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Chinua Achebe: a personal tribute

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I.

Like millions of people across Nigeria, Africa and the world, I first encountered Chinua Achebe through his books. And my “relationship” with him remained largely so until he died a few weeks ago. My physical encounters with him were only two: first in December 1982 in a restaurant at Bagauda Lake Hotel, Kano; and second, at his University of Nigeria, Nsukka campus residence in January 1990. Each encounter was very brief.

The **1982 Kano encounter**: My wife and I had been separately invited to a conference **Towards a progressive Nigeria** organized and hosted by the Kano State Government led by Governor Abubakar Rimi of the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP). We had driven from Calabar, breaking for the night in Jos, and continuing the journey the following afternoon. By the time we arrived at the venue of the conference in Kano it was already past 9.00pm; but we were directed, nonetheless, to the restaurant. On entering I immediately observed a table surrounded by faces I had seen before, but mainly in newspapers and books. We selected our own table and then moved to the faces that first attracted us. We found, or rather confirmed, that

one of the faces belonged to Chinua Achebe who was then the Deputy National President of PRP.

My wife and I paid our respects to Achebe and other writers sitting with him and then returned to our table to “arrange” ourselves. I cannot now say if what struck me about Achebe was his humility: natural, unassumed humility; or the fact that he was an author I enjoyed reading and re-reading; or the fact of his being a national leader of the PRP; or indeed the fact of his being an important member of the Post - Civil War Movement for Peoples Democracy (MPD) through which I was introduced in the mid-1970s to radical and socialist political activism at the national level; or for the four reasons.

The 1990 Nsukka encounter: An international conference, **Achebe: eagle on Iroko**, was held at Nsukka in January 1990 to celebrate Chinua Achebe’s 60th birthday anniversary. I went there from **The Guardian**, Lagos in whose Editorial Board I was then serving. During the conference I was guest to Dr. Arthur Nwankwo whose book, **Before I die**, I had reviewed a year earlier in Lagos. In the morning of the opening ceremony Nwankwo and I had driven straight from Enugu to Chinua Achebe’s University of Nigeria, Nsukka, campus residence. We found that the writer was hurrying for the opening ceremony; so he had only a few minutes with us. Within that short period, however, I was again struck by the genuine simplicity around him: his home, his dress, etc. He looked to me more like an educated village head than a popular, world – renowned writer.

As I said earlier, I first met Chinua Achebe through his books. When, a couple of months before he died, a controversy broke out over his new book, **There was a country: a personal history of Biafra**, I tried to gather all his available works in one section of our library in Calabar. My efforts yielded 12 books: the oldest, by date of acquisition, is **Arrow of God**, first published in 1964; the newest is **There was a country** published last year, 2012. The identity I had marked on this personal copy of **Arrow of God** was Mellanby Hall, University of Ibadan, October 3, 1966. This means that I must have acquired **Arrow of God** two years after its publication and the same week I got to the University to read for a bachelor’s degree in Mathematics, starting with a one-year pre-degree programme. I must have purchased and read

Arrow of God for pleasure since the book could not have been prescribed for a science programme in a University. I was then 20 years old.

The other ten books are: **The Drum** (Children's book); **No longer at ease; Things fall Apart; A man of the people; Girl's at war** (collection of short stories); **Anthills of the savannah; The trouble with Nigeria; Morning yet on creation day** (a collection of essays); **Hopes and Impediments** (a collection of essays); **The education of a British protected child** (a collection of essays). I have read all these books and numerous other published works of the author over a period of at least 47 years. I cannot now say which Achebe book I first read since I find it difficult to assume that it was **Arrow of God** in 1966. My assumption is that I read **Things fall apart** and **No loner at ease** before **Arrow of God** and that must have been in my days as secondary school student or shortly after.

I enjoy reading, and re-reading, Chinua Achebe. It is difficult, for instance, to remember the number of times I have read **Madman**, the opening story in his **Girls at war and Other Stories**. I have, for my own consumption, divided Achebe's works in my possession simply into two categories: **fiction** and **non-fiction**. A lot of things goes into non-fiction: politics, philosophy, literary theory and criticism, history, sociology, etc. Achebe's fictions give me a lot of pleasure: I love the lucidity of the author's language; I love the proverbs and anecdotes many of which I have appropriated and embellished; and I love what I have called their "truthfulness" by which I mean that you can almost "see" the events embodied in Achebe's stories happening in real life, around you. When we established the **Conscientising Nigerian Male Adolescents (CMA)** programme in Calabar in the mid-1990s I had listed Chinua Achebe as one of my references for **prose-writing** and the **Use of English Language**.

Reading Chinua Achebe's non-fictions embodied in his books and essays (which include lectures, addresses, seminar papers and formal academic papers) also give me a lot of pleasure in addition to their being a rich source of knowledge for me - by which I mean knowing what I had not known before; clarifying what had not been clear to me; or providing a different, but strong, view-point on a matter I had previously taken a position. But in reading his non-fictions I sometimes **frown**. This

happens whenever I come across a view -point with which I strongly disagree politically or ideologically. But I soon overcome my discomfort and read on. Why? Simple. First, because I enjoy reading him in spite of my occasional frowns. I have learnt to avoid lying to myself.

Secondly, I have also learnt to differentiate between my ideological and political disagreements with liberal democrats and humanists, especially when they are also intellectuals and thinkers, and my disagreements with reactionaries and conservatives, however brilliant they may be, or appear to be. At the level of praxis I have also learnt to act out this differentiation. This is why it is possible for me to retain as personal friends several men and women with whom I strongly disagree politically and ideologically. These friendships have proved more useful to me than the friendships of fake comrades. Beyond all these, I have seen the practical role this differentiation plays in building popular – democratic mass movements. Revolutions are impossible without these movements.

I have been saying that I enjoy reading Chinua Achebe's stories. I may as well give a complete picture and say that I love stories generally. Although I differentiate between the Achebe-type of stories which I classify as **serious** and "popular thrillers" written by novelists like Jeffrey Archer and Frederick Forsyth, I still read all. But given a choice between two novels, one by Chinua Achebe and the other by any other novelist, I shall choose Achebe without hesitation. Why? Because, as I said earlier, I can relate to Achebe's stories: I "see" the fictional events happening around me; and as I said earlier, I love his elegance and lucidity of language; his proverbs and the embodied wisdom. In how many places have I encountered a story like **Madman?** In how many places have I encountered proverbs like "When rain falls it falls on the tallest man first" or "When one thing stands another thing stands beside it"?

There is, however, one particular related attribute of Chinua Achebe's stories with which I battled silently for a long time, an attribute that became decisive in my choice of Achebe as my most favourite storyteller. I battled silently because the matter embodies a fundamental criticism of the Marxist political ideology, or rather, some of its particular tendencies. Not too long ago, I learnt that the "elusive" attribute

is actually what is called **realism**, the ability, of a storyteller to come as close as possible, as approximately as possible, to reality, to things as they are in reality, to events in the actual world. And you know that reality is always complex and many-sided, not simple or linear. Let me put this point subjectively: Although I read all stories that come my way, being restrained in this only by the time factor, I am sometimes irritated by fictions that tell me loudly that they are fictions or fictions that crudely reflect the author's partisanship. Reading Achebe's fiction I often forget that I am reading fictions.

II.

Talking about the attribute they call **realism** reminds me of one of the battles Leon Trotsky had to fight to save his revolutionary career, reputation, legacy and ultimately his life after the Russian revolution. That Trotsky was not "proletarian" enough, in both his political writings and his literary theory and criticism, became one of the ancillary charges that were heaped on him by forces and individuals that are now correctly described as "barracks socialists", those who see revolution, socialism and social transformation generally like the enforcement of decrees. If what I have said so far does not refer to what is actually meant by **realism** then forget the term and retain what I have said.

I used to be embarrassed whenever a work of art was dismissed on the grounds, and only on the grounds, that it was not "proletarian" or not "proletarian" enough. I do not intend to pursue this matter beyond this point – except to say this: Any Nigerian, or indeed, African, revolutionary who intends to use literature in his or her campaign and comes across Chinua Achebe's fictions but cannot see them as powerful weapons needs a fundamental self – examination.

Let me illustrate: I have read the following story in at least one of Chinua Achebe's collections of essays: A snake, riding a horse along an almost deserted road, passed a tortoise who was resting by the roadside. The tortoise laughed so loudly that the snake stopped. The tortoise went up to the snake and saluted. The snake asked why the tortoise was laughing and the tortoise replied: "Mr. Snake, that

is not how to ride a horse, rolling into where you should put one of your feet! The snake quietly crawled down the horse, on to the road. "Mr. Tortoise, please show me how to ride", the snake requested his tormentor. The tortoise quickly jumped on the horse, balanced himself properly – the "normal" way – and rode down the road.

The tortoise soon returned. "Thank you very much, Mr. Tortoise. You may now come down", said the snake to the tortoise. The tortoise jumped down from the horse and the snake crawled up into the place he usually positioned himself on the horse. As the snake was about to ride off he said to the tortoise: "Thank you again, Mr. Tortoise, thank you for teaching me how to ride a horse. But it is better to have than to know". This, as I said earlier, is a story I use in my ideological discussion with young people here. I use the story in preference to hundreds of "proletarian" stories within my easy reach.

In a communication shortly after the death of Chinua Achebe, a veteran socialist intellectual and activist regretted that Nigerian socialists have not been able to fully recognize and utilize the works of progressive humanist writers like Achebe. He confirmed that Achebe was the post-war convener of the Nsukka branch of the Movement for People's Democracy (MPD). He said of Achebe: "Achebe impressed me as an urbane craftsman with quiet charms and full of courtesies. As general secretary of MPD I found Achebe a good listener, full of commitment..... displaying in praxis his perception of reality.."

I said earlier that when reading Chinua Achebe's non-fictional works I sometimes **frown** – mildly or deeply, briefly or for quite some time, all depending on the seriousness of my displeasure or disagreement. But, as I also added, I quickly recover and continue with my reading. The areas of displeasure, as I also said are two: **ideology** as it relates to political economy, classes and class struggles and **the national question**. These two areas are fully supplied in two of his non-fictional books that I have read and re-read very closely: **The problem with Nigeria** (1983) and **There was a country: A personal history of Biafra** (2012).

What I have said about Achebe's works in general can also be said about these two books in particular: I enjoy reading them. Beyond this subjective and

unquantifiable statement and beyond my strong displeasure with areas I have identified, the two books are **sources of knowledge** for what I had not known or had not thought about; they offer a **confirmation**, just one, but important confirmation, for what I had known but needed confirmations and elaborations; and they provide **counter-propositions**: powerful, articulate, lucid and enlightened counter –propositions, right or wrong.

The claim can be made that **The problems with Nigeria** is popular in Nigeria; the central thesis there, or one of the central theses, namely, that the main problem with Nigeria is that of leadership, also enjoys wide acceptance among the political class in particular. **But I reject that thesis.** The problem with Nigeria, the Nigeria I have known since I became politically conscious, is **capitalism** - capitalism in its various historical phases and forms and through various maladies it develops as it continues on its dehumanizing and destructive trajectory. My thesis is this: Ultimately, for individual nations and for humanity as a whole, the singular question of survival will be: How do we put an end to this mode of production and, with it, this social formation, that put the accumulation of profits into private pockets ahead, much ahead, of human life and the fate of humanity?

Chinua Achebe's last book has so far been controversial and has therefore received **mixed** reactions. That is inevitable. The subject-matter and the content, the title of the book and the stature of the author all combine to make the book inevitably controversial. I frown from time to time when reading **There was a country** not because it contains falsehoods (I have so far discovered none) but because of its **omissions**, the failure of the dialectic "when one thing stands another thing stands beside it"; using Biafra and Igbo almost interchangeably as if they are the same; inadequate treatment of **Biafra's ethnic minorities**; and, above all, almost total absence of the **class** and **mode of production perspectives**.

These four "weaknesses" are, for me, inseparable. For this reason, any critique of the book that separates them or omits any of them will suffer more "weaknesses" than the original book. Conversely, a revision of this book that honestly tries to correct these "weaknesses" would produce a **wonder**: the controversies would no longer have any bases; but the main theses and propositions would still stand.

Concluding testimony before the court of history: My love of history emanated, I believe, from my love of stories generally. Later, my revolutionary consciousness made it increasingly imperative for me to be a student of history. The history of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) has been a particular subject of my studies since that war ended. In the course of these years, I have read many accounts, listened to many debates and disputations, visited many places connected with the more frightening reports of atrocities, ferocious battles, heroism, military feats and sheer human tragedies. I have conducted many interviews and cross-checked many charges. The least I can say in relation to the frightening events reported by Chinua Achebe in his **There was a country** is that far from writing a fiction, Achebe was actually restrained in the way he reported on these events. **My reservation is over what he omitted rather than what he included.**

I wish to bring this personal tribute to a close by offering two references for further reflection. Both of them are from Professor Biodun Jeyifo. First, check Jeyifo's 2008 Keynote Address at an international conference marking the 50th anniversary of the appearance of **Things fall apart**. The conference was held at the Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife. That Address is one of the two essays that make up Jeyifo's book **Things fall apart, Things fall together** (Bookcraft, Ibadan, 2010). For the second reference, see Biodun Jeyifo's five-part review of **There was a country** in **The Guardian** under the title **First, there was a country; then there wasn't: Reflections on Achebe's new book** (December 3 and 30; 2012; January 6, 13 and 20, 2013).

Chinua Achebe was a prominent, respected and famous Nigerian before the Civil War; he was a prominent, respected and famous Biafran during the Civil War; and he became, once again, a prominent, respected and famous Nigerian after the Civil War. Only few people whose lives had traced this particular trajectory had managed to live through it with the degree of dignity and humility commanded by, or associated with, Achebe. Chinua Achebe's life has again demonstrated the limitlessness of the human spirit: the wish, will and ability to continue to live in the face of serious personal adversities; not to live and nurse one's adversity, but to live to continue to work for humanity with the skill and weapon that one still has.

Thinking of this aspect of Achebe who died on Thursday, March 21, 2013 at the age of 82, conjures the image of Antonio Gramsci, a genius of Marxist thought, one in the long list of martyrs of the socialist struggle.