

For "M.O." and the Legacy She Left Us: A Tribute to Professor 'Molara Ogundipe

Adedoyin Aguoru

As a young academic at Olabisi Onabanjo University in 2005, I watched with growing interest as the Department of English prepared to receive a renowned visitor. It was Professor 'Molara Ogundipe and there was so much excitement in the air. Samson Dare, then Head of the Department of English, spoke so glowingly about her that I could not help but feel caught up in the excitement. Breezing into the department on that day in 2005 wearing black casual trousers and a flowery top, Ogundipe was brimming with confidence, vivaciousness and vitality. She could not be ignored for a second! Accompanied by her mentees, she politely enquired about the developments in the department, proceeding on an immediate tour of departmental facilities and the Faculty of Arts.

My interest was ignited further when I learned that she was the first person to head the department and had laid its solid foundation. She had actively engaged its students and staff in a collaborative and decisive manner. The department's curriculum was adapted from that of the premier university, the University of Ibadan, where Ogundipe was the first to be awarded a First Class degree in English. She subsequently pursued a teaching career at the English Department in Ibadan before offering many years later to be foundation Head of English at the newly established Ogun State University (now Olabisi Onabanjo University) in Ago-Iwoye in 1982. Apart from her curiosity-inducing feminist theory, Stiwanism (Social Transformation in Africa Including Women), Ogundipe possessed several awe-inspiring qualities that were evident from her personality as well as the things said and written about her, and even from what was left unsaid.

I was trying to work out her significance for the department and the university, which had continued to earn her such tremendous accolades decades after she left the shores of Nigeria. She was, I was told, deeply involved in the lives of students—academic and social—to the point of sacrificial commitment. Ogundipe bridged the generational and institutional gap between lecturers and students, making it possible for her students to be the best they could be. She related with

them more as a friend than as a professor. Kollington Ayinla, the Fuji maestro, had at some point during Ogundipe's tenure as head of department, come to perform at one of the students' annual activities. Ogundipe was reported to have had oversight of the students, staying with them throughout the performance and sharing in the jokes, drinks and dancing all night long.

She had also established co-curricular activities during her tenure as head of department. These included intellectual and critical engagements, dramatic performances, poetry rendition and musical arts, all of which forged strong links among the staff, students, and the entire university community. These activities gave birth to the Kollaj Festival, for which the erstwhile Ogun State University was popular in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Kollaj Festival was the annual culmination of an extremely popular and well-received creative tradition called the Writers' Workshop. Every Wednesday, students and lecturers gathered in the late afternoon to read, perform, render and critique poetry, prose and drama, mostly written by young undergraduates. This experience, and the feedback they received, produced several budding writers (Aguoru, 2005). Participants were also afforded a platform to exhibit their musical and theatrical talents. The workshop became known for attracting established writers, artists and scholars from different parts of the country. Among those hosted at the workshop were the late Ken Saro-Wiwa and Harry Garuba, Niyi Osundare, and Tunji Oyelana. Some of the students who cut their teeth at the workshop have since attained international prominence. Lola Shoneyin, the author of the internationally acclaimed novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, is a product of the Writers' Workshop. Other participants have also emerged as leading actors and actresses in Nollywood.¹ The Writers' Workshop and the Kollaj Festival remain among Ogundipe's flagship legacies.

Ogundipe, of Soyinka's days in Ibadan, was a literary giant and an activist. In Wole Soyinka's (1994) *Ibadan: The Pekelemes Years*, he refers to a certain woman as "M.O." In his (1996) review of this book, Gbemisola Adeoti wonders whether this is 'Molara Ogundipe, a contemporary of the founders of the Ibadan Mbari Club.'² In 2017, years after I had moved to the University of Ibadan, Ogundipe attended a programme at Trenchard Hall in honour of Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo, the Nigerian poet who died in 1967 fighting for the independence of Biafra. Flanking her at the high table were Wole Soyinka, Bekederemo Clark and other notable

figures and literary scholars at the University of Ibadan. Her graceful presence and interventions at the programme spoke volumes about her contribution to the identity of the woman in society as well as to the much-debated global role of a woman in institutions of higher learning.

Ogundipe's essay on her theory, Stiwanism, is a direct response to the controversy surrounding the relevance of feminism as a theory to Africa and a response to the claim that feminism is a foreign enterprise in which African women need not engage. Through her reflection on Stiwanism, she addresses these and other theoretical, critical, and creative feminist concerns in Africa. Her work has spurred more women to theorise this sensitive construct in the context of a continent that is patriarchal in all ramifications (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

'Molara Ogundipe was born on 27 December 1940 in Lagos, Nigeria. Her father was a missionary and her mother taught English and Mathematics at a teacher's college. Ogundipe's secondary education was at Queen's Secondary School, Ede. From there, she went on to the University of Ibadan, which was at the time affiliated to the University of London. Thereafter, she proceeded to Leiden University in the Netherlands where she gained her doctorate in Narratology.

Having been taught by experts, Ogundipe was an excellent teacher. She taught English Studies, Writing, Comparative Literature, and Gender Studies, from the perspectives of cultural studies and development, at universities across continents. She remained a leader in feminist activism and gender studies in Africa for decades. She established and was the first Director of the Foundation for International Education and Monitoring, which is dedicated to teaching young women the principles of feminist theories and gender equality. Ogundipe was not only a theorist and a literary critic, she was also a poet. Obi Maduakor's contribution in Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo's publication on *Nigerian Female Writers* (1989) noted at that time that Ogundipe and her counterpart, Catherine Acholonu, were the only female Nigerian poets bridging the gap between the "...menfolk and the women in (Nigerian) poetry" (1989, p. 75). To Maduakor, Ogundipe's poetry is marked by undisputed Marxist and metaphysical tempers along with poetic experiences that are national, continental and international. As a poet, Ogundipe did not only write about the titans of poetry who were nurtured in Ibadan—Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark—but she took her place eminently among them in her own right.

Ogundipe's publications include "Those Rags... My Rags of Time," in *Okike* (1979), "The Nigerian Literary Scene" in *Kiabara* (1980), and "Song to the Black America of the Sixties" and "Yoruba Love", both published in *Okike* (1981). "Song at the African Middle Class", "Africa of the Seventies", and "To a Tree in a West African Savannah Country" (1982) are all published in *Okike* No. 22. *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems* (1985) is Ogundipe's collection of poetry. *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (1994) is her book-length contribution to African feminist theory while *Moving Beyond Boundaries* (1995) is a book she co-edited with Carole Boyce Davies. It was in *Re-Creating Ourselves* that she first discussed "Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context" (1994, 207-242). Several of her essays appear as contributions to books and anthologies, such as Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson's *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (2007) and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (1984). Her poems also appear in the anthology *Daughters of Africa* (1994), edited by Margaret Busby.

Ogundipe, who passed away on 18 June 2019, is survived by two daughters: Dr. Isis Imotara Leslie, a political scientist who teaches in the United States, and Dr. (Ts'gye Maryam) Rachel Titilayo Leslie, who explores religion in Africa and the significance of African legacies for global culture (Stakahashi, 2017). Beyond Ogundipe's daughters, who bear the torch of the light she represented, several other daughters of Africa, whom she influenced with her profundity and Stiwanism, continue to be positively driven and keep the fire aglow.

Endnotes

1. A term referring to the Nigerian film industry.
2. The Mbari Club was a cultural centre set up in Ibadan in 1961. The term "Mbari" is Igbo, referring to creation; the Club was named by Chinua Achebe. Members included Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, and J.P. Clark, among others.

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