J.P. Clark was born at his maternal grandmother’s home in the Urhobo village of Erhuwaren on the 6th of December 1933 into two old Izon families, Bekederemo and Adomi, of Kiagbodo, now in the Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. After his early education at the Native Administration Schools, Okrika and Jeremi (Otughievwen), in the western Niger delta, he went on to Government College, Ughelli and the University College, Ibadan, both by entrance examinations, as a Government Scholar and State Scholar.

The poet, playwright and scholar early showed his genius and calling in life. At Ughelli, distinguished for sports and scholarship under the legendary V.B. V. Powell, he earned himself a reputation for reading every English literature title in the school library, and so his next principal, Major Cyril Carter, kindly allowed him the use of his personal library as he received new titles from the Readers’ Union in London.

But it was at Ibadan, where Clark read English, that the bud bloomed into the flower that immediately caught the eye of the public. He became editor of the Students’ Union magazine The Beacon, and then, most significantly, the first editor of The Horn, the poetry journal at the University College, Ibadan, that launched modern Nigerian poetry in English. It introduced Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka, Clark being the major contributor. His poem Ibbie, on the wrong of imperial power, beginning with the slave trade, created a great stir among staff and students. Others like Abiku, Agbor Dancer, Fulani Cattle, Ibadan, Night Rain, Olokun, Streamside Exchange and The Water Maid, were recited at sight across faculties on the campus, later becoming favourites in anthologies.

On graduation, Clark served briefly in the Nigerian press corps, first as an Information Officer at the Western Nigeria Ministry of Information, Ibadan, and then at the Express Group of Newspapers in Lagos as Features Editor and the Editorial Writer. It was, as it turned out, straight into the storm of the Action Group schism, that threw up the political turbulence out of which Nigeria has not emerged.
Those were the heady first years of Independence. It was then Clark wrote his first play *Song of a Goat*, and had ready his first collection *Poems*, both published by Mbari. This new club for artists and critics had just opened with him as Honorary Secretary. Funded secretly by the CIA through Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris, a fact that he and others invited by Ulli Beier and Ezekiel Mphahlele, to be foundation members did not know, the club instantly became the hub for the arts in the country, attracting new members from Lagos, Enugu and Zaria.

A Parvin fellowship to Princeton in the United States in 1962 gave the poet a break. There he wrote his two plays *The Masquerade*, the sequel to *Song of a Goat*, and *The Raft* which some scholars instantly saw as a prophecy of secession. *America, their America* is Clark’s account of that year abroad. Ayo Banjo identifies it as the only critique of a world outside by an African writer in modern times.

In 1963, Clark came back home, an artist, to a full life in academia, a position new then in the Nigerian university system with no criteria to judge it by. But as a Research Fellow in the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, under Kenneth Dike, he collected the Izon epic of *Ozidi* on tape and in wax and film, as performed in situ to music, dance and ritual for seven days, first by the bard Okabou, a state nightwatch in Ibadan; then the sailor Afoluwa, at Ajegunle in Lagos; and finally by the local choice, Erivini, at Orua, with the entire clan and community, now in Bayelsa State. *The Ozidi Saga*, which he transcribed and translated from the Okabou version, was published in a bi-lingual edition by Oxford University Press, London, and Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, in 1977. It immediately received critical acclaim as a landmark in the study and interpretation of oral literature. When re-issued in 1991 in the United States by Howard University Press, Professor Isidore Okpewho said in his introduction: “Clark-Bekederemo’s supreme achievement is that he has delivered this classic to us with its grandeur very much intact… I am delighted at the opportunity to bring to my job as user a long-standing admiration of the genius of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo…”

From this epic, Clark created his own play *Ozidi*, published by Oxford in 1966. ‘… Ozidi can be considered a modern morality play, concerned most essentially with the place of hubris in human affairs… (it) presents us with a character study of the utmost psychological and moral interest…’ Abiola Irele.

Clark moved to the University of Lagos in 1965 as Lecturer grade one, rising in seven years to become Head and Professor of English, the first
African writer to be appointed to that Chair anywhere in the world. To quote the late Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Professor A. B. Aderibigbe, “Clark… stayed on to build the Division and the succeeding Department to a high standard”. In his active academic career, Clark taught as a Visiting Distinguished Fellow, Centre for the Humanities, Wesleyan University, USA, Visiting Distinguished Professor of English, Lincoln University, Lincoln, USA, Visiting Professor of English, Yale University, USA, and Visiting Professor, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, where he began as a Research Fellow, 1963, and from where he took his early voluntary retirement in 1980 as Professor of English, University of Lagos.

During this period, Clark consulted for Unesco in its preparation for the United Nations the report *Apartheid: Its Effects on Education, Science, Culture and Information*. He also started for the Mid-West State of Nigeria, at the time, the Ethiope Publishing Corporation, Benin City.

The creative output of the poet and playwright grew at the same time and pace with the university teacher and administrator. A ready publishing house was the Mbari club at Ibadan, soon to be followed by major British publishers.

It was at Mbari’s stage, his contemporary and friend, Wole Soyinka, produced and directed *Song of a Goat*, playing the lead character Zifa, followed by his historic premiere command performance of *The Raft* at the University of Ibadan for the poet-president Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal in 1964.

With the publication of his second volume of poems *A Reed in the Tide* and collection of essays *The Example of Shakespeare* by Longmans in London, Clark became the first of his contemporaries to enter the list of a major British publishing house outside fiction.

*The Times Literary Supplement* welcomed the publication of his *Three Plays*, comprising *Song of a Goat*, *The Masquerade* and *The Raft*, as introducing “an entirely new set of situations and new characters, new to English literature”. Martin Esslin, saw them in another context: ‘JP Clark has here attempted something in the nature of a cycle of plays on the working out a family curse no less than a Nigerian Oresteia… (he) is clearly inspired by a classical ideal of austere archetypal characters and events (and his) verse removes his plays into an almost timeless sphere…’ At home, the perspective was still different. ‘*The Raft*,'
Abiola Irele said specifically, ‘has been interpreted as a parable of Nigeria… nothing less than a meditation on the precariousness of the human condition…’ Indeed, during the Nigerian Civil War, it was broadcast by the BBC on its Third Programme and by stations as far apart as the Australia Broadcasting Commission and Radio Czechoslovakia.

Opening the seminal essays that have become a commentary on his own works, Clark delivered in 1965, at the Federal College of Education, Lagos, the lecture Poverty of the Urhobo Dance Udje. With it, he introduced to the world of scholarship a body of great oral poetry, opening the doors for native sons and scholars, like G.G. Darah, T. Ojaide and the pharmacologist David Okpako.

Soon after his early voluntary retirement from the University to practice his art full time, as he himself put it, Clark wrote his play The Boat. The production led to the formation of PEC Repertory Theatre with his wife Professor Ebun Clark, herself the authority on the father figure of Nigerian theatre, Hubert Ogunde. It is Nigeria’s first performing theatre company, limited by guarantee. To run his resident troupe, the first in English in Nigeria, Clark relied largely on a Ghanaian crew and cast, but this professional stage later found local actors like the young Richard Mofe-Damijo, fresh from Benin. For some ten years, with the veteran television actor and director Jab Adu, Bayo Oduneye from the University of Ibadan Theatre Arts Department and the actor Sam Loco assisting at various times, he produced some of the best plays from Africa and the Diaspora, rekindling, according to The New York Times, ‘the torch of Nigeria’s theatre.’

For the theatre, Clark wrote the plays The Return Home and Full Circle to complete the trilogy The Bikoroa Plays, all published by Oxford, 1985. At this point, to meet the special demands of a small company, he wrote The Wives’ Revolt, his first comedy, presenting crisis in the oil community of his birth, left dry by Shell, (University Press edition, 1991).

The military intervention in the politics of Nigeria, with the subsequent Civil War and the events following since then, affected all lives in Nigeria, the class and clan of artists probably the most. Short of detention and death, Clark remains, even some forty years after, at the heart of it, though unrecognized; for with Christopher Okigbo, he went twice to Accra on a secret mission to bring home Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna from protective custody under Kwame Nkurumah. The keeper
of Nigeria’s uncelebrated first military coup leader was himself toppled two weeks later.

When Civil War came, the poet, of all his close literary contemporaries, chose the Federal side, a patriotic act which attracts hostile criticism to this day. In *Casualties*, Longman, 1970, Clark tells the story in verse, unfortunately not understood by many. Only now has Professor Femi Osofisan, the most gifted writer of his generation, told the full story in his recently released biography of the man *J. P. Clark: A Voyage*, Bookcraft, 2011.

During these years of trauma in Nigeria’s literary life, Clark edited with Abiola Irele, then teaching at Legon in Ghana, *Black Orpheus* in a new series, with sponsorship, first from the then Daily Times, and later by the University of Lagos. It was quite an assignment after Ulli Beier.

*A Decade of Tongues*, Longman, 1965, brings together the early collections of poems. It has been transcribed into Braille in 2 volumes. (*) *State of the Union* (1984) can be taken as an epilogue, depicting the Nigerian scene after the Civil War.

Not noticed by many critics, much of Clark’s poetry and drama has always engaged in the politics of his country. It was therefore a matter of great surprise to many, when in 1986, together with Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, he went on a mission of mercy to General Babangida to appeal for the life of the soldier and poet Mamman Vatsa and his men. The so-called aloof non-activist was in fact the initiator.

The same political passion flows through *Mandela and other Poems*, 1988, while the collection *A Lot from Paradise*, 1999, takes him back home to Funama, his personal settlement between the twin creeks of Kiagbodo. Clark, however, is never far removed from the national scene. In *All for Oil*, 2000, he comes out full sail with the story of Nigeria, the country the British created from the trade in palm oil and other agricultural products in the 19th century to the present wasting economy of petroleum and gas.

Clark recreates the same national tragedy in the television documentary *Oil at the Bottom*, broadcast twice across the country by Channels Television in 2007, and now the pilot episode for the forthcoming series of 13, telling the story of how a nation abandoned her ports to a network of oil pipe-lines.
It is a subject that the poet and dramatist has openly dealt with, over the years, from his inaugural lecture at the University of Lagos, **The Hero as Villain**, 1978, to **A Peculiar Faculty**, 2000, the foundation lecture, starting the annual series by Fellows of the Nigerian Academy of Letters, and finally to his Nigerian National Order of Merit award lecture **The Burden not Lifted**, 2001.

In addition to winning the Nigerian National Order of Merit and being named one of the seven Foundation Fellows of the Nigerian Academy of Letters, Clark’s honours include **This Day** Life Achievement Award. In 2014, he received The Nigeria Centenary Award.

A number of others, named after him, include The Association of Nigerian Authors/ NDDC JP Clark Drama Prize, Pan African Writers Association Award and the JP Clark Distinguished Lecture Series by the University of Lagos, Department of English.

In 2014, the University set up the JP. Clark Centre, endowed by the Delta State Government of Nigeria, under Governor Emmanuel Uduaghan.

The Centre holds the JP Clark Library, a foundation. It also houses Institute of African Studies and the Diaspora, founded by the University and University of the West Indies.

As poet, playwright and scholar, Clark’s works have long received wide attention abroad and, of course, at home. His poems have been translated into many languages, including Chinese, Hindi, Russian, French, Portuguese and German. *Ibadan* has even appeared on the London Underground.


**The Encyclopaedia Britannica**, in two entries, describes Clark as “the most lyrical of the Nigerian poets”; and the American scholar Robert Wren, his first major biographer, states in Twayne’s World Authors Series: “Clark is “Universally acknowledged to be one of Africa’s foremost authors… a poet and playwright of the first rank in both originality and expressive power,” 1984, a theme he pursues to the end in **The Dictionary of Literary Biography: Africa and the Caribbean**, 1990.
For Abiola Irele, Nigeria’s doyen of literary criticism in English and French, “Clark’s work… can be said to have assumed a specific historical significance in the evolution of Nigerian, and indeed, African poetry in English, for it is indisputable that his early efforts were central to both the thematic re-orientation and profound transformation of idiom that led to the decisive advance that the new poetry came to represent. … Clark helped to inaugurate a new kind of poetry in English”- Introduction to *Collected Plays and Poems* 1958-1984, Howard University Press, 1991.

Similarly, Sam Asein declares: “There can be no meaningful history of the emergence and subsequent growth of modern Nigerian, and indeed, African poetry in English today which fails to pay tribute to the immense contribution of John Pepper Clark”.

So also states Femi Osofisan in *Answering Her Communal Call*, Lagos, 2005. “I believe we can say without fear that, of all his contemporaries, JP (Clark) has arguably been the most protean, the most self regenerating, and the most continuously experimental as much in terms of form and technique, as of theme”.

In 2000, Iyorwuese Hagher and others declared him in a free vote “Nigerian Poet of the 20th Century”.

And in 2010, in a live tribute, the Nigerian scholar at Harvard, Biodun Jeyifo, declared the poet “One of the greatest living authors on planet earth; one of the finest literary artists our continent has produced…, the Balogun Otolorin of African Literature, *(the Yoruba meaning The General who walks alone)*”.

The poetry flows through the plays whether in open verse or seeming prose. Indeed, as Irele puts it, the ‘plays provide an expanded framework for the expression of the tragic vision that runs through his poetry. There is a clear affective and aesthetic solidarity between the two aspects of his work, which is emphasised by the fact that the Niger Delta is the setting for all the plays…’
In 2000, Dapo Adelugba shared his thoughts with his audience in Ibadan and Lagos: ‘Directing Professor JP Clark’s new plays, All for Oil has been a challenge of many levels. This historical play has lessons not only for the present day Nigeria but for the whole of Africa and the rest of the world. It is a work, which has both national and international significance and which, I have no doubt, will take its place in the world repertory of drama and theatre’.

The bibliography of Clark’s work and select criticism, in fact, provides a good index to the birth and growth of modern African literature, created in just over a decade by a small band of writers.


By no means tired, dried up, and dredging up early miscellany, Clark released Full Tide, Collected Poems, 1958-2010, with the new section Overflow, Mosuro, Ibadan 2010, in celebration of his more than fifty years of writing poetry. The companion volume, The Collected Plays 1962-2000, University Press, Ibadan, came out at the same time. Cruising Home, which forms part of the new collected edition of poems from 1958 to 2012, Still Full Tide, soon followed, University Press, Ibadan, 2013. So did the companion drama collection The Two Sisters and 3 Other Plays, namely, The Hiss, The Smile and the history play The Abuse of a King, mirroring present times in Nigeria. In all four plays, the poet returns to his old form of verse drama with new power. The Example of Shakespeare and Other Essays, with a preface by Dan Izevbaye, concludes the set of his complete works, comprising poetry, drama and essays, all issued by University Press, Ibadan, 2013.

The poet, at 84, has not stopped producing. Remains of a Tide is a collection of his poems, written between 2014 and 2016, and published by Mosuro in 2018.
As part of the celebration of the poet, dramatist and scholar at 80 in 2013, a collective of ‘the most accomplished painters and sculptors on the Lagos contemporary art scene’, led by Olu Ajayi, documented the man as their 5th living icon, showing how ‘painting, textural biography and literary texts… merge to provide thought about how one medium is used to situate and frame the other.’

At the same celebration, Wole Soyinka did his old friend and colleague the signal honour of delivering a birthday lecture, Writers and Critics, to a capacity audience at the University of Lagos, Lagos.

In 2015, the Lagos International Festival of Poetry, directed by Efe Paul Azino and sponsored by the Nigerian Breweries PLC, dedicated to him its first edition in West Africa.

There is now the JP Clark Society, an initiative of the Society of Young Nigerian Writers coordinated in Ibadan by Wale Adedoyin.

In 2017, University of Lagos awarded the poet The Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters (D.Litt)

It therefore, can be safely argued, allowing for the politics of ideology and ethnic interests in the criticism of African literature, that Clark is the great poet, the pre-eminent poet of a unique period of the 20th century in Africa, during which a few of his generation created on the continent, side by side with others of their kind in French and Portuguese, a new literature in English.

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