



- ▣ **SAY YOU'RE ONE OF THEM**
- ▣ **AUTHOR -- UWEM AKPAN**
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▣▣ Oprah Winfrey's Book Club 2009 Selection, Click [HERE](#) to order your copy from [Amazon.com](#)

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#### ▣ **REVIEWED BY JOSEPH ADERO NGALA**

They came in -- one, two -- and then suddenly the numbers swelled. It was Saturday at the Hekima College, a Jesuit theological college situated on Ngong Road just to adjacent to one of the biggest slums in the world Kibera. Saturday is not a good day in Nairobi, Kenya. Many people have busy schedules visiting relatives, weddings and baptisms and many other activities.

People came in big numbers just to listen to the Nigerian writer and once a student at Hekima College --now Father Uwem Akpan, SJ. He was giving a talk on his new book *Say You're One of Them* . Akpan is

a short man and has a personable smile. He wears Nigeria attire and jokes a lot. He is a wonderful writer who writes imaginative stories -- ones that will not get him into trouble with Rome because in fiction there is no

*Imprimatur*

(that simply means that the bishop has given it a clearance whether he agrees with the contents or not).

During his presentation Monica Arac de Nyeko who was the moderating the talk commended Father Uwem for a well-done job. The idea of the book started while Uwem was a student at Hekima and he wrote most of the stories at night while using the community computer that had viruses and ate much of his work.

He told a story of a fellow young Jesuit who is also my nephew -- Father Elias Omondi -- who was then working with refugees in Ngara, Northwestern Tanzania in the diocese of Rulenge. Uwem asked him what the situation was like with Rwandese refugees after the genocide. Father Omondi simply replied: "It's madness; even psychologists are traumatized so that they have to leave".

Uwem sees the lens of his writing through the eyes of African children. His writing is more photographic eyes -- he narrates what he sees and tries to put it into fiction. Father Agbonkhianmeghe Orabator a fellow Nigerian Jesuit who is the Rector of Hekima College wrote recently in an invitation letter describing Uwem as a writer who is present in the strife-ridden continent of Africa through the heartrending and stunning narratives of children in Kenya, Benin, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Rwanda. Orabator says Akpan shares his ideas about the role of religion in redeeming Africa from the perils of poverty.

When was asked why he writes only about children, Father Uwem's answer was simple. "I was inspired to write by the people who sit around my village and share palm wine after Sunday Mass, by the Bible, and by the humor and the endurance of the poor". He gave an example of when he was growing up: his mother told him folktales and got him and his brothers to read a lot. This is how he became a fiction writer during his seminary formation.

Father Peter Schineller wrote in *America Magazine* (which is Jesuit owned) that this acclaimed debuted collection of short stories by the Nigerian author Uwem gives readers a chance to see Africa through the eyes of its children.

It is not a pretty picture. A critic has praised the book, yet several have also written that they do not recommend it generally, but only for selected friends because of the brutality honest pictures it presents. One reviewer concluded that "Uwem reveals Africans pains, pity, joy and grace, and comes closer to the true modern Africa than the entire outpouring of the western mass media."

There is a true story told about Uwem when he applied in 2004 to the graduate program in creative writing at the University of Michigan. His folder attracted a lot of attention. He was both a Nigerian and a Jesuit priest, and the program was not used to applicants from either of the categories. Father Uwem's talents were abundantly evident, if a little raw. Eileen Polack, the director of the program, recalled recently in an interview that there was some hesitation on the part of the admissions committee. "There were discussions about having a priest part of workshop where students would be writing about sex and drugs," Ms Pollack said.

But in the end Father Uwem was admitted, and he endeared himself to everyone. Ms Pollack recalled his showing up on the first day of class wearing a University of Michigan sweatshirt. "Everyone loved him," she said. "It turned out he had had more experience of the dark side of the world than all the other students put together". Recently when I was reading the book *Say You're One of Them*

with my daughter Alicia Ngala, currently a Master students at Hekima International Peace Studies, she said that each of the book's five stories is set in different country and each is told from the point of view of a child subjected to poverty, dislocation or worse.

One story is about a Kenya street family in which the breadwinner is a daughter who is a 12-year-old prostitute. The parents give their children glue to sniff because it is cheaper than food and dulls their hunger (however it would be interesting to note that these kids were in the street under president Daniel Arap Moi who ruled Kenya for 24 years in disarray).

In other stories in the book a young Rwanda girl watches her father (a Hutu) kill her mother because she was Tutsi. The collection's title comes from this chapter entitled "My Parents Bedroom." We can say that most of the stories are sad ones. The question one asks is where the road from Africa? Are they making progress or are they going back to the Stone Age?

The book brings many bad memories on the continent. The recent news coming from this region is very negative. Robert Mugabe is still hanging on in Zimbabwe and his people are starving to death and many children may not live and grow up to see their native land.

In Sudan President Omar Bashir now faces charges of genocide for his role in masterminding the horrors of Darfur, where 300,000 have been killed. In the Democratic Republic of Congo an estimated 5.4 million have died in the past 10 years, even though the civil war is said to have ended in 2003.

Somalia is ruled by warlords engaging in gang warfare. The Central Africa Republic has been called a phantom state -- worse than a failed state. Fifteen Africans heads of state have been in power for more than 15 years, and 26 for more than 10 years. But positive news can be found as well. Among the 48 states of sub-Saharan Africa, the number with a free press and multiparty governance has risen to 11 from 3 in 1977 according to democracy advocacy groups. The number of nations in Africa considered not to have freedom for all has fallen to 14 from the 25 so listed a decade ago. Ghana, Liberia, Burundi, Tanzania, Mozambique and Botswana have all solidified democratic gains in recent years. There is also hope for the unity government of Ivory Coast with an election scheduled for November, 2008. Kenya, after several difficult months in which more than 1,000 people were killed, has returned to a fragile peace.

The Nigerian born Jesuit priest Uwem simply transports the readers of his book into gritty scenes of chaos and fear in his rich debut collection. Uwem's prose is beautiful and his stories are insightful and revealing, made even more harrowing because of all the horror seen through the eyes of children. With the growing canon of Africa writers what sets the stories of Uwem apart is that they come to us from the direct eye of the mad Africa continent faced with debts, religiosity, poverty, the venality of rules, and the desire for a better life. It has been said that if you want to know a place read its literature. These modern fables are reminiscent of Africa's great writers such as Okot Bitek, Jared Angira, Dr Margaret Ogola, Yvonne Owour, Muthoni Garland, Wainaina Binyavanga, Wole Soyinka, Ismail Beah and Okello Oculi, just to mention a few.

Uwen Akpan is a Nigerian born in southern Nigeria. After studied in his home village until he was six and later joined secondary school before joining priesthood. After studying philosophy and English at Creighton and Gonzaga Universities, he studies theology for three years at Hekima College (the Catholic University of Eastern Africa). He was ordained a Jesuit priest in 2003 and received his MA in creative writing from a University of Michigan in 2006. He was short listed for the Caine Prize for African writing last year. In 2007 he began a teaching assignment in Harare, Zimbabwe.

His writing fame was inspired by a young Kenya girl who used to attend his youth group in Guadalupe Church near Hekima College. The lady who is a banker now took his manuscript to Kwani Trust and by good grace the manuscript was published in

*Kwani*  
magazine.

Joseph Ngala is the Director of People for Peace in Africa (PPA) in Nairobi, Kenya. This review originally was published in ***Colleagues Home & Abroad Regional News (PPA)*** on **9 September, 2008. Email:** [ppa@africaonline.co.ke](mailto:ppa@africaonline.co.ke)