

THERE WAS A COLLEGE: INTRODUCING *THE UMUAHIAN: A GOLDEN JUBILEE PUBLICATION*, EDITED BY CHINUA ACHEBE

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Because colonialism was essentially a denial of human worth and dignity, its education programme could not be a model of perfection. And yet the great thing about being human is our ability to face adversity down by refusing to be defined by it, refusing to be no more than its agent or victim. (Achebe 1993)

Government College, Umuahia, one of Nigeria's three leading colonial secondary schools, is known among literary critics around the world for being the alma mater of eight important Nigerian writers: Chinua Achebe, Chike Momah, Elechi Amadi, Chukwuemeka Ike, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, Ken Saro-Wiwa and I. N. C. Aniebo. Many are the illustrious Nigerian scientists, intellectuals and public leaders who passed through the Umuahia Government College in its prime, and in Nigeria – and to a lesser extent in the former British Cameroons – the name of the school evokes an astounding range of success stories. But Umuahia's legend as 'the Eton of the East' and the *primus inter pares* of Nigeria's elite colonial institutions obscures its present reality: nothing remains of its magnificent past but its extensive grounds, landmark buildings, and the glittering roll call of Nigerian dignitaries who once studied within its walls. Upon a cursory search, the inquisitive web surfer is greeted by alarming synopses of the school's current state and status: 'Government College, Umuahia in tatters', 'Government College, Umuahia still crying for redemption'. Other headlines, such as 'Abia: decline of a pace setter: decay, ruin take over Abia schools' and 'Pathetic state of Umuahia public schools', reflect the fact that Government College is not alone in its physical and educational despoliation.¹ And yet, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the school's former distinction adds to the pathos of its fate.

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¹See K. Udensi (2011) 'Government College, Umuahia in tatters ... see the pictures', Gists in Nigeria website, 27 October, <<http://nigeriantalkative.blogspot.com/es/2011/10/government-college-umuahia-in.html>>, accessed 21 October 2013; K. Udensi (2012) 'Government College, Umuahia – still crying for redemption', *The Nigerian Voice*, 21 October, <<http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/nvnews/36770/1/government-college-umuahia-8211-still-crying-for-r.html>>, accessed 21 October 2013; O. Martins and O. Sampson (2013) 'Abia: decline of a pace setter: decay, ruin take over Abia public schools', *The Sun Educational Review*, 11 June, <<http://sunnewsonline.com/new/specials/abia-decline-of-a-pace-setter-2/>>, accessed 21 October 2013; O. Martins and C. Onuoha (2013) 'Pathetic state of Umuahia public schools', *The Sun*, 2 July, <<http://sunnewsonline.com/new/specials/pathetic-state-of-umuahia-public-schools/>>, accessed 21 October 2013. See also the video 'Tour of Umuahia Gov. College, Abia State, Nigeria', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5n7Axb9X8Zc>>, accessed 9 July 2014.

The decline of the Umuahia Government College is neither a recent nor a sudden phenomenon. In 1979, prompted by the many signs of impending doom, a group of old boys joined hands in a historicizing venture, *The Umuahian: a golden jubilee publication* – the commemorative booklet commissioned by the Government College, Umuahia Old Boys' Association (GCUOBA) and compiled by the school's most famous alumnus, Chinua Achebe, to mark the college's golden jubilee. The sixty-page booklet, written with an Umuahian readership in mind, conjured up the founding ideals and glorious past of Government College in order to lay the ground for its educational, ideological and physical rehabilitation. Despite its scope and purpose, and even within its restricted audience, *The Umuahian* was a rare commodity. According to Eugene Ibe, the event manager for the golden jubilee celebrations, 'We made just enough copies for distribution at the event itself. It was paid for by the Association and I don't recall now whether we charged money for it or made it part of the package given out during registration.'² Even though *The Umuahian* was reprinted an unspecified number of times, it is now a 'collector's item', in the words of literary scholar, journalist and Umuahia alumnus Obi Nwakanma.³ This explains its scant circulation in academic circles and beyond.⁴

While Achebe's editorial and its coda, the essay 'Continuity and change in Nigerian education' – both of which are featured here in the print edition of the journal – clearly state the volume's objectives and preoccupations, a reading of *The Umuahian* may appear to offer more of a glimpse than a sweeping vista of the volume's generative context and the school's complex past. However, as I will illustrate in this introductory essay, *The Umuahian* is an indispensable source for the literary, cultural and educational history of West Africa. Not only does it preserve subjective experiences of colonial education and postcolonial reflections on colonial heritage that would otherwise have been lost to history, but it is an illuminating example of what Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de memoire* – a site that subverts disruption by reaffirming a sense of historical continuity, a document in which memory and history interact, resulting in their reciprocal overdetermination (Nora 1989: 7–19). *The Umuahian* is also remarkable for its literary aspects; six out of its twelve contributions were composed by some of West Africa's most

²Personal communication, 10 October 2013.

³Nevertheless, *The Umuahian* was neither readily available upon demand nor archived in the school library. Kelsey Harrison recalls that during his period as Vice Chancellor of the University of Port Harcourt in 1989–92 (shortly after the diamond jubilee celebrations), he repeatedly asked for a copy and travelled 'specifically to Umuahia in search of the volume' in vain (personal communication, 8 August 2013).

⁴Up until now, the sole repository to hold the volume in the West has been the Harry Ransom Research Center at the University of Texas. Literary critic Robert Wren acquired the volume from former Umuahian master W. E. Alagoa in 1989; the booklet has been preserved in Wren's papers. The only scholars to have engaged with *The Umuahian* are Ezenwa-Ohaeto (in *Chinua Achebe: a biography* (1997)), Obi Nwakanma (*Christopher Okigbo: thirsting for sunlight 1930–1967* (2010)) and Terri Ochiagha in "'A little book of logic": reconstructing colonial arts of suasion at Government College, Umuahia' (2014a), 'The dangerous potency of the crossroads: colonial mimicry in Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottled Leopard* and Chike Momah's *The Shining Ones: the Umuahia schooldays of Obinna Okoye*' (2014b) and *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: the making of a literary elite* (forthcoming). Okey Ndibe cites 'Continuity and change in Nigerian education' as an unpublished essay, rather than as part of *The Umuahian* in 'The spirit of history in Chinua Achebe's trilogy' (2004).

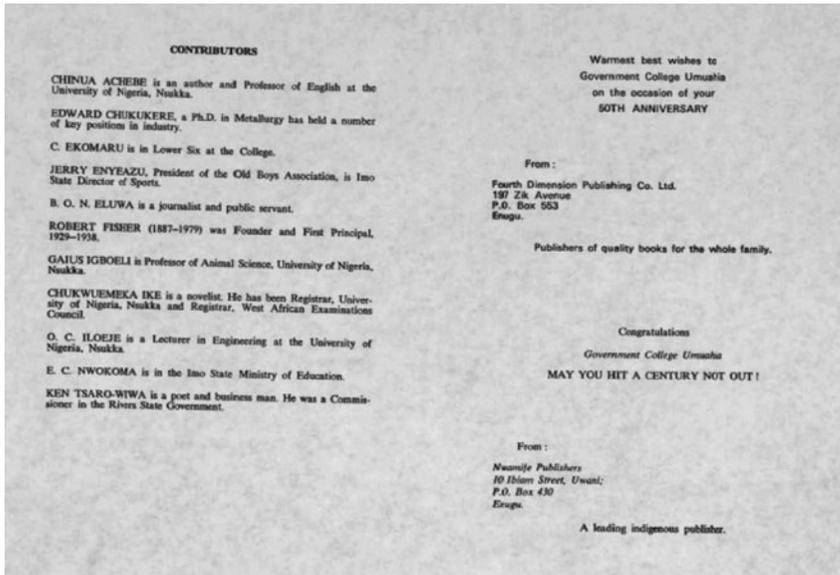


FIGURE 1 List of contributors and goodwill messages. Reproduced by permission of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

eminent writers – in some cases anticipating further and more extended literary engagement with colonial education. In addition, the booklet was edited by none other than Chinua Achebe, widely acclaimed as the father of modern African writing, whose particular vision of history pervades the entire work.

Because the contributors to *The Umuahian: a golden jubilee publication* are mostly members of a national – and in some cases an international – elite, moving in top professional, government and educational circles, they are not local intellectuals of the type that the Local Intellectuals strand of *Africa* has hitherto introduced and published. However, while the contributors to *The Umuahian* pertain to elite circles, and the volume had a world-class literary figure as its editor, the volume itself was produced for a local occasion and rarefied local audience, had a very limited distribution, and subsequently fell into obscurity. It is in the spirit of the historical and academic retrieval of such locally published and little-known materials by African thinkers and writers that this work appears.

THE NOVELIST AS EDITOR: THE PROVERBIAL MIDDLE GROUND AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF NOSTALGIC REMEMBRANCE

According to Eugene Ibe, P. Akujuoobi Nwachukwu, credited as Assistant Editor in *The Umuahian*, was tasked with preparing the golden jubilee edition. Nwachukwu was a lecturer in linguistics at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where Achebe held a professorship at the time. The Nsukka branch of the GCUOBA coordinated the publication, which explains the high number of Nsukka affiliates involved (see [Figure 1](#)). Chinua Achebe agreed to edit the

volume⁵ and old boys were invited to submit articles, but Achebe personally commissioned some of the essays.⁶ The novelist's work on *The Umuahian* coincided with a period in which he was intensely preoccupied with the nationwide fall in educational standards. He had returned to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1976 after four years in the United States, and was the English Department's Professor of Modern African Fiction. Achebe's experiences in the classroom and on university committees – he was external examiner for the University of Lagos and a member of a disciplinary panel set up to investigate examination leakage (i.e. when students obtain papers before the exam) – brought him face to face with the many failures of the educational system (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1997: 197). But there were grounds for hope – Achebe's editorship coincided with the approach of Nigeria's first civilian elections after years of military rule, and that sense of possibility pervades the otherwise bleak panorama presented in the volume.

Achebe's contributions to *The Umuahian* are quintessential Achebean essays: incisive, mellifluous, occasionally transliterative and driven by a strong didactic thrust and defence of historical consciousness. Like the rest of his work, Achebe meant *The Umuahian* 'to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us' (Achebe 1990: 43). But here, rather than look back at the colonial disruption of Igboland and contest the flawed interpretations of colonial discourse, Achebe focuses on a more recent event: the usurping of Nigeria's erstwhile colonial schools by a postcolonial military government. To those unacquainted with the entirety of Achebe's body of essays, the fact that his contributions – and indeed all the essays in *The Umuahian* – exalt the school's colonial past can be seen as an anomaly. With the exception of Chike Momah's 'Reminiscences of Government College, Umuahia in the Forties', the booklet avoids the less flattering aspects of the school's colonial history, such as its 'adaptationist' beginnings (a question to which I will return presently) and racially stratified academic hierarchy.⁷

The romanticized depiction of Umuahian school life – which includes the hagiographic treatment of principals Robert Fisher and William Simpson and the symbolic juxtaposition of Umuahia's pristine colonial architecture as exemplified by the grey and white Administrative Block, mentioned in several contributions (see Figure 2), and its British educational model – are symptomatic of

⁵Personal communication, 10 October 2013.

⁶Barring creative writers (Ike, Achebe, Momah and Saro-Wiwa) and contributors with a past or current affiliation with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Ike, Achebe, Igboeli, Iloje and Saro-Wiwa), the selection criteria for inclusion in *The Umuahian* are somewhat unclear. E. C. Nwokoma, as the principal inspector of education in the Imo State Ministry of Education, provided an essay that was authoritative and apposite. The journalist B. O. N. Eluwa had been an executive with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, in which Chinua Achebe had also worked until the inception of the civil war, and had written a history of Igbo origins, *Abo n'Idu* (1960), which might explain his affinity with Achebe and ultimate inclusion in the volume.

⁷In *When We Were Young*, Saburi Biobaku, English master at Umuahia from 1947 to 1949, recalls that as a result of his two honours degrees from the University of London (history) and the University of Cambridge (English), he was the only African in the principal's social circle and 'the only Nigerian in the Senior Service who was socially acceptable to both expatriates and Nigerians' (Biobaku 1992: 138). Biobaku's chapter on his time at Government College (pp. 135–45) is an interesting complement to the memories of the 1940s included in *The Umuahian*.



FIGURE 2 The Administrative Block of Government College, Umuahia in 1945. Reproduced by permission of Ed Emeka Keazor.

colonial nostalgia.⁸ And yet, as William Cunningham Bissell explains in another context, this emphasis on Umuahia's colonial period:

has nothing to do with the return of the repressed – colonial nostalgia is not some perverse or masochistic desire for the restoration of colonialism by those who were once subject to it. Nostalgia, after all, involves the longing for something that cannot be restored, something dead and gone. It precisely marks the distance between the 'then' and 'now' firmly anchoring colonialism in a far-off horizon, a mythic and memorialized frame ... Here as elsewhere nostalgia speaks to aspiration without possibility, deploying sensibilities and values drawn from the past in the context of current struggles. (Bissell 2005: 225–6)

Chinua Achebe's editorial locates the starting point of Umuahia's decline 'after we became an independent nation [and] our ruling elite began to use their position to send their children to the best schools even when they did not qualify for admission' (Achebe 1979b: 39). In a much later essay, 'The education of a British-protected child' (Achebe 1993), we find further clues to the sympathetic view of colonial education espoused in *The Umuahian*. In this evocative piece, Achebe forewarns:

I hope nobody is dying to hear all over again the pros and cons of colonial rule. *You would get only cons from me anyway.* So I want to indulge in a luxury which the contemporary culture of our world rarely allows – *a view of events from neither the foreground nor the background, but the middle ground.* (Achebe 1993: 52, emphasis added)

⁸Jonathan Roberts' 'Remembering Korle Bu Hospital' (Roberts 2011) outlines this commemorative booklet's construction of biomedical heritage and colonial nostalgia felt by former employees of the hospital. Many of the symptoms he describes are akin to the ones I discuss here. However, *The Golden Jubilee Souvenir* differs from *The Umuahian* in that it is a state-commissioned venture and appears to serve ulterior political purposes.

As in *The Umuahian*, Achebe celebrates Fisher and Simpson, ‘technically of the camp of the colonizer’, as educators who ‘reached across the severe divide which colonialism would have, and touched many of us on the other side’ (Achebe 1993: 57; see also Achebe 1979a: 2). Fisher’s continued dedication to the college’s welfare (Nwokoma 1979; Fisher 1979) and Simpson’s creation of ‘the very high post-war reputation of the school’ (Momah 1979: 15; Ike 1979) and its distinctive literary ambience prevail over their colonial context.⁹ It is precisely this dispassionate view of the past that animates *The Umuahian*’s manifesto: to salvage the beleaguered Government College by retrieving its founding vision and educational values.¹⁰ Svetlana Boym’s concept of restorative nostalgia, which ‘stresses *nostos*¹¹ and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home’ (Boym 2001: xviii), is of particular interest here. As opposed to reflective nostalgia, which revels in the impossibility of retrieving the past, restorative nostalgia believes in the past’s possibilities in the present. This typology of nostalgia is apprehensive about ‘those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus questions the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition’ (Boym 2001: 45). In *The Umuahian* this is reflected in its self-proclaimed historicity and configuration as a counter-discursive weapon against the ‘anti-history tendencies’ (Achebe 1979b: 38) of the regime of Anthony Ukpabi Asika, the civilian administrator of the East Central State under the military administration of General Yakubu Gowon. In 1971, Ukpabi Asika published the East Central State Public Education Edict, which pressed for the immediate takeover of all government, missionary and community-built schools from their proprietors. The pretext was that the state management and supervision of the appropriated schools would:

secure central control and an integrated system of education which will guarantee uniform standards and fair distribution of educational facilities and reduce the cost of running the schools. The take-over will ensure that schools which are in effect financed by the people and managed by their accredited representatives will more readily provide stability, satisfy the people’s basic educational and national needs, combat sectionalism, religious conflicts and disloyalty to the cause of the United Nigeria. (East Central State of Nigeria 1970: 1)

This imposition proved highly controversial (Nwangwu 1979; Ahaotu 1983) and there is a consensus among Umuahians that the takeover single-handedly triggered the fall of Government College. Beyond the economic particulars of the ministry’s administrative control over Government College, Achebe – reinforcing the

⁹In the subsection on ‘The Umuahia experience’ in *There Was a Country*, Achebe also draws attention to the fact that ‘the colonial educational infrastructure celebrated hard work and educational achievement’ (Achebe 2012: 29).

¹⁰The Government College, Ibadan Old Boys’ Association, which was founded on 29 May 1929, also produced a commemorative volume, *Built on the Rock*, that was also edited by a literary alumnus, the novelist T. M. Aluko (1979). At the time, Ibadan had not succumbed to Umuahia’s fate and still retained the status of a ‘model school’ despite its state proprietorship. This explains its comparatively pronounced self-congratulatory bent – the booklet is presented as ‘yet another mark of distinction, perhaps one more link in the chain of “First in Africa” series of achievements which have made Government College Ibadan the envy of many but the pride of all’ (p. 1). King’s College, Lagos is the sole school of these former elite colleges that retains its former status.

¹¹‘*Nostos*’ is the idea of returning home.

restorative nature of *The Umuahian*'s colonial nostalgia – draws attention to the need for ‘the sobering admission that there is already in existence a base on which I will build my masterpiece, that other people have laboured meaningfully before me in the same field. Such an admission calls for humility and a sense of history’ (Achebe 1979b: 38). This dialogue with history and tradition is best exemplified in the historical dynamics of Umuahia’s first twenty years, encapsulated in Umuahia’s resuscitation after its ‘first disaster’ – the four-year closure of the school during the Second World War to accommodate Italian and German prisoners. As Achebe, Ike and Momah allude to this episode only cursorily, it will be pertinent to expound on it here.

The establishment of Government College, Umuahia was influenced by two crucial developments in colonial educational policy. The first event was the 1922 report on education in Africa by the Phelps-Stokes Commission, which proposed a paternalistic model of education with an emphasis on moral instruction and vocational training. In 1925, the Memorandum on Educational Policy in British Tropical Africa further called for collaboration with the missions and the adaptation of Western education to indigenous culture and mentality – an education of the African ‘along his own lines’ (Coleman 1971: 120). In Nigeria, E. R. Swanston, His Majesty’s Inspector of Education, and Selwyn Macgregor Grier, Director of Education of the Southern Provinces, responded to these developments by proposing the creation of two teacher training colleges: one at Umuahia (Owerri Province) and the other at Ibadan (Oyo Province) (Aluko 1979: 71). The Umuahia Teacher Training College opened its doors on 29 January 1929 under the principalship of Reverend Robert Fisher. Shortly afterwards, the new Director of Education, E. R. J. Hussey, decided to reform the Nigerian education system, proposing a three-tiered model comprising primary schools, middle schools and a higher college, which was finally established at Yaba in 1934. A key aspect of Hussey’s reform was to convert the training colleges at Ibadan and Umuahia into boarding secondary schools with public school features. Consequently, the Umuahia Teacher Training College was renamed Government College, Umuahia, and began to function as such in January 1930. However, throughout its first decade, the college was not run exactly as an English public school. As Hussey himself stressed, when comparing the school with King’s College, Lagos – Nigeria’s premier elite secondary school – at Umuahia and Ibadan ‘*far greater stress is laid on general science and handwork*, and students who wish to prepare themselves for matriculation in Yaba will follow this course ... These courses are forerunners of vocational courses at the projected Higher College at Yaba’ (Hussey 1930: 18). In fact, Hussey’s model for both colleges was Dauntsey’s School in Wiltshire, a boarding agricultural school set up for the education of ‘rural boys’ (Hussey 1959: 90–1).

The school’s public school features were restricted to the house and prefectorial systems. Apart from the school’s vocational features, the school certificate examinations were not taken at Fisher’s government college because of his ‘strong conviction that they were entirely unsuited to the real education of the African student’ (Hogarth 1944: 4). Fisher’s vision of Umuahia as a unity school, conjured by Achebe, Nwokoma and Saro-Wiwa in their essays, crystallized on 18 March 1934, when he formed an alliance of five eastern Nigerian colleges, the ‘Eastern Star’. The league included C. M. S. Training College Awka; Methodist College, Uzuakoli; Dennis Memorial Grammar School Onitsha; Government College, Umuahia; and Hope Waddell Presbyterian College, Calabar. In 1935, Fisher

defined his vision of unity, which was based on the ideals of the Gold Coast's Achimota College, where he had taught before his arrival at Umuahia:

- 1) We stand for *the unity of our Colleges ...* Our aims and purposes are the same; in the Colleges the development of true manhood; out of the Colleges the development of the people, through us working together in one united group.
- 2) We stand for *the closer union of our various Christian organizations*, for the recognition that the Body of Christ is One; and by our unity, working in one group together, we mean to develop friendship and co-operation with the Missions in every way we can.
- 3) We stand for close friendship and co-operation between the races. (Fisher 1935: 6)

Fisher retired from government service and was replaced by W. N. Tolfree in 1938. Despite the Education Department's endorsement of Fisher's distinctive views and methods, Tolfree believed it was time to change the school's direction. He dissolved the Eastern Star coalition and its official magazine, de-emphasized the school's vocational features and the use and study of vernacular languages, and prepared the sixth formers for the school certificate (Hogarth 1944: 3). In July 1940, however, his new plans for the college were dashed – the school became an internment camp for German and Italian nationals and the students and staff were suddenly dispersed to King's College, Lagos and to other mission schools east of the Niger. The Second World War brought with it new developments in colonial educational policy. Rather than pursue an adaptationist education, there was 'an increasing emphasis on getting more students "through to the top" of the educational ladder' (Whitehead 1992: 157). Hence, when the Education Department decided to reopen the Umuahia Government College in 1941, it was decided that it would be a bona fide English public school, offering a literary education of the highest quality, upholding the cult of games, and preparing its students for higher education and positions of leadership in the colonial civil service. In 1942, after an extremely demanding entrance examination, nineteen boys were admitted to King's College, Lagos as 'Umuahia Form I'. Umuahia remained at King's College until April 1943, when the school relocated to its original campus. Classes began officially on 2 July 1943. After the intermittent administration of substantive principals W. H. Thorp (1943) and E. C. Hicks (1944), William Simpson ascended the Umuahian throne in December 1944 and 'took no time to establish an enviable reputation for all-round excellence' (Ike 1979: 25). In this new era, and despite the changes in the school's composition, Umuahia continued to demand high levels of academic performance, forged and maintained links with the surrounding mission schools and its sister school at Ibadan, and engaged in community outreach programmes. Fisher's dream of unity and cooperation between the races is evoked in the school anthem, composed by the student Edward Chukwukere in 1951, and reproduced on the concluding page of *The Umuahian*.

It is this transmission of Umuahia's founding ideals through its first two decades, unconstrained by shifts in the school's identity, cultural and educational dynamics, that Achebe finds worthy of emulation in the post-civil war era.¹² By

¹²It appears that these same values were maintained throughout the subsequent principalships of Barry Cozens (1952–56), A. K. Wareham (1956–61) and the school's first African principal, Umuahian alumnus and long-time master I. D. Erekosima (1962–67). See Saro-Wiwa and Iloje's contributions (Saro-Wiwa 1979; Iloje 1979).

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EDITORIAL

In putting together this special edition of **THE UMUAHIAN** from the collective memory and appreciate reminiscences of generations of students, one has been struck again and again by the persistence of certain values of mind and behaviour which this great College seems above all else to have imparted in its pupils through the greater part of its fifty years: a love of excellence and of quiet service.

There are, of course, other attributes clearly discernible, such as that healthy scepticism which ensures that an Umuahian would take independent decision on serious matters rather than follow what our Australian teacher, Charles Low, described at one memorable Assembly as "the sheep principle."

But I believe that this questioning mind as well as other fine attributes of Umuahia can be distilled down to the two fundamental ideas — the pursuit of excellence in work and behaviour and the desire to serve without ostentation.

These qualities and hallmarks did not fall down from the Umuahia sky one fine morning in Fisher's miraculous days but were the fruit of years of anxious cultivation of, and attention to, students and their physical and intellectual environment. Read the letter from Robert Fisher and you see how even at ninety-two, and forty years after he had left the school, his mind was still restlessly and aptly searching for new — even unorthodox — ways of improving the quality of instruction offered by the school. Or read the portrait of William Simpson and you will see how a man who was a mathematician laid the foundation of the literary pre-eminence of Umuahia which is now acknowledged in Nigeria and Africa; how he turned his boys away from the temptation of empty showiness in the boxing ring. Tudy Roosevelt's maxim: *Speak softly but carry a big stick* would seem to fit Simpson's plan for his boys, although the stick was primarily an intellectual weapon.

The Umuahia environment played a key role in our education. The moment a twelve or thirteen-year-old set foot on Government College and beheld that exquisitely trimmed quadrangle (mowed incidentally by one man) and the immaculate black-and-white A. D. Block, he knew, whatever his previous experience, that he had stepped into a new world where it would be a crime to throw pieces of paper about. (It is an indication of the long way we have come from Fisher and Simpson and Jumbo, that cars are today parked on the famous lawn from which the beautifully maintained grass of the early days has long been rooted by rank and coarse vegetation.)

Umuahia has had the singular ill-fortune of suffering two major devaluations in its fifty years — during the Second World War when it was shut down for about four years and turned into an internment camp, and again during the Nigerian Civil War when it suffered even greater

FIGURE 3 Contents page and extract of the editorial. Reproduced by permission of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

reviving the 'old' Government College through their reminiscences and biographical sketches, the contributors to *The Umuahian* breathe life into the vision and the values that the administrators of Government College, Umuahia successfully transmitted during the first three decades of its existence: 'The pursuit of excellence in work and behaviour and the desire to serve without ostentation' (Achebe 1979a: 1). What emerges is a picture of Government College as a citadel of knowledge in which discipline, a strong academic profile, sportsmanship and literary culture converge to cultivate true gentlemen. The constant contrastinction of the old Government College as 'the dream secondary school of West Africa' (Nwokoma 1979: 5), 'a place of glory', a 'pristine model of excellence', a 'true centre of moral and intellectual light' (Achebe 1979a: 2) and 'the envy of all schools in, at least, Eastern Nigeria' (Momah 1979: 19) with the present 'sad shadow of its former self' (Achebe 1979a: 2) reinforce the imperative for retrieving the 'old and tested educational principles of selection, instruction and evaluation' (Achebe 1979b: 40) and national character that forged Umuahia's reputation in the first place.

While not explicitly signposted, *The Umuahian* is divided into three different sections (see Figure 3). The first follows a chronological progression from the 1930s to the 1950s, offering student reminiscences and biographical sketches of the two major principals of the era. The second section begins with the thematic essay 'Continuity and change in Nigerian education', subsequently weaving in and out of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s even as it underscores the school's current devaluation. A final section is composed of letters to the editor and other miscellanea.

Chinua Achebe's editorial leads in to the essay 'The challenge of Reverend Robert Fisher', the story of the school's founding principal from his beginnings as a missionary in the Gold Coast to his death in 1979. Rather than describe Fisher's work as principal of Government College, the text emphasizes his continued support of the school, especially in the aftermath of the civil war. To illustrate Fisher's fatherly altruism, a 1978 letter from Reverend Fisher to the school's principal at the time – a sensitive offer of collaboration and friendship in the reconstruction of the college – follows Nwokoma's essay. The Fisher years are also reflected in B. O. N. Eluwa's 'My recollections of Mr R. F. Jumbo'. Jumbo was a teacher in the school from its inception, and played a vital role in connecting Fisher's vocational Umuahia with Simpson's 'Etonian' Government College. He was thus a veritable emblem of the historical continuity espoused in the newsletter. Unfortunately, in focusing on Jumbo, Eluwa's 'recollections' do not offer much information on the school's educational dynamics in its first decade, one of the flaws – or wilful omissions – of the volume.

In contrast, the 1940s are painstakingly recreated. Chukwuemeka Ike's 'William Simpson, O.B.E.' brings to life the figure of 'Dewar', the larger-than-life principal of the school's golden period. Ike describes Principal Simpson's philosophy and educational innovations and provides a number of enlightening snapshots of Umuahia's public school ethos, as does Chike Momah's 'Reminiscences of Government College, Umuahia in the Forties'. Momah's rich reconstruction of Umuahian school life is the longest and probably the most informative contribution to *The Umuahian*, for despite looking back at his time at the college as 'probably the happiest years of [his] life' (Momah 1979: 21), he devotes considerable space to discussing the short- and long-term effects of the most unsettling instances of epistemic violence at Government College. These include the prohibition of the vernacular ('From that day to this, to my eternal shame, I can hardly make a sentence in Igbo without mixing in a word or two of English') (*ibid.*: 15), the strategic manoeuvres deployed by the school's academic staff to suppress nationalist sympathies, and the anonymous English master's injudicious allusions to 'African stupidity' and 'Renascent Africa' (*ibid.*: 18).¹³ Notwithstanding Momah's allowance that such diatribes were 'perhaps excusable in those colonial days' (*ibid.*: 18), his assertion that 'as little black colonial boys ... It would be stretching the truth unduly to suggest that there were no teachers whom [we] rightly or wrongly considered as "scoundrels"' is at odds with the colour-blind idyll presented elsewhere in the volume.

The school's third decade is represented in Ken Saro-Wiwa's 'Umuahia in the 1950s' and G. Igboeli's 'The philosophy of sports at Umuahia'. The first is a light-hearted narration of the changes wrought by successive principals A. B. Cozens and A. K. Wareham. Igboeli's piece expounds on the games ethic, one of the cardinal points of the public school ethos and a core dimension of the Umuahia experience. Apart from the school's strengths and weaknesses in particular sports, Igboeli illustrates the gains to be accrued from the Umuahian brand of selfless sportsmanship, well worth retrieving in the year of the school's golden jubilee.

¹³For more on this episode, see Ochiagha (2014a).

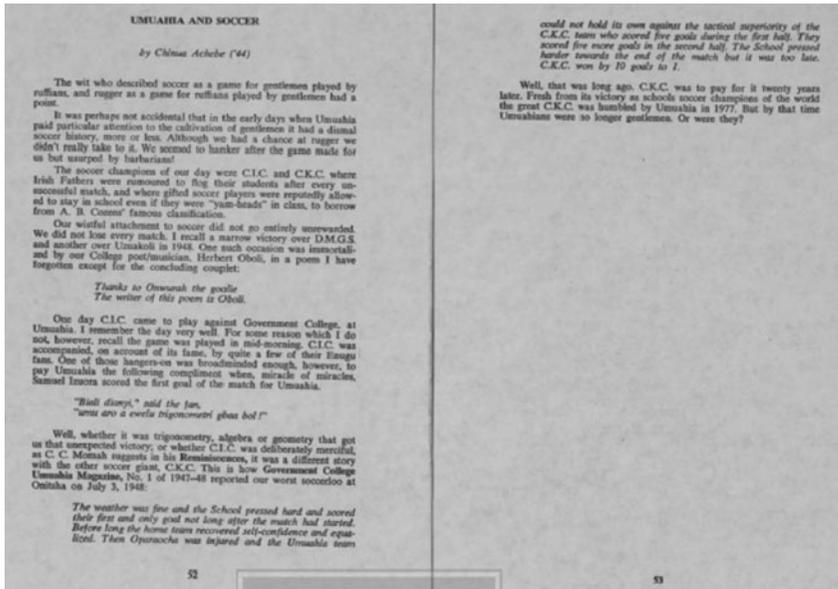


FIGURE 4 Chinua Achebe's 'Umuahia and soccer'. Reproduced by permission of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

As mentioned above, after Achebe's thematic essay 'Continuity and change in Nigerian education', the sequencing and rationale for inclusion begin to look somewhat hazy. But underneath the disjointed structure, each piece manages to capture unflattering aspects of post-independence Umuahia, reinforcing the volume's overarching trope: the aching gap between today's Government College and the college of yesteryear. For reasons that I explain in more detail below, 'Fifty years of Umuahia', the prize-winning student essay, is well placed after Achebe's coda, symptomatic as it is of the changes in the Umuahians' elite self-perception through time. O. C. Iloje's light-hearted 'A tribute to "Axiom"', included in the print version of this journal, may pay homage to an anonymous and eccentric master but it also ends up painting a very different picture of Government College to the recollections of the volume's first section. This piece is also the least essayistic contribution to the volume and is reminiscent of the school story genre in its use of a lively polyphonic dialogue, the juxtaposition of a strict master and his roguish students, and a climatic games scene.

The next contribution is a very short essay by Chinua Achebe, 'Umuahia and soccer' (see Figure 4), which could have been more plausibly inserted after Momah's reminiscences or following 'The philosophy of sports at Umuahia'. Here, Achebe focuses on the role of games in inculcating the mores of the elite, jovially recalling Umuahia's dismal performances on the football field in the 1940s. But in a brilliant move towards the end of the essay, he turns the tables in his description of the 1977 triumph of the Umuahian team over Christ the King College, Onitsha, a call for reconsideration that is not entirely out of place at this point in the volume. The last section includes extracts from the

funeral oration delivered at the graveside of the first school captain, the genealogy of Ebizie family members who attended the college, and a letter from the twice-accepted applicant unable to attend the school due to economic duress. The volume aptly ends with a transcription of the emblematic Umuahian anthem, ‘The will to shine as one’.

There are several striking and regrettable lacunae in a volume presented under the banner of historical continuity. I will give just three examples: there is neither a paragraph nor a full entry in *The Umuahian* on the figure of I. D. Erekosima – a student at the school during Fisher’s days, mathematics master during the successive principalships of Simpson, Cozens and Wareham, and finally the school’s first African principal in 1961. There are no extensive memories of the school in the 1960s, and no teacher perspectives to elaborate on the school’s internal conditions in the much-maligned 1970s.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING UMUAHIAN: THE DISCOURSE OF DISTINCTION OF THE GOLDEN JUBILEE PUBLICATION

The Umuahian exhorts old boys to ‘never forget’ (Momah 1979: 22) and to ‘continue the heritage, to return in some token measure the gift their alma mater gave them in such abundance’ (Achebe 1979a: 2), highlighting the obligations that come with educational privilege (Nwokoma 1979: 6–7; Saro-Wiwa 1979: 33). Another of its overarching concerns is the defence of the school’s elite status against the criticism of a counter-elite – Ukpabi Asika’s education administrators – and their defenders. Throughout *The Umuahian*, alumni enact and justify the school’s elite status by stressing its habitus, meritocracy of talent, special pedagogies, institutional logic, rituals of bonding, and athletic and literary extra-curricular activities. Allusions to outreach work (Fisher 1979), unequal interactions with students from ‘lesser’ schools (Momah 1979: 19–20; Ike 1979: 26; Saro-Wiwa 1979: 33), and the school’s imperative to serve the nation as ‘a true centre of moral and intellectual light’ (Achebe 1979a: 1) bolster this elite self-perception. This ‘discourse of distinction’, as Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández calls it (2009: 13–14), reveals how Umuahians internalized privilege and entitlement. Interestingly, the divergent ways in which the old boys and the sole student contributor to the golden jubilee publication understand their experience of Umuahia and construct Umuahian identifications, to borrow Gaztambide-Fernández’s phraseology (*ibid.*: 13), erode Umuahia’s original values. Shamus Rahman explains that privilege ‘deemphasizes refined tastes and “who you know” and instead highlights how you act and approach the world’ (Rahman 2011: 1415) by relying on the lived experience of struggling to become elite. This is apparent in the reminiscences and biographical sketches penned by the school’s old boys. On the other hand, entitlement involves relying on heritage and building a wall around inherited advantages. This is exemplified in C. Ekomaru’s ‘Fifty years of Umuahia – its impact on the Nigerian society’. While Ekomaru (1979) begins his essay by asserting that ‘greatness is not achieved on a platter of gold, but by patience, perseverance and diligence’ (p. 43) and concedes that ‘present day Umuahians have declined *somewhat* from the high standards the school used to know’ (p. 46, emphasis added), he goes on to confidently assert that Government College ‘still occupies the position of

a model and giant among schools. It remains a citadel built on the solid rock of discipline, academic excellence and sound extra-curricular activities' (p. 46). This diagnosis, which is preceded by a catalogue of Umuahians in top positions rather than evidence of Umuahia's enduring excellence, clashes with the alarming diagnoses of the rest of *The Umuahian's* more seasoned contributors. In placing such a premium on the school's historically established distinction and playing down its present reality, the essay exudes the kind of entitlement that Rahman describes and that Achebe critiques elsewhere in the volume (Achebe 1979b: 40). That said, Nwakanma, who was in Form II at the time of the golden jubilee celebrations, asserts that 'Umuahia was still a remarkable place', despite the funding crunch and breakdown of discipline – some of the teachers held PhDs and the school boasted a wide-ranging offer of extracurricular activities and relatively well-equipped laboratories, which were 'the dream of other secondary schools'.¹⁴ But, tellingly, the school's heritage had much to do with this partial triumph over adversity:

The remarkable thing about [Government College] was the undertow of its traditions, which informed you; from which we all learnt to be Umuahians – I call it the myth of Umuahian excellence. It could be quite heady to enter Umuahia and to be confronted by the lore of achievement by a very long line of famous Umuahians among whom, if you dare, was your right to count yourself in the future. That is what Umuahia basically is, and potentially remains: its tradition.¹⁵

THE LITERARY PRE-EMINENCE OF GOVERNMENT COLLEGE, UMUAHIA

Government College, Umuahia has produced more writers than any other secondary school in British Africa.¹⁶ Five out of these eight writers – Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Chike Momah, Christopher Okigbo and Chukwuemeka Ike – coincided at the college in the period 1944–49, which fell within William Simpson's tenure as principal of Government College, a peculiarity that Achebe stresses in his editorial and in 'The education of a British-protected child'.¹⁷ While not exactly a thematic preoccupation of *The Umuahian*, the school's reputation as the seedbed of celebrated literary authors pervades the volume. In their contributions, Achebe, Ike, Momah and Saro-Wiwa discuss some of the features of the school's unique literary ambience in the 1940s and its legacy in the 1950s – including the pedagogic exigencies of the English masters, the Textbook Act of 1945, the mesmeric influence of Charles Low, and the dynamics of student writing – which partly accounts for their later feats in the world literary arena.

¹⁴Personal correspondence, 10 March 2008.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶The Ibadan Government College comes close behind, counting Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, T. M. Aluko and Femi Osofisan among its alumni. However, these writers did not coincide at the school in one generation, unlike those at Government College, arguably making their subsequent literary careers more a matter of individual talent than of institutional literary ferment.

¹⁷I examine this in depth in Ochiagha ([forthcoming](#)).

Furthermore, *The Umuahian: a golden jubilee publication* partly re-enacts these writers' early literary friendships and initial creative steps at Government College. Achebe, Ike and Momah were close friends throughout their Umuahia school days, and a glimpse of the playful banter that characterized their interactions can be seen in Achebe's editorial notes to his two friends' contributions (Momah 1979: 16; Ike 1979: 27–8). A fourth member of this group of friends was the poet Christopher Okigbo, who lost his life fighting for Biafra in the Nigerian Civil War, and whose memory is honoured in Momah's essay and in the booklet's original photography. *The Umuahian* appropriates the name of the school's main student periodical, on whose editorial board all the college literati served at some point. Over thirty years after co-editing the inaugural issue with Sam K. Epelle and Charles Low, Achebe returns to the head editorship of the magazine in this golden jubilee edition. His participation, alongside that of Ike and Saro-Wiwa – both of whom published their first short stories, 'In Dreamland' (Ike 1948/49) and 'Ave, Ave Sathanas' (Saro-Wiwa 1989), in the school periodical – further underscores their gratitude at the school's role in triggering their creative careers. Chike Momah's participation in *The Umuahian* is particularly noteworthy; unlike the rest of Nigeria's first-generation writers, whose careers flourished in the immediate aftermath of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Momah became a bona fide novelist only two years before his retirement as librarian of the United Nations in the late 1990s. 'Reminiscences of Government College, Umuahia', however, was his first published literary endeavour. As he recalls: 'I was excited at the thought of having my writing, however insignificant, published in a serious collection of articles. It was a new experience for me.'¹⁸ Momah later expanded and slightly fictionalized the events he had portrayed in the article in *The Shining Ones: the Umuahia schooldays of Obinna Okoye* (Momah 2003). He is not the only Umuahian writer to have engaged creatively with his experience of Government College in later years. Chukwuemeka Ike's encomium of William Simpson in *The Umuahian* steered clear of such unsavoury matters, but his 1985 novel, *The Bottled Leopard* (Ike 1985), explores the psycho-cultural conflict ensuing from the invisibility of indigenous literature and culture at the Umuahia Government College, a theme that Christopher Okigbo also dramatized in his *Heavensgate* (Okigbo 1962). Chinua Achebe returned to the Umuahian setting twice, in 'The education of a British-protected child' and in his last work, *There Was a Country: a personal history of Biafra* (Achebe 2012).

CONCLUSION

As one of Africa's English public schools, the Umuahia Government College had a similar ethos, curriculum, traditions and educational policies to other elite colleges in British Africa. These institutions also forged distinct identities in the face of the multiplicity of political contexts, the educational and ideological sensibilities of principals and other academic staff, and collective student responses to such ambivalent stimuli. The scant scholarship on colonial schools confirms

¹⁸Personal communication, 27 July 2013.

these facts¹⁹ and rarely captures the magic confluence of the curricular and the extracurricular, the personal and artistic epiphanies arising from the many spaces of indeterminacy afforded by colonial educational contexts. These aspects have mostly remained the stuff of boarding school fiction and other forms of life writing, including commemorative volumes such as *The Umuahian: a golden jubilee publication*. As I have already highlighted, Umuahia's worldwide reputation rests on its literary alumni. This literary pre-eminence is of historical interest because the work of the Umuahian writers has been a crucial starting point for rethinking Africa's image in the dawn of colonial rule and up until the present day. It is also important to note that years before the confluence of writers at Government College became part of known yet unexplained lore in postcolonial critical circles, *The Umuahian* already contested the notion of the university as a starting point for the history of African intellectual writing.

Thirty-six years have passed since the publication of *The Umuahian: a golden jubilee publication*. And despite its initially ephemeral nature, the booklet retains its topicality. The questions that set it in motion were compounded over the years, and the worst fears of its contributors came to pass. The 'uncertainty about the true status of the college' that Achebe denounced in 1979 hindered Umuahia's redemption until very recently. After the independence of Nigeria, ownership shifted from the British colonial government to the successive governments of Eastern Nigeria, the East Central State, Imo State and Abia State. Faced with such an impasse, the GCUOBA, persistent in its efforts to rehabilitate the school, embarked on less idealistic and more pragmatic efforts than commemorations driven by history. In early 2014, Dr Okey Enemalah (class of 1974) persuaded the Abia State Government to hand over the Umuahia Government College to the Old Boys' Association. A memorandum of understanding was signed in April 2014, and a trust deed in December that year handed the school over to the newly instituted Fisher Educational Development Trust. This historical feat was celebrated on 24 January 2015, just as this essay was about to go to press.²⁰ A five-year restoration project is expected to reinstate the school as a 'beacon of excellence'.²¹ And yet, despite Umuahia's chequered past, *The Umuahian* need not be regarded as a failure. In an ironic twist of fate, Government College, Umuahia lost most of its colonial archive around the time of the booklet's composition.²² *The Umuahian* retrieves part of the school's history, furnishing scholars and Umuahians alike with valuable insights into the brand of elite colonial education imparted at this exceptional college, its reception, internalization, and above all its legacy in postcolonial times. In its pages, the washed-out walls, crumbling buildings and littered grounds come alive in shades of red, white and green, showing that in the backwoods of Umudike there was a college, a cradle of muses of the sort that few nations have been privileged to know.

¹⁹See Hubbard (2000); Ogunlade (1974); Yamada (2009); Charton-Bigot (2010); Summers (2006); McGregor (2006).

²⁰Personal communication with Eugene C. Ibe, 29 January 2015.

²¹'Restoring Government College, Umuahia, a beacon of excellence: preliminary financial projections', internal blueprint of document submitted to Abia State Government, 2014.

²²How this happened remains unclear.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Supplementary materials are available with this article at <<http://dx.doi.org/S0001972014000990>>.

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ABSTRACT

Government College, Umuahia is known as the alma mater of eight important Nigerian writers: Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Gabriel Okara, Chike Momah, I. N. C. Aniebo, Chukwuemeka Ike, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Christopher Okigbo. Many illustrious Nigerian scientists, intellectuals and public leaders passed through the college in its prime, and in West Africa the name of the school evokes an astounding range of success stories. But Umuahia's legend as 'the Eton of the East' and the *primus inter pares* of Nigeria's elite colonial institutions obscures its present reality: nothing remains of its past but its extensive grounds, landmark buildings, and the glittering roll call of dignitaries who once studied within its walls. In 1979, prompted by the many signs of impending

doom, a group of old boys joined hands in a historicizing venture, *The Umuahian: a golden jubilee publication* – the commemorative booklet compiled by the school's most famous alumnus, Chinua Achebe, to mark the college's golden jubilee. The booklet conjured up the school's founding ideals and glorious past in order to lay the ground for its rehabilitation. This introductory essay explains why *The Umuahian* is an indispensable source for the literary, cultural and educational history of West Africa, contextualizing its singular construction of colonial educational heritage. Sample and hitherto unpublished texts from the booklet by Achebe, his editorial to *The Umuahian* and its coda, 'Continuity and change in Nigerian education: a jubilee essay', are included with the main article. While the contributors to *The Umuahian* pertain to elite circles, and the volume had a world-class literary figure as its editor, the volume itself was produced for a local occasion and rarefied local audience, had a very limited distribution, and subsequently fell into obscurity. It is in the spirit of the historical and academic retrieval of such locally published and little-known materials by African thinkers and writers that this work appears in the Local Intellectuals strand.

RÉSUMÉ

Le lycée Government College d'Umuahia est réputé pour avoir formé huit grands écrivains nigériens : Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Gabriel Okara, Chike Momah, I. N. C. Aniebo, Chukwuemeka Ike, Ken Saro-Wiwa et Christopher Okigbo. De nombreux scientifiques, intellectuels et gouvernants illustres sont passés dans ce lycée à ses plus belles heures, et en Afrique de l'Ouest le nom de cette école évoque un éventail étonnant d'histoires à succès. Or, la légende d'Umuahia comme « l'Eton de l'Orient » et le *primus inter pares* des prestigieuses institutions coloniales du Nigeria cache sa réalité actuelle : il ne subsiste de son passé que ses vastes terrains, ses bâtiments emblématiques et l'impressionnante liste de dignitaires qui y ont jadis étudié. En 1979, interpellé par le destin tragique qui s'annonçait, un groupe d'anciens élèves s'est lancé dans une entreprise d'historisation, *The Umuahian: a golden jubilee publication* - le livret commémoratif compilé par le plus célèbre des anciens élèves de l'école, Chinua Achebe, pour marquer le cinquantième anniversaire du lycée. Ce livret évoquait les idéaux fondateurs et le passé glorieux de l'école pour préparer les conditions de sa réhabilitation. Cet essai liminaire explique pourquoi *The Umuahian* est une source indispensable pour l'histoire littéraire, culturelle et éducative de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, en contextualisant sa construction singulière du patrimoine éducatif colonial. Des extraits et des textes jusqu'alors non publiés du livret d'Achebe, son éditorial à *The Umuahian* et son coda, « Continuité et changement dans l'éducation nigérienne : un essai de jubilé », sont inclus dans l'article principal. Quand bien même les co-auteurs de *The Umuahian* appartenaient à des élites et le responsable éditorial du volume était un homme de lettres mondialement connu, le volume lui-même, produit pour une occasion locale et un lectorat local rarefié, et très faiblement distribué, a fini par tomber dans l'obscurité. C'est dans l'esprit de la recherche historique et académique de telles publications locales peu connues de penseurs et écrivains africains que cet ouvrage apparaît à la rubrique Lettrés locaux.

EXTRACTS FROM *THE UMUAHIAN*

EDITORIAL

In putting together this special edition of *The Umuahian* from the collective memory and appreciate reminiscences of generations of students, one has been struck again and again by the persistence of certain values of mind and behaviour which this great College seems above all else to have inspired in its pupils through the greater part of its fifty years: a love of excellence and of quiet service.

There are, of course, other attributes clearly discernible, such as that healthy scepticism which ensures that an Umuahian would take independent decision on serious matters rather than follow what our Australian teacher Charles Low,¹ described at one memorable Assembly as the ‘sheep principle’.

But I believe that this questioning mind as well as other fine attributes of Umuahia can be distilled down to the two fundamental ideas – the pursuit of excellence in work and behaviour and the desire to serve without ostentation.

These qualities and hallmarks did not fall down from the Umudike sky one fine morning in Fisher’s miraculous days but were the fruit of years of assiduous cultivation of, and attention to, students and their physical and intellectual environment. Read the letter from Robert Fisher and you see how even at ninety-two, and forty years after he had left the school, his mind was still restlessly and agilely searching for new – even unorthodox – ways of improving the quality of instruction offered by the school. Or read the portrait of William Simpson and you will see how a man who was a mathematician laid the foundation of the literary pre-eminence of Umuahia which is now acknowledged in Nigeria and Africa; how he turned his boys away from the temptation of empty showiness in the boxing ring. Teddy Roosevelt’s maxim: *Speak softly but carry a big stick* would seem to fit Simpson’s plan for his boys, although the stick was primarily an intellectual weapon.

The Umuahia environment played a key role in our education. The moment a twelve or thirteen-year-old set foot on Government College and beheld that exquisitely trimmed quadrangle (mowed incidentally by one man) and the immaculate black-and-white A.D. Block,² he knew, whatever his previous experience, that he had stepped into a new world where it would be a crime to throw pieces of paper about. (It is an indication of the long way we have come from Fisher and Simpson

¹William Charles Low (BA Cantab, MA Melbourne) was Assistant Principal, cricket master and English and Literature teacher at Umuahia from 1946 to 1953. He also taught Christian Religious Knowledge and informal Latin classes to the senior classes throughout his tenure. The Australian master was one of the pillars of Umuahian literary culture. He introduced creative writing into the Umuahian classroom and was the founding editor of *The Government College, Umuahia Magazine*.

²The administrative block, which graces the cover of *The Umuahian*, is the school’s most iconic feature. Reputedly the oldest building in the college, it is a long cement and wood bungalow structure, surrounded by a wide veranda and supported by concrete stilts. The building housed the school’s administrative offices, including those of the bursar, Principal and Vice-Principal, a staff room and prefect’s room, the chapel, and until 1953, the assembly hall.

and Jumbo, that cars are today parked on the famous lawn from which the beautifully manicured grass of the early days has long been routed by rank and coarse varieties.)

Umuahia has had the singular ill-fortune of suffering two major devastations in its fifty years – during the Second World War when it was shut down for about four years and turned into an internment camp, and again during the Nigerian Civil War when it suffered even greater physical and psychological despoliation. After its first disaster it was fortunate to secure the services of William Simpson as Principal for a second start. By being physically and spiritually available to the school at all hours of day and night, leaving nothing to chance, he was able to mould the school to the pristine model of excellence created by Robert Fisher. Like Fisher, Simpson had no desire for promotion to headquarters but preferred to serve quietly in his chosen outpost.

Umuahia's third start has not been so fortunate. Perhaps the fate of the proverbial old woman who slips and falls down a third time is at work here.³ Quite frankly the school is today a sad shadow of its former self. We could catalogue the many reasons for this decline, one of which would be the general fall in educational standards throughout the land but in particular in the war-torn areas such as Imo State where the spreading of grossly inadequate resources of personnel, service and equipment too thinly over vast areas of need is creating enormous problems for the future. To these entire factors one must regrettably add a discernible falling off in the quality and single-mindedness of contemporary teachers and other educational personnel.

This situation poses a major challenge to the educational authorities and a serious moral issue to us Old Boys who had the great fortune to go to Umuahia when it was still a place of glory. The issue is simply this. Have we the right to sit and watch complacently while our children and successors are given third-rate education on the very site hallowed by Fisher, Simpson and others many of whom came across seven seas to minister to our needs?

Many Old Boys in eminent and comfortable positions which their early start at Umuahia helped secure for them seem unaware of their reciprocal obligation to continue the heritage, to return in some token measure the gift their great alma mater gave them in such abundance. We seem to be unaware that the flickering torch of education in this country is in danger of extinction from rough winds and the deluge of mediocrity and neo-illiteracy, and that we who were privileged to know better have a duty to defend whatever high grounds of excellence still remain, from where in more propitious times for which we pray, a new campaign of civilization and national retrieval can be launched.

We must confess that one major obstacle to the effort of many Old Boys towards a total identification with the plight of their alma mater is the uncertainty about the true status of the college. This problem which our colleagues in Imo State have not, quite frankly, attacked with appropriate zeal and candour must now be faced without equivocation. For if they indeed view Government College, Umuahia as just another state school in their possession or even as an Odida

³From the Igbo proverb '*Agadi nwanyi da nda ughoro abuo a guo ihe o bu n'ukpa onu*', meaning 'if an old woman falls down twice, the goods in her basket should be counted' (i.e. the real causes of her fall should be looked into).

Anyanwu Local Government School⁴ there can be no justification in expecting Old Boys from other states to continue supporting it purely from sentimental considerations.

In this Jubilee year a clear decision must be taken on the future status of the school and promptly implemented. Two options have already been suggested: to press energetically for the transformation of the school into a Federal Government College, or to strike an arrangement with surrounding states in the catchment area of the old Government College for the reciprocal intake into designated schools in each state of an agreed number of pupils from the others. Either option, but especially the second, would fit into Fisher's dream of Umuahia as a 'Unity School'.

If we are able to resolve this minor problem of identity there is no earthly reason why the many grateful sons of this college scattered all over Nigeria and the Cameroun will not rally to her cause and provide enough money and counsel to restore her to her former dignity.

Given the quality of our foundation, Umuahia should easily hit a century, 'not out',⁵ and in grand style. But it all depends on who firmly we pledge in this fiftieth year to re-establish in this corner of Africa in the manner of our original founders a school which shall serve the country and mankind as a true centre of moral and intellectual light.

Chinua Achebe ('44)

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION – A JUBILEE ESSAY

By Chinua Achebe ('44)

We live in revolutionary and exciting times.

Revolutionary because profound changes are taking place all around us everyday. Exciting because the possibility of greatness seems so much more within our grasp today than at any other time in our short history as a nation. It seems to me that for the first time in our struggle towards national self-realisation we have the material potentiality for transforming ourselves into a modern state and a just society.

Perhaps I should stress right away that I am talking about *potential* greatness. I must stress that because I know what an incorrigibly optimistic – even self-deluding – people we are.

The greatness I am talking about will become a reality when we have transformed ourselves by rigorous effort into a modern prosperous and just society.

⁴The western county council to which Umuahia pertained at the time; a school run by the local government.

⁵Cricket terminology. A century is a score of 100 or more runs in a single innings by a batsman, who will be not out if he has not been dismissed by the end of the innings.

The most important single tool for this transformation is education. Or perhaps I should say an educated citizenry.

Therefore it is a matter for great joy that the military administration in the country embarked on a bold programme of educational reform and expansion at all levels.

Despite problems avoidable and unavoidable the king-pin of modernization – UPE – is more or less, in place.⁶ Never mind the cynics who ask what all these children will do after they have had elementary education. Literacy is the right of every child in the modern world and is not to be conditional on job availability. Which is not to say that we need not plan what the children will be doing after UPE. On the contrary, because UPE is already a fact our planning for the aftermath will have to be done with the urgency of a fire brigade action.

In relation to our not so distant past these revolutionary changes in educational opportunities may almost be seen as a breach in historical continuity. But I believe that historians would caution against postulating such a breach. And I am sure they are right. Change and continuity constitute the dialectic of historical development.

And this is why it is permissible, I think, to speak from the platform of an Old Boys' Association about new developments and changes in our educational system. By definition Old Boys represent the past. What hope of meaningful contribution can they offer in the face of the sweeping momentum of rapid change?

I believe that it is precisely on account of the pace and magnitude of present changes that the need for a dialogue with past experience, with tradition, becomes particularly urgent.

Man's nature is both progressive and conservative. He grows and learns and matures. But he remains essentially the same person. Or we may put it another way: man treasures the continuity of the familiar in everyday sights and sounds but hankers also after mysteries and after juxtapositions and re-ordering of normal experience which constitute his artistic aspirations.

Let us imagine a man who lives exclusively with change, with a relentless barrage of new things, to whom everything that happens is a brand-new experience. Surely such a man would go absolutely crazy. His mind would simply come apart under the bombardment of the unfamiliar, because there would be no order and no meaning in his world.

For what we do whenever we encounter a new experience is to assign a meaning to it. And assigning a meaning to something is relating it to other things in our repertory of the known, turning it from threatening stranger to friend, giving it a familiar name. If we were unable to make this relationship we would remain in a state of permanent shock and bafflement.

This is why society conserves its history. Ignorant people like Hugh Trevor Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, may declare that there is no African history.⁷ What he confuses with history is a catalogue of events and

⁶Universal Primary Education (UPE), launched in September 1976, made primary education compulsory for every child over the age of six. The scheme, considered a potent tool for nation building after the civil war, sought to level educational privilege and encourage women's education. The unexpected increase in enrolment rates proved a challenge and led to an overhaul of the entire Nigerian education system. (See Csapo 1983; Nwangwu 1978; Oyediji 1982.)

⁷Achebe refers to Hugh Trevor-Roper's affirmation that 'perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of

opinions printed in books. But there is also a history which a people – every people – derive from wrestling with their own peculiar fate, from their existential struggle, and engrave in their hearts and memory – in their culture.

When our fathers seemingly broke the flow of their discourse to interject a proverb they were linking the present with the past, the problem of now to the wisdom of all time. They might be saying to you: *Don't despair* or *don't rejoice* (or whatever was appropriate), because whatever you are seeing now is not only not new; it has happened often enough in the past for your ancestors to distil from the profusion of its variations the elegant form of its essence and meaning.

In revolutionary times it is so easy to underrate the past or be impatient with tradition. And let's face it, the past can sometimes be a burden; and tradition can become a reactionary subterfuge. That is why we must speak of tradition not as an absolute and immovable necessity but as one half of an evolving dialectic – the other part being the imperative of change. But enough of generalities.

As everybody knows the Asika administration led the nation in the taking over of primary and secondary schools by the state. A lot has been said for or against that action. I believe that its best point was its recognition of all teachers as public servants with unified and improved conditions of service. Its greatest folly was to pursue uniformity to a degree where it meant imposing low standards on all schools. This was done ostensibly in the name of democracy. But one could have invoked the same democracy – and to better account – by upgrading schools with poor standards.

Building up, however, is always slower and less sensational than pulling down. Building up calls for the sobering admission that there is already in existence a base on which I will build my masterpiece, that other people have laboured meaningfully before me in the same field. Such an admission calls for humility and a sense of history.

The anti-history tendencies of that administration found its most ludicrous expression in the decision to change the names of all schools in the State. Everything became just another XY HIGH SCHOOL. I am glad we were spared that particular innovation in the end.

And it is not simply a matter of sentiment. Here was a nation with a very short history of common enterprise: and here we were zealously digging up and scattering what little foundations there were!

The most favourable view that could be taken of those events is, as I have said, that they were inspired by the democratic urge to abolish real or imagined educational privilege and secure equal treatment to all schools and all children. Such a principle would be entirely laudable. But a good principle can be vitiated by wrong practical application. I believe the right step for a government to take in the face of disparities among its educational institutions is not to reduce basic facilities all round, but to begin to introduce them where they do not exist. If, for example, there are fifty schools and only one has a library, it should build libraries in the other forty-nine. It should *not* dismantle the one library in existence.

The Observer of Benin once carried an editorial in which it called for the abolition of 'privileged' schools. It was a rather confused piece of writing which began

Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness ... and the darkness is not the subject of history.' (Trevor-Roper 1965: 9). Achebe's entire oeuvre, especially the early fiction dealing with the colonial clash, is driven by the desire to debunk this notion. (See also Achebe 1990.)

with the historical fallacy that government colleges were founded by 'our past mis-rulers' for their own children and a few very bright others.

Government College, Umuahia, as we all know, was founded in 1929 by the colonial government not for the children of colonial administrators but for any child in Nigeria or the Cameroons who could pass its entrance examination. When I went there in 1944, my father was not a colonial administrator but a retired church teacher on a pension of £30 a year. Most of my contemporaries were sons of peasants and petty traders. There was the classic case of a Cameroonian boy who walked all the way from Bamenda to Umuahia to take up his place.

It is however true that after we became an independent nation our ruling elite began to use their position to send their children to the best schools even when they did not qualify for admission. But that is another matter and a later story.

If there were indeed any educational institutions in the country that were truly centres of luxury I would not be the one to defend them. But the only luxuries mentioned in *The Observer* editorial were LIGHT, WATER, GRADUATE TEACHERS and, I believe, LIBRARIES. Now, these are not luxuries but the basic requirements of any secondary school. Fortunately the editorial concluded by calling on the government to provide these facilities for all schools. Which is why I described it as a confused piece of writing. Why abolish those schools that do have the basic requirements only to create similar facilities all round?

The problem is that we are all apt to lose our poise, our sense of balance, when we are faced with inequalities and disparities, real or imagined. We are apt to say: *Away with anything to do with the existing system. Give us an entirely new formula!*

We see the same cry, the same tendency, in the recent spate of arguments concerning university admissions. Without doubt the closing of the educational gap between different parts of this country is a national imperative which calls for bold departures and innovation. But these changes should not be embarked upon in total contravention of old and tested educational principles of selection, instruction and evaluation.

I believe that the disparity between the North and the South will not be removed by makeshift arrangements and concessions that bear on quality. The fact of the matter is that the North must learn to run pretty fast even to maintain the present disparity; to close the gap it has to sprint furiously. This is the fact we must face, the kind of truth we must be prepared to speak to each other if we truly care for the success of this country. Unfortunately there are people, even top university academics who have been prepared to play to the gallery in this matter by proposing easy and catchy solutions which boil down to mere manipulation of admission requirements.

I do not question the value of making special concessions under certain well-controlled situations to secure temporary relief. But such a measure is called a palliative not a cure. Anybody who for whatever reason prescribes easy educational pain-killers as a cure for the imbalance in the country is either a very careless doctor or an unscrupulous one. A responsible physician would attack the trouble at its very root (i.e. in elementary and secondary schools and even before school – in the homes, in the attitude of parents and of society as a whole to modern education) so that whatever palliative and remedial measures are adopted to ease the pain will not have the disastrous effect of masking the presence of the disease.

No one has yet found the perfect way to impart knowledge or to evaluate a student. These are matters for constant debate, and quite rightly so. As a third

world country in a hurry to achieve many different goals at once we are absolutely right to question many traditional methods, especially those that appear too leisurely. But we must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water, or education itself together with particular methodology which we may disapprove of.

I do not see how any university which introduces an ethnic sieve between its own prescribed examination and its result can become anything other than a third rate college, whatever opinion it may hold of itself. Nor do I see how a student who can only gain admission into a university behind the protection of ethnic tariff walls can be anything but a third rate student.

If Nigeria is to undergo the transformation we are embarked upon it will require a large corps of trained men and women confident in their own ability, neither seeking nor giving special favours. Nigeria can produce such people from every section of its population. But first it must instil into its youth the rigorous habit of stretching themselves to the fullest in open competition rather than seeking, like some exotic plant, the special soil and climate of a green-house.

If the present generation of Nigerians fails to launch Nigeria into the modern world it would be precisely because we have not insisted enough on fielding our first eleven; because we have not always demanded or given value for money.

A few years ago a girl from Lagos got my address from a newspaper and wrote to me at the University of Massachusetts⁸ to help her gain admission to a university in the United States. She had little mathematics and less science. But she had a Federal Government scholarship to study engineering! I think that a country which can do this kind of thing to itself has probably gone beyond mere inefficiency and corruption into absolute cynicism. And that, I am afraid, is where most of the easy alternatives to academic merit being proffered today will ultimately lead.

God forbid that we should be the generation that had the resources in men and material and got so close to creating Africa's first truly modern state but frittered away the chance in parochialism, inefficiency, corruption and cynicism. There is a terrifying episode at the very end of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* where a young pilgrim having suffered and endured all the dangers and tribulations of his journey approaches heaven at last. But his salvation is not to be. He discovers to his eternal perdition that there is a way to hell even from the gates of heaven. God forbid.

Achebe's editorial note: This essay, slightly modified, was first presented at the University of Lagos under the auspices of the Government College, Umuahia Old Boys' Association, Lagos Branch.

⁸University of Massachusetts: Chinua Achebe was Visiting Professor at the university from 1972–75.

A TRIBUTE TO 'AXIOM'

By O. C. Iloeje ('59)

Axiom was a phenomenon of the fifties and sixties, an institution in his own right in the annals of Umuahia. He began when Masters used to troop in for morning Assembly, behind the Principal, sporting short sleeved shirts, khaki pairs of shorts, long hoses turned down just below the knee (with brown or black shoes to match) and a pen stuck into the space between the hose and the upper leg with just the cap showing – and looking very much like the European Principal. He ended when some younger graduates from Ibadan would come for the same Assembly wearing print jumpers over pairs of trousers and sandals. This is not to say that the entrance of the new breed had any effect on him or his tenure. By God, no! He kept to the unwritten rule in matters of colonial dress, and in everything else – in his speech, his vocabulary, his jokes, his sense of fairness, and his style, – he made his own rules and he broke them. In these other aspects, he was anti-classical, a rebel without intending to be so, a name that brought hilarious excitement to both the high and the low among the student population, and an unpredictable terror in the classrooms, during inspections, on the parade ground, and in the little room where students changed used exercise books for new ones. But above all, he was loved by everyone that passed through him.

'Teek for Teek. Alamanda for Alamanda!'

There were usually two types of notebooks issued to students which were renewed when completely and duly signed by the subject teacher. One was “thick” backed and the other was a soft backed notebook with the name “Alamanda”. But you couldn't fool Axiom. With the battle cry of *'Teek for Teek ...'* he would descend on the back of the offending Alamanda with the school stamp for USED with such ferocity as if he sought to crush the conniving student who was fully materialized in the notebook.⁹

The matter ended there if he was in a good mood. If he was not, the used up notebook would find its way to a heap on the floor, followed by a whipping out of the DETENTION list into which the boy's name would be entered.

'Ffool. Messss. Detention!'

The new exercise book was also forfeited, and the boy would leave, possibly frightened, half amused by the new phonetics, quite shaken by the dramatic consequences of his little escapade, and very apprehensive of the coming Saturday

⁹The student's offence was that he handed over an 'alamanda' in the hope of getting a 'teek' to replace it.

morning when the Detention list would be read out – with the attendant shame of having to step out in front of the whole school.

Axiom liked to think of his class tests as the wrath of God descending on the artful dodgers and the noise makers, the sneaky ones who ate groundnuts under the desk during his classes, the mischievous menaces who found ways of making his blood boil, and the waste pipes who came to school to waste their fathers' money. With some sort of vengeance, such wraths often descended without warning. But at other times the warning was quite fair and to the point:

‘Next week, next week – I bomb!’

– and with each ‘next week’, his right hand rose one foot higher to indicate the succession of weeks. Translated into simple Queen’s English the statement meant:

‘I’ll give you a test in two weeks’ time’

But one was made to understand that it would not be an ordinary test. It was going to be Axiom’s vendetta!

The day the answer sheets would be returned, graded, was usually a fateful day. Axiom would sit on his stool by his table, glowering at the class – his eyes spitting fire – red pen in hand expecting the greedy and perennially dissatisfied “mark mongers” to come up and complain for more marks, and daring them to raise a voice with a face that radiated terror. But the desire for more marks usually overcame the terror from Axiom’s face.

‘Excuse me Sir’

‘Yes. *Ffool*. You wan more marks? *Kom up*.’

‘Excuse me Sir, I got this one and you marked it wrong.’

‘Aha. Bring *eeet*.’ (Snatch Slash Slash)

And having snatched the exercise book from the complaining boy, he would quickly cancel the old score and subtract two points. The surprised student would quickly snatch back his book, but the harm would have been done. But there was now the need to complain about the reduction from 24/30 to 22/30, which would bring another snatch, and another reduction to 20/30.

Such dramatic encounters usually did the trick, and there would be no more ‘monging’ for marks that day.

Possibly, a boy called Aka may have done very well, with 30/30. Axiom would call for his answer book, and after taking a gleaming look at it would say:

‘*EEh*. *O mara akwukwo!*’¹⁰

¹⁰‘*EEh*, *O mara akwukwo*’: Igbo for ‘Yes, he is intelligent.’ Literally, ‘Yes, he knows book!’

– not minding the fact that the subject was Latin, and that speaking in vernacular was banned in the school. He would then proceed to treat the class to a surprising flexibility of the Latin language:

Aka
Aka
Akam
Akam
Akae
Akae
Aka

By the time he got to the second '*Akae*', the whole class (minus one) would have joined him.

On one occasion, Axiom was surprisingly late to class. The boys took that as an excuse to play around and make a noise. Axiom overheard the noise on his way from the A.D. Block. The class monitor had taken down the names of the noise makers, but one rough neck whose name was on the list (and he felt, unjustifiably) had snatched the list from the monitor and had torn it. When Axiom came in, he demanded for the list. The monitor dutifully narrated what happened. The rough neck got up to defend himself, and the following dialogue ensued:

'Excuse me Sir. He wrote my name, and ...'

'And you *tear* it.'

'But Sir, I wasn't making any noise.'

'*EEHE*,¹¹ and *tear* it.'

'He should have ...'

'And you *tear* it.'

By this time cracks of escaping laughter were popping out from different bowed heads and covered mouths. Lungs were close to bursting.

'But Sir ...'

'Answer me *direct*. Did you *tore* it?'

It was impossible to control anymore. The class went up in uproarious laughter. Not even the rough neck could contain himself. Axiom was beside himself with rage. He boiled and fumed but the class was out of control.

¹¹ *Eehe*: Igbo expression used for emphasis.

‘Laughing ass,’ he called them. Eventually the fun cooled off, and he promptly booked the whole class on Detention. Rough neck got an additional Detention for his own unique part.

But how did the name ‘Axiom’ all start? No one in my time seemed to know for sure. The term ‘axiom’ rightly belongs to the discipline of Mathematics, Philosophy or Logic. Axiom’s major subject was Mathematics, and rumour had it that ‘axiom’ seemed a rather frequently used word for explaining the unexplainable.

But Axiom loved Umuahia. He loved everything Umuahian. He was devoted to the boys, to the school, and would do everything positive in the interest of both. He would have to be impossibly sick to be absent from classes. All masters were in charge of one group of boys or the other for games. But whereas some masters may occasionally be absent from games, Axiom would never be. If it was soccer, he occasionally added colour to the game by following it with a running commentary as if he was on radio. He took interest in everything Umuahia did – drama, sports etc. He hardly missed a home match against another school, and no one could miss knowing that he was there, particularly if the match was getting very tough. He would be all over the boundary line, from post to post, his ‘UP UMUAHIA’, ‘NOW UMUAHIA’ rising high, heavy, and urgently above five hundred voices. If an Umuahian goal seemed impossible to come, he would shake the post of the opponent’s goal – to shake off the ‘*orumokpo*’ and ‘juju’, which must have been buried at that goalmouth to ward off goals.

On one such occasion, during a match against a mission school at the Upper Field North, he did just that. Soon afterwards, Umuahia scored the winning goal. His cries of ‘*I done it! I done it!*’ – with his rising fist of victory high in the air – drowned the jubilation of the boys.

Many boys that he helped through difficult circumstances will not forget him. Many whose hearts were made lighter by his numerous jokes will always remember him. We the Old Boys of Umuahia, particularly those that passed through him, use this opportunity to wish him the best, and God’s protection wherever he may be.

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