

CHINUA ACHEBE (1930-2013): A CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL TRIBUTE

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ABSTRACT The death of Chinua Achebe is an epochal event, for he was arguably the most forceful intellectual who deployed his writing as an important method, even ‘weapon’, to counter the cultural, educational and mental colonizations that have befallen upon the African people.

KOOBITAAN Dhimashada Jinwa Ajeebe waa mid muhimmad waqtiyeed leh, maadaama uu ahaan karo midka ugu xoogga badan sida looga hortagi karo isticmaarka dhaqnaka, waxbarashada iyo maskaxda ee ku dhacay dadka Afrikaanka ah, iyada oo la’ adeegsanayo habka ama ‘hubka’ qoritaanka.

In the informal academy of African writers in the past 50 years or so, the late Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe should have been, at least as long as he was alive, the only candidate for our doyen of letters. Achebe was born in the eastern Nigerian town of Ogidi during the height of colonial rule in almost all of Sub-Saharan Africa. He grew up in a middle range (although some of his relatives were powerful leaders of his society), semi-traditional family with both his parents converting to Christianity. Achebe was exposed early in his life to the ways of his African culture, to ancestral attachments, the complex meanings of rites, respect for elders, and to the sanctioning/instructive power of proverbs. In his social autobiography before his unexpected death when he passed away after a brief illness on March 21, 2013, *There Was a Country* (2012), Achebe

notes how his mother who, as a strong, non-nonsense woman and a pioneer for women's rights as well as a campaigner for the freedom of all, instilled in him a sense of liberating 'praxis' early in his life.

As he grew up in a land of cultural and existential clashes where the way of the colonialist was perforce rescinding the ontological-epistemological locations of his people, Achebe was clearly conscientious about the *longue durée* realities of the societal, cultural and educational deformations colonial rule was visiting upon the colonized. As can be gleaned from his discursively textured but analytically sharp counter-colonial pointers in his magnum opus, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), it seems that he belonged to a unique cadre of colonial psycho-sociologists and historians, who did not only chronicle the observable acts of the benighted project, but also engaged in socio-culturally excavating the subconsciously inferiority-conditioning imprinting on the minds of the colonized that hastened and sustained the de-patterning of their mental dispositions, thus establishing what we now know as the main achievement of European colonialism in Africa and elsewhere: the colonization of the mind, a reality that endures so much longer than physical subjugation, and assumes *ipso facto* an intergenerational genre and practice that is continually inherited by the successive progenies of the formerly colonized - hence, the pragmatic qualification of mental colonization as one of the most potent forms of education that satisfies, indeed, expansively sustains, the self-fulfilling prophecy of colonialism's long ago discredited, *la mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission).

In that psycho-social, cultural and educational temper and intellectual foci at least, Achebe should be in an impressive company of distinguished intellectuals who literally shaped both colonial and postcolonial scholarship.

These include the Martiniquian psychiatrist-cum-psychoanalytic sociologist, Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Fanon's poet compatriot and teacher, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), the Tunisian writer Albert Memmi (born in 1920), the late Tanzanian philosopher-statesman, Julius Nyerere (1922-1999), and the Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (born in 1938), the last mentioned a member of the Editorial Advisory Board for this journal.

In the cases of Achebe, Césaire and wa Thiong'o, they didn't only literally change the colonial and postcolonial studies landscape, they also literarily shifted it, so its narrative is forcefully told from the plateau of the colonized. And in this case, Achebe, as far as my reading is concerned, would be one of the most eloquent, most impactful, and most exacting in his full-scale liberating responses to the hegemonic edifice colonialism built to deform the basic existentialities of the *persona Africana*.

As he says in his works, his moment of intellectual and certainly self-discovery, even if he was already aware of the situation and especially with respect to the cultural and learning clashes of the colonial times, happened when he was a student at Ibadan University College in the 1950s. Then his English Professor, who was from England, could not comment on his writing when he wanted to talk about his Nigerian society. As he immediately realised, as a scholar and, to put mildly, she belonged to the inter-culturally incompetent category. Yet, Achebe realised it was these same people whose writings on Nigeria and on Africa were being hailed as works of unique genius that skillfully depicted the meta-rational nature of 'native' life. It was via that encounter, among a few others, including his readings of many falsehoods written about Africans masquerading as real and vintage literature and history, that Achebe felt compelled to illuminate *shaqada looga baahanyahay* (the

task expected of him), to recast African cosmological and cultural locations. This entailed an extensive response to the colonially fabricated shambles being consumed as real scholarship on Africa, and through his writings, a re-culturing of the continent/Nigeria and Igbo territory's traditional landscapes and life systems.

To achieve this historical, cultural and literary re-culturing, Achebe, who has been a professor in different American universities including Brown University where until his death, he was David and Marianna Fisher University Professor and Professor of Africana Studies, has utilized select methodologies of active and certainly very effective writing and analyses. First, in all his books, essays and poetic contributions which were written over a period of 55 years, his pragmatic confidence in knowing what he was talking about, was conveyed in his first few sentences where the reader was seemingly expected to approach the points being transferred with open mind, but also interactively be willing to learn. I am not sure if I am saying it the right way here, and Achebe was anything but a simplistic interlocutor in his writings (although delightfully simple in his writing style with an impressive economy of words usage – clearly not my forte at all). However, *qof kasta oo sidayda oo Kale Afrikaan ah* (any African person like me), who was historico-culturally attached to Achebe's work, and had to interact with it with the necessary learning *devoir* and jest, the case was clear from him: you must know this; you need to know this.

Indeed, even when you hear him talk, it was not easy to miss those professorial qualities, which might have been just an outcome of his later professional life, but might also be traceable to the social context in which he was brought up: a father who worked in the Church, and 'social activist' mother, and powerful traditional relatives whose oral

conveyances were instructive and, action-wise, directional. Moreover, that general quality of the writer, in its general terms, is not actually that different from the ambitions of many other writers who, by and large, write with the hopeful sense that their readers will minimally appreciate their intentions, style of writing and suggestive directions. For Achebe, though, it was more complicated than that. He seemingly felt the intellectual weight on his shoulders, and with that, he was not really interested to entertain, though at times fond of that concise and wryly interjecting humor, but was determined to reclaim, via the tip of his pen (*Things Fall Apart*, was all written in long hand) and later through the facility of the keyboard, usurped histories, deformed cultures, and de-patterned ontologies for immediate subjective and social redemption.

In addition, Achebe, for me at least, represents the character of the honest, transformative public intellectual who, via the educational and professional spaces accorded to him, was willing to exercise a wide form of critical stance against whoever commits any psychological, physical or resources management atrocities against the public. *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into more than 50 languages and is as relevant for our neoliberally globalizing and culturally alienating world today as it was for those colonially globalized societies of 1958. It should be seen as an explosive polemic against the destructive projects of European colonialism. However, his later works (e.g., *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the savannah* (1987)) were all exacting in their sharp razor critique of the failure of the Nigerian/African postcolonial elite to move their countries from successive inept administrations and corrupt management systems that betrayed the type of liberating cultural, educational, socio-economic and political praxes

he was hoping for. Nevertheless, Achebe was still too brilliant a thinker to lose the wide picture; he certainly knew these problems were not natural to Africa, but as the case really is, the so-called postcolonial societies are by and large, active continuities of the colonial project where, just like the long term effects of mental colonization, the continuing colonization of all life categories that immediately affect people's lives are hardly decolonized; hence the essential inverted coma that must always be placed on African 'independence' and African 'postcolonialism'.

In his mid-later writings, therefore, Achebe never left his analyses of trying to disassemble the still enduring massive colonial block. In one of my favorite books, *Home and Exile* (2000), he reminds us of the still present power of the colonial canon on Africa life. In writing against the real enemies of the people, irrespective of their background, skin color and other corporeal claims, therefore, Achebe never vacates the cultural and educational plateaus, for he clearly and rightly saw these as the necessary *terra firma* to recapture so much that was lost and so much that needs to be regained. As such, Achebe has achieved a rare and robust weaponization of the novel, the essay and the poetic fragment, so they collectively function as the critical points that pierce the thick armor of both foreign and internal subjugations that create and sustain the onto-existential and/or material pauperizations and deprivations of people.

It is indeed, fitting to say, therefore, that in the annals of African literary works that aim for horizontal liberatory prospects, Chinua Achebe did it his way, which, whenever this freedom project is achieved (it will certainly be achieved), should represent the best (new) life pathways for the ancient continent and its resilient but long suffering people.