichere's inability to visit that country at the time. Also, at UCLA, Obichere founded and edited the *Journal of African Studies*, which immensely contributed to his being more widely known. The *Journal* promoted interdisciplinary research in African studies, and, quite naturally, helped to give Dr. Obichere greater visibility.

Equally significant was his election to the Board of Directors of the African Studies Association (ASA). He became a member of this important governing body of the Association at a time when, in fact, the African presence was very much limited in the inner circles of the ASA. Obichere's presence there yielded positive results. It is well to remember that the ASA went through a serious crisis during the late 1960s and early 1970s. To Africans and African-Americans, the Association was actually infected with the virus of racism. In-

deed, as Jane I. Guyer, former President of the ASA, notes, "Race recurs as an issue in the meetings . . ."⁴ Race issues, to be sure, led to the agitation for radical reform. This movement for change first started in 1969, at the ASA's annual meeting in Montreal, Canada. "In Montreal in 1969," to quote Guyer once again, "there was a serious confrontation between the executive board and the Black Caucus, centering on the representation of African and African-American scholars in the organization and the engagement with issues of critical relevance to them."⁵ Things came to a head at the annual meeting in Boston, Massachusetts in 1970. There, the few African and African-American members demanded the revamping of the ASA, with particular reference to its objectionable voting policy, whereby only a few, mostly white members (Fellows) could vote. Frustration, coupled with sharp disagreements over the management of the organization, resulted in the breakaway of the Black Caucus from the ASA. These African and African-Americans formed the African Heritage Association, which continues to hold its own meetings.⁶

It was against this backdrop of racial antagonism in the ASA that Professor Obichere's election to the Board of Directors becomes even more meaningful. Indeed, he was expected to become an instrument of radical reform at this time of storm and stress in the ASA. It may in fact be said that he went to the Board with a clear mandate from the African and African-American constituency: To ensure the increased African and African-American representation and fuller participation in the affairs of the ASA. Working diligently with others, especially the liberal-minded Whites, the Board effected a major reorganization of the ASA. Among other things, the patronage or "expanded family" system, which bedeviled the ASA for so long, was sharply curtailed, though still not completely ended. The African Research Group, a critical and radical group of the ASA, put it bluntly this way: "A new era for African studies began in October 1969 at Montreal. The African Studies Association, established by the Extended Family in 1958, to strengthen its kinship ties, was served notice that its game was over."⁷ Indeed, as a result of pressures from African and African-American members, as well as other members, significant changes were made within the ASA. First and foremost, there was a conscious effort to recruit African and African-American scholars as full-fledged members of the ASA. Voting in the organization was liberalized. Equally important, African and African-American members could henceforth serve in various capacities, including

being elected to the presidency.

It is to be assumed that Obichere's membership in the policy-making Board of the ASA must have added to the rapid changes. For a strong African voice could no longer be ignored. After all, as Guyer acknowledges, "[o]ne has the impression that like all elective bodies the Board is comprised of members who have a range of commitments and levels of work [to do]."⁸ In the face of it, Obichere's presence on the Board must be seen as a catalyst for the increased African and African-American representation in the organization. Certainly, the revolution that began in Montreal and Boston significantly transformed the ASA, at least as seen in the increased and ever-growing African and African-American presence.

The Africanist Scholar and Historian

Following in the footsteps of the first generation of African Africanists, Obichere devoted himself to the emancipation of African history, and African studies in general, from the stranglehold of Eurocentrism, meaning the writing and interpretation of African history from the viewpoint of the Europeans. This was a task he concerned himself with until his death. He, in fact, proved to be an outstanding practitioner and fervent advocate of the new African historiography, as reflected in his teaching, seminars, writing, and public lectures. I was once invited to present a paper at one of his seminars on "Imperialism" at UCLA. I was quite impressed with him and his students, and the level and depth of the discussions. Revisionist history was at its best.

At the symposium held at Yale University in 1968, which focused on the theme "Black Studies in the University," Obichere seized the occasion to critically review the Eurocentric conception and interpretation of African history. He started his essay with a personal anecdote, which I quote at some length:

When I was living in the then eastern Nigeria, now Biafra, I was in an English-style boarding school preparing for a London University examination . . . In a textbook for this particular examination, which was a set of lectures written up in London at the time, it was very interesting to note that John Hancock was described . . . as 'the greatest smuggler in Boston.' When I came to the United States a few years later, I . . . registered for American history for a year, and in that par-

ticular class I was taught that John Hancock was a very great patriot . . . This is a simple fact, but it affected me profoundly later on in my college career . . . In this example you can see the difference in thinking, the difference in attitude, the difference in prejudices and so on and so forth. What I have just said about John Hancock here seems to me to apply to the treatment of African history at the present time. Interpretations are polarized.⁹

Using the foregoing as the backdrop of his critical essay, Obichere then plunged into the raging controversy about African history. He pointed to "the false interpretation that has hitherto been given to African history," as reflected in the works and statements of British scholars such as Hugh Trevor-Roper, R. Robinson and J. A. Gallagher.¹⁰ He upbraided historians who virtually neglected Africa in their so-called history of the "modern world." To them, Obichere lamented, "that modern world existed only in Europe and, partially, in the United States." He went on: "In the classical world histories, what does one find on Africa? Take the bestsellers of the early portion of this century: H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*, Van Loon's *World History*, H. G. Wells' *A Short History of the World*. Or take that American classic of William and Ariel Durant. What do we get on Africa? I would say, nothing, because to them . . . African history has no appeal . . ."¹¹

Commenting further on the lack of interest in African history, Obichere blamed Africans, who were trained as historians and lawyers in European universities, but "never bothered with *African* history." But his chagrin lay more with scholars who seemed preoccupied with studies of the lives and activities of Europeans in Africa, as if this was what African history was all about. With evident irritation and cynicism he observed:

Now how many years did Cecil Rhodes spend in Africa? I think you could even exaggerate, or even be sensational, in saying that he spent more time in Oriel College, Oxford, than he spent in South Africa. Or what of [Frederick] Lugard?¹² How many years of his life did he spend in Africa? Still . . . textbooks devote almost all of their treatment of Africa to these personalities.¹³

What's the corrective? Historians of Africa, he declared, should face up to the new school of African history. This means that the history

of Africa should be the history of the African people themselves. Therefore, "[i]t is the responsibility of Africans and 'men of culture' in general . . . to destroy . . . myths [about Africa] and to produce the real facts of history. African history should then be treated as African history and the important themes should be investigated. One would like to see studies of African political structures, structures of state, [and] the functioning of these states should be studied in detail and the personalities should be studied."¹⁴

On the vexing question of historical anonymity, whereby Africans were treated as though they had no names, Obichere called for a total revamping of African historical writing whereby the names of African "heroes" would be fully recognized.

Anonymity can be seen in the treatment of African heroes. Take the example [of] King of Borgu [whose name was never mentioned] . . . [Others are called] "Fine Face," or "Big Ears," or something like that. These names are from the Niger Delta states . . . [which] were foisted on the people of these areas . . . by European slave dealers . . . So, it behooves us today to examine this question of anonymity, and in our writing of African history to make efforts to pinpoint the personalities who acted in Africa before the Europeans and after the Europeans arrived on the scene. [Furthermore] we should also endeavor to cleanse the historical record of Africa [from European prejudices]. [For example,] [w]e shouldn't look at Shaka only as a "bloodthirsty, nasty Zulu" [simply] because his European opponents described him that way. [Rather,] [w]e should look at the famous man as a leader of his people."¹⁵

Finally, "we should look at him [Shaka] as an innovator" and modernizer, both in terms of his political and military revolution.¹⁶ Shaka, of course, was at times cruel and brutal. It is said, for instance, that about 7,000 Zulus were killed when his mother Nandi died!

In any case, it was this revisionist history that informed much of Obichere's writings, as reflected in his treatment of African historical figures, in which their full names are generally reproduced. This, by and large, seemed to give them a touch of authenticity.^{16b} With regard to Afro-European encounter in the 19th and 20th centuries, Obichere reminded his readers of the fact that Africans, by and large, were not passive victims of European colonization. On the contrary, they stiffly resisted the exigencies of European imperialism, as reflected in their adamant refusal to sign treaties that tended to under-

mine the independence and sovereignty of their kingdoms and states. Thus King Khama of Botswana had no hesitation in expelling "some incorrigible, arrogant European gin merchants" from his kingdom, precisely because he was determined to assert his authority. As he told the merchants, "I am Black but I am king in my country. When you white men rule the country, then you can do as you like. At present I rule and you *must obey* my laws."^{16c}

Although it is at times hazardous to speculate on possible external influences on a writer or scholar, it is clear from internal evidence that Obichere's critical reviews mirrored the writings and speeches of eminent African intellectuals and scholars. Indeed, his ideas on African history parallel those of Professor Dike of Nigeria, and progressive nationalist thinkers like President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. To be sure, Obichere greatly admired President Nkrumah, both as a nationalist and as a passionate promoter of African studies. It was Nkrumah, for instance, who had much earlier called upon Africanists to engage themselves in a serious and scientific study of African life and history, and not necessarily that of the Europeans in Africa. Thus, in his "Address of Welcome" to Africanists at the First International Congress of Africanists held in Accra, Ghana, in 1962, President Nkrumah stated, *inter alia*:

Distinguished Scholars, it is an honour and privilege for me to welcome you to Ghana and to this First Africanist Conference . . . You are here . . . to find out the truth about Africa . . . and to proclaim it to the world . . . The central myth in the mythology surrounding Africa is that of the denial that we are a historical people [and that] Africa . . . entered history only as a result of European contact . . . We know [however] that we were not without a tradition of historiography . . . Your efforts [must be] to present our history as the history of the African people, the history of our actions and of the ideology and principles behind them, the history of our sufferings and our triumphs . . . It is incumbent on all Africanist scholars, all over the world, to work for a complete emancipation of the mind from all forms of domination, control and enslavement.¹⁷

But Dike was "the man of the hour," so to say. By all accounts, he was the pioneer of the new African historiography, insofar as he championed the Africa-oriented approach to the study of African history. Like Nkrumah, he implored Africanists to place emphasis on the life and history of the African peoples themselves, instead of

the hitherto historical concentration on the life and activities of the Europeans in Africa. Indeed, Dike was in the forefront of the movement to dethrone Eurocentric historiography and to replace it with the now popular Afrocentric study of African history. In his own words, "Africa's history, culture and development [must be studied] from the African point of view."¹⁸ Equally important, Dike intoned, "the African historian . . . must outgrow the conventional outlook of the European historians," which tends to ignore non-written sources. Instead, the African historian must consider the rich African oral traditions as the *sine qua non* in the African historical reconstruction. In essence, African history must be approached from a holistic perspective. Thus Dike proclaimed:

[The African historian] must return to the traditions . . . He must be prepared to look for information not from the written sources alone, but also from the African societies around him, their institutions and traditional customs, their literatures and languages, their works of art, the fossils and other archaeological remains within the ground they tread.¹⁹

To further drive the message home Dike added: "No people can profit by, or be helped under institutions that are not the result of their own character." Therefore, sources "from the inside" must inform the new African historical reconstruction. This new methodology was amply illustrated in Dike's book, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*.²⁰

The Independent Thinker and Crusader

In a recent issue of *Transition* (an international journal), we are reminded that what distinguishes a writer/scholar is the ability to be oneself, because this is what gives one's work integrity and respect among one's peers. Besides, "[o]ne must have views, one must do more than merely respond emotionally" to problems.²¹ These statements, to a large degree, have direct relevance to Professor Obichere, insofar as he was always himself, and never shied away from controversy, or the search for the truth. He often expressed his personal views on issues that he considered germane to Africa and African studies. For instance, when African historians and social scientists seemed overly preoccupied with discourses on "indirect rule," a colonial innovation, Obichere considered this topic as irrelevant. "For heaven's sake, what is 'indirect rule' compared to other [more impor-

tant] themes in Nigerian history?" Accordingly, Obichere called for a shift in paradigm. Those engaged in the field of African history, he exhorted, "should try to tackle meaningful subjects," rather than dwell on "irrelevant" or unimportant themes and topics like indirect rule. "So, for a university in West Africa at this time of the study of African history [1960s] to spend months on 'indirect rule' and to devote, in fact, an issue of the *Journal of Nigerian Historical Society* to the indirect rule question, is, it seems to me, to be irrelevant or to have the priorities wrong."²²

Clearly, Obichere was both an outspoken critic and a passionate advocate of the new African historiography. He always spoke his mind in matters that directly affected Africans and their history. When, for instance, "experts" on apartheid South Africa were predicting a racial war that would result in a social cataclysm, unless external intervention prevailed, Obichere held a contrary view. The South African racial divide, he firmly held, "is an African problem," and must be solved by Africans themselves. History seems to have proven him partially right. For the predicted racial holocaust did not materialize; and Africans by and large, with external assistance, ultimately resolved the South African *political* problem, with the election of Nelson Mandela as President, in 1994.

Let me now turn to other aspects of Dr. Obichere's scholarship which illustrate his crusade for change. In 1971, he published his first book entitled, *West African States and European Expansion* (Yale University Press). Although his primary focus was on European imperialism, he nevertheless placed special emphasis on what he rightly called "the African factor" in the European colonization of Africa. This Afrocentric perspective practically informed most of his writings and speeches. As a passionate Africanist he was always in search of new agendas, or the expansion of the boundaries of historical inquiry. Bemoaning the parochialism and provincialism which characterized much of the work of African scholars, especially the preoccupation with one's particular ethnic group, Obichere exhorted his Nigerian compatriots to carry out research in areas *other than* their own ethnic groups. In other words, African scholars, and especially historians, needed to broaden their research projects to include other ethnic groups. Thus, in *Studies in Southern Nigerian History*, which he edited, Dr. Obichere stated:

The time has come for Nigerian historians to devote their

energies to the study of societies other than their own. The universities in Nigeria have tended to encourage parochialism in historical research. One only hopes that this was a phase in the development of the overall research plan of these universities . . . Historians, teachers of history, and students of history should . . . accelerate the pace of historical research and writing in the decades ahead."²³

The expansion of arenas of inquiry included greater focus on economic history. Thus on slavery, about which a great deal had been written, he urged for more original work. "There are . . . areas of . . . slavery and the slave trade which have not yet been fully studied. Internal and domestic slavery should be studied with the same intensity and rigour as the trans-Saharan and the trans-Atlantic slave trades."²⁴ Still on African economic and social history, Obichere urged Africanists not to be overly preoccupied with the study of the colonial period, with emphasis on the economic activities of the Europeans. Rather, they should take a broader view of African economic history, which would also examine African economic activities during the precolonial period. He writes: "In this context, the differences between the seasonal division of labour and the sexual division of labour should be investigated. The growth of professions (smiths, weavers, craftsmen, potters, tanners, dyers, and barbers) in pre-colonial times needs to be studied in the various [African] societies."²⁵ Furthermore, "The mode of production, the systems of trade, the role of markets, and the system of exchange deserve thorough study." With special reference to Nigeria, "[a]gricultural patterns and development in the forest belt, the savannah, and in arid lands call for detailed investigation and analysis . . . The study of the pre-colonial institutions is a challenge which must be taken up by Nigerian scholars."²⁶

Historical Biographies

Despite the fact that there had been earlier calls (e.g., Ayandele) for the study of African heroes, Obichere added his voice to this apparent void in Africanist historiography.²⁷ Again, he strongly urged African historians to transcend ethnic loyalties in their scholarship, so as to be free to look at other heroes from outside their own ethnic confines. To this end, Obichere focused attention on Dahomey and Ashanti (Asante). His work on King Gezo of Dahomey (now Republic

of Benin) illustrated, on the one hand, his commitment to Afrocentric history, and, on the other hand, transcendence of ethnic loyalties. He portrayed Gezo as a reformer and an innovator.

But Obichere was not overly obsessed with the histories of the powerful, such as African political luminaries like Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik) of Nigeria, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, or Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. There is, of course, abundant literature on these African stalwarts. So, what seems to have been of concern to Obichere was the virtual lack of historical attention given to the less powerful, such as African athletes. He, therefore, pleaded: "We need substantial biographies of our sports heroes such as Hogan 'Kid' Bassey, Dick Tiger (Dick Ihetu), and Nojim Maiyrgun and numerous others." He added that Nigerian (and African) participation in the Olympic Games "should no longer escape our historical purview." Furthermore, "[w]ho have been the athletes and what has been the measure of success that has attended their efforts?" Without question, he concluded, "[t]he study of sports as social history will yield comparative data for the study of the relationship between Nigeria and the various neighbouring West African states that have engaged in sports competition with Nigeria."²⁸

Education and Technology

On education, Obichere, like most of his Africanist scholars, bemoaned the tendency of Africans to slavishly copy the Western systems of education. Right from the onset of European colonialism, African nationalists have chafed at the European system of education, which by and large served European, instead of African, interests. Thus Western models, Obichere cautioned, must *not* be seen as universal. Citing the example of the great African educator W. J. Davis, who extolled the values of traditional African education, Dr. Obichere warned against the tendency of African educators to cling "tenaciously to [a European] system of thought" and principles of education. He opined that, in fact, "[n]o system is the perfect one" for Africa. Therefore, African policymakers must consciously revamp the education system so as to make it *relevant* and peculiarly tailored to suit African needs. After all, "[o]ur forefathers . . . knew the principle of learning by doing long before James Dewey was born in America. The African smiths, weavers, craftsmen, sculptors, gold-

smiths, etc., all taught their apprentices on the principle that a learner learnt best by participating and by active attention."²⁹

Obichere was not, of course, the lonely voice on this matter of education reform. African political leaders, as well as cultural nationalists, had for long condemned the "aping" of European education systems. Thus the Nigerian cultural nationalist, and the reputed "Boycott King," Mazi Mbonu Ojike, put it forthrightly, "[t]here is a necessity for complete overhaul of the [British] educational system of Nigeria."³⁰ Nkrumah concurred:

Our pattern of education has been aligned hitherto to the demands of British examinations councils. Above all, it was formulated and administered by an alien administration desirous of extending its dominant ideas and thought processes to us. We were trained to be inferior copies of Englishmen, caricatures to be laughed at . . . Our text-books were English text-books, telling us about English history, English geography, English way of living, English customs, English ideas, and English weather . . . *All this has to be changed* [Emphasis added] And it is a stupendous task . . . [But] it is vital that we should nurture our own culture and history if we are to develop that African personality which must provide the educational and intellectual foundations of our Pan-African future.³¹

Similarly in the area of technology, Obichere criticized the tendency of the Nigerian governments to borrow uncritically, from the more industrial countries, technologies that were not functional in the Nigerian context. Although he allowed that "what is desirable in Western technology can be borrowed and adapted to local needs of Nigeria," Obichere nonetheless warned against unwise mimicry of Western patterns of economic development, as evidenced in the "wasteful" and unproductive projects in various parts of the country. He declared: "I do not want to sound atavistic or to champion the 'cottage industry' policies espoused by the renowned Mahatma Gandhi of India. I want to stress the point that blind mimicry and uncritical aping of Western technology and industrial styles may prove to be more harmful and wasteful in the short and long run to Nigeria and other Third World nations than they would be beneficial." Once again, he emphasized the importance of incorporating indigenous technologies into the education system. He thus asked: "Should not technology be homegrown?" By this he meant "that the

basic technologies that have served our people for centuries should be inventoried and the blue-prints of these should be prepared," so as to situate technical education on indigenous ideas and practices.³²

The Internationalist

By all accounts, Dr. Obichere was certainly an outstanding internationalist. As noted earlier, his international network was expansive. At the ASA annual meetings, for instance, he seemed to know most of the conferees. Thus on the corridors of hotels, one found Obichere talking with a host of people. "Hi Bonny," friends and acquaintances would hallow as they passed by, while others would not pass by until they had a chat with him. Quite characteristically, he would not leave until he had said "hi" to this or that man/woman, or had had a firm handshake with a host of male friends and acquaintances. He would speak in Igbo with his Igbo compatriots or in his heavy French accent with French-speaking friends and acquaintances. At times, when we were together, I would grow impatient of waiting for him, especially when we had to go out for lunch or dinner! But that was Bon, the quintessential internationalist par excellence, who transcended ethnic and racial boundaries. It is significant that, at a memorial service held in his honor, at the ASA annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio in 1997, former students, friends, and colleagues spoke eloquently of him. Professors, such as Eliot Skinner of Columbia University, J. F. Ade Ajayi of Ibadan University, and Godfrey Uzoigwe of Imo State University, among others, extolled the virtues of this great humanist and internationalist. Obichere, we were told, was "a man of the world." Although an Igbo, a Nigerian, and an African, he was nevertheless a Pan-Africanist to the core. Indeed, Bon, we miss you, but your memory will live with us forever.

Professor Obichere's internationalism is also manifest in his call for studies beyond the African horizon. African history, Obichere notes, must not be divorced from Black studies in the United States and the Third World. He illustrates:

Since the Bandung Conference (1955) the Afro-Asian world has been feeding on a new mental diet and that diet, whether it is in the extreme form or in the mild form, reminds them that after all is said and done, despite poverty, despite segregation and discrimination, they are the *majority* of human beings, of what we have categorized as *homo sapiens* . . . Though Afro-

Asian solidarity has not been a functional thing in many cases, I think it has been a fact at least ideologically. Black history or the study of black experience in America is one extension of this Afro-Asian consciousness. The Black revolution in the United States and the social and political revolution going on in Africa and Asia and, in fact, Latin America cannot be completely segregated in water-tight compartments.³³

Professor Obichere, of course, was an indefatigable traveler. By his own admission, "there is no part of Africa that I have not visited, except, of course, apartheid South Africa." This was obviously due to the fact that South Africa, at the time, was a "closed society." The racist, white minority regime did not, until recent years, allow black scholars entry to the country. But Obichere's professional travels/connections were not limited to Africa. On the contrary, he participated in numerous conferences and seminars in Europe, the Caribbean, and South America. He gave lectures in Brazil, where he surveyed African cultural survivals, as reflected in religion, food, body language, etc. At the conference at Kent State University, in 1991, Obichere also pointed to the large presence of black people in Argentina, and he jokingly exploded the notion held by "my friend" X at UCLA, that Argentina is a white country and does not have blacks there (for personal reasons, I omitted the personal name). Historically, "[t]here have been Black people in Argentina since the 17th century. The first slave ship that carried blacks, 600 of them, arrived in 1624. The first census in Argentina showed there were about 800,000 blacks there." Elsewhere in South America, he reminded his audience, black presence and black culture had flourished for a long time. "When I was in Curacao [in the Caribbean] I ate so much *dodo* [fried plantain] that I thought I was in Ajegunle in Lagos!"³⁴ To be sure, "[w]herever the Africans went in the New World, they modified the culinary dietary habits of those around them." Thus, as E. Bradford Burns has observed, "[m]any of the rice and bean dishes so common in Latin America have African origins. Yams, okra, cola nuts, and palm oil are but a few of the contributions of the African cooks."³⁵

Through his travels, of course, Obichere was able to widen the boundaries of his international connections. In addition, they enabled him, as the quotation above illustrates, to gain practical knowledge of the lives and cultures of other lands. Through careful study and travel, for instance, Professor Obichere challenged accepted knowledge which tended to obscure African contributions to world

history. For example, in a lecture delivered at Kent State University, in 1991, he exploded the "myth" of white origins of the cowboy phenomenon in the United States of America. The cowboys, he said emphatically, were the Mandingo male slaves in America who took care of the cows. Because white Americans had the racist attitude of calling black men, young or old "boys," these Mandingo cow keepers were derisively called "cowboys." Nowadays, however, white Americans who ride longhorn cows have appropriated the name "cowboys." But the name did not originate from them. In Latin America, as well, Africans who tended the cows were called "cowboys."

The Great Speaker

What seems even more remarkable about Dr. Obichere is that he was often in high demand as a speaker. This was largely so because his public performances were characteristically lively, dramatic, full of humor, and, at times, spiced with humorous exaggerations. Wherever he spoke, he exuded enthusiasm, wit, and extraordinary erudition. It was the stature of this erudite and well traveled man that led the authorities of Imo State University in Nigeria to invite him to deliver the inaugural convocation (graduation) address at the University, in 1986. In characteristic style, Dr. Obichere began with the recitation of a didactic Igbo folktale that placed community welfare above individual comfort. In humanistic analogy, he told the students (and others) the story of a hen that was asked to give her eggs to be used to make sacrifices for the welfare and life of the entire community. The hen complied with the request, and, in the process, contributed to the welfare and security of the entire community. This is the brief rendition of the folksong in Igbo:

Okuko, okuko Uneo, une ngala une
 Nne gi si gi: Uneo, une ngala une
 Nye ya out akwa Uneo, une ngala une
 Akwa eji eme nini Uneo, une ngala une
 Akwa eji egwe aja, Uneo, une ngala une
 Aja nini? Uneo, une ngala une
 Aja ndu [mmadu] nine Uneo, une ngala une
 Ole dibia gbara? Uneo, une ngala une
 Dibia Uto Osu Uneo, une ngala une.³⁶

There is no question that Professor Obichere thrilled his audience, for

this folksong certainly has a wealth of philosophical, moral, ethical, and religious implications.

Also in characteristic humor and seriousness, he said to the graduating students:

You are graduating at a time when the world political economy is in a state of recession bordering on depression. It will, therefore, not be as easy for you to obtain employment as it was for the graduates of the 1950s and 1960s and even the 1970s. [In that case] [y]ou have to exercise a lot of patience in your search for a career. You are also graduating at a time when the peace of the world is far from being assured. The two superpowers who are in command of the nuclear arsenals of destruction are being led by two old men [Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev] who come from generations when international warfare was a thing that was looked forward to . . . Despite all these . . . [y]ou should work for world peace . . .³⁷

Finally, he challenged the students to prove to the world that "you have learned something significant from this university." Specifically, they were encouraged to conduct themselves in a manner that clearly reflected "the knowledge and the intellectual development and character training that is the mark of an educated man or woman." Above all, "you should work and pray for the stability of Nigeria. [For] [s]tability and peace are two ingredients necessary for your success and longevity. Furthermore, "[y]ou should be imbued with ideals of virtue, honesty, humanism, philanthropy, and . . . fair play." In characteristic style, he also enjoined students to rise above current tendencies in Nigeria—to get rich quick through corrupt practices, including embezzlement of state funds. In closing, Obichere admonished the students to be patriotic and to always see themselves as role models. "You should be the flag bearers of Imo State University as its first alumni. Live a good life, set a good example for others and be proud of your association with Imo State University."³⁸

Conclusion

I have attempted in this essay to portray Dr. Obichere as a dear friend, whose association I shall always cherish, as a social leader and role model, an Afrocentric scholar and humanist, an internationalist, and a Pan-Africanist to the core. I would like to conclude with this epitaph:

Boniface Obichere: You lived a good life
 You helped a good number of people, both
 in Nigeria and in America.
 And now that you are no longer with us
 May your soul rest in perfect peace.
 Your memory will always be with us.

Notes

¹ Obichere generally expressed gratitude to his senior brother Sylvanus Obichere (Ndaa Sylvanus), who trained him at Holy Ghost College, Umuahia.

² Joseph E. Hollaway, "The Significance of Dr. Boniface I. Obichere within African Studies in U.S. Higher Education," *The Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1998): 6.

³ Lecture at Kent State University: "Pan-Africanism: African Cultural Survivals in the Diapora," 18 October 1991.

⁴ Jane I. Guyer, *African Studies in the United States: A Perspective* (Atlanta: African Studies Association Press, 1996), 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For more details on this fractious episode see African Research Group, *Africa Report - A Tribal Analysis of U.S. Africanists: Who They are; Why to Fight Them* (1970).

⁷ African Research Group, *Africa Report*, 78.

⁸ Guyer, *African Studies*, 59.

⁹ Boniface I. Obichere, "African History and Western Civilization," in Armstead L. Robinson, Craig C. Foster, and Donald H. Ogilvie (eds.), *Black Studies in the University* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1969), 65.

¹⁰ See Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe," *The Listener* 70 (1963): 871-75; Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher, and Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1961)

¹¹ Obichere, "African History."

¹² Frederick Lugard (later Lord) was the first Governor-General of Nigeria (1914-22). He popularized the British colonial administrative policy of "indirect rule," first introduced in Northern Nigeria, and carefully defined in his *Dual Mandate* (1922).

¹³ This is quoted from the original manuscript, which was omitted in

the published version, but reprinted as "Lecture by Dr. Boniface I. Obichere," p. 2-3. Hereafter, "Reprinted."

¹⁴ Obichere, "African History," 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93. For contemporary African nationalists' portrayals of King Shaka see the editorial in the *Lagos Weekly Record* (31 December 1898), where Shaka is also described as "the courageous Zulu King." See also, Max Gluckman, "The Individual in a Social Framework: The Rise of King Shaka of Zululand," *Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 1974): 113-144. Here, King Shaka is presented as a remarkable "great man," who built the reputable Zulu Empire.

¹⁶ Obichere, "African History," 93.

^{16b} See Boniface I. Obichere, "Change and Innovation in the Administration of the Kingdom of Dahomey," *Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Fall 1974): 235-251.

^{16c} Obichere, "African Critics of Victorian Imperialism: An Analysis," *Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1977): 5.

¹⁷ Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, "Address Delivered to Mark the Opening of the First International Congress of Africanists," in Lalage Brown and Michael Crowder (eds.), *The Proceedings of the First International Congress of Africanists*, Accra, 11-18 December 1962 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 6-11.

¹⁸ K. Onwuka Dike, "Address of Welcome to the First International Congress of Africanists," in *ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ Dike, *Proceedings*, 64, 67.

²⁰ K. Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956).

²¹ Okot p'Bitek, "Acholi Love," *Transition An International Review, The Anniversary Issue* (1975/1976), 198.

²² Obichere, "African History," 91.

²³ Boniface I. Obichere (editor), "Introduction," *Studies in Southern Nigerian History* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1982), 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ Obichere, *Studies*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ There has been a significant number of works on this topic. See, for instance, Obaro Ikime, *The Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1968); Rina Okonkwo, *Heroes of West African Nationalism* (Enugu, Nigeria: Delta, 1985); S.J.S. Cooley, *King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His Life and Times, 1821-1891* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1974); Felix K. Ekechi, *Rev. M.D. Opara of Nigeria*,

1915-1965: *Missionary Pioneer, Patriot, and Nationalist* (Forthcoming).

²⁸ Obichere, *Studies*, 6.

²⁹ Boniface I. Obichere, "Imo State University in the Context of Higher Education in Nigeria," Imo State University Convocation Lecture, Etititi Campus, 23 January 1986, 9. Hereafter, "Convocation."

³⁰ Mbonu Ojike, *My Africa* (New York: John Day Company, 1946), 263.

³¹ Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 49.

³² B. I. Obichere, "Nigeria's Oil Refineries: Assets and Liabilities," *Alvina Journal of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (November 1988): 14.

³³ Obichere, "African History," 93.

³⁴ Obichere, Lecture at Kent State University, 1991.

³⁵ Ibid. See also, E. Bradford Burns, *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*, 5th Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 25.

³⁶ Obichere, "Convocation," 6.

³⁷ Ibid., 15.

³⁸ Ibid., 16.

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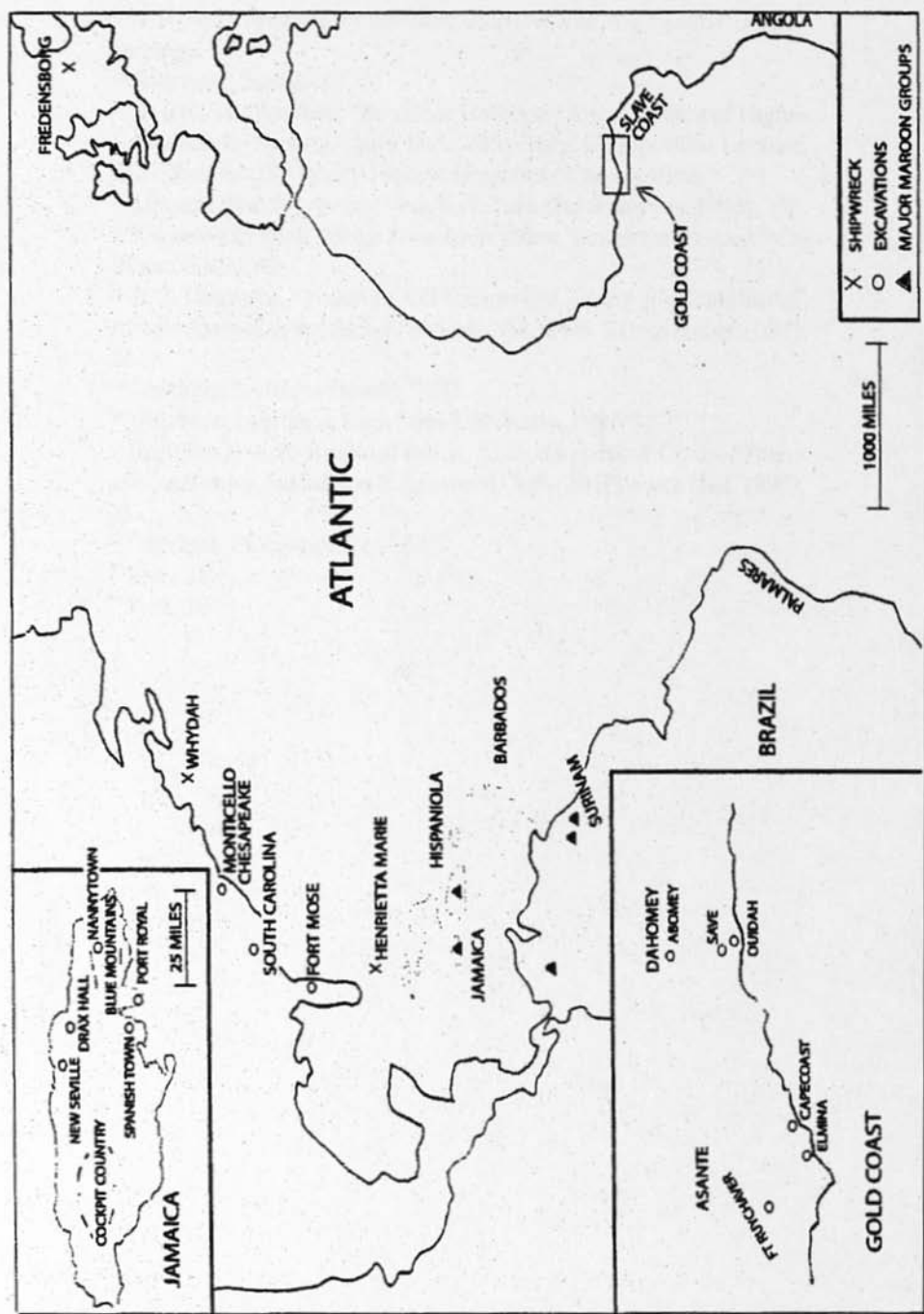
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Map Source: Merrick Posnansky