The Last Interview
Interview by Ezenwa–Ohaeto

SOMETIME IN THE EARLY 1970s, a young, unknown army officer, Mamman Jiya Vatsa, sent some poems to the editor of *Okikè*, the most important Nigerian journal on arts and culture. It was almost a decade later that the editor, Chinua Achebe, met the soldier–poet for the first time. The assessment of *Okikè* in the early 1970s had confirmed that Vatsa was to be considered as a serious poet, and the poet proved the assessment to be correct: He wrote many books for children in the English, Hausa and Nupe languages; along with numerous books for adults and an interesting collection of pidgin poems, *Tori For Geti Bow Leg*. Between 1974 and 1985, he published an average of two books per year. Vatsa edited two collections of poems, *Voices From the Trench* (1978) and *Soldier’s Children as Poets*. He has received several awards, including the national honour of Officer of the Order of the Federal Republic (1979), First Prize in poetry at the North-Central State of Nigeria Festival of Arts (1974), and the Gold Medal of the Union of Bulgarian Writers (1984).

Mamman Vatsa was commissioned in 1964, at the age of twenty, and served as a commander of many infantry brigades; he was an instructor at the Nigerian Military School and Nigeria Defence Academy, member of the Nigerian Security Organisation during the Civil War, Commandant of the Nigerian Army School of Infantry, Quartermaster-General and Federal Minister for the Capital Territory of Abuja, rising to the rank of Major-General. It is unfortunate and also tragic that he was implicated in a coup plot against the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. Despite weak evidence against him and public opinion in his defence, he was executed. The mood of the period is best illustrated by Wole Soyinka’s statement that “they [the soldiers] have the logic but we have the vision.” This interview was held in Abuja on December 3, 1985.

Ezenwa–Ohaeto: I would like to congratulate you on your reappointment as Federal Minister for Abuja, though this interview is not about politics or government. How is this going to affect your literary efforts?
Mamman Jiya Vatsa: Not so much, really. It is not a new responsibility that I have been given, because since 1983 I have been a member of the Supreme Military Council. And I have been doing my writing since then.

*It is not often that creativity is expected from soldiers, who are trained for battles and wars. But it seems that you have been of tremendous influence especially with regards to your fellow soldiers?*

I, as a soldier, have written some books. I consider it as something normal, although I know that it is not common in our profession to write poetry. But if you pick other professions you find that it is not common to have many of them writing, either. I think that we, as writing soldiers, have attracted so much attention because of the peculiarity of our job and the fact that we are always in uniform. We are easily identified; otherwise I do not see it as anything extraordinary for a soldier to write – after all, we are human beings and part of the community. So we express our feelings and reactions just like other people.

*You launched a poetry magazine, Poetry Post, and you encouraged the insertion of poems in Soja Magazine. You have also edited an anthology of poems: Voices From the Trench. What other efforts have you made to encourage soldiers to write?*

Well I have organized competitions from time to time both for soldiers and soldiers’ children; the outcome of the competitions include *Soldiers’ Children as Poets* and *Voices From the Trench*. However, what I have been doing is to pick a particular field or magazine and encourage the soldiers and officers to write in them. The moment they catch on to the idea, I pull out and try to encourage another section. This has been my attitude and my major aim; to highlight the talents that we have in the service and also to remove the misunderstanding that soldiers do not have the same feelings that other people have. I think that we have made tremendous progress and I am happy about it. I know that when our troops went to Lebanon, they were one of the first sets of people to contribute poems to the Forces magazine there. It shows the progress that we have made; and one or two other officers have published books since then. Many soldiers have also gone into other writings, and that makes me feel good.

*Chinua Achebe, for instance, attributes his maturation as a poet to the Nigerian Civil War. He probably means that the war made him develop an interest in poetry. Interestingly, you have written poems about the Civil War. To what can we attribute the most important source of inspiration that has affected your creativity?*

It is the nature of my job that inspires me most. You see, soldiers, by the nature of their training, are moulded to do everything sharp and quick. I believe that poetry is a quick and sharp type of writing. You want to say as many things as possible