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## After Empire

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In a myth told by the Igbo people of Nigeria, men once decided to send a messenger to ask Chuku, the supreme god, if the dead could be permitted to come back to life. As their messenger, they chose a dog. But the dog delayed, and a toad, which had been eavesdropping, reached Chuku first. Wanting to punish man, the toad reversed the request, and told Chuku that after death men did not want to return to the world. The god said that he would do as they wished, and when the dog arrived with the true message he refused to change his mind. Thus, men may be born again, but only in a different form.

The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe recounts this myth, which exists in hundreds of versions throughout Africa, in one of his essays. Sometimes, Achebe writes, the messenger is a chameleon, a lizard, or another animal; sometimes the message is altered accidentally rather than maliciously. But the structure remains the same: men ask for immortality and the god is willing to grant it, but something goes wrong and the gift is lost forever. "It is as though the ancestors who made language and knew from what bestiality its use rescued them are saying to us: Beware of interfering with its purpose!" Achebe writes. "For when language is seriously interfered with, when it is disjoined from truth . . . horrors can descend again on mankind."

The myth holds another lesson as well--one that has been fundamental to the career of Achebe, who has been called "the patriarch of the African novel." There is danger in relying on someone else to speak for you: you can trust that your message will be communicated accurately only if you speak with your own voice. With his masterpiece, "Things Fall Apart," one of the first works of fiction to present African village life from an African perspective, Achebe began the literary reclamation of his country's history from generations of colonial writers. Published fifty years ago--a new edition has just appeared, from Anchor (\$10.95)--it has been translated into fifty languages and has sold more than ten million copies.

In the course of a writing life that has included five novels, collections of short stories and poetry, and numerous essays and lectures, Achebe has consistently argued for the right of Africans to tell their own story in their own way, and has attacked the representations of European writers. But he also did not reject European influence entirely, choosing to write not in his native Igbo but in English, a language that, as he once said, "history has forced down our throat." In a country with several major languages and more than five hundred smaller ones, establishing a lingua franca was a practical and political necessity. For Achebe, it was also an artistic necessity--a way to give expression to the clash of civilizations that is his enduring theme.

Achebe was born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe in 1930, in the region of southeastern Nigeria known as Igboland. (He dropped his first name, a "tribute to Victorian England," in college.) Ezenwa-Ohaeto, the author of the first comprehensive biography of Achebe, writes that the young Chinua was raised at a cultural "crossroads": his parents were converts to Christianity, but other relatives practiced the traditional Igbo faith, in which people worship a panoply of gods, and are believed to have their own personal guiding spirit, called a chi. Achebe was fascinated by the "heathen" religion of his neighbors. "The distance becomes not a separation but a bringing together, like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully," he later observed.

At home, the family spoke Igbo (sometimes also spelled Ibo), but Achebe began to learn English in school at the age of about eight, and he soon won admission to a colonial-run boarding school. Since the students came from different regions, they had to "put away their different mother tongues and communicate in the language of their colonizers," Achebe writes. There he had his first exposure to colonialist classics such as

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"Prester John," John Buchan's novel about a British adventurer in South Africa, which contains the famous line "That is the difference between white and black, the gift of responsibility." Achebe, in an essay called "African Literature as Restoration of Celebration," has written, "I did not see myself as an African to begin with. . . . The white man was good and reasonable and intelligent and courageous. The savages arrayed against him were sinister and stupid or, at the most, cunning. I hated their guts."

At University College, Ibadan, Achebe encountered the novel "Mister Johnson," by the Anglo-Irish writer Joyce Cary, who had spent time as a colonial officer in Nigeria. The book was lauded by Time as "the best novel ever written about Africa." But Achebe, as he grew older, no longer identified with the imperialists; he was appalled by Cary's depiction of his homeland and its people. In Cary's portrait, the "jealous savages . . . live like mice or rats in a palace floor"; dancers are "grinning, shrieking, scowling, or with faces which seemed entirely dislocated, senseless and unhuman, like twisted bags of lard." It was the image of blacks as "unhuman," a standard trope of colonial literature, that Achebe recognized as particularly dangerous. "It began to dawn on me that although fiction was undoubtedly fictitious it could also be true or false, not with the truth or falsehood of a news item but as to its disinterestedness, its intention, its integrity," he wrote later. This belief in fiction's moral power became integral to his vision for African literature.

"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond." From the first line of "Things Fall Apart"--Achebe's first novel--we are in unfamiliar territory. Who is this Okonkwo whom everybody knows? Where are these nine villages? Achebe began to write "Things Fall Apart" during the mid-fifties, when he moved to Lagos to join the Nigerian Broadcasting Service. In 1958, when he submitted the manuscript to the publisher William Heinemann, no one knew what to make of it. Alan Hill, a director of the firm, recalled the initial reaction: "Would anyone possibly buy a novel by an African? There are no precedents." That was not entirely accurate--the Nigerian writers Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi had published novels earlier in the decade. But the novel as an African form was still very young, and "Things Fall Apart" represented a new approach, showing the collision of old and new ways of life to devastating effect.

Set in a fictional group of Igbo villages called Umuofia sometime around the beginning of the twentieth century, "Things Fall Apart" begins with an episodic, almost dreamlike chronicle of village life through the family of Okonkwo. A boy named Ikemefuna has just come from outside Umuofia to live with them, and soon becomes like a brother to Okonkwo's son Nwoye. (Ikemefuna's father had killed a woman from Umuofia, and the villagers agreed to accept a virgin and a young man as compensation.) Over the next three years, the story follows Okonkwo's family through harvest seasons, religious festivals, and domestic disputes. The language is rich with metaphors drawn from the villagers' experience: Ikemefuna "grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life." The dialogue, too, is aphoristic and allusive. "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten," the narrator explains. (As the reader has already seen, palm oil is used to flavor yams, the villagers' staple food.)

Despite the pastoral setting, there is nothing idyllic about this portrayal of village life. If the yam harvest is bad, the villagers go hungry. Babies are not expected to live to adulthood. (Only after the age of six is a child said to have "come to stay.") Some customs are cruel: newborn twins, thought to be inhabited by evil spirits, are "thrown away" in the bush. The Igbo are not presented as a museum exhibit--if their behavior is not always familiar, their emotions are. In a pivotal scene, a group of men, including Okonkwo, lead Ikemefuna out of the village after the local oracle determines that he must be killed. The boy thinks that he is at last returning home, and he worries that his mother will not be there to greet him. To calm himself, he resorts to a childhood game:

He sang [a song] in his mind, and walked to its beat. If the song ended on his right foot, his mother was alive. If it ended on his left, she was dead. No, not dead, but ill. It ended on the right. She was alive and well. He sang the song again, and it ended on the left. But the second time did not count. The first voice gets to Chukwu, or God's house. That was a favorite saying of children.

Tradition holds the people together, but it also drives them apart. After Nwoye finds out that his father killed Ikemefuna, "something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow." When the first missionaries arrive, those who have suffered most under the village culture are the first to join the church. To Okonkwo's dismay, Nwoye is among them. The missionaries, though ignorant of local customs, are not all bad: one in particular treats the villagers with respect. But others show little interest in their way of life. "Does the white man understand our custom about land?" Okonkwo asks a friend in puzzlement. "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" the other man responds. In the book's final chapter, the colonizer's voice takes over; the silence that surrounds it speaks for itself.

Western reviewers praised Achebe's detailed portrayal of Igbo life, but they said little about the book's literary qualities. The New York Times repeatedly misspelled Okonkwo's name and lamented the

disappearance of "primitive society." The Listener complimented Achebe's "clear and meaty style free of the dandyism often affected by Negro authors." Others were openly hostile. "How would novelist Achebe like to go back to the mindless times of his grandfather instead of holding the modern job he has in broadcasting in Lagos?" the British journalist Honor Tracy asked. Reviewing Achebe's third novel, "Arrow of God" (1964), which forms a thematic trilogy with "Things Fall Apart" and its successor, "No Longer at Ease" (1960), another critic disparaged the book's language as "folk-patter."

This was a grotesque misreading. In a 1965 essay titled "The African Writer and the English Language," Achebe explains that he had no desire to write English in the manner of a native speaker. Rather, an African writer "should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience." To demonstrate, he quotes several lines from "Arrow of God." Ezeulu, the village's chief priest, is curious to find out about the activities of the new missionaries in the village:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow.

Achebe then rewrites the passage, preserving its content but stripping its style:

I am sending you as my representative among these people--just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight.

By deploying stock English phrases in unfamiliar ways, Achebe expresses his characters' estrangement from that language. The phrases that Ezeulu uses--"be my eyes," "bring home my share"--have no exact equivalents in Achebe's "translation." And how great the gap between "my spirit tells me" and "I have a hunch"! In the same essay, Achebe writes that carrying the full weight of African experience requires "a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings." Or, as he later put it, "Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it."

Achebe's views on English were not yet widely accepted. At a conference on African literature held in Uganda in 1962, attended by emerging figures such as the Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka and the Kenyan novelist James Ngugi, the writers tried and failed to define "African literature," unable to decide whether it should be characterized by the nationalities of the writers or by its subject matter. Afterward, the critic Obi Wali published an article claiming that African literature had come to a "dead end," which could be reopened only when "these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that true African literature must be written in African languages." Ngugi came to agree: he wrote four novels in English, but in the nineteen-seventies he adopted his Gikuyu name of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and vowed to write only in Gikuyu, his native language, viewing English as a means of "spiritual subjugation."

At the conference, Achebe read the manuscript of Ngugi's first novel, "Weep Not, Child," which he recommended to Heinemann for publication. The publisher soon asked him to sign on as general editor of its African Writers Series, a post he held, without pay, for ten years. Among the writers whose novels were published during his tenure were Flora Nwapa, John Munonye, and Ayi Kwei Armah--all of whom became important figures in the emerging African literature. Heinemann's Alan Hill later said that the "fantastic sales" of Achebe's books had supported the series. But the appeal of English was not purely commercial. A great novel, Achebe later argued, "alters the situation in the world." Igbo, Gikuyu, or Fante could not claim a global influence; English could.

Political imperatives were not hypothetical in Nigeria, which, having achieved independence in 1960, entered a prolonged period of upheaval. In 1967, following two coups that had led to genocidal violence against the Igbo, Igboland declared independence as the Republic of Biafra. Achebe himself became a target of the violence: his novel "A Man of the People" (1966), a political satire, had forecast the coup so accurately that some believed him to have been in on the plot. He devoted himself fully to the Biafran cause. For a time, he stopped writing fiction, taking up poetry--"something short, intense, more in keeping with my mood." Achebe travelled to London to promote awareness of the war, and in 1969 he helped write the official declaration of the "Principles of the Biafran Revolution."

But the fledgling nation starved, its roads and ports blockaded by the British-backed Nigerian Army. By the time Biafra was finally forced to surrender, in 1970, the number of Igbo dead was estimated at between one million and three million. At the height of the famine, Conor Cruise O'Brien reported in *The New York Review of Books*, five thousand to six thousand people--"mainly children"--died each day. The sufferers could be

recognized by the distinctive signs of protein deficiency, known as kwashiorkor: bloated bellies, pale skin, and reddish hair. Achebe's poem "A Mother in a Refugee Camp" describes a woman's efforts to care for her child:

She took from their bundle of possessions, A broken comb and combed , The rust-colored hair left on his skull, And then--humming in her eyes--began carefully to part it., In their former life this was perhaps , A little daily act of no consequence, Before his breakfast and school; now she did it, Like putting flowers on a tiny grave.

The heartbreak of Biafra shook the foundations of Nigerian society and led to decades of political turmoil. Achebe took the opportunity to distance himself temporarily, spending part of the early nineteen-seventies teaching in the United States. During these years, as the independence era's potential for brutality became clear, he set out to correct the colonial record with even greater vigor. In essays and lectures, he railed against what he called "colonialist criticism"--the conscious or unconscious dehumanization of African characters, the vision of the African writer as an "unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day," the assumption that economic underdevelopment corresponds to a lack of intellectual sophistication ("Show me a people's plumbing, you say, and I can tell you their art"). He was infuriated to find how widespread these attitudes remained. One student, learning that Achebe taught African literature, remarked casually that "he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff."

Achebe recounts this anecdote in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' " (1977). Examining Conrad's descriptions of the "savages," Achebe shows that the novel, far from subverting imperialist constructions, falls victim to them. Marlow, the story's narrator, describes the Africans as "not inhuman," and continues, "Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman." And yet the blacks in the novel are nameless and faceless, their language barely more than grunts; they are assumed to be cannibals. The only explanation for this, Achebe concludes, is "obvious racism." Many have responded that Achebe oversimplifies Conrad's narrative: "Heart of Darkness" is a story within a story, told in the highly unreliable voice of Marlow, and the novel is, to say the least, ambivalent about imperialism. The writer Caryl Phillips has asked, "Is it not ridiculous to demand of Conrad that he imagine an African humanity that is totally out of line with both the times in which he was living and the larger purpose of his novel?" But, even if Conrad's methods can be justified, the significance of Achebe's essay was that justification now became necessary: he made the ugliness latent in Conrad's vision impossible to ignore.

In contrast to European modernism, with its embrace of "art for art's sake" (a concept that Achebe, with characteristic bluntness, once called "just another piece of deodorized dog shit"), Achebe has always advocated a socially and politically motivated literature. Since literature was complicit in colonialism, he says, let it also work to exorcise the ghosts of colonialism. "Literature is not a luxury for us. It is a life and death affair because we are fashioning a new man," he declared in a 1980 interview. His most recent novel, "Anthills of the Savannah" (1987), functions clearly in this mold, following a group of friends who serve in the government of the West African country of Kangan, obviously a stand-in for Nigeria. Sam, who took power in a coup, is steering the nation rapidly toward dictatorship. When Chris, the minister of information, refuses to take Sam's side against Ikem, the editor of the government-controlled newspaper, the full wrath of the government turns against both of them. The book does not match the artistic achievement of "Things Fall Apart" or "Arrow of God," but it gets to the heart of the corruption and the idealism of African politics.

Achebe insists that in its form and content the African novel must be an indigenous creation. This stance has led him to criticize other writers whom he regards as insufficiently politically committed, particularly Ayi Kwei Armah, whose novel "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" (1968) presents a dire vision of postcolonial Ghana. The novel begins with the image of a man sleeping on a bus with his eyes open. Streets and buildings are caked with garbage, phlegm, and excrement. Beneath the filthy surfaces, structures are rotten to the core. Armah's novel has been acclaimed as a vivid rendering of disillusionment with the country's new politics under Kwame Nkrumah. But Achebe finds Armah's "alienated stance" no better than Joyce Cary's, and particularly objects to Armah's existentialism, which he calls a "foreign metaphor" for the sickness of Ghana. Even worse, Armah has said that he is "not an African writer but just a writer," which Achebe calls "a statement of defeat."

Is it too utopian to imagine that the African novel could exist simply as a novel, absolved of its social and pedagogical mission? Achebe has been fiercely critical of those who search for "universality" in African fiction, arguing that such a standard is never applied to Western fiction. But there is something reductive about Achebe's insistence on defining writers by their ethnicity. To say that a work of literature transcends national boundaries is not to deny its moral or political value.

In 1990, Achebe was paralyzed after a serious car accident. Doctors advised him to come to the United

States for treatment, and he has taught at Bard College ever since. "Home and Exile," a short collection of essays, is the only book he has published during this period, though he is said to be at work on a new novel. But, if Achebe is largely retired, another generation of writers has taken up his call for a new African literature, and the majority have followed his lead: they embrace the English language despite its colonial connotations, but they also seek to establish an African literary identity outside the colonial framework. And the achievements of African writers are increasingly recognized: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Half of a Yellow Sun," an excruciating and remarkable novel about the Biafran war, won Britain's Orange Prize last year.

The "situation in the world," fifty years after "Things Fall Apart," is not as altered as one might wish. As Binyavanga Wainaina, the founding editor of the Kenyan literary magazine Kwani?, demonstrated in a satiric piece called "How to Write About Africa," racist stereotypes are still prevalent: "Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. . . . Make sure you show how Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls, and eat things no other humans eat." But the power of Achebe's legacy cannot be discounted. Adichie has recalled discovering his work at the age of about ten. Until then, she said, "I didn't think it was possible for people like me to be in books."

Ruth Franklin

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