

# Talking to Chinua Achebe About His Year

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Last Friday, a few colleagues and I gathered at the Annandale, New York home of Professor Chinua Achebe to interview him on literature and life. Joining me were Sowore Omoyele, Oyiza Adaba, and Joyce Abunaw, a Cameroonian who teaches African literature at the University of Connecticut.



Achebe, Africa's greatest novelist, who is at the very top of the top tier of living writers, is an exciting and rewarding interview subject on any day. But there is a particular reason that Achebe is on every literature-loving person's lips this

year. 2008 happens to be the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's classic of the encounter between Africa and Europe and the tragic dimensions of that clash.

In order to appreciate the scope of Achebe's achievement in this novel, we should consider the following: Things Fall Apart is the all-time most widely read novel by an African author; fifty years into its life, it continues to outsell most just-released novels; it has been translated into more than fifty languages around the world, making it the most translated work by an African author; it is a staple of humanities courses on all the continents; it has made every list of the most important books of the last 100

years; it has also been named one of the most remarkable books ever written; it has spawned whole libraries of theses and dissertations around the world. To commemorate its fifty vibrant years of existence in the republic of letters, celebrations have been lined up in various parts of the world, including Nigeria, Portugal, India, Kenya, Gambia, England, the U.S., Jamaica, France, South Africa, Brazil and Ghana.



In short, the novel has become an essential part of our humanistic heritage. It belongs in that rare company of books that every person with a claim to liberal education is expected

to be acquainted. *Things Fall Apart* has become an integral part of the global literary landscape. So much so that it is possible to stipulate, when we meet an otherwise literate person who has never read it, that such delinquency constitutes a colossal deficit in the person's aesthetic, literary and historical imagination.

The Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) had asked me to interview Achebe, inviting the living legend to reflect on his novel's extraordinary

travels and fortunes, its assured place in canon, and its pervasive influence on African and world literature, literary theory and history. I felt immensely fortunate when Achebe agreed to do the interview, and fixed Friday, February 15, 2008 as the date. I had interviewed Achebe numerous times in the past, beginning in 1983 when I was a rookie reporter at the Concord Group of newspapers. But I had the intuition that this was going to be a particularly special interview for two main reasons.



One reason had to do with the quality of excitement elicited by the golden anniversary of *Things Fall Apart*. A few weeks ago, a Nigerian scholar who teaches in the United States

told me that he had never witnessed anything approaching the scale of interest and depth of attention in a novel's fiftieth birthday as was being lavished on Achebe's first novel. The other issue had to do with Achebe's longstanding role as one of Nigeria's most eloquent voices of conscience. Much as my instruction from ANA was to harvest Achebe's meditations on his oldest, yet timeless, novel, I was not going to forego the opportunity to tease out what the novelist thinks when he thinks about Nigeria. With his nation mired in the morass, it seemed to me that many Nigerians would be interested in his insights.

Achebe's trademark sense of the ironic and his flair for concision were on display during our one-and-a-half hour interview. Part of Achebe's power as a writer and intellectual lies in his ability to speak with disarming simplicity and clarity about the most difficult issues. Like George Orwell, he recognizes that language can be, and is often, used as much to obfuscate as to communicate. His choice is to deploy language in the service of communication, and to communicate ideals and ideas that expand our collective humanity. Having made that choice, Achebe chooses his words with great care. In his presence, the effect is of a magical experience of watching a man as he chewed and tested out each sentence before he permitted it passage.

He talks like a man who eschews linguistic pretentiousness and affectations, a wise man who abhors the

self-indulgent circuitousness that marks, and mars, much of what passes for contemporary intellectual speech. Many years ago, he told me that his image of a true expert is not one who knows a subject so thoroughly that he can befuddle others. Instead, he stated, a true expert should demonstrate mastery by breaking down arcane and puzzling issues in codes that non-experts are able to grasp.

Last Friday, Achebe left no doubt that he remains a stickler for clarity of thought and expression. My first question to him was to ponder his first novel's amazing journeys, its capacity to speak to people across cultural lines. Did he ever expect that this novel was going to become the phenomenal success it is, not just in sales and reach, but also in being able to illuminate for our world the tensions between societies, the existential tussles that lend drama to human history. Achebe responded in a vein that I had never heard him speak before. What emerged in his answer was the impression that the novel is a product both of the author's desire as well as the story's mystical volition. "This was my story," Achebe remarked, then added, "I don't know why the story chose me" to tell it.

There is often an air of wonder, even bemusement, when Achebe speaks about the global power of *Things Fall Apart*. A man whose style revolts against any advertisements for himself, he reports that he had no grounds to expect that the novel would become such a literary

powerhouse. But he never nursed doubts about the innate gravitas and narrative ambition of his story. Many years ago, he told me: "There's no question at all that the story of our encounter with Europe was one of the most important stories of our time."

*Things Fall Apart* is my favorite novel to teach. For me, part of its appeal is the inexhaustibility of its insights. Each time I reread the novel in order to teach it, I find new things to leave me astonished and in awe. Each rereading becomes, in some substantial way, like a first reading. Given this experience, which few other novels have yielded, I am awed that Achebe wrote it when he was in his mid-twenties. If one didn't know the author, one would have guessed that a much older writer, perhaps a fledged novelist in his sixties, composed the novel. When I broached the idea, Achebe took the opportunity to speak about the paradox created by colonialism: that Europe, which trumpeted itself while denigrating Africans, left Achebe—as well as other educated young Africans—with the burden of telling Africa's story. European-style education had displaced Africa's elders; it fell to the young to take up the mantle of telling our narratives and rescuing the continent from cultural degradation and historical denudation.

For Achebe, this challenge of standing up to speak through texts in place of the silenced elders must have come at a steep price. He has seen Nigeria, like much of Africa, stumble from one man-made disaster to another. He has also written

about this tragic history, in fiction, poetry and essays. In his youngest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, he asks: "What must a people do to appease an embittered history?" He invoked that line last week as he contemplated Nigeria. It is a question that takes on greater urgency by the day, and remains largely unanswerable.

Asked about his thoughts on Nigeria, Achebe responded with a passion mediated by disappointment. "I think of Nigeria as home," he said, and then paused momentarily. "It is a frustrating home, sometimes an irritating home, but it is home," he underlined. After another weighty pause, he added: "If I had my way, this interview would be taking place in Nigeria."

It was as subtle, and yet as clear, a statement of the writer's exilic anguish as it is possible to make. Achebe carries the scars of Nigeria on his body, having sustained serious injuries in a 1990 car accident that left him paraplegic. In his wheelchair, Achebe's towering spiritual strength is profoundly evident. He told us about a friend who visited him while he was hospitalized in England shortly after the accident. The visitor wondered aloud why such an unfortunate accident should befall Achebe. Achebe's response to the man was: "Why not me? Do you have another person you would rather put in my place?" He has a too penetrating insight into the tragic essence of human existence to waste time bemoaning his fate, or wallow in self-pity.

When one of us asked Achebe what it would take for him to seriously consider returning permanently to live in Nigeria, he answered that he wants a country whose best doctors don't flee abroad en masse, and a place where one could buy antibiotics without the fear that it was fake. His two anecdotes vivified part of the trouble with Nigeria, to borrow a phrase from the title of his polemical book on his country's travails.

Achebe's magisterial stature as writer, intellectual and conscience point up, and rebuke, Nigeria's largely desultory narrative. From his American address, Achebe continues to radiate moral courage. Three years ago, he boosted Nigerians' spirits by rejecting former President Olusegun Obasanjo's offer of a national honor. His public letter spurning the tainted investiture was a classic of principled repudiation of the crude

excesses of banal power. Achebe wrote to Obasanjo: "For some time now I have watched events in Nigeria with alarm and dismay. I have watched particularly the chaos in my own state of Anambra where a small clique of renegades, openly boasting its connections in high places, seems determined to turn my homeland into a bankrupt and lawless fiefdom. I am appalled by the brazenness of this clique and the silence, if not connivance, of the Presidency." When we brought up the matter, Achebe noted simply that he was in no mood to accept a national honor from the kind of leader that Obasanjo had become.

As we took leave of Achebe, after nearly four hours, we came away with gratitude for the generosity and unassuming presence of this man who tells our stories to the world and who seeks, and speaks, truth—especially to power.





## Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

#### Speaking Engagements

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail ([okey@okeyndibe.com](mailto:okey@okeyndibe.com)) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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