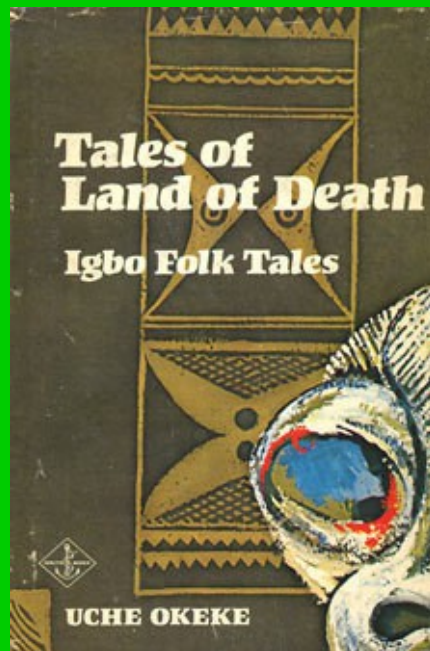


JALIYA

celebrating African and Caribbean Folklore
Issue Five - May 2023



Talking with Uche Okeke

compiled and edited by Natty Mark Samuels

Editorial

Dear Reader

This, the May issue of JALIYA, is the second instalment of what I've called, The Nigerian Icons Trilogy; celebrating figures from the three main ethnicities of that country, who have made an outstanding contribution to the oral traditions. In April, we honoured Dan Maraya, of the Hausa; June, it will probably be Amos Tutuola, of the Yoruba; in this issue, we honour Uche Okeke, of the Igbo. This collection of pieces, in conversational style, were written in 2021; I've added a front cover, photos and an editorial.

One of the luminaries of 20th century art, Uche Okeke was also a pioneering educator, generating Uliism, one of the great movements of African Art. A traditional creativity associated with women, Uli – from the plant that produces the paint – is a form of body and wall decoration for important occasions. His mother was a uli artist of wide renown and appears to have had equal skills as a storyteller. He took this celebratory art from its original setting in the village, to the city classrooms, such as Nsukka University, where it was a transformative aid, in the changing of the art curriculum. Treat yourself, by looking at the *Oja Suite*; the beauty of curvilinear magic.

Since writing 'Talking With Uche Okeke,' I've purchased *Tales of Land of Death*, his classic of Igbo folklore. It's a part of my Hallowed Quartet, including *Tales of Amadu Koumba*, by Birago Diop; *Black Cloth* by Bernard Dadie and *Sundiata* by D.T.Niane.

Tales of Land of Death, is like a testament, a homage to Igbo orality. There are songs, proverbs and riddles, as well as tales. Of the latter, three remain uppermost in my memory. *Usu (The Bat)*, about estrangement, unbelonging. *Mbe's Greed*, in which the second word of the title, gives the clue to the content of the vignette. Mbe the tortoise, is the trickster of Igbo folklore. And then there's *Gourd Daughter*, a tale yearning for parenthood. This one reminds me of one from the Ga people of Ghana, entitled *Pineapple Child*, with the same yearning, finally resulting in a child conceived by a plant, generating prejudice, resulting in the bullied one, returning to where she came from. Because of Rootical Folklore, this is my favourite.

In the first two paragraphs of the foreword, he states...

I first put these tales in writing in 1950. Since then, I have given much of my time to the study of traditional Igbo folk life and art.

It was my mother who fired my interest in our folklore. She told folk tales often when we worked together in our home. I still remember to this day her vocal interpretation of "A Maiden's Cry." In her younger days she was also active in making "Uli" body drawings.

Published in 1971, he dedicated the book to his mother.

Jaliya is a Mande term for their bardic tradition. The jali is storyteller, musician, historian, geneologist, tutor, advisor and envoy. Jalimuso is the female counterpart of Jali.

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**Back cover photograph of Uche Okeke, from *A-Arts*;
front cover image, from *Abe Books***

Dedication

to Jacqueline Forrester
of The Working Men's College
for her contribution to African Studies
and support of Rootical Folklore



Uche Okeke

from *The Guardian Nigeria*

1933 - 2016

mbe

Tell me, Uche Okeke.
How old were you,
When you first heard a tale,
About the maneuverings of the one called Mbe?

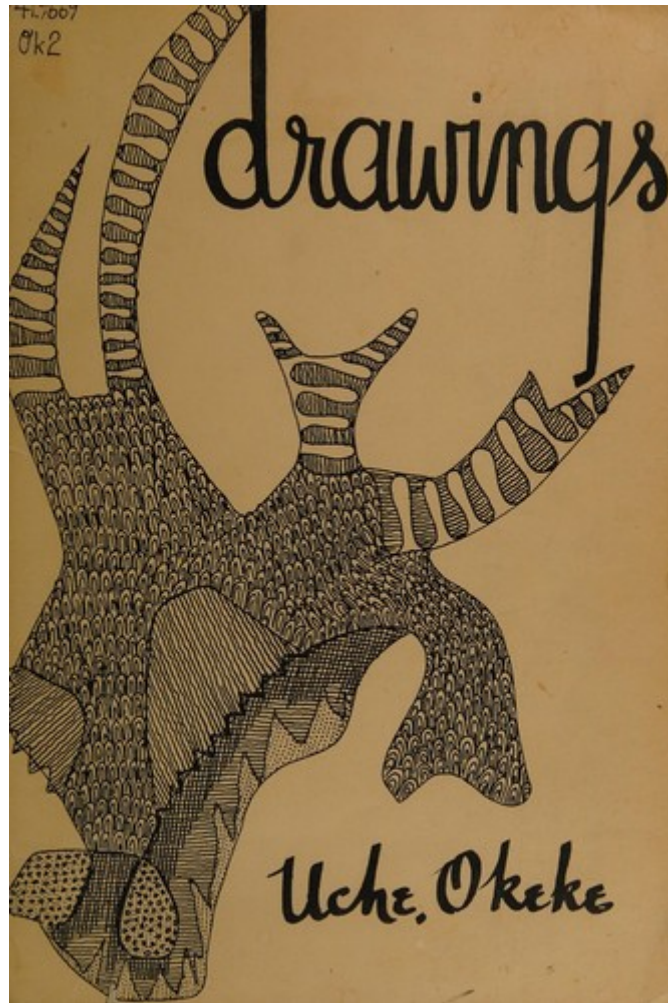
You'd washed the calabashes,
After yam and pumpkin.
And while the evening breeze,
Invited the banana leaves to dance,
Rapture painted a picture on your face
Entitled the 'Entranced One;'
As the twin spirits of Rest and Peace,
Laid their hands on each and every head.

Enchanted

I imagine you,
Reluctant to leave the enchanted circle,
But its necessary that you do.
So you give it a quick shake,
Desperate to get back,
To the 'Tale of Tortoise and the Ram.'

Nimo

Your ancestor at Igbo Ukwé,
Was riveted also,
During the telling of that story,
Of the 'Tortoise and The Magic Drum,'
As you were,
Growing up in that village called Nimo.



from *Open Library*

Iwa Ji

The children can stay up longer tonight, stories till early morning, alongside their visiting cousins. Their parents make another libation, as they share a gift of palm wine. The first yams have been blessed and eaten; the masks have been danced and the offerings made. So let them stay up, while the stories continue to unfold.

Patriarch

Its on the list, Uche Okeke,
Vision from my next payment.
To purchase your collection,
'Tales From Land of Death.'

Thinking in August,
That I'll have it in September.
A book by the patriarch,
Paying homage to ancestry.

Mbeku Chant

Mbe, mbe,
Watch out for mbe, mbe:
He'll trick you before you can blink.

Cunning and shrewd,
He knows a hustle or two:
He'll trick you before you can blink.

He'll spin a line,
Then change it next day:
He'll trick you before you can blink.

Uche Okeke

ART IN DEVELOPMENT
— A NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE



iwalewa
books

from *CKN News*

Grace

Sometimes,
Things don't go so well;
Did you ever see a tortoise,
"Fall flat on its face?"

Its carapace offered no protection,
Loneliness made an investment.
Watch how you go,
So there's not a fall from grace.

Strength

Those who built,
Knew the foundation;
Celebrating Chinua Achebe
And Demas Nwoko.
The stronger ones,
Had their sources of strength;
Celebrating Simon Okeke
And Christopher Okigbo.

Panthera pardus

Ahhh, I sense your frustration *Panthera pardus*. The big cat, struggling against the little reptile. You, symbol of strength and royalty. Chinese emperors have sat on your skin, as have the African chiefs. You are the prize of the hunter who is then celebrated. To have succumbed to human maneuverings is one thing, but to be continually subdued by a little member of your domain, is something else. In your legendary battles with your greatest adversary, so many lessons were learnt in the moonlit telling. I think of you Uche Okeke, waiting with excited anticipation for another instalment, of the eternal combat between Tortoise and Leopard.



from *Professor Uche Okeke Legacy Organisations*

Favourite Tales

Wish I could have asked him, Uche Okeke,
The one who went before you.
He painted masquerades,
And gave us Anyanwu.
Sculpted a monarch,
Painted a princess:
Wish I could have asked Ben Enwonwu.

Mama Okeke

With her finger and charcoal,
Your mother decorated the wall of your home,
An artist who received commissions.

With her voice and the fire,
She embellished the evening hours,
Adorning the Igbo tradition.

Uche and the Spell

Before Jos and Zaria,
Tales with a carapace.
Before Enungu and Kafanchan,
Lessons on the human race.
Before Lagos and Nsukka
Moonlight and a shell.
Before Owerri and Port Harcourt,
The storyteller's spell.

"Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past."

Uche Okeke

from the "Zaria Art Society Manifesto,"

Natural Synthesis, 1960

