

Chinua Achebe

In the Service of the Arts: In the Service of Culture and the Nation

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May I express my candid appreciation and gratitude to the organizers of Chinua Achebe Memorial Lecture for inviting me to give a brief discussion on the topic: "Chinua Achebe: Art, Culture and the Nation" which the erudite Professor J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada presented. The topic is indeed an ambitious one as it covers all that the late Professor Emeritus Chinua Achebe believed in and lived for. There are three aspects of Professor Nwachukwu-Agbada's lecture: Achebe and the Arts; Achebe and Culture; and Achebe and the Nation.

Before I begin my intervention, let me first answer the question posed by the lecturer at the very beginning of his lecture. He said that he did not know why there is always 'a pall of silence' when a writer dies; whether it was because if people talked about him/her, they would be exposed to sudden death and so on. From my own perspective, there is nothing superstitious about it. It bespeaks a lack of reading culture in Nigeria; pure and simple. People do not generally cultivate the zeal to read novels. Even those in the Humanities find it extremely difficult to read classical literatures or contemporary ones not to talk about those in the Sciences and other disciplines. So, lack of reading culture is a general

problem in Nigeria. People look for shortcuts to everything. Acquisition of knowledge is now secondary.

Achebe and Art

Achebe's status in the scheme of Arts worldwide is best captured in the following well known classical story:

An alien arrived on earth with the mandate to wipe out humanity unless we proffer a justification for our existence. Human beings in one accord offered him a Picasso painting, a Beethoven symphony, a Shakespearean play and an Achebean novel. So, he took them willingly and spared the world.

Art is then that justification for human existence. Art becomes not only the most important and indispensable discipline but also the oldest profession on earth. Take a look at Art in action in Genesis 1 and 2 where the Master Craftsman created human beings. Man is indeed complex, complicated, intricate, and beautiful. No wonder He looked at man and was satisfied.

Professor Nwachukwu-Agbada, in extolling Achebe's notion of art and the artist which he brings out in "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation", reasons that the artist is a historian, a custodian of the lofty ideals of the past, teacher and social crusader. Art which is difficult to define finds its full definition in Achebe and his works. As a historian, Achebe chronicled the Igbo ways of life before, during and after the colonial era in Nigeria which Nwachukwu-Agbada takes in three phases, corresponding to three phases in Achebe's career. As a Custodian, Achebe's novels are archives of Igbo "lofty ideals of the past". As a Teacher,

Achebe taught not only in word, but also or even majorly by example. His exemplary attitude surpassed that of many Nigerians past and present. As a Social Crusader, he had campaigned against corruption in politics and advocated for better life for the masses he identified with. Achebe was indeed Art epitomized.

Art makes life worth living. It is indispensable for life as it answers existential questions about it. In art, we are connected with something we see, read about or even feel which may have huge influence on us. Art is man's conscience. Your conscience is awakened, and if you are in a position of authority, you begin to position or bring yourself to feel for other less privileged people and out of the abundance of caution, you begin to stir your country into new actions for positive change. This is how Art (Literature) works. According to Achebe:

Once you allow yourself to identify with the people in a story, then you might begin to see yourself in that story even if on the surface it's far removed from your situation. One great thing that literature can do – it can make us identify with situations and people far away.

(BrainyQuote)

In other words, literature produces pure and real human beings with conscience. Art is therapeutic because it is corrective. It brings about a change of attitude in the right direction. It can also unite people of opposing cultures in the world aesthetically, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually through exchange of ideas and viewpoints for global unity. In Art, we find a common way of handling life death. Art brings out the emotional part of man which may appear to be latent.

To Achebe himself, “Art is man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him” (BrainyQuote). An artist can transform or foreground any situation. This is how Achebe took the traditions and practices of his people and transformed them into fiction in very remarkable ways. Art is transformational.

An immeasurable contribution of Achebe’s art is his use of the English Language to transform his people’s tradition into masterpieces. This must not be overlooked because he uses English Language imaginatively in *Things Fall Apart* and it has projected the work internationally. In the book, he presents the rich African culture to other cultures of the world. He artistically uses code-mixing by incorporating elements of Igbo words, rhythms, and traditional concepts into his works. Words like ‘egwugwu’, ‘chi’, ‘ogbanje’ and Igbo rhythms like the group response of ‘Umuofia kwenu... Yaa!’ (Chapter 2), the desperate call of the priestess, ‘Agbala do-o-o-o!’ (Chapter 11); and the Igbo concept of ‘ozo’ title-taking and more all add to his artistic use of the English Language in such a way that the context of the text illustrates the concepts clearly to non-Igbos.

Achebe and Culture

I would be doing his lecture injustice if I attempted to summarize Professor Nwachukwu-Agbada’s write-up on the cultural aspect of Achebe. He has given us a gamut of Igbo cultural experiences from Achebe’s point of view from Igbo religion to Igbo politics. He details Achebe’s views on Igbo dualism, humour, cyclic thought and the female image. May I add that Achebe’s works interestingly position Igbo women

in the scheme of things – the gender mainstream. Take for instance the comparison between Okonkwo's relationship with his wives and Obierika's relationship with his in *Things Fall Apart*. Whereas Okonkwo relates with his wives in a matter-of-fact manner, Obierika relates with his own cordially. Achebe's works also bring the Igbo cosmovision and the entire Igbo race to the forefront to the world. If I may summarize the erudite Professor's section of the lecture on Achebe and culture, I would say that Achebe's works are indeed monumental experiences in Igbo culture which in turn go a very long way in portraying Igbo people's behaviour and ways of life. Thank you, our Father of Modern Literature, Professor Chinualamogu Albert Achebe, for making Igbo people proud. Permit me also to say that Achebe extensively depicts elements of Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart* in particular. This is the novel that best shows Igbo culture and also the novel that projects Achebe to the world. It has been translated into more than fifty languages thereby making Achebe the most translated African author of all time.

In the course of extolling Igbo culture, Achebe is not oblivious of the negative aspects of the same culture. The novel is an objective representation of Igbo tradition and practices. The Igbo metaphysics leads one to believe that masquerades are elements of the supernatural, religious and magical possessions (Jones 199 qtd in Nwachukwu-Agbada's paper). But the unmasking of the 'egwugwu' masquerade by an 'Osu' to reveal the human being behind the masquerade is a cutting remark or a barb on the supernaturalness of masquerades in Igbo culture. An 'Osu' is an outcast, an ostracized person in Igboland. To make him unmask the

revered and feared 'egwugwu' masquerade is a lesson in disguise. An 'Osu' is an anathema in Igboland. An excommunicated person defiling the revered 'egwugwu' masquerade has a far-reaching implication. It goes a long way in not only confirming Achebe's objectivity in his story but also in establishing the fact that Igbo culture is not without its flaws.

Also, the 'Ozo' title taking in Igbo culture has been shown in its positive and negative sides in *Things Fall Apart*. The negative portrayal comes forth in the dialogue between Okonkwo and Obierika about the significance of the 'Ozo' title:

- Sometimes I wish I had not taken the 'Ozo' title... In many other clans, a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree (Obierika).
- In those other clans you speak of, 'Ozo' is so low that every beggar takes it (Okonkwo).
- In Abame and Aninta the title is worth less than two cowries... (Obierika) (48).

This means that 'Ozo' title is regarded as both prestigious and worthless in the same Igboland depending on the clan of the Igbo concerned.

The ambivalence towards the 'Ozo' title, the unmasking of the masquerade and many other instances show that there was no idyllic or utopian Igbo custom even before the arrival of the colonial masters. Achebe himself said he wanted to create his society and his people "in their fullness" without idealizing them. So, he never presented Igbo culture as faultless.

Achebe and the Nation

Achebe's works transcend the Igbo culture. Nelson Mandela, the late former South African President, described Professor Achebe as "a writer in whose company the prison walls fell down" (Labaran) because his works probably galvanized his struggle to remove the apartheid South African regime. We are yet to see any Nigerian President who is inspired in the same vein to end corruption in this country. Achebe's two socio-political treaties: *The Trouble with Nigeria* and *There was a Country: A personal History of Biafra* are more than enough to stir apathetic politicians and the masses to move toward ending or curbing corruption and its attendant consequences in Nigeria. These works challenge politicians in this country to reexamine themselves. To Achebe, "Nigeria is a country that does not work – schools, universities, roads, hospitals, water, the economy, security, life" (and I add 'electricity') (qtd in Ezukanma): none of these infrastructural amenities taken for granted in modern states works in Nigeria. Achebe rejected two national awards because he did not want to "hobnob with a government notorious for its corruption, ineptitude and the economic strangulation of the masses" (Ezukanma 1). These rejections find their meanings in one of Achebe's timeless quotes: "one of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised" (qtd in Emuleomo). Can there be a better illustration of integrity? How many Nigerians or Africans can reject such juicy awards? These actions are unparalleled in Nigeria if not in African. He really taught by example. This is what he said that art should do to us – to move us to question the political status quo of social imbalances, Achebe's works indeed have

such transformative powers. In Achebe's view, "Nigeria is what it is because its leader are not what they should be" (BrainyQuote 1). "A functioning, robust democracy requires a healthy educated, participating followership, and an educated, morally grounded leadership" (BrainyQuote 1). But Achebe did not mince words in telling us that Nigerians are good people: "My relationship with my people is very good. My relationship with the rulers has always been problematic" (BrainyQuote 2). This shows that Achebe never had any personal axe to grind with any person. What he could not stand was the insensitivity of a government.

It can no longer be concealed that Nigeria is a very corrupt country. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron's recent description of Nigeria as "fantastically corrupt" serves as an eye-popping proof of Achebe's thesis. Literature no doubt produces pure men and women with conscience and who are willing to positively change the courses of their countries. But how many Nigerian rulers read such literatures? Nigeria, unfortunately, is bedevilled by many insensitive people who are busy amassing what they can of the country's wealth for themselves. Ironically, we are busy honouring these people who are supposed to be put in prison for corruption. There is so much poverty in Nigeria that God can only appear to the poor masses in the form of 'garri'. These are still the people that hail and eulogize the corrupt politicians. This is the level of degeneration and poverty in the country now. According to Achebe "the only thing we have learnt from experience is that we learn nothing from experience" (BrainyQuote 2). This reminds me of Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* where man keeps searching for meaning in an unintelligible nation.

One would wish that our leaders would see themselves in some of Achebe's characters and change for the good of the people they rule.

It would interest us to know that many leaders of developed countries continually quote and remember the literary works of their ancient poets; mortalize their abodes; and erect their statues in conspicuous places all over their countries for the new generations and visitors to see and admire. What do we do here in Nigeria? Hardly does a typical child in the primary or secondary school know about Achebe. S/he may never have seen Achebe's picture or statue. How will such a child be motivated to read Achebe's works? What prevents our government from erecting Achebe's and other notable artists' statues in public places to inspire people to want to know more about them? Charity, they say, begins at home. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka organizes a biennial public lecture in honour of Chinua Achebe. This is a step in the right direction. It would be an amazing and astounding gesture to show visitors where Achebe lived and worked on campus. A statue of Achebe should be erected on campus and in the state capital. We do not have many of such people in a generation. The house he lived in and the office he used are top destinations people all over the world would like to come and see.

Achebe's works were not even officially displayed for visitors to see during this biennial lecture. You see history brought to life when you visit Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birth place. You walk in his footsteps and explore the house where he was born and grew up. You see many memorabilia including a gaint wallbook that stretches

over nine meters where his thirty-eight (38) plays are displayed in a timeline. University of Nigeria should take a clue from these examples.

Conclusion

What Achebe revealed about Art, Culture and the Nation are thought-provoking. His literary works not only reveal the Igbo cosmivision to the world but also show that culture has its own flaws which Achebe did not occlude. That also endeared him to the world. We cannot underestimate the value Achebe projected of Igbo culture in particular and African culture in general. Thank you our Father of African Literature. Rest in Peace. He had continually shown why Nigeria should change for good. He lived by example when he rejected the national awards. That was a noble gesture that continues to speak a lot about him. Let me end by saying that our leaders should re-examine themselves because when an old person speaks, it is not because of the sweetness of words in his mouth, it is because he sees something which others do not see.

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