



Chinua Achebe (1930-2013)

And Home Goes the “Teacher of Light”²⁹

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I first encountered the venerable Chinua Achebe on the pages of his oft-neglected little masterpiece, *Chike and the River* (1966). The book, republished abroad for the first time after three decades of its initial publication by a small press in Nigeria, is part of the corpus of four books for children produced by the author whose bestselling novel

²⁹ This epithet is from the title of a book by Tijan M. Sallah and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. 2003. *Chinua Achebe, Teacher of Light: A Biography*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

³⁰ Dr. Nduka Otiono, a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, Carleton University, Canada, was Senior Research Assistant to Professor Chinua Achebe at Brown University, USA. A shorter version of this tribute had been published in *The News* magazine (<http://pmnewsnigeria.com/2013/04/02/achebe-and-i/>), and reproduced online by Nigeria Village Square portal with the title “A Glimpse of Prof. Chinua Achebe through the Power of Personal Experience” at <http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/a-glimpse-of-prof-chinua-achebe-through-the-power-of-personal-experiences.html>

Things Fall Apart somewhat overshadowed the rest of his masterpieces. The other children's books are *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (with John Iroaganachi, 1972), *The Flute* (1977), and *The Drum* (1977). But so overpowering has been the success of *Things Fall Apart* that the author's exceptional achievements as a writer of children's stories, short stories (*Girls at War and Other Stories*, 1973), and award-winning poetry are hardly mentioned in discussions of his enviable stature as "Father of African Literature" – a title that he continued to reject with characteristic self-effacement. Beyond his already documented protestations against the title, I witnessed Achebe 'award' the title to an older contemporary. We were at a meeting at Brown University discussing the organization of an event, "Conversations in Africana: Voice and Memory in Poetic Imagination,"³¹ moderated by me. It featured Achebe himself, former poet laureate of Louisiana Brenda Marie Osbey, and Gabriel Okara, nonagenarian poet and one of the oldest writers alive. Professor Achebe, happy that his abiding desire to share the stage with Gabriel Okara, whose work he admired greatly, was coming into fruition, said to me between his trademark soft smiles and verbal play: "People often call me the Father of African literature; the title should actually go to Dr. Gabriel Okara. He is our father."

Yet the evidence of literary history supports the ascription of the appellation "Father of African Literature" to Achebe. From his own account in the chapter "The Empire Fights Back" in *Home and Exile*, to the submissions of eminent scholars of African literature including Nadine Gordimer (2013), Lyn Innes (2006), Kwame Anthony Appiah (2013), Douglas Killam (2000), Charles Larson (2013), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2013), the author of *Things Fall Apart* and the first editor of Heinemann African Writers series emerges as the first African writer who, to appropriate Appiah's words in a recent tribute, "established, for those who wanted to write fiction in English

³¹ For a full video recording of the event see <http://vimeo.com/54372463> (accessed March 29, 2013).

about African life, the first great model of how it could be done." And "acted as midwife to scores of other writers."³² While cognizant of Africa's great indigenous literary tradition—oral and written—that preceded him and from which he drew inspiration, Achebe acknowledges his pioneering role in the emergence of modern African literature in this revealing excerpt from *Home and Exile* (2000: 51):

The launching of Heinemann African Writers series was like the umpire signal for which African writers had been waiting on the starting line. In one short generation an immense library of new writing had sprung into being from all over the continent and for the first time in history, Africa's future generations of readers and writers—youngsters in schools and colleges—began to read not only David Copperfield and other English classics that I and my generation had read but also works by their own writers about their own people.

I am a part of that generation of youngsters to which Achebe refers. I did not imagine then that I would meet the author whose inventive mind and magical prose inspired my love for words, my favourite in *Chike and the River* being "nincompoops" and "scallywags." I did not think then that I would meet the author whose little book left me forever thinking of Professor Chandus, the (in)famous magician, and planted in me the desire to become a writer. I encountered more of his works later, especially the early novels that defined his fame, and then at the University of Ibadan, also Achebe's alma mater, I encountered his essays and more consciously began to engage his works critically. Also at Ibadan, Dan Izevbaye, a notable critic of African literature and my professor, introduced Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and framed the context of Achebe's most influential essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1975). Almost immediately, my admiration for Achebe soared. Inspired and buoyed by Achebe's own achievements and the literary accomplishments of other pioneers such as J.P. Clark, Christopher

³² Kwame Anthony Appiah. "Achebe Took Literature About Africans Global" <http://www.theroot.com/views/achebe-took-literature-about-africans-global> (Accessed March 23, 2013).

Okigbo, Mabel Segun, and Wole Soyinka, and aided by my favorite professor and mentor at Ibadan, Isidore Okpewho, I collaborated with a few classmates to establish The Storytellers Club.³³

But it was not until during my career as a journalist with *ThisDay* newspaper that I had the opportunity of meeting *the Man* in August 1999. He was visiting home after nine years in exile following a life-changing auto crash on March 22, 1990. The remarkable trip to see Achebe in his hometown of Ogidi evoked the title of James Baldwin's 1965 psychological short story "Going to Meet the Man."³⁴ My initial anxiety melted on my actual encounter with him. His simplicity and unassuming, accommodating nature ignited confidence in me and fired me on through my assignment. The support of members of Achebe's close-knit family made my mission easier. The report, "Homecoming of a Master Storyteller" was published afterwards in *ThisDay*, the Sunday paper. How well-received the story turned out was manifested in my first meeting with Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, then-World Bank executive, and now Nigeria's Finance Minister. In search of photographs for *Chinua Achebe: Teacher of Light* (2003), a biography of Achebe which Dr. Okonjo-Iweala co-authored with Tijan M. Sallah, Gambian writer and economist, she came to me referencing my *ThisDay* story. More importantly, one year after that report, Achebe sent me a surprise invitation to his 70th birthday at Bard College in the U.S. I was again invited to Frankfurt

³³ My first stories, some of which I later revised and collected into my first book, *The Night Hides with a Knife* (1995), were written and shared in the creative writing class taught by Isidore Okpewho as well as The Storytellers Club workshops in the mid 1980s at Ibadan. Like Achebe and his contemporaries who as students at Ibadan had published a students' magazine called *The Horn*, edited by J.P. Clark, we published *Echoes*, which I edited. Rather subconsciously, like many other contemporaries of mine at Ibadan, Achebe and his cohort of pioneers highly influenced and shaped my intellectual development and that of many others in my generation.

³⁴ Besides the eventfulness of finally meeting "the Man", the trip offered another gift in the form of an encounter with a street vendor at Upper Iweka, a popular commercial bus transit in Onitsha, Eastern Nigeria. The street vendor's name was Smokey Joe, and I could not help thinking of how Achebe could have re-invented him in a story. Smokey Joe later provided the creative spur for my doctoral dissertation on street stories in postcolonial Nigeria.

when Professor Achebe received the prestigious German Book Trade Peace Prize (2002), and had the opportunity for my first long interview with him. It was published in *The Insider* magazine.

Professor Achebe's generous spirit and deep sense of appreciation of little things were legendary. At the 70th birthday celebration at Bard College, I recall highlights from some of the tributes which included the often quoted excerpt from Nelson Mandela's tribute—"the writer in whose company the prison walls collapsed." Amongst other memorable testimonies was Nuruddin Farah's recollection of a trip to Ogidu to visit Achebe at the latter's invitation. According to the Somalian writer: "A day before they parted, they talked about the most mundane of matters: money." In the course of their discussion Achebe learnt that Farah had difficulties accessing money in his account at a bank in Jos which had accrued from Farah's two years' salary for teaching at the University of Jos. In response, revealed Farah, "Achebe went upstairs to his rooms and returned shortly with a cheque in pounds sterling to be drawn at a bank of my choice." Farah added: "It was thanks to this seed money that I was in the comfortable position of being able to set home in The Gambia to begin serious work on my second trilogy, *Blood in the Sun*, of which *Maps* is the first, *Gifts* the second, and *Secrets* the third."³⁵

I got to know the master storyteller more closely and to benefit from his generosity when I joined him at Brown University as a postdoctoral fellow and Senior Research Assistant to him. The negotiation of the terms of my fellowship gave me the opportunity to witness the compassionate consciousness that created that memorable character Unoka, Okonkwo's "lazy" father, whom many would loathe and describe as a loafer in *Things Fall Apart*. From the moment Professor Achebe suggested, at a private meeting after the first Achebe Colloquium on Africa at Brown in December 2009, that he would like me to work with him, I was enchanted by his humility.

³⁵ Excerpts from an unpublished text entitled "Chinua Achebe: A Celebration," Farah's tribute to Achebe during Achebe's 70th birthday at Bard College in 2000.

He laid out reasons why he thought I was a perfect fit for the position. And in his typical contemplative manner, asked me to take my time to consider the proposition. There was no hint of self importance in his voice in spite of his having the rare distinction of being the first living author included in *Everyman's Library*, and of *Things Fall Apart* being listed as one of "The 100 greatest novels of all time."³⁶

As he addressed me in the presence of his son Ike, his voice as soft and reassuring as ever, I tried to suppress my excitement and the fulfillment of a childhood fantasy. But even then, I was mindful of the credence of his characteristically measured words, an acknowledgment that as a family man myself, relocating from Alberta, Canada to Rhode Island, USA, was not like going on an excursion. Throughout the negotiation for my relocation, Professor Achebe placed the interest and wellbeing of my family on the front burner. Not once did I get the impression that the work I would be doing for, and with, him mattered more than my own research and family's wellbeing. He was particularly concerned about the challenging American health insurance policy, and suggested that I not take that lightly.

Working with Professor Achebe at Churchill House, home of Africana Studies at Brown University in Providence, was like working with a guardian angel. His charming personality often lit up a room whenever he appeared, and his warm disposition often lifted one's spirit. Usually preferring to wheel himself on his mobility device as much as possible, his movement in and out of the building often caught the attention of passersby. On one particularly memorable occasion, a young man sighting him and eager to greet him mistook him for Nelson Mandela. Achebe smiled shyly, waving as he was fond of doing. Perhaps in his mind it was an ironic twist to the expe-

³⁶ See "The 100 greatest novels of all time. The list" in *The Guardian* at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/oct/12/features.fiction> (Accessed March 24, 2013).

rience of mistaken identity since other distinguished colleagues of his were the ones usually mistaken for him. Ngugi narrates such encounters in his tribute to Achebe. He recalls how in April 1964 shortly after the publication of his first novel, *Weep Not Child*, which Achebe facilitated, he “assumed that every educated Kenyan would have heard about the novel.” But he “was woken to reality when [he] entered a club, the most frequented by the new African elite at the time, who all greeted [him] as their Kenyan author of *Things Fall Apart*.” And that was not all; Ngugi recounted further similar experiences:

Years later at Achebe’s 70th birthday celebrations at Bard College attended by Toni Morrison and Wole Soyinka among others, I told this story of how Achebe’s name had haunted my life. When Soyinka’s turn to speak came, he said that I had taken the story from his mouth: he had similarly been mistaken for Chinua Achebe. The fact is that Achebe became synonymous with the Heinemann African Writers series and African writing as a whole. There is hardly any African writer of my generation who has not been mistaken for Chinua Achebe. I have had a few such encounters. Every African novel became *Things Fall Apart*, and every writer some sort of Chinua Achebe. Even a protestation to the contrary was not always successful.³⁷

Although Achebe lived five decades of his adult life in the limelight—following the publication of *Things Fall Apart* at age 28—he never seemed comfortable with fame and attention. Indeed as Larson (2013) has noted, “Few writers live to observe the fiftieth anniversary of their novels—let alone with increasing readership.” But Achebe’s modesty forbade him from exhibiting any signs of greatness or relishing his celebrity status. He would stay quiet at most meetings, yielding space for younger colleagues to talk, and offering wise counsel only when extremely necessary. At the meetings we had to plan the annual Chinua Achebe Colloquium on Africa, a major initiative which he inaugurated at Brown University in keeping with

³⁷ See “Chinua Achebe: The Spirit Lives – Tribute” by Ngugi wa Thiong’o (<http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/lucas/activities/leeds-african-studies-bulletin/chinua-achebe-the-spirit-lives-tribute-by-ngugi-wa-thiongo.php> accessed May 15, 2013).

his life's work to foster greater knowledge of Africa and to promote democracy and the rule of law, he would resist any attempts to assign prominent roles to him. He would argue instead that the Colloquium was not about him, and that he should not be made the focus.³⁸

Ever willing to give so much of himself, official work for him was not limited to the office, not even in his twilight years and on a wheelchair. Thus he would welcome me to his residence at Warwick, Rhode Island, whenever there were urgent matters for discussion. Working closely with him enabled me to better appreciate what Professor Christie Achebe, his loving wife and scholar in her own right, had told me during our first meeting in 1999, as published in the *ThisDay* report. She described the patriarch as a very humane, caring, kind and loyal husband, and revealed that even as a paraplegic, her husband did not isolate himself to write. Mrs. Achebe added: "He still works very hard, he is still writing. Unlike me who needs solitude to work, Chinua is easily accessible even when he is writing. Once the muse is there, hardly any form of distraction will deter him from his project. He is even more accessible than me, always willing to listen to people's problems, to assist wherever he can."

Achebe was so at ease, so at peace with himself, and cautious with criticism during conversations. He would quietly say *O ka fa mada be* (it's the limit of their knowledge) in describing the shortsightedness of Nigeria's political leaders. His humility and measured words generally made most visitors, including children, comfortable in his company. He would joke and banter with my 13-year-old daughter Kika, as if he were talking with a colleague. That was not really surprising, seeing how at home he was with his own grandchildren, and also given the kind of consciousness with which he

³⁸ Not even the occasion of his 50th wedding anniversary celebration in Rhode Island on September 9, 2011, a modest family party, would make him embrace the spotlight and make a speech; he preferred, instead, quiet interaction with his guests and his grandchildren.

wrote *Chike and the River* and other children's books. Additionally, I could see in his unpretentious disposition the kind of cosmopolitan vision that enabled him to support his two daughters to marry non-Igbos in an often ethnically-charged society. Yet, some of his worst critics following the publication of *There Was a Country* have accused him of hating Yorubas because he criticized an icon of the Yorubas, Chief Obafemi Awolowo—something he had done multiple times in the past. Such critics are clearly oblivious of the fact that Achebe's grandchildren have Yoruba and Itsekiri blood, and therefore in "hating" Yorubas Achebe would have to hate his very family.

Achebe demonstrated the power of the written word, sparking stormy debates with his books in the hallowed precincts of the ivory tower and in street corners of urban cities and African villages. Amongst other scholars, the critic Charles Larson and Lyn Innes, with whom Achebe edited an anthology of short stories, respectively capture the significance of Achebe's work. In Larson's words, "Nigerians on the street are certainly proud of the novel [*Things Fall Apart*] and of their compatriot's fame; it is the one novel they are most likely to have read or at least to know about." For her part, Innes (2006: 196) notes that:

Achebe demonstrated that it is possible for a novelist to be creative, original, formally innovative, interrogating language and genre, and at the same time reach out to and involve a wide audience. In this sense Achebe's novels are profoundly democratic because they respect the reader as an equal, calling on his or her involvement, interpretation and judgement.

Similarly, Farah (2000) acknowledges that Achebe is

enviably the most quotable of writers, every utterance of his proving to be a gem, every single thing he has penned containing vignettes cast in the currency of his wisdom. He is a man for all occasions, a writer whom Queen Elizabeth II may quote with the same panache as a taxi driver in The Bronx, or a villager sinking a well in Onitsha.

The public outpouring over Achebe's death on the streets of Nigerian cities and in other parts of the world further prove his near rock-star

popularity as a public intellectual. It is this unusual popularity of a first-rate intellectual that earned Achebe the top spot of *Forbes* magazine's "The 40 Most Powerful Celebrities In Africa."³⁹

Achebe's popular credentials transcend his art into his commitment as a socially conscious citizen. He operated from an ideological standpoint that invests the artist with an activist vision. In his novel *Anthills of the Savannah* he declares: "Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit – in state, in church or mosque, in party congress, in the university or wherever" (160). In the same vein he avers that, "Writers don't give prescriptions. They give headaches" (Ibid). Thus beneath his telling quiet disposition was an insurrectionary temperament against the trouble with the dysfunctional postcolonial state in Africa typified by Nigeria. He describes that trouble in the first sentence of his widely quoted political treatise as "simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (*The Trouble with Nigeria* 1). Twice rejecting national honors to protest debilitating poor leadership in Nigeria, he is unsurprisingly listed as one of the "Makers of the Twentieth Century." Besides the Man Booker International Prize for lifetime achievement, he also received the prestigious Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, awarded to a man or woman who has made outstanding contributions to the world.

Although better known and celebrated as a distinguished novelist, Achebe's volume of poetry *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*, written during the Biafran War, was jointly awarded the first Commonwealth Poetry Prize. The volume grew out of an earlier collection, *Beware Soul-Brother, and Other Poems*, and both collections have also been merged in his *Collected Poems*. The poems are meditations on life and death, a collective testament to the Biafran war during

³⁹ See Mfonobong Nsehe, "The 40 Most Powerful Celebrities In Africa." *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2011/10/12/the-40-most-powerful-celebrities-in-africa/> (Accessed March 26, 2013).

which, together with his family, he narrowly escaped a bombing attack.

It is understandable, therefore, that Achebe's personal history of Biafra, articulated in *There Was a Country*, was perhaps the most difficult book to write. As I learned from family sources, he clung unto the project like his final testament, and as a perfectionist, worked and reworked it up to the point of its publication. The book was particularly important for him, one that he may never have finished writing because the memories were sore, and the recollections never exhaustive. Clearly, he had more to say. But being a man who preferred verbal economy to verbose pontificating, he knew he could never say *all*. It is a triumph of his resilient spirit and career that the book was published in his life-time. His sensitivity to the Biafran subject is reflected in the fact that one of the few creative works he wrote in Igbo language was his poem for his friend and marvellous poet, Christopher Okigbo. Achebe gave a most memorable reading of the poem at the Conversations in Africana event referred to earlier in this essay. A major regret of Achebe's passing at 82 on March 22, 2013, is his unfulfilled dream of personally translating his poems and the iconic novel *Things Fall Apart* into Igbo.

Achebe was always the visionary. In a twist of fate, what he said in a tribute to Ikemba Ojukwu could be said of him:

There is a cruel irony in the coincidence between the death of Ikemba Nnewi, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (1933-2011), and a disturbing surge in sectarian violence in Nigeria. Ojukwu's life, career, and abiding commitments were shaped by just such trying circumstances as Nigeria faces today. That his death and funeral are framed by the familiar circumstances that he fought against four decades ago clearly project the significance of his life and the unsolved challenges confronting our dear homeland. A beleaguered nation sorely needs Ikemba's voice at this juncture to caution our feet against treading the path of thunder.

So does it still need Achebe's voice.

Two momentous, albeit unrelated, events, framed Achebe's exit: One was the suicide bombing at a bus terminal in Kano, reminiscent

of the 1966 events that sparked the Biafran war. The other was the 39th annual conference of the African Literature Association (ALA) in Charleston, South Carolina. While the Kano suicide bombing represents the sectarian evil that Achebe pointed out as framing Ojukwu's exit, the ALA conference celebrated African literature which Achebe championed. Such is the exit of great men, especially in the context of traditional Africa where dates were marked by special events. It is not surprising that Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark, two of Achebe's contemporaries, have highlighted the significance of the Kano tragedy in their tribute to their departed compatriot. In their words, "These are forces that arrogantly pride themselves as implacable and brutal enemies of what Chinua and his pen represented, not merely for the African continent, but for humanity." Clark and Soyinka intoned that they "cannot help wondering if the recent insensate massacre of Chinua's people in Kano, only a few days ago, hastened the fatal undermining of that resilient will that had sustained him so many years after his crippling accident." But Clark and Soyinka ended on an optimistic note: "No matter the reality, after the initial shock, and a sense of abandonment, we confidently assert that Chinua lives. His works provide their enduring testimony to the domination of the human spirit over the forces of repression, bigotry, and retrogression."⁴⁰

Certainly so; Achebe lives not only in his enduring works being celebrated universally, he lives in our hearts. Not many writers have the good fortune that a trailblazer like Achebe has enjoyed. He lived a charmed life, cheating death in the noon of his life, and living out the Igbo proverb, *Uwa mgbede ka nma* (the twilight years are sweeter). For Achebe, literature is a celebration. In his eternal transition, we do not mourn him; we celebrate *Ugonabo* – as the close family circle fondly called him – for he was twice an Eagle on the Iroko.

⁴⁰ See "Chinua Achebe's death: we have lost a brother," guardian.co.uk, Friday 22 March 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/22/chinua-achebe-wole-soyinka-jp-clark> (Accessed March 24, 2013).

God so loved the revered writer that he gave him 22 more years after that ghastly auto crash that crippled him. And although he was confined to a wheelchair for mobility, he stood tall in every gathering, often drawing others to bow down to greet him in reverence or to take photographs or get autographs from him as his numerous fans were wont to do at every opportunity.

Comparing himself to Achebe, the great Nelson Mandela declared in his tribute to Achebe on the occasion of his 70th birthday:

I became a lawyer when it was a profession white-ruled South Africa regarded as beyond the capacity of a black. He, by way of teaching and broadcasting, became a writer when literature was regarded by Europeans as beyond the capacity of a black. Both of us, in our differing circumstances within the same context of white domination of our continent, became freedom fighters.⁴¹

And in a nuanced affirmation of the significance of Achebe's work, Mandela declared: "His political activity landed him in periodic exile; mine landed me in prison."

I last saw Professor Achebe on Sunday, December 9, 2012 at a luncheon at his residence in Rhode Island. That day, his house was virtually full in a way that, looking back now, was a valediction of sorts. Some guests from the fourth Chinua Achebe Colloquium on Africa had insisted on visiting him before their departure. I did not realize we were seeing the influential thinker for the last time. I did not recognize that the autographed copy of *There Was a Country* he gave me that day would be his parting gift. As I stare at his autograph every now and then, I appreciate how he continues to live as a moral authority, in my world and in the world of countless other admirers. When I think of other projects inspired and nurtured by the venerable Chinua Achebe—including the Igbo Language dictionary project—I realize it would take a while to harvest these for publication, and further populate his legacy which, as President Barrack Obama

⁴¹ From an unpublished text of Nelson Mandela's goodwill message at Chinua Achebe's 70th birthday celebration in 2000 at Bard College, USA.

notes in his tribute to Achebe, “will endure in the hearts of all whose lives he touched with the everlasting power of his art.”⁴² So that although Ngugi (2013) has rightly proclaimed Achebe as “the single most important figure in the development of modern African literature as writer, editor, and quite simply a human being,” and Gordimer (2013) has identified Achebe’s work as “the founding creation of modern African imaginative literature, the opening act of exploration into African consciousness using traditional modes of expression along with those appropriated from colonial culture, particularly the English language,” it may still be morning yet in the unraveling of the creative genius of this Teacher of Light.

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⁴² See “Achebe, a revolutionary author—Obama” in *The Punch* newspaper online, June 4, 2013 (<http://www.punchng.com/feature/literary-punch-achebe-a-revolutionary-author-obama/> accessed June 4, 2013).

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