From the issue dated February 8, 2008

Coming Together

On the 50th anniversary of *Things Fall Apart,* Chinua Achebe reflects on his intentions and his influence

By PETER MONAGHAN

Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.

Related materials

Article: Five Views of 'Things Fall Apart'

Article tools

Fifty years after he published *Things Fall Apart*, his first novel, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe recalls having modest hopes for the book. At the time, he was a young university graduate who had found a job at the Nigerian Broadcasting Company, in Lagos. "I was alone in my room, scribbling away, and if nobody had paid any attention at all to me, I wouldn't have been terribly surprised," Achebe recalls with a quiet chuckle, here in his home on the campus of Bard College.

Yet the towering achievement of *Things Fall Apart* has been to become arguably the most influential work of fiction by an African writer. Since William Heinemann Ltd. first issued it in London, the novel has sold about 11 million copies in some 50 countries and as many languages. (This month Anchor Books will issue a 50th-aniversary edition.) In the United States, in an era of multiculturalism, it has become a fixture on college and high-school reading lists — for Americans, the quintessential novel about Africa. The influential critic Harold Bloom included it in 1994 in his selection of the canonical works of world literature, along with two of Achebe's later novels dealing with Nigeria's transition through colonization to troubled independent nationhood, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God.*

Soft-spoken and humble in person, Achebe has been forceful and uncompromising when reflecting on his native country and continent in his fiction, poetry, and critical essays. In 1993 *The Sunday Times*, in London, named him one of the "1,000 Makers of the 20th Century" for his contribution to creating "a modern African literature that was truly African." More than 30 universities have awarded him honorary degrees.

Last year, Achebe won the Man Booker International Prize, which goes once every two years to a writer for a body of work; the shortlist included Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, the 2007 Nobel Prize laureate Doris Lessing, Ian McEwan, Philip Roth, and Salman Rushdie.

Things Fall Apart emerged at a time when very few Africans had written novels. Literary conceptions of the continent were still steeped in reductive romance, primitivism, and colonial sentiment. Providing an expansive alternative to those conceptions was, to say the least, a mighty accomplishment for an author still in his 20s. Achebe forged an original voice by merging African storytelling traditions with elements of the Western literature that he most admired growing up — including one of its foundations, Greek tragedy, as well as modernist techniques like the breaking of linear sequence. In a tale of a tribal leader floundering to come to terms with a new social order in an Igbo village, he suggested the destructive power of colonization, as well as Nigeria's struggles to achieve postcolonial stability.

Set during the onset of colonial incursions into Nigeria at the end of the 19th century, *Things Fall Apart* depicts

the rise and fall of Okonkwo, a would-be patriarch. Burdened by an amiable but improvident father, Okonkwo develops qualities of manly leadership whose dark sides — pride, cruelty, inflexibility — lead him into a spiral of conflicts with family members and villagers. Afraid of appearing weak, he follows an oracle's orders to kill a hostage boy whom he has come to love — in his troubled, self-hating way — perhaps more than his own son. For Okonkwo, worse ensues when callous colonial rule irreversibly disrupts the social and spiritual order in his village.

Fifty years on, Achebe clearly takes special pride in the novel. When he started it, he says, he had no experience as a writer. But "I knew that there was a story that was needed, that was waiting to come. And so I just … well, one was sufficiently naïve to think it was going to be possible."

With that admission comes, again, the wry, throaty chuckle. The statement is both a gentle jab at himself and a typical instance of his calm insistence on faithfully representing the facts. As a devotee of words, and meaning, he speaks slowly enough to be certain of every statement, respectful of the power of speech and writing. His decision to write the novel in English, a choice some critics questioned, was similarly deliberate: English was the language in which Nigeria had been misrepresented, so he would redress inaccuracies in that language, too. To emphasize the inadequacy of those earlier portrayals, he worked Nigerian proverbs and idioms seamlessly into his prose.

Achebe says it was his love of English literature that inspired him to believe that somewhere there would be a Nigerian equivalent. He came to realize that it might even reside in him. He sees a kinship between novel writing and Igbo storytelling. In the Igbo fascination with stories and proverbs, he says, he finds a "struggle with language, to make language say as much as possible to our condition."

"The only thing I knew about doing a story well was being honest," he says. "I wasn't going to show off. I wasn't going to make the people I was writing about or the places I was writing about better than they were. For one reason or another, that was a thing that I knew as if it was from nowhere."

The son of igbos who converted to Christianity, Achebe was not intimately familiar with Igbo culture. Before going to University College of Ibadan, from which he received his bachelor's degree in 1953, he had attended missionary school in his home village, Ogidi, and then a government regional high school in Umuahia.

"I didn't get to take [Igbo society] for granted, because I didn't know anything about it," Achebe says now.

His non-Christian schoolmates had participated in initiation and other tribal rites. "They knew about those things," he says, "and, so, I had to go and find out about them." At the time, he says, that looked like a great disadvantage; looking back later, he realized it encouraged him to try even harder to understand Igbo life around him.

His university literary study, too, spurred him to the task of capturing his society in what he once described as "an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son."

"People around me were not like the people presented in the European so-called African romances," he says. "These were stories by a number of people, but the example that gave me a bad name was [Joseph] Conrad's."

In a 1975 lecture, and then in an essay, Achebe took Conrad to task for emerging in his seminal short novel, *Heart of Darkness*, as a "thoroughgoing racist" even as he denounced imperialism. Achebe pointed out that Conrad had deprived his African characters of any voice, granting them only eight caricaturing words in the whole short novel. Pointing, still today, to those meager eight words, he says: "That's all that Africa has, of language; the rest is screaming, shrieking, howling — animal sounds, you see."

His criticism of Conrad drew vigorous protest from the author's defenders. But Achebe says his intention was simple: to ask "why does one go to Africa for this kind of exoticism that demeans people, makes them less than

their worth?"

Things Fall Apart does not idealize Nigerians; far from it. In Okonkwo, for example, Achebe depicts courage and nobility but also ignorance and cruelty. The mighty Okonkwo beats his wives and kills a child. Fellow villagers leave twin infants in the bush to die because twins are considered evil, and mutilate the bodies of dead children so that their *ogbanje*, or spirits, do not return to torment their mothers again.

"There are some very hard things going on there," says Achebe. "I knew that I had to be truthful. I don't know why, because it's just as easy to make the thing up a little. But I refused. I went out of my way to pick up, to find out, to learn as much of the bad things that were going on, and bring them in, deliberately." His characters, he says, "have a dark side, if you like. But I dare you to say they are not human, in spite of that."

Just as some African critics originally chided Achebe for writing in English, the language of the colonizer, some feminists also objected that female characters were not fully realized in *Things Fall Apart.* Achebe's supporters responded that such criticism fell into the undergraduate trap of criticizing a work for what it was not, rather than viewing it for what it was. Achebe's female characters, his defenders said, were crucial to the plot, and anything but stereotypes.

In later novels, Achebe would point to greater respect for women, and attention to the knowledge they had, as one possible way ahead for Nigerian society. He also inspected the toll of corruption in the new nation-state, and imagined alternative forms of social and governmental organization — multi-ethnic, -linguistic, and -religious, led by enlightened intellectuals — that drew from indigenous customs.

But even there, Achebe was hardly wishful. In his third novel, *Arrow of God* (1964), for instance, he portrayed a traditional village priest who seeks an accommodation with British administrators provided they do not compromise his standing with his people or with his gods. "I wanted to see what would happen if this story of the coming of the white man were told again, and you had a different person confronting them," says Achebe. "Unfortunately, what I discovered was that it didn't matter. He also came to a sticky end. In other words, what has come to the Igbo people is bigger than they can deal with."

The writer's own history is fraught with strife and personal loss. Many of his friends and colleagues died during the civil war in Nigeria, from 1967 to 1970, when he served as the ambassador of the breakaway, and quickly crushed, Biafran government. His close friend, the poet Christopher Okigbo, was killed fighting in the Biafran army. Achebe's apartment was bombed.

In 1990, Achebe was severely injured in a car accident in Nigeria that left him paralyzed from the waist down. That year he came here to Bard at the invitation of its president, Leon Botstein, to continue his recuperation, and he has stayed, living in exile from his homeland.

In 1999 he returned to his village for an extended festival in his honor. "I couldn't do anything else, except receive people," he says. But more recently, his protests against government corruption in Nigeria have made him unwelcome there. After years of dignified but forthright objections to Nigeria's often-tyrannical rulers, in 2004 he declined the high Nigerian honor of Commander of the Federal Republic. "That has changed everything for me," he says. "I can't simply get on a plane and return home."

The idea that he will be a permanent expatriate clearly saddens him. It angers him, too. Nigeria is a study in wasted opportunity and promise, he contends. "Nigeria should not be a third-world country, at this stage," he says. "It is very lucky in human and material resources. So to see it going to waste is very annoying."

Here at Bard, his wife, Christie Chinwe Achebe, with whom he has four children, is a professor of psychology, while Achebe has long taught a course in African literature. He can happily report to his students that the "African romance" appears to be a thing of the past. He also is able to detail the considerable growth in African

literature since *Things Fall Apart,* because of novelists like Flora Nwapa, Chris Abani, Helon Habila, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Those writers point to Achebe as an inspiration to take part in Africans' telling of their own tales. Consistently, they cite both Achebe's dignity and his humor.

At home here, Achebe jokes that, for all the accomplishments of his successors, he would like to dismiss any talk about a "post-Achebe" school of African fiction. "I don't like that; I don't like that, at all," he says, not just because it makes him sound like he has passed on, but because it elides the essential nature of a novelist.

"Writers do not work as a committee," he says, all shared cultural ties and political convictions aside. "In the end every writer goes home and writes his or her own stuff, and that's the way it should be. That's the only way you can ensure a valid and sustainable literary tradition."

Achebe continues to share such perspectives with colleagues and students here. He originally intended to stay only one year, but medical and political considerations changed that. And this year, as celebrations of his first novel are planned all around the world, he actually prefers to remain at home.

"I am delighted, of course," he says, "but I don't want to be the one doing anything for the celebration. I've begged my friends and also my children who are involved in this to let me just observe it."

Peter Monaghan is a correspondent for The Chronicle.

---

http://chronicle.com
Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 54, Issue 22, Page B6