
"Folklore Is Life" Interview with Odili Tony Ujubuonu

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INTRODUCTION

Odili Tony Ujubuonu is one of the promising stars of the Nigerian Literature in the 21st century. He is a writer who writes with a rare knowledge of his people, his culture, custom, belief, tradition and above all, their history which he recreates in his fictional works and saves for the generation yet unborn. His books are revealing, insightful, purposeful and are quality books for today and tomorrow as he confessed in the interview that his books 'are for the next generation', the people yet unborn. He writes in the ever enchanting and artistic style we refer to today as the *Achebean tradition*, a style of writing and literature initiated by the master, Chinua Achebe. Odili Ujubuonu is an award-winning writer. He made his debut in the literary scene with his first novel, *Pregnancy of the gods* which was the first novel in the series of works that made up his trilogy. The novel, *Pregnancy of the gods* won the 2006 ANA/Jacaranda Prize for Prose. The second in the series, *Treasure in the Winds* won the 2007 ANA/Chevron Prize for Prose. *Treasure in the Winds* also made the long list of the 2008 edition of the NLNG prize for literature. Only recently in 2012 under the umbrella of JALAA, he published the last of the trilogy that started with his first novel, *Pregnancy of the gods*. The title of his recent publication and the last of the trilogy is *Pride of the Spider Clan* which has started receiving the critical attention it so deserves among scholars and critics. The novel was able to make shortlist for Wole Soyinka Prize for African Literature and it won the ANA Prose Prize for 2012. Odili is a staunch member of Association of Nigerian author where he has served in some various official positions. He is married with children and lives presently in Lagos where he has continued to practice his advertising job since 1991, a job he dutifully combines with his calling as a writer.

In this interview, Odili Ujubuonu was made to speak on his career as a writer, the ingredients that informed his rare and unique style of writing, his background, his growing up, early years experiences, the glories and pains of his childhood days and the slow but steady journey to adulthood which were all part

of what combined together and fortified him for the kind of literature he writes today. He spoke about his education, his muse and most importantly how he came about to possess the rare information about his history, his people and his culture. His definition of folklore made the title of this interview. Odili spoke on arrays of issues that concern the growth and development of African literature that readers will find his comments and contributions not only insightful and remarkable but purposeful in our quest to make our literary world better. We hope it will worth the while of every reader who has the growth and future of African literature at heart. Enjoy it!

Interview Session

Asika: Can we meet you Sir?

Ujubuonu: My name is Odili Ujubuonu. I was born on June 13th 1954. I had my primary school in Lagos and in 1977 I proceeded to Christ the King College Onitsha, where I had my secondary education; the place had a turning point on my life and my view about language, probably the type of literature I am writing about today. When I came to Christ the King College I couldn't speak Igbo very well as a result they were laughing at me, so in the process of trying to reverse that deficiency I took very deep interest in the things of my people, the ways of my people, the language of my people, and the culture of my people. So instead of rushing back to Lagos when the school closes, I would head to the village and I had uncles that were alive then. Meanwhile I lost my father quite early so I stay with my uncles in the family Obi and will be chatting. During some of our discussions I learnt a whole lot about my root, my family, our heritage, that is the way we were doing things. Sometimes I witnessed quite a lot. I witnessed the morning prayers, which were very interesting and very gripping. Interesting, in the sense that it added a new vista to my world view; I realized that god was not just what it was interpreted to me in the Christian religion. It had a different and deeper meaning within the Igbo cosmology. Well, after Christ the King College I proceeded to University of Nigeria Nsukka, where I studied Political Science and while I was studying Political Science, the same thing that happened in Christ the King College continued. I was very still very closer to my root, closer to my root than I was when in Lagos. In the village I joined the *mmonwu* cult. I was involved in almost everything my people were doing. I was living my life, fully and happily, fully balanced life. By then I could speak Igbo very fluently. As a matter of fact in Christ the King I wrote A1 in Igbo, that was when I completed the reversal. So that is the background of myself.

I graduated from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, and I joined the Nigerian Police Force and I worked in the Public Relations Department. When I was there, I was doing my service year; I said to myself that I am not going to waste my service year, so I started writing articles and publishing the image of the police in a journal. I was trying to write for them. I saw a new image of the police too. So in the course of writing for them, that was for the first time somebody ever called me a writer, I never knew I was a writer, I just saw myself as someone scribbling things down. I even had a journal while I was doing my youth service in a big ledger book. The content of that journal has not entered any of my literature, may be in future they will. Then I used to write personal letters, articles and speeches for the then Commissioner of Police, Amos Dangana. In fact he was the one who introduced me to somebody as a prolific writer. Then I went back to check the meaning of the word 'prolific' and I saw it means a person who writes so much. And that's probably where the seed of "I can do it" was sowed. Then I left Jos and came back to Lagos. I landed my first job in advertizing firm and I started working. But came 1993 was a turning point for me, as a writer, for in 1993, when they had the June 12 crisis, and then nobody had anything to do. I woke up in the morning; I will go to the office doing nothing because there was nothing really to do. So I had to buy a 20 leaves exercise book from a Mallam and I said to myself why should I sit down here at my age doing nothing. My time and my youth cannot be wasted, so I started writing. I didn't plan it, I didn't do anything like an outline, and I just started writing. That was how it all started.

Asika: As a graduate of Political Science, and Master degree holder in History, I want to know how you do so well in what many graduates of literature cannot, that is writing creatively. What can you say about that?

Ujubuonu: Well, like I said earlier, first and foremost I come from all line of artists and politicians. My father was a builder and a politician. My uncle was a politician, a then member of House of Assembly. He represented Lagos in Western Nigeria. You can imagine an Igbo man representing the West, Hon. Fred Ekwedike of blessed memory. Then my grand aunty was the one that designed the *Mkpokiti*, and she was a widely known *uli* artist. Most of my cousins and my relatives if in the 70's, if you go to any of their houses you will see an *uli* sign on the walls and on the doors. They had protective elements and know so many things about the *uli*. And then my uncle was a builder like my father. One was an architect, so we were really into visual artist. We come from a line of artists and storytelling was part of the things that we learnt very early. We had

an aunty that; when she is telling you a story, even the mosquitoes will not bite that night because you will be engrossed in the depth of what she was talking about. I will say that, it comes from nature, then when it comes to nurture; you talk about the fact that I read Political Science and I am quite aware of many philosophical thoughts from Plato to Azikiwe. We had a thousand and one models of tools of analysis we were taught. That is what Political Science is all about. All these helped me a lot because if you are doing fiction, the best a fiction writer needs is the imaginative elements and because my dual upbringing, starting from the village to the city and the village, it opened up my world of imagination because I lost my father quite early. I grew up dreaming what if my father was still alive. In the course of all these I lived a very interior life and when you live an interior life your mind will always go inwards and it is easier for you to write because when you write, it is what you see within that you write without. So that's probably what may answer your question. But history on its own aided my direction and focus.

Asika: I am sure you know that your name is fast becoming a household name, what do you say about your continual rise to fame in the Hall of Fame of African literature?

Ujubuonu: Well, I don't know about fame but I know about name. Name in the sense that you have published a book and your book have succeeded and received honorable mention and critical attention. It gives a writer greater joy than even the award and money. Critical mention is more than anything else. So people mentioning your book shows that you've been able to touch issues that make literary writers take interest in what you are doing. I think for us literary writers, and for me I don't think it is particularly as a result of my efforts but as more of a blessing, because when I started writing I never knew what was good writing and what was bad writing as I never studied literature except the one I did in class 3 in secondary school. I didn't know what it was; I felt the teachers were just telling me bloody stories.

Asika: What novel brought you to limelight as a writer?

Ujubuonu: I think my first novel, *Pregnancy of the gods*. It won the ANA-Jacaranda Prize 2006, and it got so much mention and a lot of reviews. It was something new and nobody gave me a chance. When *Treasure in the Winds* came I was nominated for Nigerian Prize for Literature. That same year it won the ANA Chevron Prize and someone said, 'look, he's got his head around his

shoulders.' *Pride of the Spider Clan* came and it was able to make shortlist for Wole Soyinka Prize for African literature. And it won the ANA Prose Prize for 2012.

Asika: What inspired you to write the novel, *Pregnancy of the gods*?

Ujubuonu: Well, *Pregnancy of the gods* is a story of gain and a story of pain. Gain in the sense that I wanted to give back to the culture that welcomed me when I was nothing, like I told you my story is Christ the King College. And a story of pain in the sense that I was the son of a widow and I know the challenges that widows face. Sometimes the people over ride the issues of widows and make it look like the Nigerian and Igbo societies are very mean to the issues of the widows. My father died when I was very young and for us to grow up, my mother lived a free life. My uncles, I don't think if they were as mean as some people expected them to be, we would have inherited lands or any other thing. When my father died, his brothers were the one who took care of us. Nobody outside took care of us except close friends. My uncles made sure we lacked nothing. Nobody forced her to have a child for him; you know that kind of thing in our society. My mother was young when my father died, so there was a whole lot in our interpretations of our culture which sometimes I choose to call 'The Hollywood Mentality', where everything is negative. So *Pregnancy of the gods* is story of so many things, the story of my experience living under Abacha, living under people who want to hold on to power. They don't want to give up power and as a result, whoever was the vehicle trying to bring down that power had to be killed. So that is why the pregnancy of the woman was the democracy that needed to be given birth to. Because Abacha was the king; he loved his power so much so they didn't want that birth. You know if you read all my works you see that at the end of the day, that birth was given. Even though it was given in a somehow condition. You know I like writing on levels. I like writing stories on levels. I could be telling story about that cupboard (points) but you will read it and go home believing it is the story of this cupboard and I will keep on wondering if you will ever realize my deeper meaning. I will be in corner watching and waiting for critics or reviewers who will be able to crack the nut and when they cracked it I smile and move on. You know most time I don't think people understand me and I know I am writing a difficult genre of literature. And when you are writing a difficult genre of literature, you just have to keep on piling it, so that it would be able to live beyond you. I don't even think my book is for this generation, I don't think this generation understands my book well enough.

Asika: Do you suppose to mean your works are futuristic?

Ujubuonu: No... not that they are futuristic but for everything I write, I am interested in preserving something. I want to preserve the culture; I want to preserve those things the people are beginning to forget. I preserve culture, I preserve magic, those things that are untouchable, and the kinetic elements that you think if you write or talk about you go to hell. You know I preserve those things I know some writers don't write because of their faith. You know I read and write them irrespective of my faith in order to preserve them in the future because may be in future, some people may pick them and will learn so much that we may have forgotten and they could deconstruct all these and when they deconstruct all these, it becomes beneficial. So that is it.

Asika: I read somewhere that it took you 13 years or so to complete *Pregnancy of gods*. I want to know what really happened.

Ujubuonu: If you look at the year 1993 to 2006, that's 13 years but that doesn't mean that I spent the whole 13 years writing it. But you know it is from the day you started writing to the day you are published that determines the time spent in writing. They were of course interregnum- lots of them. They were periods that I never worked on the books and there were periods I worked on them almost on a daily basis.

Asika: Why did it take you lesser years to write other novels, *Treasure in the winds* and *Pride of the Spider Clan* in less than 8 years of producing *Pregnancy of the gods*?

Ujubuonu: 2006-2012 that's six years, *Pregnancy of gods* was published 2006 and *Pride of Spider Clan* 2012, you don't know your mathematics, it's six years. (Both laugh) so just do the calculations.

Asika: So why did it take you lesser years?

Ujubuonu: May be because one, I have found my voice, two, the story had been told. The next thing was to write it. You know it was a trilogy, three books. You know that by the time *Pregnancy of the gods* was finishing, the writer has already knows every line that will feature in the last of the novel that complete the trilogy, *Pride of the Spider Clan*.

Asika: You have taken me to the next question. When you were writing *Pregnancy of the gods* was there a laid down plan to make it trilogy, were you envisaging the other two novels coming or were they accidental?

Answer: Yes, of course, I know they will come. In fact by the time *Pregnancy of the gods* was finishing, I knew the end of *Pride of the Spider Clan*. That was why I had to work hard to complete them and it took a lot of discipline to complete them.

Asika: So sir can you tell us more about the Nzamili... your muse.

Ujubuonu: Okay, my muse, yeah, the truth is that everything I wrote in the forward of *Treasure in the Winds* happened. There was day I was sleeping and then I had a dream. I had a dream that I found myself in a canoe and the canoe docked at the bank of *osimili* River, and there was this beautiful maiden who had what we call *Akwammiri*, *Akwammiri* is what the Onitsha call *akwaocha*, but theirs is white, ours is blue. The blue cloth woven...She had the *akwammiri*, the blue stuff and was paddling the canoe and I was there. She said I should enter the canoe that she wants to paddle me to the land. That she is *Nzamili*, the goddess of story, and that she will paddle me to the land where I will get more stories and I told her, 'thank you very much that I like to paddle my own canoe.' I told her that I like paddling my own canoe, that I don't want anybody to help me. Then she now smiled, and then I woke up. So for me, I know that it was a conscript of the muse but yet I still want the spirit element, my being, myself to take control of everything I do. I don't like being led by other spirits and other things. This sounds a little psychological but that was what actually happened. Then when I was working on *Pregnancy of the Gods*, I had a full experience were in my dream too I had two midgets, sorry three midgets appeared and they came to me. They had an *otuugo* and they had an Igbo feather and they came to me and used *okeokpa*, (cock) you know what *okeokpa* means and they hit it on my *ikenga* (he demonstrates) and you know what it means, it is like charging you to greater things in the future. *Ikenga* is like your life, *ikenga* is from here to here (shows the portion from the chest to a point below the heart) this is your *ikenga*, so they hit my *ikenga* and one of them saluted me and so they left. So the three midgets and they were all scarified, you know what scarification means? '*Igbuichi*' and I come from a place where the first son of my family must be scarified, *ogaegbuliliichi* and I came from a line of titled men. I am the one that has not collected one. In fact from my line it was only my father that did not collect a title but my father was scarified too.

So at Nri the scarification was an Nri signature, the depth of all that had got me involved in the Oluada Equianoh thing. I am sure you must have heard of the word '*mgbirichi*'. So that is it.

Asika: Some critics call you one of the loyal sons of Achebe. They said you are continuing the Achebe and tradition. Do you agree?

Ujubuonu: Yes, of course, I agree. I didn't have to reinvent the wheel. All I needed to do was to enter the bus. So I am a passenger in the Achebe's bus. (Both laugh).

Asika: What does folklore means to you?

Ujubuonu: Well, folklore is life. Lore is the story, folk is the people. That is the story of the people. The story of my people, because they are travelers when you talk about *Oluna Igbo*, *Olu* being the Eastern part of the Niger and the Western bank of the Niger; That is, the *Olu* because the word '*olu*' came from '*olulunri*' that is the entire land, the fertile land of the Western bank of the Niger. So people migrated to areas from Benin, some came from Igala, some came from Izon, Ivon, Nupe, they all intermingled and now became the *olu* people but the *olu* people are not the pristine Igbo but they are Igbos at the hinterland of the Eastern part. That's why an Onitsha man will call you '*onye Igbo*', *Onye Igbo*. He is not calling you *onye Igbo* for some people who doesn't have a good sense of history think that it has to do with the war but it's a lie. The Achalla man calls you *onye Igbo*... then Aguleri man sometimes calls you *onye Igbo*. These are the *olu* people and they are intermingling but we are the hinterland Igbos, the *oluna Igbo* was the nation of old if you remember Afam Ogbuotobo in has song '*olu n' Igbo bianu*' (He sings) and if you really listen to a deep Igbo person speaking he says, '*ejemolu je Igbo*' so it is so much. Our people were travelling people and we venerate the earth and because we venerate the earth, we travel safely. Because everywhere we go we say '*Anibuotu*' because Ani will always guide us. Because we are travelers, we are bearers of stories. So we have folklore, it is our people's stories, it's only the man who travels that can come back with stories. That is why the Igbos are good story tellers. My view of folklore is that as long as we had *Idu n' Oba*, our boundary between *Olu n' Igbo*, the boundary between *Olu n' Igbo* is '*Aniigbanke*,' or *Aniigbooke* '*igbanke*' is the next town in Edo State, the next town after *Ata Agbor*. We had *igbanke* that is *igbaoke*, so the *igbanke* land is in Edo State but it is an Igbo speaking land, so and after *igbanke* you enter *Ani Idu n' Oba*, which is the Benin kingdom. So,

among the Igbo's the Benin culture and kings were so foreign to us, and we mystified it. That is why the Igbo speaking olu people will tell you they come from Benin. Everybody wants to come from Benin. Benin you know was a mythical thing; it was a glorious mystery, just like people talk of heaven now. It was a mysterious thing because it was the land of magicians, the kings with many wives you know but these are stories for another day. That is the much I can say about folklore.

Asika: You made abundant use of folklore materials and oral traditions in your novels were they accidental or intentional?

Ujubuonu: Of course they were intentional. They are very essential too. You can never tell our stories without the lore.

Asika: So how did you come about the lore? Was there a direct contact?

Ujubuonu: Of course we earned them. There was a direct contact while I was growing up and some I took them from some translations I made from F.C. Ogbalu's *Mbediogu*.

Asika: Why did you use them in your novels?

Ujubuonu: I used them in my novels because I am writing in English and I was expressing the Igbo worldview so I wanted to give it a wider outlook.

Asika: You incorporated so many proverbs in your novels, can you justify their inclusions?

Ujubuonu: yes, because I wanted to preserve them if you remember what I told you earlier. I wanted to preserve a whole lot in my works and I am still proverb-hunting. I hunt them so that I can preserve them for the future generation.

Asika: In almost all the three novels you have tales in them. Please why did you recreate these tales?

Ujubuonu: Folktales, I help to preserve them too.

Asika: Where there any other function they were playing outside your aim of preserving them?

Ujubuonu: Yes, of course, they were helping to drive the story. Our people pay so much attention to 'okwu'. The word *okwu* is almost worshipped. 'Anyinaejeokwu' 'Anyinweluokwu n' abania', 'okwuanyikwuluubochi d' you know 'okwunna m gwara m' you know... so okwu is beyond letter. It is sacred, so that mysterious nature of okwu, show that there are certain things involved in okwu and for you to make okwu less biting on the ears, you use the vehicle of proverbs to tune them down. You use the vehicle of folklore to tune them down and to drive them. If you remember in the story of Adaego that is in the *Treasure in the Winds*, there was a place where Obiuta had Adaego in between his legs playing the *oja* and telling her stories of tortoise, the wise tortoise who had all the wisdom stuffed in a bottle and was trying to cross just simple barrier and he couldn't cross and it took a palm wine tapper who told him that you think you know everything, just put that bottle behind you and your hands will be free and you will cross freely. And the tortoise did as was told and crossed it. He now removed the bottle and broke it and said that nobody has a monopoly of knowledge. So, Ikechukwu thought he was a very intelligent man, he thought he was the most intelligent man on earth but he didn't know that even his slave could outsmart him. That was why Obiuta told the child that story, trying to let the reader know that even Obiuta was conscious of that fact that he was making a very bold step by the countering the most intelligent man in Abanta.

Asika: How do you assess the growth of Nigerian writers in contrast with development elsewhere perhaps in other parts of Africa?

Ujubuonu: Well for me, a story is a burden and every writer is pregnant with a story. You know pregnancy is a burden and you carry it until you deliver it. What you can count in population is the number of children you don't count the number of unborn children. So from that view, I think we need more stories today whether it is successful, whether it is not successful. Whether it is read throughout the whole world or whether it is not, people should keep writing stories, quality stories which I will say is the maternity. The vehicle of this delivery which is the publishing is also what we need to be selective about so that the stories will not come out boldly, so that Nigerian books can favorably complete with international standards.

Asika: So do you think we are on the right track, I mean Nigerian writers when you compare our output with that of writers elsewhere, say Ghana, Sierra Leone and other Africa countries?

Ujubuonu: Well, I can only say we are hardworking people and in every aspect of life, we put in hard work and when you put in hard work it shows. I can say yes, Nigerian writers have done very well. If you look at Caine Prize and some other prizes you will know that we have done well. We have done better than some other people.

Asika: I noticed something recurrent in all your novels and that is the use of dreams. You explored several issues through the use of dreams of your characters. Sometimes they serve as suspense, other times as foreshadowing of something that will still happen and other times may not have a clear-cut bearing on the plot of your stories please what can you say?

Ujubuonu: Yes, like I said, I believe and I tell myself that I do three dimensional writing and if you are doing three dimensional writing you have so many things to worry about. The fourth dimension is the dream stage. You know where the character is expressing sometimes. We the Africans, the Igbos we believe so much in dreams. Dreams help us to foreshadow our lives. It helps us to live our current lives and even warn us about dangers.

Asika: Where they conscious elements in the novels?

Ujubuonu: No! No, no, let me put it this way, it is like telling the traditional Onitsha story today without mentioning 'nrioka'. If you don't mention 'nrioka' it means you don't know the culture very well. What I am saying is that in the cosmology of the Igbos, we know that dreams are very important vehicle. That is why I use them. I use them because one I am an Igbo man. Two, I want to be real, for everybody to see that.

Asika: What do you have to say about the handling of sexuality and obscenity in modern literature or what I called 'Literary Eroticism' which prompted Femi Osofisan to cry foul in one of his papers entitled "the Wounded Eros and Cantillating Cupids...."

Ujubuonu: For me, the most erotic scene I have and I am always quick to tell people that the person who insisted I write them was a born again Christian. One I am catholic and because I am a catholic I have a kind of measured approach. You know I believe sex is something that a man does. It is not something a man writes about. A gentleman does not go about discussing or writing about sex. If I keep on writing much about them I am telling people look

I enjoy them. Everybody pretends not to enjoy sex but a lot of people do enjoy sex. But the truth is that it is still a private thing; it is the most private part of my body and most private part of another's body, so why should I now be putting the most private part of my body or relationship on paper, am I promoting them? So for me I think while I don't have any problem with writers doing what they feel, I will never legislate sexual writing, I will not be very quick to be too graphic in my writing but I can lead you in that direction.

Asika: So are you trying to decry obscenity and literary eroticism as we have in our literature today like Osofisan did in his paper?

Ujubuonu: Let me let you know my opinion. My own opinion as Odili Ujubuonu, I don't know about Femi Osofisan is that sex in literature if it is a fundamental part of a story, removing it is like removing the story or removing the strong chain of that story. But some writers, a writer's writing is the product of your mind. If your mind is designing stories that will make sex an important driving element of that story, then you fall into what Osofisan is talking about, but if it is accidental in what you are writing, you can actually tune it down. I can't be writing 'Sex is a Nigger Game' and I won't be writing how you will insert your finger inside a woman's vagina. This is because that is the vehicle driving the whole thing.

Asika: It wasn't much in your work compared to many other Nigerian novels except for one place I think you're guilty of using such, it was the scene involving Ozodi and Adamma in your *Treasure in the Winds*, when you were describing the effect of the flute on Adamma and how Ozodi seduced her which in the end culminated to the loss of her virginity.

Ujubuonu: You know (laughs) my editor insisted that I write it. And if you notice I still had to break it down, and at the final encounter, I allowed birds to fly, before I said the last thing. (Both laugh).

Asika: It is quite funny and fun too. At the verge of it all, at the very peak of their encounter you allowed birds to fly that's very interesting and diplomatic too.

Ujubuonu: Yes, I had to tune it down. The reader shouldn't be so much engrossed. So I had to tune it down with birds distracting the flow of the thoughts of the reader. I have this colleague of mine who with always taunt me

about some lines in my *Pregnancy of the gods*, where I wrote about where they 'discovered hairs in the hidden corridors of her limbs'. The guy never leaves me alone. He kept insisting I explain what are the hidden corridors, but that is a very good way of talking about the idea that she was growing pubic hairs but I didn't want to say that, so I don't want to make it graphic so that to find hair in the hidden corridors of her limbs, and remember that 'Nkpaabu' is also limb, you could still see hairs there and they all go with puberty.

Asika: Your novels seem to be environmental conscious, the vegetation, 'everything echoing green'. These novels could be best studied from eco-critical point of view. Was that deliberate or part of what makes you and your writing unique?

Ujubuonu: I believe that when you are doing three dimensional writing, it is not just about humans, it is about everything. Remember in the past that leaves spoke to people and people spoke to the leaves.... People look at leaves and tell you their medicinal value and power. The herbalists will look at leaves, counts the number of petals it has and the number of petals will tell you '*nke a na'gwonkaa* (this one heals this one) and when he enters the bush he is looking for the number of petals on that leaves so that when he counts them you find that the one that has 18 petals, plus mixed with the one that has 15 petals are going to, when you add water and add fire, put them in air for three days you are going to achieve a certain cure. So that is the secrets the herbalists gather, they gather them and it become a science and no longer art. So for you to write on Africa literature, you have to understand the language of the forest, you have to understand the mumblings of the rivers, wind, the earth, fire, they are the four elements that rule the environment so you must know them. Wind, earth, water and fire, and these are the four elements that rule magic .So without four of them magic cannot take place. And life itself is magic.

Asika: You sound esoteric a little and it reflects in your works.

Ujubuonu: No, what I am trying to explain here now is that the environment must have as bearing; it must have a stake in good stories.

Asika: All your books are good stories and could make a fruitful study in the area of eco-critical discourse. Thank you very much for that. It is a nice one seeing a novel where everything echoes green, uniting nature and man in one common cause. Thank you. So can you tell us about your awards?

Ujubuonu: Like I said earlier, I think I've mentioned them. *Pregnancy of the Gods* won the ANA Jacaranda Prize for Prose in 2006. *Treasure in the Winds* was nominated for Nigerian Prize in Literature in 2008 and it went ahead to win the ANA-Chevron Prize on Environmental Issues in 2008. Then *Pride of the Spider Clan* won the Nigerian Prose Prize in 2012 and was nominated for Wole Soyinka prize.

Asika: The Wole Soyinka Award have they selected a winner?

Ujubuonu: Yes, it was a South African writer that won it.

Asika: Okay. What does JALAA mean and what's your involvement with them?

Ujubuonu: JALAA is actually a group of Nigerian writers who are committed to writing and publishing and improving the Nigeria literature. So we put in our resources together to bring good stories to the public. And you know JALAA had a very huge success. For the first outing, Akachi Ezeigbo's book, *Roses and Bullets* you know was shortlisted for the Wole Soyinka Prize in Literature. Jude Dibia's book, *The Black Bird* was nominated also for Nigerian Prose Prize that year which *Pride of the Spider Clan* won. Uche was also shortlisted for Nigerian prize in literature. So four books that JALAA published were all successful and it goes to show the quality of JALAA products. The fact is that we are very imaginative people in JALAA but we are also passionate about what we produce. We are not like some of young writers who would want to published anything. We are very slow. With time Nigeria will see and enjoy the JALAA model.

Asika: I guess that's an acronym?

Ujubuonu: No: JALAA is actually a language spoken in northern Nigeria that was almost going extinct and before it goes extinct we felt we could preserve it.

Asika: Somebody once argued that JALAA is an acronym of Jude Dibia, Akachi Adimora and host of other writers.

Ujubuonu: No, No, No it is not true.

Asika: Outside fiction do you hope to be celebrated in other genres of literature?

Ujubuonu: No, no, no I don't think so. I write poems but my poetry is for my personal consumption. It is my personal journey.

Asika: (jokingly) like a mad man talking to himself

Ujubuonu: Yes, my poetry is for me.

Asika: Do you hope to write modern fiction some day?

Ujubuonu: Yes! Have you read my short stories? You can find them online like "Good Evening Street". It is a short story by me. You just type online *Good Evening Street* and it will appear. Then you can find "Scarlet Puddle". They are short stories and they are all modern stories. The other is a story about prostitution in Ajegunle where I grew up. "Scarlet Puddle"

Asika: What do we expect from JALAA and you in the near future?

Ujubuonu: Well I am working on a new book and JALAA is also working on new book and we have a lot of plans.

Asika: So how do you combine writing with your advertising job and married life?

Ujubuonu: Well writing is a vocation, advertizing is my profession, my occupation and my family is my life. So I first of all protect the nature instinct which is life. So my family comes first. My profession comes second because it gives me the resources to take a vocation.

Asika: There is an argument that the crop of new writers have not fitted properly into the shoes of older writers and they are yet to attain the level of creative excellence the older writers attained...writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Chukwuemeka Ike, Ekwensi among few notable names...what is your opinion?

Ujubuonu: I think Nnolim was talking about the older generation writers but there was a line he used. Try and find the exact line. It was published online that time. For me the truth is that the past is always very attractive for so many critics. The past to some critics is more lustrous than the future. And the past for us writers, we will always romanticize it and it is part of literature. So it is only natural that critics will look at the past and see things that are better

in the past than how we have it today. But don't forget that today will become the past of some other future and will tell the people then that they didn't handle some issues the way we do today. It is only natural for people to idealize and glorify the past. Mothers today don't do anything expect their own mothers. Mothers of today criticize their children that they don't do anything. So Nnolim was caught in the web of Nostalgia. (Both laugh)

Asika: That's a big statement you have there, which is bound to provoke further criticism and responses.

Ujubuonu: Yes, Nnolim is caught in the web of nostalgia and his idealized past.

Asika: Okay, among your there novels which one can someone 'catch' you reading quite often?

Ujubuonu: Well, *Pregnancy of the gods* has a role in my life as it was my first major work. *Pride of the Spider Clan* is a book I loved writing, I loved writing it because it said so much things about the things I love and support. But the truth is that I am an artist and I believe that the book I wrote from an artist point of view is *Treasure in the Winds*. For me the book is the one that is so artistic and musical to my ears. I don't give a damn what the world loves most but the book is the one I love most, *Treasure in the Winds*. It is just because of the art element. There are so much of art elements in it, that being an artist, a consummate artist, the singer, dancer and lover of visual arts, lover of everything that is music I think that's the one, even in the choice of language, it is the one that is musical to me. That is the one I have my preferment.

Asika: What is your connection with ANA?

Ujubuonu: I am a member of ANA, and I am supportive of ANA and I believe in ANA and I think we are being too critical of ANA and we see ANA as infallible because it is being run by writers, but life has shown me that nobody is infallible you know expect the pope, quote and unquote. That's all. Any way for me, why I am not too critical of people or human being is that I don't expect too much from people and the moment you learn not to expect too much from people you never get disappointed by people and I don't get disappointed. I think people should given ANA a chance, ANA has the capacity to do well. So when they do well we hail them, when they do badly we criticize them.

Asika: Do you think you've written your best work?

Ujubuonu: If I've written my magnum opus that means I am not ambitious!

Asika: What are you working on presently?

Ujubuonu: Well I am working on a book, for posterity and for the best of writing I wouldn't tell you what I am working on. But you can be sure I am working on something new.

Asika: This is almost the last question. Some readers call you a 'suspense-craft master' considering have you weaved the suspense that ran all through your novel in such a mastery way, like the web of a spider... almost all incidence and events were well reconciled in the end...what do you say about that?

Ujubuonu: Well I have always loved suspense filled novels. I've always loved Harold Robin; I've always loved the Igbo story tellers. I have this aunty who when she starts telling you a story, she begins with (mimics the sound in vernacular) *di gim di gim di gim... o we di kakamgbaanyijinoluebe a. Ebenile we daakpoo! E we n' eje, n' eje, n' eje, n' ejeagakatagakata, gbosaa!* So I've always loved that kind of delivery, and ... I try to convey all these things in my works. That why some people say you write like Achebe you write like... the only thing I borrowed from Achebe is language. I borrowed from some other writers too.

Asika: What are you hobbies?

Well, I love reading things that people have decided not to read. I love interacting with children because that's where you get the original inspiration. I love interacting with village people. I love scrabble because it makes me think. I love sports and swimming.

Asika: Any word of advice for upcoming Nigerian writers?

Ujubuonu: Yes, don't be in a hurry to publish! I received a material from someone who wants to be a writer. He gave me his manuscript to edit. I honestly, diligently wanted to look at the manuscript even with my time and everything and I promise myself that I was going to read the first chapter to the end. I worked hard but I couldn't read up to the ten pages reason because as far as I was concerned, he wasn't writing yet. At that point, he should be learning how to write. First of all he has not learnt his language. You can never

tell a story in a bad language. No publisher will collect a manuscript that has bad language. My advice to us is that we should master the language, if we can't master the English language let's go and master the Igbo language. Tony Ubesie was wonderful writing in Igbo. If you have not mastered the English language there is no point writing in it. When a writer misses his tenses, his syntax, misses the basic things about grammar, it become a problem to readers. That is number one. The second is that we must broaden our imagination. So much work to do on our imagination. You must be able to close your eyes and try to walk from here to there locating your way. As you are doing it you are opening your mind's eye. You should be able to take quite walks. When you get to the village go to the streams, sit down there on your own. You should be able to do a whole lot of things. Be introspective. Travel within. Explore the landscape within. Do so much. It is in training that you will be able to write. Your senses must be at work. You should be able to smell, you should be able to hear, perceive if possible. Do the ESP, the extra centric perception. By the time you finish it, when you write something and somebody is reading it, the person will be feeling it. That is what I think. And I have not perfected my writing. I am shall working on it.

Asika: The last but not the least question. You have said so much about Okey Okpa and I guess you fondly call him 'foot'. Can you say a little about him?

Ujubuonu: Did you see a book they did for him recently?

Asika: No

Ujubuonu: I was all over in the paper.

Asika: My own little experience is that when I came to Lagos I went looking for him only to realize that I was looking for and calling the phone number of a dead man. It was thrilling and pathetic too.

Ujubuonu: As your saying this, you have triggered a well of tears in my eyes (wipes off the tears in his eyes) we were in the University of Nigeria Nsukka. I was in He was in Njoku. He was in 419; I was 414, so we were always very close then. Our rooms were very close. He was studying English with another Okey Anyaneme. They were in English I was in Political Science. But as early in the university I noticed they had a burden. That people who study English has a huge burden to carry, the huge burden was that they are spending so much of

their time looking at what is wrong with literature instead of what is good about life. So the university system made people that study English to go and look at what is wrong with writing, what is wrong with criticism. When they come back they always talk about what this man said about Achebe and what the other said about Soyinka but very few people thought about the beauties of life. The wonders of life, the luscious nature of life which is what life is all about. So I saw it was such a great burden that all of them are carrying and I felt it a part of me that I should go and do the thing for them. Since all of them were criticizing, let me go back and write it for them. So when we left 'foot' joined the advertizing business and Okey joined the advertizing business. But somehow we crossed ourselves and met again. And when he knew I was writing he started editing me. He edited *Pregnancy of the gods*, and *Treasure in the Winds* and he was looking forward to *Pride of the Spider Clan*. He was so much in love with the title. He said that it was one of the greatest tittles he has ever heard. 'Pride of a spider clan', he will repeat it over and over again. He was always saying: 'don't give it to me yet' and he never said the manuscript before he died. That was why I dedicated *Pride of Spider Clan* to him. It was a book he never saw. Some other editors worked on it and I am sure if he had worked on it, he would have given it some other shape because he has his own touch (wipes his face again).

Asika: I wouldn't want us to end the interview in a sorrowful mood, so your course in the university has it any bearing on your works?

Ujubuonu: Yes, I have a Masters in History, and when I went to study History. I went to study history because of the kind of writing I am doing today. I needed to sharpen my knowledge of environs, the world. That's my burden now because you find out that there is something about a free man, a free writer and I who read History. If did not study history I probably would have finished my next novel but I want to do it so well. Now I studied history I am trying to do it properly. That is the problem because I read History. I cannot be that fictitious. I have to create real history in my work. So that's a burden. Okay, let me give you an insight into what I am working on right now. I am doing a work on a case that happened in my village and I want to work on a very small thing. All my books I have explored so many big issues, now I want to work on a very small thing. I want to confine it to a very small space so I have to focus more on the characters. So the characterization is strong in what I am doing now, as a result of that the historic element of that particular case. I need to get them as strong as possible so that when I bring fiction into it, it will be so real like the case of Ekemma and Eze Ochendo in *Pregnancy of the Gods*. Everyone had his

own advocate in *Pregnancy of the gods* and both of them clashed and it was a huge case. It is a litigation case tried in the court of ani. That is how the Igbo justice system works. So I am working on a very interesting story. It is a story I know for me and for the writer when it is well done, it will help people understand how we use language, our lore, and witnesses.

Asika: In a kind of an ending remark, the genre of writing you have taken to is not an area a young writer will a in a hurry to join. So what will you tell a young writer towing your line?

Ujubuonu: Yes, what I will tell the person following the same line with me is, know your people very well, and know your culture, your heritage, your people, and wear out their lore. Visit them, interview them, befriend them, spend on them, let them empty their knowledge on you, so that by the time you come out even your first paragraph will be something. It will be like a bomb. That is what I will tell any young writer towing my line. Again I depended on secondary materials. There are so much that has been written about the Igbos lying there in History Departments. The histories of so many towns are there. Go to Religion Departments, you will see what people have done. Go to the internet, American universities and blacks all over the world have carried out much research on the Igbos. There are so many materials that will help to enrich a young writer. Don't depend on the ones that you know. Those materials people thought are nothing should be something to you.

Asika: It is been a wonderful moment of interaction with you. On a lighter note, you seem to be knowledgeable in the mythical art and culture of the Igbo people. It was from your work that I pick the definition of *mmonwu* which means *mmaonwu*. I think it is another side of you worthy of note and the reading public won't mind knowing more.

Ujubuonu: Yes, *mmonwu* is *mmaonwa*- 'I know death. There is something we call 'amaram ma egwuatum', I know you yet I am afraid of you because our *mmonwu* is more like a cult. When the *mmonwu* is out, the initiates are much more afraid of it than the non-initiates because the non-initiate knows little but the initiates know the mystery of our *mmonwu*. If *mmonwu* appears here now I will be the first to run, because of the idea of 'amaramegwuatum'. 'Nwatamarammonwuomaraonwugaegbuya! The *mmonwu* said 'I am *ijiaman' otubuonye a!* 'Adiabuagbaizuobuluonyeato', 'onyanwabuonyeibianyunsu n' ata', *makaonyeibinyuonsi n' ataataaduwasiayaibi...* (Continues to chant in vernacular).

Asika: We could go on and on and on. Thank you very much Odili. It has been wonderful chatting with you and I know the readers will feel the same way too. We look forward to greater exploits from you in the near future and should the need arise; I will still come to you. Thank you very much.

Ujubuonu: The pleasure is mine. Thank you too.

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