

Tribute

Chinua Achebe (1930–2013)



“Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond.”

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958

“I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.”

Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 1975

“The writer is often faced with two choices—turn away from the reality of life’s intimidating complexity or conquer its mystery by battling with it. The writer who chooses the former soon runs out of energy and produces elegantly tired fiction.”

Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 2012

Things Fall Apart, 1958 (novel)
No Longer At Ease, 1960 (novel)
The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories, 1962 (short stories)
Arrow of God, 1964 (novel)
A Man of the People, 1966 (novel)
Chike and the River, 1966 (children's fiction)
The Insider: Stories of War and Peace from Nigeria, (with others), 1971 (essays)
Beware, Soul-Brother and Other Poems, 1971 (poetry)
How the Leopard Got His Claws, (with John Iroaganachi), 1972 (children's fiction)
Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems, 1973 (poetry)
Girls at War, and Other Stories, 1973 (short stories)
Morning Yet on Creation Day, 1975 (essays)
In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka at the University of Washington, 1975.
The Flute, 1975 (children's fiction)
Winds of Change: Modern Stories from Black Africa,
 (with Jomo Kenyatta and Amos Tutuola), 1977 (essays)
Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo,
 (with Dubem Okafor) 1978 (poetry)
The Drum, 1978 (children's fiction)
Aka Weta: An Anthology of Igbo Poetry; Aka Weta: Egwu Aguluagu, Egwu Edeluode,
 (with Obiara Udechukwu), 1982 (poetry)
The Trouble with Nigeria, 1983 (essays)
African Short Stories, (with C. L. Innes), 1985 (short stories)
Anthills of the Savannah, 1987 (novel)
The University and the Leadership factor in Nigerian Politics, 1988
Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987, 1988 (essays)
Beyond Hunger in Africa: Conventional Wisdom and an African Vision, 1991 (essays)
The Voter, 1994 (short stories)
Another Africa, 1998 (poetry)
Echi di ime : taa bu gboo , / odee ("Tomorrow is pregnant with the unknown"), 1999
Home & Exile, 2000 (essays)
Collected Poems, 2005 (poetry)
The Education of a British-Protected Child, 2009 (essays)
There Was a Country, A Personal History of Biafra, 2012 (memoir)

Tanure Ojaide

Tribute

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Chinua Achebe (1930–2013)

Chinua Achebe's place as one of Africa's greatest writers is not contestable. He bestrode the African literature world like a colossus and he would be remembered not only by us but by generations to come in Africa and elsewhere. In his work he restored pride to the African whose postcolonial condition had tried to rob him of human dignity because of Western colonial policies denigrating African culture. In fact, one of his most impressionable convictions was that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; [...] their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty [...] they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity." He thus inscribed African culture boldly on the world literary stage. And he spent his writing career exhorting his African society to regain "belief in itself" since colonialism attempted to strip its self-confidence away. At the same time, he castigated his Nigerian society for its obsessive corruption and ineptitude that made a nation so abundantly endowed to be still wallowing in poverty. To him, the major problem with Nigeria was that of lack of good political leadership. He inspired African writers to write not art for art's sake or pure art as done by Western writers but "applied art" to make them "teachers" working towards changing their societies for the better. He thus espoused a transformative ideology of art. He was our champion wrestler in the global literary stage and the Eagle on the Iroko made us very proud.

While I have always been familiar with Achebe through his work—novels, essays, and poetry—that I have to read as a student, teacher, and writer, I had the opportunity to be very close to him on one major occasion. It was when I won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Africa Region in 1987 and we were together in London at the Queen's reception for Commonwealth leaders and poetry award-winners from different regions of the world. I experienced Achebe's admirable humility. An iconic writer he already was and I a "budding" poet, he related to me as if like a comrade of equal status. He was cheerful and always exuded subdued humor with his trademark shy smile. When the Queen quoted him in her speech, he turned to me, smiling shyly and said: "Tanure, you are my witness!" Now I am his witness and bear testimony

to the great man known all over the world and respected by the Queen of Great Britain and the Presidents and Prime Ministers present. All his life, he remained humble and those young and old who came to him always testified to the humility that made him tower so high today in my memory.

Chinua Achebe taught me to be principled and truthful, especially as a writer, since one is bound to be involved in controversies. He was not controversial for the sake of being so or to gain cheap popularity but he said things and took actions based upon deep conviction. His anti-colonial stance made him write a counter narrative to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and other works of European writers who portrayed Africans as one-dimensional characters. Achebe insists that Africans are a people who are neither angels nor devils. His stand during the Nigerian Civil War should be seen in the context of one with a keen sensibility who responded to events following the pogroms of 1966. He was an emissary of Biafra, the secessionist state, and worked for it and was never apologetic about his role during the war. His last book, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (New York: Penguin, 2012), has been controversial in Nigeria and has offended many groups and people on the opposite side—including me—during the war but he aired his views frankly. He was a courageous man who did not hide his position on crucial issues.

A great inspirer who sparked the literary imagination of young Africans to take writing seriously, Achebe was among the chief writers who blazed the trail of modern African literature. His writings have helped to build a canon of modern African literature that younger writers are today working hard to reinforce with their respective works. There has been so much talk about his not winning the Nobel Prize for Literature but that should not in any way diminish his literary reputation. Literature is a cultural production and one does not expect him to be rewarded by the culture whose literary philosophy and cultural genocide he denounced by pricking the conscience of the West on colonialism!

Achebe was not just an Ogidi man, an Igbo, a Nigerian, an African; he was a man with a deep humanity. He has joined the ancestors but will forever be with us in spirit.

Obari Gomba

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Tribute

**Things still apart:
Chinua Achebe's whetstone**

I grew up with knowledge of Chinua Achebe (1930–2013). I had read *Chike and the River* (1966) in early school, and the name stuck in my memory. Again, my elder brother and his mates loved to talk about *Things Fall Apart*. I felt it was a curious title at the time but my brother and his friends always talked glibly about the book. I recall that I had tried to make sense of the book. I flipped through my brother's copy. I could not comprehend it. It was too tough for my young head. Of course, *Things Fall Apart* was never meant to be a novel for boys, as Achebe said of *Chike and the River*. But I knew I would have to read it someday, if only to prove to my brother that his book was not beyond my ken. Not much later, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) brought the book to most of us. The adaptation enthralled me at the time. There were only a few black-and-white television sets around. And the Nigerian Electric Power Authority (NEPA) had not given electricity to Eleme at the time. On each telecast schedule, the neighbourhood would gather at those few sites where we could watch it. With other children in my neighbourhood, I sat with adults to watch the dramatization of Achebe's great novel. It was always a solemn event. The adults did not give room for childish behaviour. It was as if a communal rite was on course, and the soul of the community was at stake. Many years later, I came to understand why each telecast had such ritual significance. Granted that a great number of us might not have known the importance of the book then, it was nonetheless our story. We bonded with the television set because it was our story. We might not have set about it in a deliberate way, but it reached to us as a retrieval of selves and community from the fog of history.

The effort of the NTA had a long impression on me until I got around to reading the novel. I noticed that the NTA had taken scandalous liberty with the text; and I did not think they had the right to deceive me in the name of adaptation. This, I confess, is a minority position. My country men have continued to praise the NTA for that effort, and they have continued to ask why the NTA had not continued to adapt other great novels by Achebe and others. It strikes me that the popularity of *Things Fall Apart* in Nigeria owes a great deal to the NTA. There are lots of Nigerians who have not read their country's greatest novel, but they can tell you the main thrust of the story of Okonkwo. And they are likely to tell you how that story intersects the past and present realities of the continent.

For many years, *Things Fall Apart* has defined our perception of the African novel. Some critics have made a doctrine of *the sons and the daughters* of Achebe. Baring the extremities of such a doctrine, there are valid points on how Achebe has come to influence writing on the continent. I confess that after reading *Things Fall Apart*, I too came to measure every other African novel by that template. After all I was a teenager at the time; and I was merely developing my sensitivity to literature. It is needless to say I was not alone. *Things Fall Apart* has come to become the quintessential novel to many a great critic. Even Achebe has laboured to get out of that mould. The variety of his oeuvre: *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of the People*, *Arrow of God*, *Girls at War*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, etc. has not helped Achebe to escape the charge of *unrelieved competence*, as Wole Soyinka has been wont to say. Achebe's reputation has survived such modes of interpretation. Some have ascribed this success to the privilege of Achebe's early start. But it cannot be that alone. He has paid his dues in craft and in context. He has attracted attention to himself and to African writing.

Achebe is not a lone tree that makes a forest. We shall not subscribe to such a mythology. If he were a lone tree, then his great work on the African Writers Series would have been in vain. It is a blessing that Achebe is not a lone tree that makes a forest. It is a blessing that the rise of Achebe has brought about the rise of many others, directly or indirectly. African literature is not homogenous in a strict sense. Africa is a rainbow of many colours. The challenge is for us to see the dimensions of Africa's diversity in the letters that bear the name of the continent. This understanding has become my own turning point as a critic. I came into this epiphany at Nsukka where I encountered Achebe's towering presence in spite of his absence.

The news of Achebe's life-changing accident came to me in my days in college. I heard about his relocation to the United States of America. Interestingly, when I got to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1997 to pursue a degree in English, Achebe's mystique was still marked on the ambience of the university. His office was still there, hardly open, revered beyond measure like a sacred grove. Cobwebs lent to its grandeur. And there was *Okike*, the African journal of New Writing, which Achebe started after the civil war. We boasted then that *Okike* and *The Muse* were the longest surviving journals of literature on the continent. And we believed our boast. Till now, I have not made any attempt to check the veracity of that claim. *Okike*, in particular, is iconic because it represents the resilience of the human spirit. Out of the chaos of war, we got a great platform from the inimitable Achebe. In 1998, the English Association at Nsukka crowned me as the Best Literary Artiste of the Year. The editors of *Okike* honoured me with a one-year free subscription. I had all the issues of *Okike* for that year. I had come to enjoy the fruit of Achebe's labour and foresight in a very personal way.

I have held Achebe in awe for many years. Achebe means a lot to us. He means a lot to me. I consider his death as a kind of peak in his apotheosis. Call it bardolatry. There

has been a kind of godlike essence in the way I see him. Mind you, deities do not have to be perfect. In fact, the more flawed they are; the more we venerate them.

Last year, I published my fourth collection of poems, *Length of Eyes*. The first and the last poems in the collection are tributes to Achebe. In the heat of the debate on Achebe's *There Was a Country*, I wrote another poem, dedicated to Achebe and Odia Ofeimun. The poem has been published online on *Voice*, the Garden City Literary Festival blog. On World Poetry Day for 2013, I made a last minute decision not to read the poem to the audience at Le Meridian Port Harcourt. Achebe died the following day. I refused to make any comment in the media on Achebe for weeks. The death was such a weight on my mind. I just could not talk to the media about it. When I finally loosened my tongue, it came out crappy for no fault of mine. I captured the situation on Facebook. Let me cite a portion of my post:

Last week, a journalist from *The Nation* showed up in my office to get my view on the person of Achebe. The result of that conversation was out last Thursday, 23 May 2013. It was horrible. The transcription was horrible. If it were in the past, I would have fumed about the piece, to say nothing about the misspelling of my name and the detestable photograph of me. But I have chosen to laugh about it. On the same day, I called Betty Abah, the poet(ess), and we had a good laugh. I have also called the said journalist. I expressed my disappointment in a mild manner; and I invited him to an evening of beer. We could not make it to the pub. Port Harcourt traffic. We shall make another arrangement soon. While I wait for a beer date with my journalist, I have become busy with a tribute on Achebe for a journal. I hope it comes out good. I began by stating the obvious. Achebe means a lot to us. Today, he has gone to join the ancestors. We shall all miss his interventions. We live in a country that is in dire need of interventions. We live in a world that is in dire need of interventions. Whether we choose to laugh or to cry, this point is clear. Achebe has left a whetstone. We must sharpen the blunt edges of our lives on that whetstone.

The whetstone is a figuration for the corpus of words which he has left behind. If Africa does re-examine itself in the light of Achebe's numerous testimonies, Nigeria cannot afford to be deaf and blind to those testimonies.

A keystone in his career has been his concern for Nigeria. We could write volumes on *Nigeria, Achebe and the Rest of Us*. He says: "Nigeria is a child, gifted, enormously talented, prodigiously endowed and incredibly wayward." Those are the words of the inimitable Achebe on his engagement with Nigeria. Days after I read those words in Achebe's *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, I wrote a poem which I entitled "Chinua Achebe's Country". The poem says Nigeria is a sick child.

Little did I know that *There Was a Country* was so close by; and that it would raise a lot of dust:

We see the tough rind of your love,
You love your dear country

As a man loves
A child

With Down Syndrome.
Clusters of frazzled cells

Trussed up on a trembling plain.
O to love such a child

Is to hang the nerves on rafters.

Nigeria has continued to try the patience and the faith of all us. Never mind that there are those who profit from the status quo and they could be quite glib about the merits of this dysfunctional space.

In their hearts, they know that the Achebes of this country are right on many counts about the need for a new direction. It is a pity that Achebe is now caught in the endless mess of Biafra. But it takes very little from his agony over Nigeria.

Sometimes you wish it dead,

And sometimes you boil
In the head until you

Poke at God the Poor Craftsman.
Chromosome-riot, broad skull

And blunt face. A short drape
Over a short-circuited mind.

You really love this child
With Down Syndrome.

A few months after this poem was published in my *Length of Eyes*, Achebe has once again stirred a debate on Nigeria. His book, *There Was a Country*, has swept all Nigerians in thrall. The significance of this book is beyond the craft and the gaps. The strong point of this book is that it holds a mirror on the borderlines within Nigeria. It reveals the culture of denial which frames the ethnic boxes in which Nigerians stew. Nearly 100 years after the bloody British violated aboriginal autonomies and "froze" ethnic

boundaries, the tide of blood and bitterness has continued to insist on the otherness of the disparate nations that Lugard trapped in the Nigerian *mélange*.

Of course, colonialism is the source of Nigeria. And we can keep throwing stones at the White Devil for such a poor work. But is there any salvation in aiming stones at the White Devil? I do not think so. I think we should know our history and know where the Abiku began to torment us. But we cannot continue to stand under the burden of this sick child. There are questions for all Nigerians. Granted that the British have left this albatross around our neck, what have we done with it in over 50 years?

What have we done with the sick child? The debate about Achebe's book has revealed that we are still where the British left us, and we are mostly to blame for our poor craft of statesmanship. Could we not have been brave enough to bury the child and move on? But how can a sane man bury a child that is not dead? Could we not have been brave enough to kill the child, kill ourselves too and end the misery? But are infanticide and suicide not downright cowardly? Could we not have been brave enough to cure the child and live happily? There are more options, I admit. Why are we stuck with indecision? Why do we celebrate prevarication? To postpone doomsday? Or to advertise our death-wish?

A number of Nigerians have pointed at the way forward. Wole Soyinka, for instance, has consistently called for a Sovereign National Conference. The idea is that all the nations which are caught in this British conundrum must seat to discuss the future. The proposal makes a lot of sense. But there are others who do not see the necessity for a Confab: they argue that the child is not deathly ill; they make light of the symptoms. We hear such denials mostly in the bedrooms of power from persons who are either pathological liars or outright fools. How can anyone make light of the drums of war which have remained loud since Gowon and Ojukwu rolled them out? How can anyone make light of the undying anger of Biafra? How can anyone make light of Boko Haram's rain of booms? How can anyone make light of the deceptive lull of guns in the Niger Delta? How can anyone make light of the combustible hearth of O'dua? How can anyone make light of Nigeria's inability to conduct a proper census? How can anyone make light of the skewed federalism we practice? How can anyone make light of the ethnic import of our political parties? How can anyone make light of our questionable elections? Rather than hide in our ethnic boxes, let us step out and breathe fresh air into this country. Achebe may not have put it in these words, but even in death he would not deny that all these were part of what he saw as "the trouble with Nigeria". The structure of Nigeria is the point that must be addressed. The issue of resource control is central to the problem of structure.

As we march towards the next election, let us all know that the strength of this country will be tested by a storm. Let us know that this country has another date with destiny. We owe it to ourselves and to Africa to prove that we can save the child. It is

before us this day to choose life or death, laughter or misery. Will things remain fallen and apart in Nigeria? Achebe would smile excitedly from his grave if we say no. The world is watching us.

James Ogude Tribute

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Chinua Achebe

My first encounter with Achebe was in early 1970s and I can vividly recall when in my second year High School, I encountered *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's first novel. This was due to the influence of the now famous Ngũgĩ revolution, at least I would learn later, which called for the re-location of African literature at the core of our English literature syllabus. The East African Examination Council, which had just replaced the Cambridge Overseas examination, had grudgingly introduced a few titles by African writers to supplement what was predominantly an English syllabus. The introduction of African titles was left to the discretion of the school and the English teachers. It would take a young English and History teacher, freshly returned from the USA and imbued with black consciousness radicalism to carry out the experiment that was to change the lives of many of us. The difference between *Things Fall Apart* and the other texts we had read was that, unlike the other English texts which had dominated our syllabus, we could not connect with them culturally and politically coming out as we did under the shadow of African nationalism—a Pan-Africanist impulse that had defined the decade before and continued to shape our identities. Clearly, *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958 and written just two years before Nigeria's independence, had such a profound impact on African minds at its publication and continues to have a resonance for us as we negotiate the difficult aftermath of the colonial experience.

Beyond his maiden text, when one considers Africa's literary history over the last five decades, Achebe's body of work constitutes an important intervention. His works have had a tremendous impact within the academy in Africa and beyond. Achebe is read and discussed more than any other African writer. His works, to use his words, have always provided us "with a second handle on existence", enabling us to create for ourselves "a different set of reality from that which has been given to us". If Achebe's works, even those set deep into colonial history, continue to resonate with freshness of insight, it is because they often jolt us into an awareness of our own weaknesses too, as Africans, as blacks, while equally speaking forcefully to our common humanity. As black Africans, they compel us to come to grips with our history, especially our encounter with colonialism in order to understand where we lost the initiative and agency—to locate where the rain begun to beat us as he would have it.

In trying to map out a new vision in the postcolonial state in Africa, Achebe's works teach us not to fall into the trap of essentialism and political dogma. They urge us to move beyond simple binary opposition and to come to terms with how we are implicated in our own political paralysis and social decay. Like the character, Ikem Osodi, in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe insists that the role of the writer in Africa is "to widen the scope of that self-examination [...] And not to foreclose it with catchy, half-baked orthodoxy" (158). On this he remains adamant and reminds us that: "Whenever something stands, something else stands beside it", or better still, in his most eloquent proverb on change: "The world is like a dancing mask, if you want to see it, you must move with it" (*Arrow of God* 61). It is the way Achebe's vision forces us to reckon with the duality and complexity of existence, constantly urging us to look at things twice and to complicate meaning that sets his works apart from the average writers. For those who cling to political dogma or seek ideological closures, he warns them that they have no space in the complex world of mother idoto.

And yet Achebe's works also underscore the sheer power of narrative, of the story; of memory as an indispensable agent of history. This is what the old man of Abazon in *Anthills of the Savannah* means when he says that the story, memory, is our escort: "It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence" (124). The tragic death, for example, of Ken Saro-Wiwa during the tyrannical rule of Sani Abacha, Achebe would argue, is precisely because our political leadership fears the story teller because they remind them of where we come from and the perils of repeating the same mistakes that our erstwhile conquerors made.

Achebe's works also stand out because of his consummate and eloquent use of language; that ability to transform ordinary metaphors into myth and complex instruments of cognition. Through his creative use of the English language, Achebe has shown us that Africans were not mere passive victims of those institutions of Western modernity, but rather, they engaged with them, appropriated and quite often used them to fuel their own projects. He animates his works with Igbo linguistic genius through new images and idioms, and the imposition of new syntactic structures and rhythms, and quite literally forces the English language to mediate the peculiar Igbo and African universe. In this sense, he not only helped in subverting and undermining the so-called purity and the unassailable position of the English language, but he also succeeded in domesticating it to mediate our peculiar realities.

It is a sad irony of life that Chinua Achebe lived his last days and died outside Africa, the continent that has been a major source of inspiration for most of his works. The *iroko* tree may have fallen, but this giant of African letters leaves behind him a rich literary legacy.