academicresearch Journals

Vol. 2(11), pp. 277-290, December 2014

DOI: 10.14662/IJELC2014.075

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ISSN: 2360-7831©2014 Academic Research Journals http://www.academicresearchjournals.org/IJELC/Index.htm

International Journal of English Literature and Culture

Review

EXPLORING AND BIBLIOGRAPHING THE NIGERIAN ONITSHA MARKET LITERATURE AS POPULAR FICTION

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Accepted 1 December 2014

The lack of local literature bedevilled African and Nigerian literatures for a long time. This contributed in no small measure to a few critics averring that Africa and Nigeria lack literature of any major type especially of the traditional form. The twentieth century Onitsha Market Literature in Nigeria which came in pamphlets, novellas, and chap-books is just an example to disprove this assertion. Within this traditional but regional literature is a compilation of oral literary sourced works and documented solutions to modern life issues. It is a potpourri of life experiences of Nigerians within the colonial and post-colonial life. This paper, through pedagogical and bibliographical modes, situates the development and effect of this onerous popular fictional phenomenon as a relevant precursor to the origin and development of not only present day Nigerian Literature but also to a large extent, to the Anglophone West African Literature.

Keywords: Popular Fiction, Onitsha Market Literature, Nigerian Literature, Pamphlets, Novellas, Pedagogical, Bibliographical

Cite This Article As: Solanke SO (2014). EXPLORING AND BIBLIOGRAPHING THE NIGERIAN ONITSHA MARKET LITERATURE AS POPULAR FICTION. Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult. 2(11): 277-290

INTRODUCTION

The literary phenomenon referred to as the Onitsha Market Literature, according to Larson (1978), could be traced to about twenty five years after the end of World War 11. This trend originated in Onitsha, a commercial city within the Igbo speaking region of South-East, Nigeria. It was also where the market so named was sited: it was (and still is to an extent) where one could purchase or sell, under the sun, anything worth selling or

buying.

This was a process helped by the character and happenings within the city of Onitsha as at the time. It is a city sited beside the River Niger serving as a link between Western and Eastern Nigeria. It continuously stands as the site of a great market 'reputed as the biggest in the West African sub-region' (*TELL Magazine*, July 4, 2013). During the period in question, the city was

undergoing a lot of physical, educational, and socioeconomic changes and developments. These were pangs of urbanization; civil service developments, influx of rural people looking for white-collar jobs, rapid increase in Nigerian-owned and operated printing presses and population explosion. In respect of the population increase, as an example, the 1911 census for Onitsha was about 18,100 while in 1931, it was 58,100. By 1959, the eve of Nigerian Independence, it had gone up to about 163,000 (Population Statistics 1999/2006). Onitsha was one of the most populated eastern cities of Nigeria, if not the most populated from the end of World War 11 into the independence period. There was also the resultant effect of the 'Indian Connection'. Most returning and demobilised soldiers, who had served in Burma and in the Far East, during World War 11, came home with foreign pamphlets and magazines. The covers and contents of these works, which did not have precedence within the Nigerian socio-communication environment, went a long way in influencing the start of the Onitsha Market Literature outputs.

Onitsha Market literature developed due to a great undercurrent socio-cultural change: Nigeria was moving towards getting her national independence from Britain, her colonial overlord. So, the Nigerian populace wanted to read from fellow countrymen about Nigeria and Nigerians' problems and their attendant and proffered solutions. There was also an elite group of literates interested in monitoring developments within the country. These ones became social and political commentators on national issues though official and non-official communication agencies like the radios, television (there was only one at the time: the Western Nigerian Government Broadcasting Corporation (WNTV) which was based in Ibadan as the first television station in Tropical Africa) and the newspapers of the day. People. especially students, were also getting fed-up with the English Victorian set books within the academic environment. Finally, there was the idea of helping to galvanize the local artistes to a standard that could be regarded as Nigerian.

Functionalities

The texts thrown up in this literature were those that had a lot to do with the life of the common man. This shows that the writers must have had their ears to the ground. According to Nwoga (1965: 27),

Mostly, however, education is taken in its broader sense and these authors are trying to teach people to live a more moral life . . . More than three quarters of the extant titles aim at the education of the readers, and more than half of these have to do with the relationship between

men and women, boys and girls. This, in a way, is inevitable because when there is a break-up of established moral conscience, sex is the most common direction of expression of the new freedom.

Thomas Iguh, in the prologue to his *The Sorrows of Love* (1961), expatiates: "This novel is designed to serve as a lesson to some of our young boys and girls who feel that there is another heaven in the game of love". Didacticism was, therefore, a major theme for the works as emphasized in J. U. Tagbo Nzeako's *Rose Darling in the Garden of Love* which ends with the authorial commentary: "Her inevitable doom on the other hand, was typical of Heaven's final punishment to those in the shoes of Rose Darling, as the deceiver must never go undeceived". This sets the functional tempo for the Onitsha Market Literature works. They educated, improved the minds of the readers, were moralistic and pointed out lessons of life. They were also didactically linked to oral literary sources, traditions and culture.

According to King (1980), the literature treated issues on how to make love, write love letters, speak at meetings, write applications, and how new city dwellers should behave. They were also composed of general and fictional stories. Obiechina (1972) opines that the writers were roughly of three kinds - the educators and lifeteachers; those who prepare others for (new) roles in life; and the entertainers. The works, therefore, cut across instructional manuals for life to fictional stories; all aspects of life.

The works had the people as the focus. These were the new city dwellers, the semi-educated people and those who lacked the modern formal education to become full societal elite but could still not be regarded as fully traditional.

To serve these different groups, the works were as varied as their titles. There were self-helps (manuals), political/topical pamphlets, love related books and moral texts. The self-helps (manuals) were meant to show or teach the reader how to behave in all spheres of life or perform life tasks. The non-fictional and instructional manuals included those that dealt in the how-to of life, examination techniques, coping with love, handling various life and human problems, situations and endeavours. Some of the titles include: The Way to Success in Life; How to Write Love Letters; The Game of Love and How to Play It; Win Girls' Love; 95 Love Letters and How to Compose Them. The other group of pamphlets were on the adventures in love, life, marriage and their travails. The titles include The Disappointed Lover; The Sorrows of Love; Miss Rosy in the Romance of True Love; Rosemary and the Taxi Driver. Political pamphlets, which dwelt on topical and contemporary issues, include How Lumumba Suffered in Life and Died in Katanga; The Struggles and Trials of Jomo Kenyatta;

Zik in the Battle for Freedom; The Life History and Last Journey of President John Kennedy.

The turn-out of these pamphlets was so high that between Nwoga (1965) and Larson (1980), it is posited that within the years of 1963 and 1967 there were about 400 titles in circulation. As earlier averred, these pamphlets catered to students, the emerging middle class, the civil servants, traders, lorry drivers, market women, farmers and other emerging literate groups. To understand the appeal of the literature to the people, one must understand that unlike the English Victorian novels and the set books for students during the colonial period which cost a lot, these pamphlets were cheap. Unlike the lengthy English novels, hardly could one find a pamphlet covering a hundred page or more as they usually, on the average, range between 40 - 80 pages, Larson (1978: 91) contends that the popularity was so much because the texts depict "everyday occurrences (real or imagined) in an identifiable contemporary social situation and their writings are among the best depictions of realism that the African novel has seen to date".

This cultural and commercial phenomenon (Dodson 1979) can also be explained with a careful look at one or two of the pamphlets. Speedy Eric's (pseudonym) *Mabel the Sweet Honey That Poured Away* (1960) and Cyprian Ekwensi's *When Love Whispers* (1961) are two major representative works of this literature.

Mabel the Sweet Honey That Poured Away is a seventy paged novella. It has both Onitsha and Port-Harcourt for realistic Nigerian settings. The Chapter One titled 'A Look at a Girl's Skin' has 'Have you ever looked at a girl's skin and felt that if you pinched her she would shed blood? A skin as smooth as glass and also round and plumpy. No trace of nerves or bones on the skin' as an opener. The text uses flashback to give the picture of Mabel as a young fatherless girl helping her mother in their 'eating house' (a hotel). Margie, an older and more sophisticated waitress, through her actions introduces Mabel to sex and sexuality though it took long for the latter to succumb: 'One may say that Margie was corrupting her (Mabel) but one thing is certain - she is predisposed for corruption. She had an unhealthy desire for sexual matters' (196?, 23). In the text, as in most Onitsha Market Literature pamphlets, there is authorial intrusion for moralistic purposes directed always at the reader: 'We shall see what Mabel did in her own case. Read on Dear' (196?, 20); 'Dear Reader, you watch for yourself how the only daughter of Mrs. Helen (or even the only child) is drifting slowly to her ruin' (196?, 23).

Mabel is introduced to contraceptives by Margie: escapes many temptations but falls for Gilbert who deflowers her. After this, her life takes a turn for the worse. She marries Gilbert but is not satisfied sexually with him and starts dating other men: 'The romance did not last long on Mabel's side. After the first month the insatiable taste for man in her was beginning to show'

and 'there were a handful of other men who she had made romance with' (196?, 58). Caught by Gilbert, their marriage falls apart and she leaves for Port-Harcourt where, continuing with her sexually active life, she stays at Palace Hotel. Finally, she gets pregnant, tries aborting using 'contraceptives and the overdose too" and "the blood flowed freely unchecked by about four-thirty to the last drop that held her together flowed away. And she collapsed and died. End' (196?, 70).

The other text, When Love Whispers by Cyprian Ekwensi, was according to his Jagua Nana (1969) published at Onitsha in 1947. In the text, Ashoka, who is asked to marry a King by her father, refuses preferring to wait for her love, John Ike, who had travelled for further studies. Along the line, like Mabel, she falters and gets pregnant for Olu Tayo who refuses ownership because John Ike is his friend. She tries aborting it but fails. The King takes her back because according to him, 'I am a modern Oba. And the daughter: who will ever argue about her? Women do not rule in this country...' (196?, 41). Afterwards, Ashoka has a son, the heir. Then John Ike returns but is rejected: 'John please go. Go before you wake up my love for you: it is dead now. Love has no part in my life now. Only duty' (196? 40).

Erich Auerbach's comment in *Mimesis* (1953:399-400) on Abbe Prevost's novel *Manon Lescaut* (1731) is relevant to *Mabel the Sweet Honey, When Love Whispers* and most Onitsha Market Literature pamphlets:

The subject matter is supplied by scenes of love and family life in which now the erotic, now the sentimental is more strongly emphasized but in which neither element is rarely completely absent. When the occasion permits, clothes, utensils, furnishings are described or evoked with ... meticulousness and great delight in movement and colour ... secondary characters from all classes, commercial transactions and a variety of pictures of contemporary culture in general are woven into the action... for we hear a great deal about money ... there is realism everywhere. On the other hand, the author wants us to take his story seriously; he endeavours to make it in the highest degree moral and tragic for its moral aspects, we hear a great deal about honour and virtue. (The heroine's) nature is such that she loves pleasure above everything.

Here, the manner and reasons for Mabel and Ashoka's failures in not been able to rise above themselves are categorized: their love for sex, money, clothing and going against tradition (a woman not wanting to play the second fiddle). The language employed in the two texts is simple and easy to understand with the authors' presence felt at every turn. On the other hand, within the texts are problematic spellings and expressions: collapsed,

steadily, imagine, disappointed, worst of it all, seventeen years old Mabel, two storey plot and others. The educational levels of the authors and even the publishers as at then are thus revealed. The major difference between these two texts is that one author is willing to make his heroine pay the full price for her failings while the other, Cyprian Ekwensi, is unwilling to. This distinguishes him from the majority of the Onitsha Market Literature writers. He gets thoroughly involved with his heroine. According to Larson (1978:34) for Cyprian Ekwensi's heroines 'although they may have sinned, usually they do not get hurt too much because they reform before it is too late'.

In summation, one cannot but agree with Larson's (1978:33) position:

These books are significant both as literary efforts and in their revelation of the popular attitudes to socio-cultural phenomenon. We have a new life and a new language. In the unassuming simplicity and directness of Onitsha Market Literature, we find authentic evidence of what these new elements mean to the common man and what his reactions to them.

And above all, they gave what the readers wanted: love, racy actions, sex, intrigues, suspense, morals, lessons and didactic endings.

Authorship

Not all the writers were of Igbo origin as there are extraneous names of writers from other parts of Nigeria like Akinadewo Samuel (West of Nigeria), Gowon Yakuba (North of Nigeria - sounds like the name of a former Nigerian military head of state, Gowon Yakubu 1966-1975), Ngbanti Jackson (West of Nigeria - 'Ngbanti Ngbanti' is what the Igbos - (Easterners) - call the Yorubas - (Westerners) - of Nigeria). This is apart from the noms de plume and pseudonyms like Maxwell Highbred, and Speedy Eric that some of the writers utilized. Those from the East of Nigeria where Onitsha is sited were basically Igbos and constituted the majority of the writers. The preponderance of the writers, therefore, shared nearly the same world view: cultural, traditional, social, religious and moral. They were students, traders, clerks, school teachers and others who were educated to different levels of reading and writing competencies in the English Language. They were also provincial journalists who got qualified through the correspondence colleges that abound them. A writer, Wilfred Onwuka, had completed one year of secondary school before writing his first pamphlet in 1963 while another, Ogali A. Ogali, had completed Form V, the highest level of secondary

education (then), eight years before his first work, the very popular *Veronica My Daughter* (1957) which sold more than 90,000 copies according to the publisher, Appolos Oguwike (Dodson, 1979:174):

Pamphlets usually go through several printings. *Veronica My Daughter*, the greatest best seller, has been reprinted so many times since 1957 that publisher Appolos Oguwike says he cannot keep track of the number. He states that he sold more than 80,000 copies in one year alone and that he printed another 10,000 shortly after the war.

Thomas Iguh, another writer, was in secondary school when his first work, *Alice in the Romance of Love*, was published. There were other writers like E. U. Anya, Okwudili Orizu and J.N.C. Egemoye who went on to achieve University education.

Due to the average level of education of the writers, most of their works were dotted with grammatical and spelling mistakes, wrong sentential constructions, inept vocabulary usages and general typographical errors. Readers had to find their meaningful ways through most of the extra-ordinary spellings and sentential constructions. As an excuse though, a few of the inaccuracies might have been due to typographical errors and editorial intrusion by some of the printers and publishers.

A few of the well-known authors include Nathan Njoku, Ogali A. Ogali, Wilfred Onwuka, R. Okonwko, J.N.C. Egemoye, Thomas Iguh, Udegbunem Anya, C. N. Obioha, Highbred Maxwell, Cyprian Ekwensi and others. Their works were highly influenced by oral traditions, Christian ideologies, western educational ideas, the cinema, romantic magazines, newspapers, current sociopolitical happenings and their individual and group world views and opinions. They were, most of the time, paid off when their manuscripts were bought by the publishers. And for well-known authors like Thomas Iguh and Wilfred Onwuka a princely sum of between £15 and £20 was paid for a manuscript while lesser known writers received between £3 and £10 (and some got promises based on how their works would move). A writer like Ahanotu Umeasiegbu of Ideal Friendship Between Boys and Girls went on to receive royalties (of two pence on every copy sold) from his publisher, Peter Udoji. It was, therefore, a very individualistic market dictated by individual push, work, luck, popularity and merit for according to Thomas Iguh (Dodson, 1979:180):

I wasn't really sure who to approach with my manuscript initially. I simply walked into the market, found the book section, confronted one man (Appolos) with my manuscript and he agreed to print it. Later, traders became

interested in me and started coming to me to scout for these manuscripts.

In the same vein, another writer, Cletus Nwosu (1960), in the preface to his novelette, *Miss Cordelia in the Romance of Destiny*, states that he wrote for three reasons: to ginger the interest of Nigerian students, to have the chance of dedicating a work to a friend, Lawrence Chukwendi, and to be known as an author.

Readership

As earlier averred, the average reader of the Onitsha Market Literature was the man on the street who saw himself or herself as becoming one of the educated elites based on his/her half or full education – (semi-literate or full literate). He/she was also a person who wanted to read something indigenous from his fellow country man. Within this group, therefore, were found students, civil servants, clerks, the semi-literates and the market people.

According to Chinweizu et al., in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980:263), a lot of credit should be given to these works: 'we should mention the successes of ... the Onitsha Market writers, in producing their works in the variants of English used in their respective milieu'. In reference to the universality of diction and language used within the literature, the writers posit: 'anybody who can read what is popularly known as Onitsha Market Literature... should be able to read whatever our other poets write in English' (Chinweizu et al., 1980:246). This is buttressed by Okonkwo, R. in *Never Trust All that Love You* when he states: 'This booklet... has been edited at the request of the publishers to meet the literary taste of several readers and all lovers of novels and stories'.

The readership audience and regional capture extended from Nigeria, the base, to other countries like Ghana, Cameroon and other Anglophone West African countries. It was, therefore, a literature of the masses meant for the masses, written by writers from among the masses and enjoyed by the masses.

Publishing

It would be a grave oversight if the publishers who made the publications of these writers and their works possible are not discussed. Though referred to as publishers, they were in reality printers, general stationers, bookshop owners and suppliers of educational materials. For profit purposes, they veered into printing and the distribution of these literary works. They operated a guild called the Pamphlet and Novel Publishers Association of Nigeria. This was established in August 1971 by seven of the

publishers (Anafulu, 1973:168). To become a publisher, one had to go through the apprenticeship process as a 'boy' – a general servant and ward – who is unpaid but 'settled' – set up – in business by his boss when he 'graduates' (becomes free).

Publishers were not left out of wanting their signatures in the texts. Most of the time when the writers have sold or transferred their copyrights, the publishers go on to make in-text changes. These can be at different levels: name of the author, title of the work, attributions and content. Maxwell Highbred, a publisher, who never wrote a text, has many carrying his name.

Asked why they were interested in the Onitsha Market Literature publications and how they made their profits, Onwudiwe, a publisher, opines that they did not really make high profit from their normal sales. According to him (Dodson, 1979:184), they published the texts and sold stories based on the followings:

One, if it is a story that connects the present wave, – the immediate wave which connects the country like this Nigeria Civil War now, you know this connects the country now. If it's anything on the civil war, it will sell. If the book is published during that period, it will sell like hot cake – as I published that book on Lumumba during his death – it sells.

Successors

From this non-academic but popular literature, there was a movement to the academic environment within the Nigerian environ. This, along with the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970 (during which the Onitsha Market was destroyed), limited the Onitsha Market Literature's focus and reach but enhanced its standard and general acceptance within the world of Nigerian Literature.

Around the period, the University College, Ibadan (now the University of Ibadan), was established in 1948. A better educated elite emerged. It set about re-modelling the socio-academic world view of Nigeria and Nigerians. This resulted, within and outside the University, into new cultural and educational developments. As early as 1952, 'The University Herald' had been established. In the 1952-1953 academic session, its Editorial Board consisted of Chinua Achebe, Chukwuemeka Ike, Mabel Segun, D. Oforiokuma, Akio Abbey and Agu Ogan. And one of its earliest contributors was the late Chinua Achebe (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997:39-41), who became a world renowned Nigerian writer. 'The University Herald' was meant to be a connecting point for literary voices within the Campus.

The magazine, which subsisted for more than five years, had columns and sections for a variety of social issues. The magazine however

dwelt more on students, members of staff, and general campus matters. At different points in time, there were editors, columnists and writers, who made it popular and who later became big shots in their different chosen professions. Among the writers and columnists were (Ambassador) Iyalla, (Prof) Chinua Achebe, (Chief) Bola Ige, (Mrs.) Mabel Segun, (Prof.) J.F.A. Ajayi, Gbajabiamila, (Prof.) Wole Soyinka, (Prof.) Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, (Prof.) J.P.Clark, etc. (Sheriff, 2002)

In 1954 'The Horn' was established by John Pepper Clark (later known as a distinguished Nigerian poet and playwright) and others to serve as a Poetry Journal for the students of the University of Ibadan. According to Sheriff (2002), 'The Horn, which was both creative and poetic, in capturing university life' became a stepladder for students like Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo, a well-known poet, who died at the war-front during the Nigerian Civil War (Achebe, 2012: 184-185).

Further developments saw the creation of the Mbari Club, Mbari Press and the 'Black Orpheus' within the University around the 1960s. These became centres for English-speaking black African writings. Authors from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and even from outside of Africa were published. Some of these include Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Ulli Beier, Gerald Moore and others.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding its limitations, Onitsha Market Literature was a phenomenon that was 'a clearly popular literature for the masses and the publications by these authors are literally devoured by an audience starved for material mirroring their own social conditions or personal dreams and fantasies' (Larson 91).

It served as a stepping stone within the academic environment unto national stage in the Nigerian sociopolitical and literary world. Through it, writers developed literally. Notwithstanding the destruction of the market and therefore the publishing outlets during the Nigerian Civil War, it was continuum that allowed a few artistes to make their marks in the literary world. Cyprian Ekwensi (Jagua Nana [1969], Burning Grass [1962], Beautiful Feathers [1963], People of the City [1963] and Juju Rock [1971]) was able to move from that level to others (national and international). Through it, therefore, writers developed from the local, unto national and international lime light.

It was a springboard from the non-academic to the academic environment. It was a pedestal from which national developments in the Nigerian socio-cultural, political and literary space were envisioned, discussed

and formulated. It also, as a major contribution, corrected the wrong notion that Africa did not have any popular fictional literature. It can be substantiated that orality and the literary were and are still part of the general life of the African (and the Nigerian).

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APPENDIX 1

According to Nwoga (1965, 26), publication datings on the books affected their sales: 'when the readers finished with a book they used it for toilet paper or rolled their tobacco in it to make cigarettes or just threw it away. This lack of a sense of continuity has led the publishers not to put dates of publication on their books. One of them explained to me that if the date indicated that a book was up to a year old nobody would buy it'. In this compilation, therefore, I have relied on about three sources: personal (with incomplete references), the Onitsha Market Literature compilation of the University of Kansas Libraries © 2003 Kenneth Spencer Research Library and the one given by Joseph C. Anafulu in his paper titled, 'Onitsha Market Literature: Dead or Alive?' published in Research in African Literatures, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 165-171 published by Indiana University Press. According to Anafulu (1973, 169) 'The West Africa section of Janheinz Jahn's A Bibliography of Neo-African Literature (London: Deutsch, 1965) contains an excellent listing of Onitsha Market Literature. Bernth Lindfors's "Additions and corrections to Janheinz Jahn's Bibliography of Neo-African Literature," African Studies Bulletin, 11 (1968), lists works published up to1966. E. N. Obiechina's Onitsha Market Literature (London: Heinemann, 1972) contains on pp. 177-182 what is perhaps the most comprehensive list available between two covers, but its lack of bibliographical details limits its overall usefulness. The following bibliography is intended to update Jahn and Lindfors, as well as indicate what was previously listed by both and still in print. In the case of reprints, the entry is followed by Jahn's or Lindfors's entry number'. In this compilation, therefore, I have maintained Anafulu's 'Jahn's or Lindfors's entry number', put (UKL) after the ones of the University of Kansas Libraries, (ANA) after Anafulu's entries and (SOS) after my own entries.

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Abiakam, J. How to speak to girls and win their love. Onitsha: J. C. Brothers [1971]. 48 p. illus. (Lindfors 11)

Abiakam, J. C. 49 Wise sayings, 72 idioms, 44 questions & answers and some speeches of world leaders, past and present. Speeches made during the Napoleonic wars, second world war and extracts of speeches made by Winston Churchill on Hitler, etc. Onitsha, Nigeria, J.C. Brothers Bookshop, [1965?]. C3291.(UKL)

Abiakam, J.C. How to speak and write better English, good letters, receipts, agreements, compositions, business letters, telegrams and applications. Onitsha, Nigeria, J.C. Brothers Bookshop, [1964?]. C3284.(UKL)

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Abiakam, J.C. How to speak in public. With 300 questions and answers. And general knowledge made easy on facts worth knowing. Onitsha, Nigeria, J.C. Brothers Bookshop, [1965?]. C3295.(UKL)

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Abiakam, J.C. Never trust all that love you. 6th ed. (enlarged). Onitsha, J.C. Brothers Bookshop, [196-?]. BC 5034.(UKL)

Abiakam, J., The game of love: a classical drama from West Africa. Onitsha: J. C. Brothers [1971]. 52 p. (Lindfors 120)

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