



**Nnabuenyi Ugonna**  
**1936-1990**

Born 12 October 1936, Nnabuenyi was the eldest child of *Eze Ugonna Ezenwaka* and *Ihudia Ugonna* of *Amaokpara, Ihitenansa*, a village some 40 miles south-east of Onitsha in the Igbo heartland.

Born on Eke day, he was called Okeke, and later christened Frederick. He had three younger brothers, five younger sisters, and two half sisters all of whom were very dear to him throughout his life.

Nnabuenyi's father belonged to a generation in Ihitenansa that received no mission education. Their education was still traditional and Ugonna Ezenwaka received the best this system of education could offer. He was initiated into mmonwu society and became learned in the traditional lore of his people.

Throughout his life, Nnabuenyi held his father in the very deepest affection and respect, and often spoke of his father's insight and wisdom. He himself was initiated into the mmonwu society and took an Ozo title, and the name, Nnabuenyi. The appreciation of traditional knowledge that Ugonna Ezenwaka passed onto Nnabuenyi profoundly influenced his later decision to spend his life in teaching and researching Igbo oral literature and tradition.

As a young man, Ugonna Ezenwaka had seen the advantages of the education he had missed, and had vowed that as soon as his first son could walk, he would send him to school. Thus it came about that his friends nicknamed the new born Okeke (Nnabuenyi) *Onyenkuzi* (teacher).

In due course, Nnabuenyi completed primary school, but though bright and clever, there was no support for continuing to secondary (high school) level. After a spell in Onitsha, trading, his maternal uncles, who were teachers, managed to find him a place as a pupil teacher, and he worked his way through the system, gaining his teachers' certificates grades three, two and one. He attended Bishop Shanaghan Training College in Orlu. While teaching in and heading schools in the Orlu area, he studied in his spare time for his O and A level examinations and gained admission to Ibadan University to read English in 1962. This was made financially possible by the establishment of the Education Council of Ihitenansa. Nnabuenyi initiated this with the support of many important people in Ihitenansa as a kind of revolving loan scheme, and the scheme helped many students to complete their university education in later years.

After graduation, he stayed on in Ibadan to do a master's degree. In 1966, he went to London to attend a summer school and to carry out some research towards his thesis on Casely Hayford the author of *Ethiopia Unbound*,

probably the first truly African novel. Staying in Bloomsbury, he discovered the work of the School of Oriental and African Studies and realised that there was a gap in international scholarship – very little work had been done on Igbo.

Around the time of the Igbo massacres in Nigeria in Autumn 1966, his short study fellowship in England ended, and he arranged nervously to return to Nigeria. Unlike many other Igbo students, despite the pogroms, he never contemplated staying away – this would have been incompatible with his love for his family, whom he could not bear to be separated from at such a dangerous time. He managed to slip back to Eastern Nigeria, designated Biafra in the famous *Ahiara declaration* of May 1967. Here he joined the Biafran Propoganda Directorate where he worked among a group of young men who all distinguished themselves in the intellectual life of Nigeria in later years.

The Civil war had an indelible influence on Nnabuenyi's generation in both practical and emotional ways. For most of them, rebuilding their lives and their careers after the war was a difficult process. They contended throughout their lives with institutionalised discrimination. They had seen thousands of Igbo refugees crowding into Biafra from all parts of Nigeria - people who had discovered that they had not been assimilated into their new localities when a crisis happened; people who had lost their way of life, their jobs and their property. Now they realised that the vision of one integrated Nigeria, offering opportunity and success to everyone prepared to work hard, the vision indeed promoted by the great Nnamdi Azikiwe, did not in fact exist. For many years, Nnabuenyi though living and working successfully in Lagos, would not invest in anything that could not be packed into the boot of his car – in case there was another need to flee back to the East.

Moreover the refugee Igbos who flocked back to the East in 1966 were people who had lost touch with their culture and traditions, and were, initially, neither appreciative of nor fluent in Igbo language and literature. Biafran nationalism combined with the need for identity, provided an opportunity that Nnabuenyi was determined to take after the Civil War – to establish the study of Igbo language as a respectable academic subject and to record traditional literature, which was in danger of dying away.

At the end of the Civil war, Nnabuenyi was virtually penniless and, in Eastern Nigeria, at that time, jobs were hard to find. He hitched a lift to Onitsha, and boarded a vehicle going to Ibadan. When the driver came to collect fares from the passengers, Nnabuenyi admitted that he did not have the money to pay and started to get off the truck. One of the passengers was a Nigerian Federal soldier. He levied all the passengers to raise the fare and insisted that the driver take Nnabuenyi right to the very gates of Ibadan University. When Nnabuenyi arrived in his old department, he found that his scholarship and a residential place in post-graduate hall were all waiting for him. After the drama and tragedy of the civil war years, he thankfully embraced the tranquillity of the library and academic life, completing his masters' thesis in early 1971. The good deed of that soldier was never forgotten and the story was often retold in the family.

In March 1971, Nnabuenyi joined the newly established School of Basic Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where as a stop-gap he taught English while he looked out for an opportunity to get involved in Igbo scholarship. It was here that he met Judy Corran, who was teaching at the Department of Library science on a VSO assignment. On 11 September 1971, they married before the District Officer in Orlu. That evening, the people of Amaokpara came together at Obiegede, Ugonna Ezenwaka's house, and, the marriage was celebrated by the light of the stars and a few lanterns, with palm wine, dancing and the singing of both traditional and Biafran war songs into the small hours of the night.

Soon afterwards, Professor Adeboye Babalola, who had pioneered academic Yoruba studies at the University of Lagos, offered Nnabuenyi a post as lecturer in the School of African and Asian studies, to develop and teach a proficiency certificate in Igbo. This was a small but significant step in the direction Nnabuenyi wanted to go. He arrived in the school in December 1971 and remained at the University of Lagos for the rest of his life.

The seventies were fruitful, creative and happy years in which Nnabuenyi's life developed steadily in all directions. His four sons were born and each gave him great joy and interest: Chidi in 1972, Dike in 1974, Kelechi in 1976 and Okechukwu in 1978. He was able to provide some support for his parents and for the educational aspirations of his brother Muodebe (who studied architecture in Chicago setting off for the United States in 1976) and sister Chinonye (who went to the University of Ilorin in 1978 to study history).

His reputation as a pioneer of Igbo scholarship was growing and he attended many conferences, perhaps most notably the colloquium at Festac 77. In 1978, he completed work on the traditional poetry texts that later became a well known collection : *Abu na egwuregwu odinala Igbo* (Longman, 1980),

Soon after coming to Lagos, he registered for his PhD with the University of Ibadan where he was supervised as a part time student by Oyin Ogunba who was noted for his own research into Yoruba dramatic masking tradition. Nnabuenyi's thesis on *Mmonwu, a dramatic tradition of the Igbo* (later redeveloped for publication by the University of Lagos press, 1983) was presented successfully in 1976.

The eighties began with personal tragedy. Grace, one of the prettiest and gentlest of Nnabuenyi's younger sisters died at the age of only 29 in 1980 leaving behind six young children and a shocked grieving family: Nnabuenyi never got completely recovered from this loss to his family circle.

In public life, the Nigerian boom days of the seventies were over with a vengeance. The transition from military rule to civilian rule was not at all how an idealistic Nnabuenyi imagined, with widespread corruption and conspicuous waste. In the University of Lagos, he battled to establish degree courses in Igbo, and to get recognition both for the discipline and his own work. It was often disheartening and stressful. One day he sought an

appointment with the Vice Chancellor, the distinguished historian, Professor Ade Ajayi, and made a personal and emotional case for Igbo to be recognised as a degree subject. At last approval was given, and University of Lagos became the first university to offer Igbo at degree level. With this, Nnabuenyi was able to attract colleagues like Professor Sam Uzochukwu and Asonye Uba-Mgbemena to the department, and a crop of bright young students started to make a names for themselves – these included Dr Ejike Ezeh and Dr Charles Ogbulogo.

In 1982, Nnabuenyi took an overdue sabbatical year, spending part of the year at the University of Nigeria Nsukka and part of it at University of Indiana, Bloomington. Finally in 1986 he was promoted to Professor of Igbo Studies.

But more challenges were lying in wait. Ugonna Ezenwaka died at the age of 86 years, a huge loss for Nnabuenyi, and the moment when he first recognised that his own health was in decline. After the traditional funeral ceremonies at Christmas 1987, Nnabuenyi went into hospital for his first treatment for what turned out to be prostate cancer of the more virulent and galloping form. Two courses of treatment in England could put the illness into remission and he died on 5 June 1990.

*A biographical sketch and a bibliography of his work can be found at the back of the the volume: Advances in African Languages, Literatures and Cultures: essays in memory of Nnabuenyi Ugonna, edited by Charles Ogbulogo, P A Ezikeojiaku and Olugboyega Alaba (2001)*