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## Richard Freeman

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## Richard Freeman

### Abstract

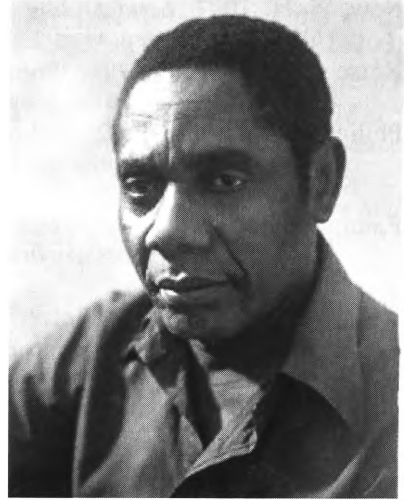
Biographical Introduction by Kay Williamson The Nigerian writer and story-teller Richard Ayeberemo Deribi Freemann died at Port Harcourt on 3rd August, 2002. According to his official records, he was born on 24th May, 1944 in what is now Bayelsa State, Eastern Nigeria, in the village of Ikebiri, formerly within the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, now in the Apoi/Olodiama Local Government Area. Richard Freemann received his primary education in Ossiamia from 1953 to 1957, and his secondary education, from 1957 to 1960, in Bomadi. In the early 1960s he moved to the Nigerian capital, Ibadan, where I was working on the Izon language. The Izon language is spoken in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, with many dialectical variations, and is rich in imaginative stories and expressions.

## KAY WILLIAMSON AND CHARLES LOCK

## Richard Freemann

**BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION BY KAY WILLIAMSON**

The Nigerian writer and story-teller Richard Ayeberemo Deribi Freemann died at Port Harcourt on 3rd August, 2002. According to his official records, he was born on 24th May, 1944 in what is now Bayelsa State, Eastern Nigeria, in the village of Ikebiri, formerly within the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, now in the Apoi/Olodiama Local Government Area. Richard Freemann received his primary education in Ossiamia from 1953 to 1957, and his secondary education, from 1957 to 1960, in Bomadi. In the early 1960s he moved to the Nigerian capital, Ibadan, where I was working on the Izon language. The Izon language is spoken in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, with many dialectical variations, and is rich in imaginative stories and expressions.



The first thing I heard about Richard Freemann was that a wonderful story-teller had come to town. As an Izon speaker, he was soon introduced to me. He was looking for a job and thought of joining the army. This was just before my parents came from England to visit me; the very night they arrived he came to my flat clutching a live chicken, which he presented to my mother. She rose to the occasion, accepted the chicken and then sat down with Richard who told her all his troubles. The next day my mother suggested that he needed a skill and paid for him to take a course in typing.

One day, watching me teaching a rather slow undergraduate how to write and tone-mark Izon, Richard Freemann asked if I would teach him too. I agreed, not expecting much, and to my surprise he immediately got the idea and quickly became a very accurate transcriber of his own Olodiama dialect of Izon. With both typing skills and the ability to write Izon, he was qualified for appointment as a transcriber of a Nigerian language at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan.

He was employed at the University of Ibadan from 1965 to 1977, and in that time advanced his education on numerous fronts. In 1971 he took a course in fishery studies, offered by the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources; in

1973 he received an Instructor's Certificate (with Distinction) after a course at Port Harcourt in the writing of local (Rivers State) languages. He was awarded a certificate in Fine Art and Design in 1974, from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and in 1975 he took a course at the Kainji Lake Research Project, New Bussa, in the scientific drawing of fish. When the University of Port Harcourt was founded in 1977, Richard Freemann was able to return permanently to Rivers State: he was appointed to the Faculty of Humanities as a Language Field Assistant, and later moved to the Faculty of Education where he was promoted to the post of Higher Cultural Officer in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology.

He was three times married, and left ten children.

Celebrated even in his youth as a storyteller, Richard Freemann applied his skills to the composition of written stories and poems, in both Izon and English. In 1972 the Institute of African Studies at Ibadan published his book, *Okoyai aumgbomo: Seeds of Poetry*, consisting of poems created in both languages on facing pages. Some stories were accepted for publication in the *Literary Review* (New York) and *African Arts/Arts d'Afrique*. He also published a school reader in Izon commissioned by the Rivers Readers Project, with Teacher's Notes in English, and a translation of a story from the Bible. His studies on fish and fishing methods in the Niger Delta are unpublished: a major work on this topic remains uncompleted.

Richard Freemann was someone for whom the boundary between the physical everyday world and the spiritual world was very thin. He dreamed dreams and he saw visions, and he would talk about them with sympathetic listeners. He was to a great degree an interpreter of one culture to another. He told and wrote stories about the interaction of the different worlds he experienced: I could often not tell when he moved from fact to fiction. As a Christian in a still largely traditional society, he moved through a great variety of churches, and it was as a Quaker that he endured the depredations of AIDS. A Service of Songs was held in Richard Freemann's memory at the University of Port Harcourt on 31 October 2003. He is buried in Ikebiri.

#### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION BY CHARLES LOCK

I met Richard Freemann once, far too briefly, on a visit to the University of Port Harcourt in April 2002. A UNESCO lecture on 'Amos Tutuola and Ken Saro-Wiwa: A Heritage of Rotten English' had been delivered to a distinguished but unconvinced audience (now published in *Kiabàrà: Journal of Humanities* [Port Harcourt], 8.1, 2002, pp. 1–10). I was dismayed to note that in the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Amos Tutuola is still an anomaly, an embarrassment; recognition of Tutuola's stature remains withheld in his homeland; only outside of Africa is he regarded as an initiating presence in African (and post-colonial) writing in English. One of the very few listeners who assented to my argument was Richard Freemann, the language of whose

stories can certainly be placed within the heritage that I had outlined, from Amos Tutuola to Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (Saros, Port Harcourt 1985). Indeed, this point had been made as long ago as 1968 — long before Saro-Wiwa had coined the term 'Rotten English' — in an unsigned prefatory note (56–57) to Richard Freemann's story 'Udouye the King of Beauty', published in *African Arts/Arts d'Afrique* (II.1 1968),

the idioms and syntax of the mother tongue impose on English an odd yet curiously refreshing and piquant flavour. This is not bad English but a different English.... The work of the well known writer Amos Tutuola has been the focus of great debate on this point, some critics praising the unusual quality of language, others deploring the inaccuracies of his English judged by standard norms of the language. For all the fierce argument, *The Palm Wine Drunkard* [sic] remains justly appreciated and Mr. Freemann's work has something in common with Tutuola's, at least in its freshness and originality.

Tutuola's reputation cannot be said to have risen since 1968, and there has been a surprising lack of sustained interest in irregular forms of English to be found in what was then known as Commonwealth literature, and which has since been re-appropriated under the name of post-colonial literature. The unsigned preface to Freemann's story of 1968 concludes that 'For many scholars, the adaptations writers are bringing to English as they absorb its forms into their own traditional usage is a fascinating subject....' (57). However, the premise that language must not be prescriptively judged, and therefore that 'anything goes', has unfortunately stifled curiosity in what ought to be one of the richest seams of inquiry in post-colonial studies. Despite much interest in New Englishes and Global English as linguistic phenomena, there has been insufficient attention paid to the literary consequences of their deployment in texts. This might in part explain the neglect of Freemann's work after some promising symptoms of interest in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The general assumption is that such irregular forms of English can be ascribed merely to deficiency, to a lack of education: in the case of Tutuola, it appears that he could not write 'correct' English — that his novels fairly indicate his command of English syntax — and that he was even ashamed of the 'mistakes' that his remarkably tolerant and enlightened publisher (Faber) had allowed to stand. Of the extant typescripts of Richard Freemann's stories, Professor Kay Williamson has informed me that 'What I normally did, for anything which he showed me, was to correct purely grammatical things like verb tenses as well as obvious spelling errors, but leave his phraseology untouched.' Such a practice raises a number of questions, though I hasten to add that my own procedure, in editing the story presented here, is hardly more rigorous. I have 'corrected' only the sort of 'oddity' that appears to be a typing error — one that would have no justification whether phonetic or idiomatic, or is obviously produced by the striking of an adjacent key. Of course, to judge the difference between a graphic 'error' and a typographic 'error' remains open to the charge of subjectivity. As editorial theory

moves beyond the once-axiomatic distinction between ‘substantives’ and ‘accidentals’ so texts such as those of Richard Freemann become particularly problematic.

If the ‘speaker’ is to be represented in writing as having an irregular accent, that voice will be notated by irregular spelling: this is a common device in Burns and Scott, Hardy and Mark Twain, and it is marked and precipitated by a distance from the metropolis, a sense of regional or national distinctiveness. By the same token, however, a writer who is an ‘irregular speaker’ may well be entirely happy with regular spelling. The Scottish novelist Alasdair Gray refuses to spell ‘night’ in the conventional Scots way as ‘nicht’. That, Gray says, is for him the German negative, and not a word in his language at all. When Gray reads the word ‘night’ he hears a sound that does not rhyme with ‘site’, a sound that is quite accurately represented by the regular spelling of ‘n-i-g-h-t’. By what right (voiced to rhyme with ‘n-i-g-h-t’, not with bite) should the English decree that ‘night’ is to be heard as ‘nite’? One suspects, by the same token, that when a Nigerian reads (or writes) ‘ask’ he hears ‘aks’: certainly I’ve known speakers of Nigerian English who do not write ‘aks’ or ‘ax’ instead of ‘ask’, not even as a literary device. It is the remarkable disparity between orthography and phonetic value in English that has made English ‘speakable’ in such diverse ways, without threatening a degree of orthographical modification that would lead to a proliferation of distinct and separate languages.

In considering Richard Freemann’s practice as a writer of stories, we should recall that the relationship between Professor Williamson and Richard Freemann had been founded on instruction in transcription. She taught him to write Izon, the Central Ijo or Ijaw (anglicised spelling) language. It has been recorded in an unsystematic way since the sixteenth century, and has had a regular orthography since c.1860, in which the five vowel letters of the Roman alphabet are supplemented with four vowels marked with subscript points (‘subdots’) to represent the nine different oral vowel sounds. Few works, however, have been published in this script, and very few people can write it accurately. Moreover, it is a tonal language, and although it is usually written without tone-marks, this creates ambiguity at many points. Modern scholarly writing in Izon makes increasing use of tone-marks to remove this ambiguity. As a transcriber, Freemann’s value lay in his competence to listen to a tape-recording and represent the sounds by means of the regular orthography supplemented by tone-marks.

Those who write in English today assume a somewhat arbitrary relation between orthographics and phonetics; they use irregular orthography either — like George Bernard Shaw — in order to promote spelling reform (a metropolitan conceit that would have disastrous consequences for the ‘unity’ of the English-speaking and English-writing world), or to draw attention to an idiosyncratic way of speaking. To speak only of languages using the Roman alphabet, English is today by far the most tolerant of orthographic deviance in literary representation.

Ken Saro-Wiwa's 'Rotten English' would not be possible without such tolerance. If there is no such concept as 'Rotten Spanish' or 'Rotten French' or 'Rotten German' in those literatures this may have less to do with the imperial and colonising histories of these languages than with their respective degrees of concord between spelling and voicing.

Freemann knew not only English and Izon but also a certain amount of Latin terminology concerning fish. Latin, as a 'dead' language, has no standard pronunciation (as Erasmus was already shocked to find on his visit to Cambridge c.1500) and is largely muted within writing: even educated English speakers now say 'i-ee' instead of 'id est' and almost all say 'ee-gee', having forgotten that e.g. stands for 'exempli gratia'. (However, I have yet to hear anyone in Europe say ee-tee-see for etc.). Listen (as best one can) to this:

Therefore, one day, he prepared the hook with rod. He dug out some earth-wirms [*'corrected'* from 'warms'] and went down to the extreme western part of the beach, trying to hide himself from people seeing him. He stood on the bank and baited the hook and as soon as he threw the hook into the water, a big grunt (type of fish) *Pomadasys sp.* 'egeleu,' in Izon was caught. ('The Poor Man and the King', ms. p. 1)

How, indeed, does one hear '*Pomadasys sp.*'? Rather less confidently and fluently, I suspect, than does our piscatorially learned author. So much for reading and hearing; as for our understanding, European readers are likely to be humbled that a Latin gloss so generously supplied may be of little more referential or explicatory value than 'egeleu,' or even 'grunt'.

Freemann's writing bears in its very consistency the signature of a transcriber, of one for whom the boundaries between spelling and hearing can be of fascinating variability. Thematically, his stories are much concerned with water and the creatures that live therein, both fish and dolphins, and thereon, those whose business is fishing. From traditional legends are derived diverse 'water wives' and water personages: 'As previously said in some of my stories, the Ijo (Ijaws) believe that there is another set of people living in the water. This set of people can appear and disappear and many a time move with the land dwellers, the Ijo (Ijaws).' So begins 'The Boy Was His Saviour'. The story published here, 'The Poor Man and His Vernacular Speaking Goat', may be taken as exemplary of Freemann's method, of the accomplished naïveté of his manner, and of his ability to confuse us (as Professor Williamson notes) as to what is fact and what fiction. Or rather, to challenge our judgement of what belongs to a serious discourse of explanation and plausibility, and what is fabular. Tricksters and acts of metamorphosis are certainly represented in these stories: but these stories are themselves out to trick us, and the first task of any trickster is to appear simple, perhaps a trifle dull, at any rate inconsequential. Connoisseurs of rotten English, of Alice-mannered explanations, of Ovidian shape-shiftings, of Rabelaisian disproportions, and of crafty telling, will, it is hoped, see (and hear) something else.



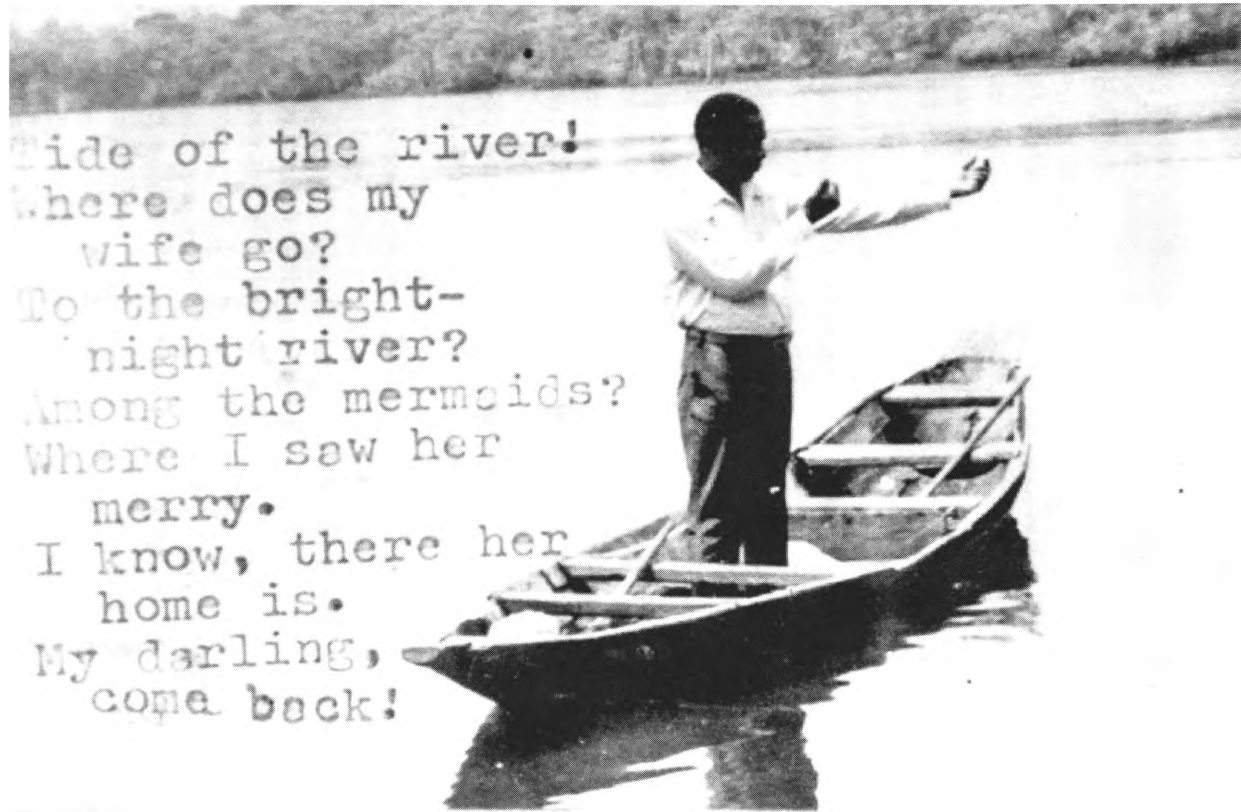
Orfirima, 'Shark Masquerade', by Richard Freemann

Sketch: Courtesy of Kay Williamson





Photo: Courtesy of Kay Williamson



Tide of the river!  
Where does my  
wife go?  
To the bright-  
night river?  
Among the mermaids?  
Where I saw her  
merry.  
I know, there her  
home is.  
My darling,  
come back!

Photo: Courtesy of Kay Williamson