

A perfect, riceless Xmas

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By Okey Ndibe

Earlier this year I drove from my home in central Connecticut to the quiescent country precincts of Annandale-on-Hudson to visit Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, whose novel *Things Fall Apart* is enjoying a cheery 50th anniversary.

Achebe's self-effacing, soft-spoken personality is in ironic contrast with the exuberant celebration that has erupted around his first -- and most widely read and translated -- novel.

I was in Achebe's home to coax him to look back on 50 years of his book's journey. As the author told me several days ago, I was one of perhaps more than a hundred interviewers he'd hosted this year. Even so, I dared tell myself that there was something special about my interview with him. Let me explain.

I had interviewed Achebe several times in the past -- first in 1983, when I was a rookie correspondent for the now defunct African Concord, the last time in 1987, shortly after the publication of his latest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*. That first interview set a mood for my relationship with the author; he saved my career.

I met Achebe by serendipity. It was 1983 and I had just graduated from college. Visiting Ogidi, his hometown, to see my girlfriend at the time, I raved and raved about Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*. The girl listened for a while, a bemused smile creasing her cheeks. Then she said:

"Achebe is my uncle. His house is a short walk away. He happens to be home this weekend. Do you want to visit him?"

Did I ever!

Achebe personified grace. He served us cookies and chilled Coke. He regarded me with penetrating eyes as I gushed about his novels, his short stories, his essays, even reciting favourite lines. I told him I had just got a job with the Concord and would be honoured to interview him. He gave me his telephone number at Nsukka, the university town where he lived and ran the Institute of African Studies.

A week later I flew to Lagos, reported for work and told the weekly magazine's editor that I had Achebe's telephone number -- and a standing commitment that he would give me an interview. Elated, the editor dispatched me on the assignment. It was my first real task as a correspondent.

Achebe and I retreated to his book-lined office at the institute, its air flavoured with the scent of books stretching and heaving. Five minutes into the interview I paused and rewound the tape. The recording sounded fine and our interview continued for another two hours. Afterwards Achebe told me it was one of the most exhaustive interviews he'd ever done.

I took leave of him and, heady with excitement, took a cab to the local bus stop where I paid the fare for a bus headed for Enugu -- the state capital where I had booked a hotel. That evening several of my friends gathered in my hotel room. They asked questions about Achebe, then pleaded that they wanted to hear his voice. Happy to oblige them, I fetched the tape recorder and pressed its play button. We waited, not a word. I put in two other tapes, the same futile result. How was I going to explain this mishap to my editor who had scheduled the interview as a forthcoming cover?

I phoned Achebe in panic. In a desperate tone I pleaded that he let me return the next day for a short retake. "Thirty minutes -- 20 -- would do," I said. I half-expected him to scold me for lack of professional fastidiousness and hang up, leaving me to stew in my distress. Instead he calmly explained that he had commitments for the next day. If I could return the day after, he'd be delighted to grant me another elaborate interview.

Two days later we were back in his office for my second chance. This time I paused every few minutes to check on the equipment. I stretched the interview to an hour-and-a-half before guilt -- mixed with gratitude -- made me stop. It was not as exhaustive as the first outing, nor did it have the spontaneity of our first interview, but it gave me -- and the readers of the magazine -- a prized harvest. My friends got a chance to savour Achebe's voice, with its mix of faint lisps and accentuated locutions.

That interview happened 25 years ago; it was followed by several encounters with Achebe, but it still stands out. I had admired the man from a distance, in awe

of his extraordinary powers as a writer. After he saved my career, I was inspired by his uncommon generosity.

Many years later I came into the debt of another Nigerian writer, this time Wole Soyinka, the 1986 Nobel laureate for literature.

It was October of 1997, Soyinka was in his second tour as a political exile, hounded out of Nigeria by the brutal regime of Sani Abacha, a rustic of a general who favoured dark glasses, was reputed to have an insatiable appetite for spirits, young sexual partners and expensive automobiles. Soyinka had been invited to give a series of talks at five different colleges in what's called the Pioneer Valley area of Massachusetts. I had known him from afar, even though I had interviewed him the year he won the Nobel.

That night he was to speak at Hampshire College in Amherst. I had just finished the first draft of my novel *Arrows of Rain*, inspired in part by Soyinka's prison memoir, which contains the haunting words: "The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny." I wanted to persuade him to read my manuscript. Yet, when I got to the venue, my nerve betrayed me. It seemed a bit selfish to burden a man like him, impossibly busy at the best of times and now wrestling with the pain of exile, with any more demands.

I stood in the packed auditorium and listened to Soyinka's moving talk about the perennial tussle between power and freedom. As soon as he was done, I hastened to the podium to greet him. His eyes lit up. "Okey, you came," he said as we embraced. Then he added: "One of

your professors told me you've written a fascinating manuscript. I'd like to read it." I was amazed.

He asked that I post the manuscript to him. For the next three months, I'd call him, anxious to hear what he thought. Each time he explained that he hadn't had time to look at it, but then assured me that he intended to.

Fast forward to Christmas 1997. My family and I were invited by an American family to spend the day with them, sharing lunch and dinner. There was a lot to eat and drink, but the meals were a disaster as far as I was concerned. There was no rice, no chicken, no goat -- staples of any festivity in Nigeria, but especially at Christmas. As the night wore on, I told my wife that we had to leave. "This is the first Christmas in my life when I've not eaten rice. And chicken." Chicken would be too complicated to make, but not rice. We would run home, I would boil a few grains and would spare myself the trauma of my first riceless Christmas.

As we walked into our house, I noticed the blinking light of the phone's voicemail. Among the messages was one from Soyinka. He had just read my novel and found it "highly evocative".

That was it: I wasn't going to bother with eating my grains of rice after all. Soyinka had saved my Christmas. "Soyinka's message is better than rice," I said to my wife.

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

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