Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture

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I have never met Chinua Achebe in person, but every time I read his fiction, his essays, or critical works, I feel as if I have known him for most of my life. For if the act of reading and re-reading establishes networks of connections between readers, writers, and context, and if texts are indeed crucial to the modes of knowledge we come to develop about subjects and objects and the images we associate with certain localities and institutions, then I can say without equivocation that I have known Achebe since I was thirteen years old. I can still vividly recall the day when, in my first or second year of secondary school, I encountered *Things Fall Apart.* It was in the early 1970s. We had a young English teacher who, although a recent graduate of Makerere University College, which was still the bastion of Englishness in East Africa, decided to carry out a literary experiment that was to change the lives of many of us: instead of offering the normal literary fare for junior secondary school English, which in those days consisted of a good dose of abridged Robert Louis Stevenson novels, Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare,* and Barbara Kimenye's popular readers, we were going to read *Things Fall Apart* over a period of two weeks. We would read a chapter of the novel every day, aloud in class, until we got to the end. Once I had started reading *Things Fall Apart,* however, I could not cope with the chapter a day policy. I read the whole novel over one afternoon and it is not an exaggeration to say that my life was never to be the same again. For reading *Things Fall Apart* brought me to the sudden realization that fiction was not merely about a set of texts which one studied for the Cambridge Overseas exam which, for my generation, had been renamed the East African Certificate of Education; on the contrary, literature was about real and familiar worlds, of culture and human experience, of politics and economics, now re-routed through a language and structure that seemed at odds with the history or geography books we were reading at the time.

At the center of the transformation engendered by my reading of Achebe's first novel was nothing less than the figure of the yam. Yes: the figure of the yam had been bothering me even before I read *Things Fall Apart.* As (post)colonial subjects of my generation may recall, the yam had been making its way into the standard geography books in anglophone Africa since the modernization of the curriculum in the late 1950s, ostensibly in anticipation of independence. In the 1960s and the early 1970s, the major geography primers were the *Geography for Africa* series printed by Oxford University Press and written by a certain McBain, graduate of Oxon or Cantab (I forget which); these works were primarily concerned with mapping the movement, or nonmovement, of the African from primitive production to modernization. Somehow, the yam seemed to occupy a central position in this narrative of the African's modernization. In

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McBain's *Geography for Africa* for standard four, for example, young minds were informed that the yam was essential to agricultural production among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, and that it had, together with palm oil, been a major part of the regional economy before the discovery of coal at Enugu. In those days it made sense to see African life as the movement from primitive (agricultural) practices to industrial production, and we were thus not interested in questioning the logic of this narrative of modernity; still, for those of us growing up in the highlands of East Africa, the yam was as alien as the proverbial apple that opened all English readers. Having never seen a yam in our lives, we were hard pressed to understand its value. Indeed, it is now clear to me, in retrospect, that McBain of Oxon/Cantab did not explain the notion of commodity value well enough for us to overcome the distance between Nairobi and Enugu. But in reading *Things Fall Apart,* everything became clear: the yam was important to Igbo culture, not because of what we were later to learn to call use-value, this time at the University of Nairobi, but because of its location at the nexus of a symbolic economy in which material wealth was connected to spirituality and ideology and desire. The novel was teaching us a fundamental lesson that old McBain could never comprehend. *Things Fall Apart* provided us with a different kind of education.

I begin these reflections on the significance of Chinua Achebe to the institution of African literature and culture by noting the transformative power of *Things Fall Apart* for two reasons. The first one is to call attention to an interesting phenomenon that I have noticed in conversations with many Africans of my generation, both inside and outside academia, on the role of literature in the making of African subjects. I have noticed that when the debate turns to questions of culture, of literature, and of the destiny of Africa, subjects that concern many of us as we get older and the problems of the continent seem to multiply with our aging, we seem to clamor for those Pan-African moments that defined our identities as we came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. These debates and questions crystallize around many of the tragic and triumphant events that stand in our memories—the Mexico City Olympics or the Civil War in Nigeria, for example—but while these events generate disagreement, the transformative nature of *Things Fall Apart* is undisputed. Like one of these momentous events that one is bound to remember, like where one was when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, many of us recall where we were when we first read Achebe's first novel. But, of course, such acts of recall only make sense for a generation that has come to feel, rightly or wrongly, that it shared a common cultural project. Whatever questions we may now have about this project (was the 1960s the golden age of African independence or does it appear to be so only through the prism of bourgeois nostalgia and against the background of postcolonial failure?), there is consensus that *Things Fall Apart* was important for the marking and making of that exciting first decade of decolonization. There also seems to be consensus that the production of the novel, as well as its reading and (re)reading, and its circulation within the institutions of education, came to define who

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we were, where we were, and as Achebe himself would say, where the rain began to beat us.

My second point, however, is that the association of a text such as *Things Fall Apart* with a certain generational project, or even a foundational moment of literary history, also marks the gap between the text and those readers removed from its moment of irruption into the world; those are the readers who are bound to be baffled by the claims to monumentality adduced to the novel itself. Scholars and readers of my generation, people who often take the monumentality of Achebe's work for granted, are constantly frustrated when their young students seem unable to comprehend the historic nature of his intervention in the field of African literature, which was, in the 1950s, in state of flux, and in my judgment, crisis. I am often taken to task for having claimed, or rather repeated the claim, that Achebe was the person who invented African literature. From the perspective of literary history, as I argued in *Reading Chinua Achebe* (London: Currey; Portsmouth: Heinemann; Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1991), Achebe had important precursors on the African scene and the more I reread the works of such figures as René Maran, Amos Tutuola, Paul Hazoumé, and Sol Plaatje, the more I am convinced of their significance in the foundation of an African tradition of letters. Still, none of these writers had the effect Achebe had on the establishment and reconfiguration of an African literary tradition; none of them were able to enter and interrupt the institutions of exegesis and education the same way he did; none were able to establish the terms by which African literature was produced, circulated, and interpreted. So the question that needs to be addressed in any tribute to Achebe is not why he was the person who invented African literature as an institutional practice, but what exactly accounted for the foundational and transformative character of his works, not to mention its monumentality. Why must *Things Fall Apart* always occupy the inaugural moment of African literary history?

Perhaps this is the place to confess that, from the perspective of a literary critic rather than a common reader, I came to discover the significance of Achebe's novels in the shaping of African literature through a negative example. Sometime in the late 1970s, as an apprentice editor at the Nairobi office of Heinemann Educational Books, I was asked by my senior colleagues, Henry Chakava and Laban Erapu, to review a manuscript by a certain Dambudzo Marechera and, specifically, to address the concerns of the "London Office," whose managers were not sure that *The House of Hunger* could be published and marketed as African literature. I did not have to ask what exactly was construed to be African literature. It was assumed that it was something akin to Achebe's novels, especially *Things Fall Apart,* and this seemed to exclude many forms of experimental writing. My first thought was to react against this tendency to equate African literature with Achebe's works, a tendency that had produced what I felt were many poor imitators in the Heinemann African Writers Series, books about village life and the crisis of change whose titles we no longer need to mention. My first impulse was to read Marechera's manuscript as

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an attempt to break out of what I then thought was an ill-advised over-determination of the series by its first—and most important—writer.

But as soon as I started reading *The House of Hunger,* I realized that the question of overdetermination was more complicated than I initially thought. Marechera's "avant-garde" fiction could not simply be juxtaposed against Achebe's works; on the contrary, it existed in a productive relation to it, so much so that one could not argue for the newness of the title story or novella ("The House of Hunger") without invoking its relationship with Achebe's project. Even a cursory reading of Marechera's fiction indicated that his protagonists had been reading Achebe and other African writers; these African writers were important tools in their struggle against the culture of colonialism in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. What was even more remarkable about Marechera's subjects was the fact that they took the existence of this African literature for granted and considered it inseparable from the idea of an African identity and a Pan-African culture. Like many Africans of my generation, Marechera's characters paid homage to African literature by taking it for granted as something that didn't need to be rationalized or justified; more importantly they were leading their lives according to the dictates of a Pan-African, rather than, or in addition to, the colonial, library. If I were writing that review of Marechera's manuscript today, I would say that the soon to be gadfly of African letters was important to the tradition not because he was writing a different fiction than Achebe, but because he had taken Achebe's fictional world as an integral part of what it meant to be African. Achebe's novels had become an essential referent for the African cultural text.

However, when I said that Achebe had invented African literature, I was thinking about something more than the existence of his novels as the Ur-texts of our literary tradition; what I had in mind then was the tremendous influence his works have had on the institutions of pedagogy and interpretation and the role his fictions have come to play in the making and unmaking of African worlds. Like most émigré African intellectuals, I am ambivalent about the institutionalization of *Things Fall Apart* and the wisdom of using it as supplement for African culture or the authorized point of entry into Igbo, Nigerian, or African landscapes. Within Africa, itself, I have sometimes wondered why the institutions of power have been so keen to place Achebe at the center of the curriculum. I am reminded of an episode that took place in Kenya sometime in the 1980s when the state, in its eagerness to isolate Ngugi wa Thiong'o whom it then considered to be the single most threat to its cultural hegemony, sought to return to a colonial literary curriculum, one in which Shakespeare would once again occupy a place of honor. The Kenyan state was eager to purge the curriculum of radical writers, I am told, but still the president and the then minister of higher education wanted Achebe retained because, in spite of their hankering for the colonial days, they wanted students to have a dignified sense of African culture. Ironically, when he was detained at the end of 1977, Ngugi was in the middle of teaching a course focused on Achebe's work as a mirror of the transformation of African history from the precolonial past to the neocolonial present. If the Kenyan state associated

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Achebe's fiction with the idea of a dignified African culture, its radical opponent read the same fiction as a critique of decolonization.

Given the appeal he has had for different kinds of readers and factions, the institutionalization of Achebe raises some important questions: what is it about his novels that enabled them to play their unprecedented role as the mediators of the African experience and the depository of a certain idea of Africa? Why is it that when the term African culture is mentioned, Achebe's works almost immediately come to mind? Since this is a tribute to Achebe, I will try to answer these questions by making another extravagant claim: Achebe is the person who invented African culture as it is now circulated within the institutions of interpretation. I can already hear the rattling of theoretical counterarguments and the marshaling of other equally powerful forces in the Pan-African library. But I want to support my claim by making a pragmatic rather than a theoretical or historical argument: I want to insist that Achebe's intervention in the already existing colonial and Pan-African libraries transformed the idea of Africa and that his project has indeed valorized the idea of culture in the thinking of African worlds. The argument can be made that the valorization of culture as the medium of thinking the African was already underway when Achebe started writing his novels. After all, is there a more profound valorization of culture than the one we encounter in Senghor's Negritude? Perhaps not. But for reasons that are too complicated to discuss here, the valorization of culture in Senghor's work—and indeed the writings of early Pan-Africanists—was so closely associated with European ideas, or sought to reconcile the African to the dominant European discourse about race and culture, that they could not seriously be invoked in radical gestures of dissociation from European ideas about Africa. I will not be audacious enough to claim that Achebe's work is not indebted to European ideas of Africa or to the culture of colonialism (they carry powerful signs of these entities); but I think the claim can be made that these works have been read—or at least render themselves to being read—as counterpoints to the colonial library.

A brief context can help clarify the argument I am trying to make here: we have now come to associate the idea of an African culture with the whole discourse of decolonization that we forget, too often perhaps, that there was a time when the narrative of African freedom was predicated on the negation of what we have come to call tradition. This negation is the fulcrum in key texts of Pan-Africanism for most of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The Pan-African elite might have celebrated the greatness of African cultures, but as even a cursory reading of their sourcebooks will show, their celebration of "classical" Africa was a flight from the barbarism associated with the "tribal," those whom Achebe's parents would have called the people of darkness. Up until the 1950s, the education of Africans was predicated on their relocation from the darkness associated with the "tribal" to the sweetness and light of colonial institutions. When African culture entered literary texts, it did so either as European idea of Africa, or as a sign of lack. *Things Fall Apart* is as anxious about its colonial context as other texts from this period; at the same time, however, it seems

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to exist in excess of this context; for a novel written within colonialism, it seems confident about its ability to represent its African background as it is of its power to manage the colonial anxieties that generated it in the first place. I would argue, then, that this confidence is precisely what enabled Achebe to shift the idea of Africa from romance and nostalgia, from European primitivism, and from a rhetoric of lack, to an affirmative culture. It is in this sense that Achebe can be said to have invented, or reinvented, the idea of African culture.

The Autumn of the Literary Patriarch: Chinua Achebe and the Politics of Remembering

Adebayo Williams

For any notable writer and cultural icon, the autumn of career, or "the doyen's December," is an acute and memorable milepost. It is the last bend of the great river. There are final obligations to be met, ancient feuds and awkward accounts to be settled, and the equivalent of a literary will to be written for generations to follow. The anxieties of influence long settled, it is the anxieties of being influential that remain to be settled. Where such a writer is also the crystallizing exemplar of a paradigm shift in literature—postcolonial literature for that matter—the anxieties are bound to be particularly poignant.

Arguably Africa's most influential and most admired writer of the postcolonial epoch, Chinua Achebe is also one of its most retreating and enigmatic. In him, natural habits of dignified reserve and poised restraint have matured in old age into a gnomic, sage-like reticence. Achebe is like a traditional African deity, all-knowing, all-seeing, but enveloped in a forbidding wall of silence. Not for him the coterie of devotees, the tribe of squabbling adulators, or the swarming literary lunchers. Instead, the grand old man of Nigerian—and African—letters has cultivated his own wise, Olympian counsel, and his rich career is distinguished by its rectitude and exemplary decorum. In an irony that would not be out of place in his own exactingly nuanced fictional labors, Achebe's fine manners, his courtesy, and infinite politeness remind one of an English gentleman rather than a long-distance cultural warrior from Africa.

A calm and contemplative character with the proverbial memory of an elephant, it is only the extremely foolhardy that will be tempted to confuse Achebe's natural reserve and equanimity with political timidity or moral cowardice. As many of his compatriots and the world at large would remember, Achebe can be outspoken and forthright to the point of political incorrectness; his natural aversion for cant and hypocrisy may lead in the direction of a radical contempt for established political norms. In

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