

“Making the Poet Making Poetry”

by
Chinyere G. Okafor

Paper presented at the Kansas Writers’ Association workshop.
Rockwell Library, Wichita, KS. June 21, 2008.

Introduction:

I was invited to talk about the ‘process of writing poetry’ but since I cannot claim to know the process that works for everyone. There are as many different ways of making poetry as there are poets. I’ll talk a little bit about how I became a poet and how I write poems as an introduction to the three creative exercises that we’ll perform in this workshop.

1. Background:

I’m from the Igbo culture area of Nigeria where people particularly adepts in the Igbo language use a lot of idioms and proverbs in their speeches. This is admired in the tradition and learnt informally through socialization and artistic entertainments at marriage, naming, funeral and other ceremonies as well as communal festivals, mask and other theatrical performances. One of my most memorable socialization processes was the creative evening gatherings. As a child I looked forward to these sessions on the art of creativity. We listened to stories and songs including those that we had heard before. They were narrated by the same or different persons, but the experience was always unique and enjoyable.

In these sessions, we were also cultivated in the art of poetry, story-telling, and imitation through spontaneous artistic competitions that demonstrated our knowledge of tongue twisters, riddles and proverbs. We also chorused and sometimes acted out parts of a story. We were always told or required to explain the moral expressed in the story. These were my earliest study of what the Igbo call *nka*, which is the art of imagination and creativity, that is, the use of the mind to imagine and the hand to make - handicrafts, literary, performing, plastic and other arts.

My approach to making or writing poetry is basically the one that I grew up with – experiencing other people’s art and trying out my own. We experience the works of others by listening to them, viewing them or reading them. This process helps us to build up an artistic resource, not consciously, but through latent learning. It can also be conscious. It can also be through formal learning.

1st Exercise – Visualizing

2. Knowledge, practice, and experimentation:

From oral culture and unraveling of proverbs, I became interested in poetry because of its reliance on suggestion (images). Some people complain that images are difficult to unravel, and they might well be; but I enjoy listening to the crafting of words that make up layers of meaning. Crafting is not just the use of complex and obscure images, but also the use of simple words to

craft expressions that have lasting impressions. Some people begin to make poetry by consciously imitating poets of their choice or adapting their works. When I started writing, I did not imitate or consciously do so. I started expressing myself poetically. How?

Some poets require contemplation and quiet moment to make the verses. This is useful and works for them. For me; it is stress, passion, and emotion that trigger my poetic thinking (Of course I need space and quietude for doing the job finally). Let me give an example by imagining a common situation where someone hurts your friend. To be more specific, let's say that your friend's friend cheats on her or him or vice versa. How do you deal with it as a team of friends? In those days, my friends and me would gather and vent our anger on the victimizer. We would talk about the offender in terms of the ugly people that we knew or we had heard of or read about. We would call up names of animals that we didn't like or we thought were mean. Casanova, wild dog, elephant tongue, double-faced tornado readily come to my mind (and please don't bother about tornado shapes; I live in KS!).

In this kind of scenario, there is emotion – anger. There are images of various kinds.

And if we listen to (or imagine) the beat of the hearts of the supporters and the sound of the voices, we have beat, rhythm and music.

What about the structure? At this stage, it is better to let the poem dictate its structure.

2nd Exercise – Imagining and creating images.

3. Self knowledge and self expression:

It is important to have a good knowledge of yourself (not the whole self), but just a good knowledge of where you stand; whether in front or behind or in-between or nowhere at all – positionality is important because it influences poetic expression (especially attitude and solution). What type of person are you? How does this influence your writing? Are you afraid? Of what? What is your relationship to the world? What is your role as a poet? To make people laugh? To make people cry, think, and act? To create awareness? About what?

I'm not saying that you should bombard yourself with questions, but just that you should find ways of learning who you are, because it will influence your interaction with your muse.

3rd Exercise: Imaginative journey:

4. Making of poetry checklist

At the end of these three exercises, you should be able to:

Learn or emphasize something about your personality

Say what poetry means to you

Write a simple poem

Know what appeals to you in a poem

4th Exercise: Experimentation: