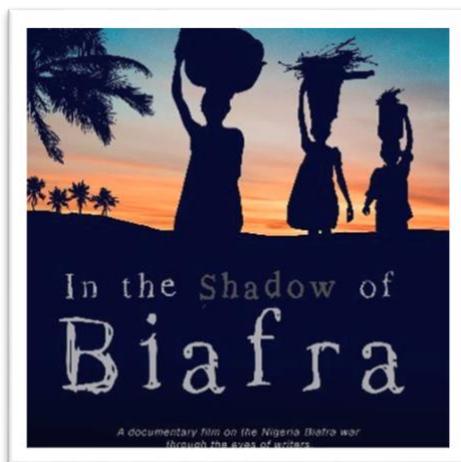


A Sojourn to the Vault

Biafra, Iwalewahaus and Natural Synthesis

In 2017 I was invited by Dr Louisa Egbunike (Durham University), then based at City, University London, to join her as she led a project that sought to explore the Biafra war (1967-1970) on the 50th anniversary of the conflict's outbreak. The project, at this early point, had a multitude of outputs planned, most significantly an exhibition of works by a collective (NASUK) of contemporary Nigerian artists based in the UK, to be launched in the Brunei gallery (SOAS), along with an accompanying book.

Initially, I was brought on board to film a number of interviews of the artists that would be making contributions to the exhibition - to capture their intentions and artistic process, however, this evolved, as these projects sometimes do, into a fully-fledged film on the role of art during and following the Biafra war. The project, in 2018, took us to Nigeria to interview a number of prominent Nigerian artists, writers and scholars, many of whom were actively involved in the war, experienced it as children or who inherited the memories of the war from their families – including Nnedi Okorafor, Chukwuemeka Ike, Okey Ndibe and Ernest Emenyonu. We also travelled across parts of the UK for interviews, one of which was with the playwright Inua Ellams, to Jamaica to interview Linton Kwesi Johnson, and to the US (Baltimore) where we interviewed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. As we accumulated more and more interviews and material, a theme began to emerge that we had not anticipated. The artists and writers that we interviewed provided us with compelling stories and insights, and at some point in 2019 we decided that the film would focus exclusively on how writers thought about, remembered and wrote about the war, as well as exploring the role of writers during the war, how their work influenced international perceptions at the time, and how this work continues to shape perceptions of the war in the contemporary. Trailer can be seen here: https://youtu.be/593Q_mjL57A)



The film, *In the Shadow of Biafra*, was completed at the end of 2019, and featured contributions from an array of prominent Nigerian writers and scholars. We launched the film at the beginning of 2020 at the Curzon in Bloomsbury. Reactions from the audience were incredibly poignant, with many expressing that this was one of the first times they had been able to safely reflect on the horror they had experienced. While the war continues to be a contentious debate for many Nigerians, we take the position that the film seeks to engage with the subjective memories of the war, to facilitate dialogue and to shed some light on this horrific chapter in post-colonial Nigeria. The film was part of an Impact Case study for City, University of London, in 2021, for the English department, gaining a 3/4 star rating:

<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/64a01736-3e97-4281-aab2-b0aa70f693de?page=1>

Of course, at some point Covid hit, and the tour of the film came to a premature end.

While we have only recently begun to share the movie again, exclusively through organised screenings, we are also in the process of ensuring purchasable DVDs are available for institutions, in the initial, and later for the general public. More recently, we screened the film at the African Literature Association (ALA) Conference (2023) in Knoxville and were subsequently invited to screen the film at Princeton. The downtime from the project during COVID enabled us to think about what to do with the abundance of unused material related to artistic visual representations of the war, which of course was the initial intention of the film. And so, at the beginning of 2023 we committed ourselves to exploring this aspect of the project. We already had a number of interviews with Nigerian artists, lots

of archival footage, and material from the exhibitions, but we knew that while we wanted to explore the visual arts in relation to the war, we didn't simply want to traverse the same ground as the first film had, albeit through the lens of visual arts.

Iwalewahaus, Bayreuth

In search of our new direction and narrative arch, in April of this year (2023) Dr Egbunike arranged for us to visit the University of Bayreuth in Germany, specifically to explore the artworks of two prominent Nigerian artists, Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu, stored at the Iwalewahaus institution. Iwalewahaus was established to store artistic pieces from all across Africa, initially donated by Ulli Beier, in the 1980s. Beier, originally from Germany/Poland, was an influential thinker, editor and writer, who founded the Black Orpheus magazine, which would become a crucial site for Nigerian literary publishing, and in the early 1960s he co-founded the Mbari Writers and Artist Club – a central hub for African creatives in this post-colonial moment in Nigeria. His collection at Iwalewahaus includes pieces from all over Africa, but the work of Okeke and Udechukwu exist as significant contributions within these archives.

The role of Okeke in the development of African arts in the 20th century cannot be overstated - Okeke was not only an artist but a significant theoretician of African arts, developing a manifesto for African artists in the emerging post-colonial world of the 1960s titled *Natural Synthesis* – a decolonial approach to art, art-history, and practice. Following his period as a member of the Zaria Rebels, Okeke would go on to establish the Nsukka School of Arts at the University of Nigeria as a hub for Nigerian Modernism in the 1970s.

Through his efforts at Nsukka, and his manifesto on *Natural Synthesis*, Okeke, and other artists, in this pre-war period, would explore questions of cultural and national identity in post-colonial Nigeria. Later, and more critically, he and Udechukwu would play a prominent role during the war producing propaganda posters for the Biafran efforts. Their artistic output shaped perceptions of the conflict nationally and internationally.



Our time spent in Iwalewahaus was incredibly generative for the project, from the richness of the collections stored in the basement vault, to the knowledge, kindness and expertise offered us by our colleagues there. There were of course many ethical questions that we pondered during our time there – about the context of how many of these artistic pieces were acquired, why these memories, techniques and traditions of African artists were stored so far away from their origins, etc. These were conversations we had with our colleagues at Iwalewahaus, many of whom are actively engaged in addressing this contentious history of acquisition - their emerging digitisation strategy being one part of that.



Iwalewahaus is an incredible institution that may be of interest to many of our Nottingham colleagues and students – particularly those studying African artistic traditions, decolonial theories, African history, Pan-Africanism and repatriation.

Following our visit to Bayreuth we flew out to Carson, California, to interview Obiora Udechukwu, where he now lives with his family, where we discussed his role during the Biafra conflict.

The second film in the *In the Shadows of Biafra* series will hopefully be completed within the next year. We will also be expanding this project, yet again, to include a digital archive of memory in order to share the vast collection of recordings we currently hold, and potentially two more films, one on the Mbari Club and one focused on the role of women during the war efforts.

For more information please contact: Dr Nathan Richards Nathan.richards@nottingham.ac.uk (Nottingham) or Dr Louisa Egbunike (PI) louisa.egbunike@durham.ac.uk (Durham)

For information on Iwalewahaus please visit: <https://www.iwalewahaus.uni-bayreuth.de/de/index.html>