

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98105

December 4, 1974

Bernth Lindfors, Editor
Research in African Literatures
Division of General and Comparative Studies
The University of Texas at Austin
Box 7457, University Station
Austin, Texas 78712

Dear Professor Lindfors:

Enclosed please find copies of the sections on Kofi Awoonor and Chinua Achebe. Pages on Wole Soyinka will be mailed tomorrow (I am taking the precaution of mailing two-thirds of this today, having had some bad experiences recently with the U.S. mail service). Your version of Achebe's portion has not been proofed and half of Soyinka's is not yet typed on blue-line paper. At least, however, you can assess the content of the proposed publication. In addition to the three sections which you will receive, I plan on doing a brief introduction.

After our conversation this morning, I hastily called Rene Brawmann (African Studies Director) and Herbert Ellison (Director, Institute of Comparative and Foreign Area Studies). They reaffirmed their interest in expediting release of this material by your assuming responsibility for the printing and distribution. To assist in this the Institute is prepared to donate \$500. I would retain credit as editor and the Institute would be listed along with African Studies, University of Washington, as sponsoring the seminar which led to the publication. If your committee agrees to this arrangement, I will write a memoranda of understanding to Dr. Ellison stating the terms; he in turn will transmit the funds immediately to the person and office designated by you.

I sincerely hope that your organization consents to make the edited proceedings of Soyinka's, Achebe's, and Awoonor's visit to the University of Washington campus available to the large audience of your publications. If there are any difficulties with the offer we propose, please call me at (206) 543-6598.

Sincerely,



Karen L. Morell, Ph.D.
Comparative Literature
Special Assistant to the
Vice President for Minority Affairs

KLM:nl
Enclosures

C H I N U A A C H E B E

AFRICA AND HER WRITERS*

SIMON OTTENBERG**: I'm an anthropologist, and I've never introduced a famous literary figure, and that presents a puzzle: how does one do it as an anthropologist? So I'll start with an Igbo proverb. "He who has people is richer than he who has money." So we welcome here Dr. Chinua Achebe, who is one of the finest of African writers, and indeed one of the finest writers in the world. We are richer for his being here. We've had the opportunity, many of us, to read some of his works. And now we are fortunate to have him with us. The facts of his life can be quickly told—that is by me—I don't know by Dr. Achebe. He was born in 1930 in the large village of Ogidi east of the Niger River in southeastern Nigeria, of Igbo parents. His father was a mission teacher, his mother's father came from the Awka group of Igbo famous traveling blacksmiths and ritualists. While an anthropologist would probably go on further with the genealogy, I will stop here.

He went to one of the best high schools in Nigeria—the government secondary school in Umuahia. Then he studied at the university college of Ibadan at a time when that was the only Nigerian university and when it was just starting to give degrees. In 1952 and 1953 while at Ibadan he was already writing and publishing short novels and short stories which

*Presented at Roethke Auditorium, April 5, 1973

**Simon Ottenberg, Professor of Anthropology, University of Washington, is noted for his work in Igbo culture.

took something of the general shape and style of his later novels. In 1954 he began working for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, and by 1961 he was director of External Broadcasting for Nigeria—a post he held until the outbreak of the Biafran war in 1967.

It was during this time, working for the radio corporation, that many of his famous works appeared. There are four novels, each one a literary gem: *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, which is his best known work in America; *No Longer at Ease* in 1960 which is something of a continuation of this first novel; *Arrow of God* in 1964; *A Man of the People* in 1966. I just asked him which he liked best, and he said, "They are all my children." He also found time to publish a collection of five short stories—*The Sacrificial Egg and Other Short Stories* in 1962—and a short novel for children, *Chike and the River* in 1966. During the civil war he was with the Biafran side, working for the Ministry of Information, and he spent a good deal of time abroad on diplomatic and fund-raising missions.

Following the conflict, he took up a position with the African Studies Institute at the University of Nigeria back in the east—in his home area—and he is currently a visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts. He has also been awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by Dartmouth College. In the past years he has been writing short stories and poetry, having published *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems* just this year, and he is editing a literary journal, *Okike*.

His writings reflect both a sense of the traditional and of the modern in Nigeria and in Africa and the conflicts and contradictions between them. He deals with questions of fate, with moralities, and he is an expert in the use of the "ironic twist"—a sudden turn of events.

As he has continued to write, there has been a growing sense of the importance of the political world, and he himself has moved from being largely a literary person to also being a political individual. And there is an increasing sense that his

writing is more and more for a Nigerian and African audience, though he continues to write also for the rest of the world. I could go on, but as another Igbo proverb goes, "Do not be in a hurry to rush into the pleasure of the world like the young antelopes who dance themselves lame when the main dance is yet to come"—and the main dance is clearly Dr. Chinua Achebe. He will talk tonight on the role of the writer in modern Africa. Dr. Achebe.

CHINUA ACHEBE: Well thank you very much, Dr. Ottenberg. I don't remember anybody who has introduced me without any mistake in all these years. [laughter] This is a measure of the expertise you have concerning that land which belongs to both of us, the Igbo country. Now I'm going to talk about Africa and her writers.

Some time ago, in a very testy mood I began a lecture with these words, "Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorized dog shit." Today, and particularly in the civilized community, I should quite prepare to modify my language, if not my opinion. In other words, I would still insist that art is, and was always, in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myths and told their stories and legends for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight). They made their sculptures in wood and terra cotta, stone and bronze to serve the needs of their time. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society and created their works for the good of that society.

Now I've just used the word "good," which no decent man uses in polite society these days. I must hasten to explain. By "good" I do not mean moral upliftment, although why not? That would be part of it. I mean, rather, "good" in the sense in which God at the end of each day's work of putting the world together saw that what He made was good. Then and only then did he count it a day's job. "Good" in that sense does not mean pretty.

In the beginning art was good and useful. It always had its airy and magical qualities, of course, but even the magic was often intended to minister to

a basic human need, to serve a down-to-earth necessity, as when the cavemen painted on the walls of their caves animals they hoped to kill in their next hunt.

But it seems somewhere in the history of the European civilization the idea that art should be accountable to no one, and needed to justify itself to nobody but itself, began to emerge. In the end it became a minor god and its devotees became its priests, urging all who are desirous to approach its altar to banish entirely from their hearts and minds such doubts and questions as "What use is this to me?" That would be the ultimate irreverence and profanation. Words like "use," words like "purpose," "value" are beneath the divine concerns of this Art, and so are we the vulgarians, craving the message and the morality. This Art exists independently of us, of all mankind. Man and his world may indeed pass away, but not a jot from the laws of this Art.

Do I exaggerate? Perhaps a little, but not too much, I don't think. True, Edgar Allen Poe's famous lecture, "The Poetic Principle," may not be the gospel it was to earlier generations, but the romantic ideas of "the poem written solely for the poem's sake" still exerts a curious fascination on all kinds of people. I remember my surprise a few years ago at a conference of African writers in East Africa when an obscure white poet announced solemnly that a good poem writes itself. I very rarely wish writers ill [laughter], but that day I would have been happy if Shango had silenced that one with a nicely aimed thunderbolt and given his ghost the eternal joy of watching new poems surface daily unto his earthly notebook, or whatever he scribbled his verses on.

Strangely enough (or perhaps not so strangely—perhaps we should say, "appropriately"), there is from the same European mainspring another stream flowing down the slopes on the other side of the hill, watering a different soil and sustaining a different way of life. There, on these other slopes, a poet is not a poet until the Writers' Union tells him so. Between these two peoples an acrimonious argument rages. Each side hurls invective over the hill into the other camp. "Monstrous Philistines!" So loud

and bitter does their recrimination become that it is often difficult to believe that these two people actually live on two slopes of the same hill.

Once upon a time, according to my favorite Yoruba story, two farmers were working on their farms on either side of the road. As they worked they made friendly conversation across the road. Then Eshu, the god of fate and lover of confusion, decided to upset the state of peace between them. A god with a sharp and nimble imagination, he took his decision as quickly as lightning. He rubbed one side of his body with white chalk and the other side with charcoal and walked *up* the road between the farmers with considerable flourish. As soon as he passed beyond earshot the two men jumped from their work. And one said, "Did you notice that extraordinary white man who has just gone up the road?" In the same breath the other said, "Did you see that incredible black man I have just seen?" In no time at all the friendly questions turned into horrible argument and finally into a fight. As they fought they screamed "He was white!" "He was black!" After they had belabored themselves to their hearts' content, they went back to their farms and resumed their work in gloomy and hostile silence. No sooner had they settled down than Eshu returned and passed with even greater flourish between them *down* the road. Immediately the two men sprang up again, and one said, "I'm sorry my good friend, you were right, the fellow is white." [laughter] And in the same breath the other fellow said, "I do apologize for my blindness. The man is indeed black, just as you said." And in no time again the two were quarreling and they were fighting. And as they fought this time they shouted, "I was wrong!" "No, *I* was wrong!" [laughter]

The recrimination between capitalist and communist aesthetics in our time is, of course, comparable to the first act of the farmers' drama, the fight for the exclusive claim on righteousness and truth. Perhaps Eshu will return one day and pass again between them down the road to inaugurate the second act, the fight for self-abasement, for a monopoly on guilt.

As African writers emerge onto the world's stage they come under pressure to declare their stands. Now I'm not one for opposing an idea or a proposition simply on the grounds that it is "un-African," because this is a common ploy of obscurantist self-interest. Thus, a modern leader in Africa who wants to go and continue in his business of transforming public wealth into private dynastic fortune will often tell you that socialism, which quite rightly scares the daylights out of him, is un-African. We're not talking about that type of situation. But there seems to me to be a genuine need for African writers to pause momentarily and consider whether anything in traditional African aesthetics still fit their contemporary condition.

Let me give one example from Nigeria. Among the Owerri Igbo of Eastern Nigeria there was a colorful ceremony called *mbari*, the profound affirmation of the people's belief in the indivisibility of art in society. *Mbari* was performed at the request of the earth goddess, Ala, the most powerful deity in the Igbo pantheon, for she was not only the owner of the soil but also controller of morality and creativity. Every so many years this goddess would instruct the community through her priest to prepare a festival of images in her honor. That night the priest would travel through the town, knocking on many doors to announce to the various households who of their members Ala had chosen for the great work. These chosen men and women then moved into seclusion in a forest clearing and, under the instruction and guidance of master artists and craftsmen, began to build a house of images. The work might take a year, sometimes even two, but as long as it lasted the workers were deemed to be hallowed and were protected from undue contact from the larger community.

The finished temple was architecturally quite simple—two side walls, a back wall, and a high thatched roof. Steps ran around the full width of the temple ascending backwards and upwards almost to the roof. But in spite of the simplicity of its structure, *mbari* was often a miracle of artistic achievement, a breathtaking concourse of images in bright, primary colors; and, since the enterprise

was in honor of Ala, most of the work was done in her own material, simple molded earth. But the execution turned this simple material into finished images of startling power and diversity. The goddess had a central seat, usually with a child on her knee—a telling juxtaposition of formidable, even implacable, power and gentleness. Then there were other divinities; there were men, women, beasts, and birds (real and imaginary). Indeed the total life of the community was reflected from scenes of religious duties, scenes of piety, right down to pictures of village scandal. At the completion of the work, the village declared a feast and a holiday to honor the goddess of creativity and her children, the makers of images.

This brief and totally inadequate description can give no idea of the impact of *mbari*. Even the early Christian missionaries who were shocked by the frankness of some of the portrayals couldn't quite take their eyes off. What I want to do is to point out one or two of the aesthetic ideas underlying *mbari*. First, the making of art is not the exclusive concern of a particular caste or a secret society. Those young men and women whom the goddess chose for the reenactment of creation were not "artists." They were ordinary members of society. Next time around, the choice would fall on other people. Of course, mere nomination would not turn every man into an artist—not even divine appointment would guarantee it. The discipline, instruction, and guidance of the master artists would be necessary. But not even a conjunction of those two conditions would insure infallibly the emergence of a new, exciting sculptor or painter. *Mbari* was not looking for that. What it was saying was that there is no rigid barrier between makers of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all and is a function of society. When Senghor insists with such obvious conviction that every man is a poet, he is responding, I think, to this concern of our traditional societies.

All this, I dare say, will sound like abominable heresy in the ears of mystique lovers. For their sake and their comfort let me spell it out for them. The idea of *mbari* does not deny the place or importance

of the master, the master with unusual talent and professional experience. Indeed it highlights such gift and competence by bringing it into play on the seminal potentialities of the community. Again, *mbari* does not deny the need of the creative artist to go apart from time to time so as to commune with himself, to look inwardly in his own soul. For when the festival is over the villagers return to their normal lives again, and the master artists to their work and contemplation. But they can never, after this experience, after this creative communal enterprise, they can never become strangers again to one another. And by logical and physical extension, the greater community which comes to the unveiling of the art and then receives its makers once again into its normal life becomes a beneficiary, indeed, an active partaker of this spiritual experience.

If one believes, as many seem to do in some so-called advanced cultures, that the hallmark of a true artist is the ability to ignore society and paradoxically demand at the same time its attention and homage, then one must find the ruling concerns of *mbari* somewhat undramatic. Certainly no artist reared within the *mbari* culture could aspire to humiliate his community by hanging his canvas upside down in an exhibition and withdrawing to a corner to watch viewers surpass themselves in admiration of its many hidden parts, with much nodding of the head and outpouring of sophisticated jargon. [laughter] It is really an appalling relationship. And the artist has more to answer for than all those pathetic courtiers lost in admiration of the emperor's new clothes, desperately hiding in breathless garrulity the blankness of their vision. They are only victims, victims of an irresponsible monarch's capriciousness. And quite rightly, it is not they but the emperor himself who suffers the ultimate humiliation.

There is, of course, a deep political implication to all of this. The Igbo society from which the example of *mbari* was taken is known, one could almost say is notorious, for its unbridled republicanism, different from other ushers of republicanism, I might add [laughter]; this is basic republicanism.

Now a society that upholds and extols an opposing political system is likely to take a different cultural viewpoint. For example, it seems to me that the European aesthetic, which many African writers are accepting so uncritically today, developed in a rigid oligarchical culture in which kings and their nobilities in the past cultivated a taste different from the common appetite. And since they monopolized the resources of the realm, they were able also to buy over the artists in society through diverse bribes, inducements, and patronage: Thus over many generations a real differentiation occurred between aristocratic culture and the common culture. Now the common culture, having no resources to develop itself, went into stagnation. There is such a thing as poetic justice, and in the fullness of time the high culture living so long in the rarefied reaches sensed that unless it made contact with the ground again it would surely die. So it descended to the earthy, stagnant pool of the common culture and began to fish out between delicate beaks such healing tidbits as four letter words.

Where does the African writer come in all this? Quite frankly, he is confused. Sometimes, in a spasmodic seizure of confidence, he feels called upon to save Europe and the West by giving them Africa's peculiar gifts of healing, irrigating, in the words of Senghor, the cartesian rationalism of Europe with black sensitivity through the gift of emotion. In his poem "Prayer to Masks," we are those very children called to sacrifice their lives like the poor man his last garment,

So that hereafter we may cry "hear" at the
rebirth of the world being the leaven
that the white flour needs.

For who else would teach rhythm to the world
that has died of machines and cannons?

For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy
that arouses the dead and the wise in
a new dawn?

Say who else could return the memory of life
to men with a torn hope?

And in his famous poem "New York" he tells that amazing metropolis what it must do to be saved.

New York! I say to you: New York let black
blood flow into your blood
That it may rub the rust from your steel joints,
like an oil of life
That it may give to your bridges the bend of
buttocks and the suppleness of creepers.

The trouble is that personally I am not so sure of things to be able to claim for Africa such a messianic mission in the world. In the first place we would be hard put to it "in our present condition of health," to use a common Nigerian cliché, we would be hard put to it to save anybody. In the second place the world may not wish to be saved by Africa even if she had the power to do so. There is nothing more pathetic than the poor man who offers his last garment and is snubbed.

In talking about the world we really mean Europe and the West, but we have all got into the bad habit of regarding this slice of the globe as the whole thing. That an African writer can so easily slip into this error is a tribute to its hold upon the contemporary imagination. For those of Europe and the West such a habit if not entirely excusable is at least understandable. It can even be amusing in a kind of harmless way—as when, for example, a game between Cincinnati and Minnesota is called the World Series [laughter, applause]. But it ceases to be funny when it consigns other continents and other people into a kind of limbo, and it begins to border on the grotesque when these continents and peoples begin to accept this view of the world and of themselves.

Sédar Senghor's solicitude for the health and happiness of Europe may indeed have a ring of quixotic selflessness about it, but at least it seems to be rooted in a positive awareness of self. Not so some of the more recent and, to my mind, quite bizarre fashions in African literature—a near pathological eagerness to contract the sickness of Europe in the horribly mistaken idea that our claim to sophistication

is improved thereby. I'm talking, of course, primarily about the "human condition" syndrome. Presumably European art and literature have every good reason for going into a phase of despair. I don't see that ours does. The worst we can afford at the moment is disappointment. Perhaps when we too have overreached ourselves in technical achievement and sheer infamy we shall be entitled to despair. Or, who knows? Maybe we'll learn from the history of others and avoid that particular destiny. But whether we learn or not, there seems to me no sense whatever in rushing out so prematurely to an assignation with a cruel destiny that will not be stirring from her place for a long time yet.

There is a brilliant Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah, who seems to me to be in grave danger of squandering his enormous talents, his enormous energy in pursuit of this "human condition." I'm going to talk about him at some length, not because I hate him. In fact I like him very much. This is why I'm talking about him. In an impressive first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, he gives us a striking parable of the corruption of Ghana society, and he gives us the picture of one man who refuses to be contaminated by this filth; he is prepared to suffer the cruel taunts of a disappointed wife and a vicious mother-in-law, to bear the innocent accusations in the eyes of his deprived children rather than accept a few innocent *cedis* like everyone else.

It is a well written book. Armah's command of language and imagery is of a very high order indeed. But it a sick book. Sick not with the sickness of Ghana but with the sickness of "the human condition." The hero of this story, pale and passive and nameless—a creation in the best manner of existentialist writing—wanders through the story in an anguished half-sleep, neck-deep in despair and human excrement, of which we see a lot in the book. Did I say he refused to be *corrupted*? I must take that back. He did not do anything as positive as refusing. He reminded me very strongly of that man and woman in Jean Paul Sartre's novel who sit in anguished gloom in a restaurant and then in a sudden access of nihilistic

energy seize table knives and stab their hands right through to the wood to prove some very obscure point to each other. [laughter] Except that Armah's hero doesn't even seem capable of suffering any seizure.

Ultimately the novel failed; at least it failed to convince me. And this was because Armah insisted and pressed that this was happening in Ghana and not in some modern existentialist no man's land. He threw in quite a few realistic ingredients like Kwame Nkrumah to prove it. And that was a mistake. Just as the hero was nameless, so should everything else be. And Armah might have gotten away with a modern "universal" story. Why did he not opt simply for that easy choice? I don't know. But I'm going to be supersitious and say that Africa probably seized hold of his subconscious and insinuated there this deadly obligation to use his considerable talents in the service of a particular people in a particular place. Could it be that under this pressure Armah attempts to have what Europe would call a moral fable at the same time; to relate the fashions of European literature to the men and women of Ghana? He tried very hard. But his Ghana is unrecognizable. This aura of cosmic sorrow and despair fits badly. Where, for example, is high life, where are the gaiety and the warmth of collective experience, or did Nkrumah kill all that?

True, Ghana was sick, and what country is not? But everybody has his own brand of sickness. Ayi Kwei Armah imposes so much foreign metaphor on the sickness of Ghana that it ceases to be true. And finally, the suggestion of the hero's personal justification, justification without faith or works, is grossly inadequate, especially in a society where such individualism has no chance of existence. For even a lunatic walking stark naked through the highways of Accra has an extended family somewhere suffering vicarious shame.

Armah is clearly an alienated writer, a modern writer complete with all of the symptoms. Unfortunately Ghana is not a modern existentialist country. It is just a West African state struggling to become a nation. So there is an enormous distance between Armah and Ghana. There is something scornful,

something cold and remote about Armah's obsession with the filth of Ghana:

Left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a hasty anus sliding all the way up the banister as their owners made the return trip from the lavatory downstairs to the offices above. Right-hand fingers still dripping with the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat crotches. The callused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture. Afternoon hands not entirely licked clean of palm soup and remnants of *kenkey* . . .

You have to go to the early European writers on Africa to find something of the same icy distance, like this one:

Fada is the ordinary native town of the Western Sudan. It has no beauty, convenience or health. It is a dwelling place at one stage from the rabbit warren and the badger furrow; and not so cleanly kept as the latter. It is . . . built on its own rubbish heaps, without charm even of antiquity. Its squalor and its stinks are all new. . . . All its mud walls are eaten as if by small-pox. . . . Its people would not know the change if time jumped back fifty thousand years. They live like mice or rats in a palace floor; all the magnificence and variety of the arts, the learning and the battles of civilisation go on over their heads and they do not even imagine them.

That is from Joyce Cary's famous novel, *Mister Johnson*, "the best novel ever written about Africa," according to *Time* magazine. [laughter] Joyce Cary was an alien writing about Africa. Armah is the alienated native. It seems that to achieve the

modern alienated stance an African writer will end up writing like some district officer.

Armah is quoted somewhere as saying that he is not an African writer but just a writer. Some other writers (and friends of mine, all) have said the same thing. It is a sentiment guaranteed to win applause in Western circles. But it is a statement of defeat. A man is never more defeated than when he is running away from himself. When Pablo Neruda received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971 he said: "I belong to all of the people of Latin America, a little of whose soul I have tried to interpret." I wonder what an African writer would have said. Perhaps, "I belong to the universe, all of whose soul I have successfully interpreted" [laughter].

I know the source of our problem, of course. ANXIETY. Africa has had such a fate in the world that the very adjective "African" can still call up hideous fears of rejection. Better, then, to cut our links with this homeland, this land of liability, and become in one giant leap the universal man. Indeed, I understand the anxiety. But running away from myself seems to me a very inadequate way of dealing with an anxiety. And if writers should opt for such escapism, who is going to meet the challenge?

Sometimes this problem appears in almost comical forms. A young Nigerian poet living and teaching in New York sent me in Nigeria a couple of years ago a poem for the literary magazine I edit. I liked it. It was a good poem, but in one of his lines he used a plural Italian word as if it were a singular. There was no reason I could see for him taking poetic license. So I made the slightest alteration imaginable in the verb to correct this needless error. The bright young poet, instead of thanking me, wrote an angry and devastating letter in which he accused me of being a grammarian. I didn't mind that really; it was a new kind of accusation [laughter]. But in his final crushing statement he contrasted the linguistic conservatism of those like myself who live in the outposts of empire with the imaginative freedom of the dwellers of the metropolis. At first I thought of replying but in the end decided it was a waste of

my time. If I had replied I would have agreed with him about our respective locations, but I would have gone on to remind him that the outposts had always borne the historic role in defending the empire from the constant threat of the barbarian hordes; and so, indeed always had to be awake and alert, unlike the easygoing, soft-living men of the capital [applause].

But jokes apart, this incident is really a neat parable of the predicament of the African writer in search of universality. He has been misled into thinking that the metropolis belongs to him. Well, not yet. For him there is still the inescapable grammar of values to straighten out, the confused syntax of uncertain, fledgling polities. Ease and carelessness in the frontier where we belong will only cause a total breakdown of communication.

But you might say: What does it really matter? A man could have the wrongest ideas and yet write good poems and good novels, while another with impeccable notions writes terrible books. This may be true. Certainly those who will write bad books will probably write bad books whatever ideas they may hold. It is the good or the potentially good writer that should interest us. And for him I would sooner risk good ideas than bad. I don't believe that he will come to too much harm by asking himself a few pointed questions.

The late Christopher Okigbo was perhaps a good example of an artist who sometimes had and expressed confusing ideas while producing immaculate poetry. He was, in fact—at least in my view—Africa's finest poet of our time. For while other poets wrote some good poems, Okigbo conjured up for us an amazing, haunting poetic firmament of a wild and violent beauty. Well, Christopher Okigbo once said that he wrote his poems only for other poets, thus putting himself not just beyond the African pale but even in deliberate opposition with the great English dramatic poet who defined himself as a man writing for men. On another occasion Okigbo said: "There is no African literature. There is good writing and bad writing, that's all." But quite quickly we are led to suspect that this was all a bluff, for when

Okigbo was asked why he turned to poetry, he said:

The turning point came in 1958 when I found myself wanting to know myself better, and I had to turn and look at myself from inside. . . . And when I talk of looking inward to myself I mean turning inward to examine myself. This, of course, takes account of ancestors. . . . Because I do not exist apart from my ancestors.

And then, as though to spell it out clearly that ancestors does not mean some general psychological or genetic principle, Okigbo tells us specifically that he is the reincarnation of his maternal grandfather, a priest in the shrine of the Earth goddess. In fact, poetry becomes for him an anguished journey back from alienation to resumption of ritual and priestly functions. His voice becomes the voice of the sunbird of Igbo mythology, mysterious and ominous.

But it was not a simple choice or an easy return journey for Okigbo to make, for he never underrated his indebtedness to the rest of the world. He brought into his poetry all the heirlooms of his multiple heritage: he ranged with ease through Rome and Greece and Babylon; through the rites of Judaism and Catholicism; through European and Bengali literatures; through modern music and painting. But at least one perceptive Nigerian critic has argued that Okigbo's true voice only came to him in his last sequence of poems, *Path of Thunder*, when he finally and decisively opted for an African inspiration. This opinion may be contested, though I think it has substantial merit. The truth is that Okigbo is such a bewitching poet and casts such a powerful spell that, whatever he cares to say or sing, we stand breathless at the sheer beauty and grace of his sound and imagery. Yet there is that undeniable fire in his last poems which was something new. It was as though the goddess he sought in his poetic journey through so many alien landscapes and ultimately found at home had rewarded him with

this new thunder. Unfortunately when he was killed in 1967 he left us only that little, tantalizing hint of the new self that he had found. But perhaps he will be reincarnated in other poets, and sing for us again like his sunbird whose imperishable song survived the ravages of the eagles. Thank you. [applause]

If you have a few brief questions, I would be glad to answer them.

PARTICIPANT: Your point about the art being for the people and your contrast between capitalism and communism--how does this tie in with Mao Tse Tung's philosophy?

ACHEBE: When I talked about the communist aesthetic I was thinking about classical communist aesthetic, and I was merely saying that these two aesthetics--capitalist and communist--are two extremes, two sides of the same coin, but there is another possibility, and this may well be what Mao Tse Tung is talking about. It's not surprising. I don't read Chinese, but I believe he's a good poet. It's interesting that you can have a political leader who is also a poet; it's only a different kind of tradition that can produce it. I don't think the Western tradition can anymore, because a president who writes poetry would be suspect. [laughter] So I think Mao Tse Tung must belong to the third possibility I was hinting at.

PARTICIPANT: With your feelings about art for art's sake, I wonder what your opinion is about the work done in Oshogbo in Nigeria.

ACHEBE: Yes, well I think that belongs to the kind of culture that I was describing, the idea, anyway, that you get people together and excite them and something happens; you discover new talent. It's not really an art school. It's freer than that, and it has its drawbacks. I'm not saying this is the perfect answer. It certainly has possibilities which we ought to look at, and all I'm saying is that we shouldn't simply adopt the styles of other people in this

because there are other possibilities that suggest themselves to my mind. I don't imagine many people here know about Oshogbo, but it's simply an idea of somebody or a little group of people getting together, young people, and letting them create. It's produced some very interesting things. Unfortunately, it required the continued presence of the inspirer. The inspiration traveled to New Guinea, and the work itself seemed to decline. This might be an argument against the amateurism thing, but it's a risk that I would prefer to take.

PARTICIPANT: What about the European influence on Oshogbo with Ulli Beier?

ACHEBE: Well, Ulli Beier is sufficiently emancipated. He's essentially an emancipated European, you know, not insisting on any kind of dogma; in fact, he is extremely free and easy on this. This is why I think the school made the kind of impression it made in the first years.

PARTICIPANT: I was kind of interested in the statement you just made, saying that if the president were to write poetry he would be suspect. Don't you feel that it's true of any writer? You've stated that it's important that the writer be involved in the community, but yet the more he becomes involved in that community, the more his work becomes suspect.

ACHEBE: No, what I am saying is that it is a result of the separation between art and life in this society that a president would become suspect if he were a poet. Because a poet is supposed to be irresponsible. He's not supposed to know what is good for his society. Now if you have a different approach or idea, then you might have the odd poet who also had this capacity. I'm not saying every poet; some poets cannot run their own lives, let alone other people's [laughter]. There's no intrinsic conflict. When a poet gets into public life there are dangers. I didn't touch on that. There are dangers, but that's another matter; there are dangers anyway, whatever he does. I wrote an

innocent novel some years ago and it was acclaimed. Then six months later it was said to be part of a plot to overthrow the government. So it doesn't matter.

PARTICIPANT: Could you say something about the black writers of America? Which ones you like and which ones you don't like.

PARTICIPANT: No, I wouldn't do that in this audience [laughter]. No, no, it isn't that I'm joking. No, I don't really know enough. In the last four or five years I was busy with other things, more pressing to me, and I didn't really get to read. I know that I'm completely out of touch with things. In 1963 I had a fellowship, and I came to this country to find out precisely what was happening in the creative areas, especially with the black writers. I was beginning to get into it and to know the writers and their work. Then there was this break. So I don't really know the new generation. In 1969 at the height of the Biafran war, to give you an example of how cut off I have been, somebody asked me about militant writers, and I mentioned--what is his name--[laughter] you know, *The Fire Next Time*. Yes, James Baldwin. And everybody collapsed in laughter, so I know I have a lot of reading to do. I haven't done it yet, but I'm beginning, so I'd rather not make a judgment.

PARTICIPANT: Do you think the African writer can adapt to the philosophical, theological, and aesthetic implications of the world-wide phenomenon of science [shortened]?

ACHEBE: Well, I don't know if I fully understand the question [applause], but let me try. When I was talking about universality, I was actually implying roots because I do not believe that it is the business of any writer to chase, to run after universality. I think it is the business of universality to be chasing the writer. Now anybody who sets out trying to be universal will fail. This is the way it strikes me. I think the business of a writer is to write from his position, from his experience, from his view of the

world, from where he stands, from what he knows, and as long as he does this faithfully there is enough that is common between peoples, between one culture and another, for what he says to be appreciated. At least some of it will be appreciated in other cultures. So I don't think there is any real problem. The problem arises when we think we have to adopt a particular posture or to achieve a particular sophistication in order to create works of art. I think that would inhibit creativity. I think one should write what one knows. And usually what one knows is what happens around him. Does this come near the question you asked?

PARTICIPANT: You have defined the role of the writer as one of responsibility to the growth, development, and future of his people. Given your particular conception of the writer with respect to his society, socio-cultural group, or country, and with particular reference to the poet, and by extension other literary artists and ideologists, what is the role (moreover, the proper role, to be specific) of the cynic: one who has come to view the world as mad, pathetic, and at the least bizarre? This person, the poet in this case, rejects both the causes of his predicament and also his much loved people. He responds to the predicament such that he (the poet) has become extracted from the situation and is a personification of a juxtapositional, objective, and abstracted commentator.

ACHEBE: A cynic? Well, if that is his view of the world, I think he's entirely at liberty to explore it. I am not laying down the rules for any or all writers. All I am saying is that the danger I have noticed is the danger of simply accepting what we have not even looked at because that seems to be the fashion, and it is the fashion that I'm concerned with. If somebody takes a look at society and says, "I have nothing to do with it," I would be sorry for him, but I will still say that he is entitled to his opinion. And if out of this kind of vision he creates marvelous poetry--and mark you, some of the great poets have had curious ideas, fascist ideas--it means we can't

legislate. All I'm saying is let's not simply accept things because they are done in another culture or this culture. Once an African artist cures himself of this illness that is spreading, then I would leave the rest. I wouldn't go further.

TELEVISED DISCUSSION*

ACHEBE: I've done all kinds of things in my time, but I've never read poetry from a grilling chair. Anyway, I'll try; I'll read a couple of poems, and then we'll go on from there. This collection was largely written out of war experience. So the first poem I'm going to read is a war poem. It's called "Refuge Mother and Child."

No Madonna and Child could touch
that picture of a mother's tenderness
for a son she soon would have to forget.

The air was heavy with odours
of diarrhoea of unwashed children
with washed-out ribs and dried-up
bottoms struggling in laboured
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most
mothers there had long ceased
to care but not this one; she held
a ghost smile between her teeth
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's
pride as she combed the rust-coloured
hair left on his skull and then—
singing in her eyes—began carefully
to part it...In another life this
must have been a little daily
act of no consequence before his
breakfast and school; now she
did it like putting flowers
on a tiny grave.

The next poem is different. It's called "NON-
commitment."

*KCTS/9 Television Studio, April 6, 1973

Hurrah! to them who do nothing
see nothing feel nothing whose
hearts are fitted with prudence
like a diaphragm across
womb's beckoning doorway to bar
the scandal of seminal rage. I'm
told the owl too wears wisdom
in a ring of defence round
each vulnerable eye securing it fast
against the darts of sight. Long ago
in the Middle East Pontius Pilate
openly washed involvement off his
white hands and became famous. (Of all
the Roman officials before him and after
who else is talked about
every Sunday in the Apostles' Creed?) And
talking of apostles that other fellow
Judas wasn't such a fool
either; though much maligned by
succeeding generations the fact remains
he alone in that motley crowd
had sense enough to tell a doomed
movement when he saw one
and get out quick, a nice little
packet bulging his coat-pocket
into the bargain—sensible fellow.

And finally a poem called "Their Idiot Song."

These fellows, the old pagan
said, surely are out of their mind—
that old proudly impervious
derelict skirted long ago by floodwaters
of salvation: Behold the great
and gory handiwork of Death displayed
for all on dazzling sheets this
hour of day its twin nostrils
plugged firmly with stoppers of wool
and they ask of him: Where
is thy sting?

Sing on, good fellows, sing
on! Someday when it is you
he decks out on his great

iron-bed with cotton-wool
for your breath, his massing odours
mocking your pitiful makeshift defences
of face powder and township ladies' lascivious
scent, these other roaming
yet his roomy chicken-coop will
be singing and asking still
but YOU by then
no longer will be
in doubt!

PARTICIPANT: I realize that there were many things that happened in Biafra during the war, and I realize that many of the people in Biafra during the war had not before experienced some such pressures, especially those that threatened their lives. They weren't sure that they would be able to feed themselves the next day. I was wondering how these incidents would affect the way the Igbos, in particular, would now look on life, whether these experiences will have any effect on the world view which previously had been characterized by many people as being highly optimistic?

ACHEBE: Yes, that's a very big question and it's impossible to answer it in the time available. It's also impossible to answer it so soon after the event. But it's quite clear that the experience of this war was so tremendous, so huge, that it's impossible to think of the people who went through it coming out exactly the same. That's out of the question. I mean, take a simple example. In my village today there are no old people left; they really all died. So you cannot have the same kind of society as you had before the war. What its new nature is going to be is not clear yet. I think basically the optimism you referred to will be there still, although it will be tempered I think by a certain amount of, maybe, cynicism. But I've already noticed the optimism. At the end of the war everyone sort of said, "It's over; let us see what we can gather together from the ruins." There's a bit of that, and this has led many people to think that all the problems have been solved, which isn't true, but I don't think I want to pursue this.

PARTICIPANT: Have you ever written poetry in the vernacular?

ACHEBE: Yes, I've written some poetry in Igbo. The last one I did was a dirge in memory of Christopher Okigbo who was a friend of mine, and, to my mind, Africa's finest poet, who was killed in 1967. But reading poetry in Igbo requires an audience that will respond in certain ways.

PARTICIPANT: Can you translate it?

ACHEBE: No, no, I don't translate. I don't do any translating from one language to another. If I feel like writing in Igbo, I will write in Igbo, and it seems to me that it is in poetry, and perhaps drama later, that I want to use the Igbo language, not in fiction.

PARTICIPANT: That brings us to a question about a lot of African literature. Much of it is written in English or French? What is the difference? Do you think differently, or do you think that the fact that these languages have been imposed and now can be used changes the writer in a way as he approaches his material, or do you find that something African that wasn't imposed can surge up through it as well as, say, in Igbo?

ACHEBE: Well again, this is something that is still evolving. We don't really know. What we are trying to do in a way is an experiment. The linguistic situation is quite complex in Africa. In Nigeria you couldn't talk about Nigeria one minute longer if you were to remove the English language, as the country is today. Now whether this is going to go on I don't know. It looks to me like a political decision in the end. But if we keep the metropolitan, the English, language, then it certainly has to be able to cope with our experience. In other words, we ought to be able to do something to it so that it can carry our particular message. At the same time, we just have to keep a number of our own languages. We have

about two hundred and fifty languages, that's just too many. But I think three or four at least ought to survive with a literature so that you would have a situation in which there is a literature in English, literature in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba. That is the way I see it.

PARTICIPANT: Mr. Achebe, I was very interested in something you said a few minutes ago about the relationship between poetry in Igbo and a particular kind of audience response. I wonder if you would say a few more words about that. The kind of audience response that is necessary for the performance of the poem.

ACHEBE: Yes, well this is changed. It is not said; it is sung, and it is based on a dirge which in my village, if somebody died prematurely, a young man or a young woman, his age group will go around the village singing it. A main singer and a chorus. That is what I mean. And in this poem I would be the main singer and there would be the chorus replying. Some of the things I would sing would be in the form of a question: "Who are we looking for?" And the audience would reply: "We are looking for Christopher Okigbo; if he has gone to the market let him come back; if he has gone to the stream let him return." And so on.

PARTICIPANT: In reading some of your novels, not because I am an Igbo myself but because of the fact that I have some interest in some of the stories of the novel, I keep wondering whether you think in Igbo and then write in English, or whether you think in English and then write in English. What do you usually do?

ACHEBE: When people talk about thinking in English or thinking in Igbo, I really don't know how it is done. When I am thinking, I am thinking. [laughter] What happens is this: the language, the character, the scene, everything comes together in my mind. I don't separate the language in which a particular story is told from the story itself. Therefore, if I am thinking about the chief priest in *Arrow of God*, then I'll be thinking, I imagine, in his language, trying to see what is happening through his eyes.

This is what happens. That is probably what you mean by thinking in Igbo. But I have never been able to stop and say, "I am now thinking in Igbo; I am now thinking in English." I suppose if I made the effort I would be able to separate the two, but I haven't. On the other hand, if I am writing about Winterbottom or his group, then I try to see the world as they see it and in their language. I don't think it is simply a question of words. The words are important, but not all important. It's language in a deeper sense. Their view of the world, their feeling, their conception of the world, which is different; it is not just words. And once you get the view right, I think the words would come.

PARTICIPANT: I notice that you have written a story for children. I wonder if you would comment on the major writer's role or responsibility with respect to children in literature, since it does not happen too often?

ACHEBE: Yes, I have written two books for children. The first one was prompted by Christopher Okigbo, the poet; he really put me on to it when he was representative of Cambridge University Press in West Africa. And he came to me and said, "You must write a children's book because this is very important," and I'd never done it before. I have a kind of missionary thing about writing in addition to its pleasures, so I agreed with him that there was a need for this. I had seen it myself. I had seen it in my daughter who was growing up and for whom I was beginning to buy children's books. I never read those books myself when I was growing so I didn't know what was in them. But I soon realized that my daughter was getting all kinds of wrong notions. This was in Nigeria, not in Europe or America. So one day I decided to look into these books, and, to give you a very quick rundown of the kind of story I saw: It is a story of a kite. There is a little boy, a white boy in Europe; you know, it's a glossy book, a lot of illustrations. You see the idea of Europe, town, big city, and this boy is flying a kite; and then the kite goes right up and gets

caught in the tail of an aeroplane that is passing. And this aeroplane carries it and on and on and on, and somewhere far away this kite dislodges itself and begins to fall, and it falls into a coconut tree. And then you see the huts, the round huts, and a lot of luscious background; and then you see a little black boy, naked, climbing the coconut tree, and then half way up he sees this kite, and so he is frightened, and he jumps down and calls his father who comes out with a spear and looks up and sees this kite; and he's scared and there's a big to do in the village. They send for the witch doctor, naturally. So the witch doctor comes with his group and a lot of drumming, and they dance around the tree seven times, and then the witch doctor's attendant climbs up and brings down this strange being with great reverence, and there is a big procession, and they take it to the village shrine where it is worshiped to this day. This is a very dangerous story. I don't think anyone has the right to tell children that kind of story about other people. Even if they had the right, I would not want my children to be brought up with that kind of story. This is the kind of feeling that set me going, and I found also it was interesting writing for children. It's very exciting.

PARTICIPANT: Mr. Achebe, how do you see the relationship between art and politics? Do you use your writing as a tool of liberation, or for liberation?

ACHEBE: Yes, liberation in a wide sense. But you don't say in your mind "I am going to write this novel in order to liberate." I think if you did that you would probably cramp your style. But I believe that writing is very much a political activity. Any kind of writing, any novel, especially in our situation, becomes very much a political action. And I don't buy the idea that there is a separation between politics, public life, public themes, public concerns, and an individual artistic concern. I don't see the difference. But having said that, I must hasten to add that there is a difference between a novel and a political tract. In other words, just saying I want

to do something good, I want to liberate the minds of my people, would not itself be a novel. It would not be a poem, either. There will be something else, another dimension. All I am saying is that I do not think that the two things are mutually antagonistic.

PARTICIPANT: If I could persist. Are black Americans reading your work, Afro-Americans reading your work, as much as you would like to see them. What's been your reception among black Americans?

ACHEBE: Quite frankly, I don't really know for a fact. I have met a number of people who say they have read my works. But I have not been able to find out exactly how many or what proportion. I have a better idea about home.

PARTICIPANT: I think I can answer that question a little. At least to the extent that in one of the Seattle public libraries, which I run, your novels plus that of Cyprian Ekwensi are very popular for popular reading, not just for school assignments. And they are being read by black Americans.

ACHEBE: How do you know which ones are read by black Americans?

PARTICIPANT: Well for one thing, the library is situated in the black community.

ACHEBE: Oh, I see. Well, I asked that question because, I'm not just being facetious, there was a library in the city where I used to live in Nigeria, a British Council library in the '50's, and they had this system of telling who was reading a book by using two colors: a black pen when the book is borrowed by an African and a pink pen when it's borrowed by a European. [laughter] So they could tell just who was reading what, and I was assured that there was no racism implied. And I believe it.

PARTICIPANT: I think with the advent of paperbacks it has been a great help.

PARTICIPANT: One short question. One of the misconceptions probably a lot of Americans have about Africa is that it is a very unified place culturally, and it doesn't take long to know that there is a lot of diversity; but, do you see part of what you're doing and part of what the other writers, both in English and French, are doing bringing more of a collective consciousness together; do you see communication within Africa improving?

ACHEBE: Oh yes. There are differences obviously, but the similarities are even more striking than the differences. There is no doubt at all about that. I have found this in my travels in other parts of Africa, in Eastern Africa for instance. I traveled there before they became independent, and many colonial administrators who left West Africa and moved to East Africa, sort of running away from independence, would tell you immediately that these people are different from yourselves. In other words, it is okay to have independence in West Africa but not here. Well that is not true because I soon found Africans telling me that my story is a Kikuyu story; you know, they are talking about *Things Fall Apart*. I remember somebody said, "If you change the names of this book to Kikuyu names, this would be our story." So obviously the differences are not as startling, but they are there, and it would be foolish to ignore real differences where they exist.

PARTICIPANT: I would like to ask you; some writers find it very difficult to write in both a prose form as well as in a poetic form; do you feel that you have found a satisfactory vehicle in both forms?

ACHEBE: Yes. Well there is a kind of history to this. I never really bothered too much with poetry until the Biafran War came, and suddenly it seemed to me that the novel was a luxury; I mean I couldn't afford it. I just didn't have the wish to do it so I turned to poetry.

CLASS DISCUSSION*

PARTICIPANT: In writing poetry which language do you prefer, your native language or English? Which is the best vehicle for you to use?

ACHEBE: I have written in both, and I don't think it is a question of which is better. I think certain ideas and certain things seem better done in Igbo and other things seem better in English--that's poetry. I have not written any fiction in Igbo. I don't think I want to do that. I would probably write some plays. When I turn to writing plays I would probably write them in Igbo so I don't think that there is any rationale that I can give you at the moment. It is just as the spirit moves me.

PARTICIPANT: Related to that question about the language that you write in might be a question concerning the audience that you and other African writers write for. Many of your books, of course, are known in this country and in the Western world. To what extent are they being read in Africa, and do you feel any sort of ambiguity in terms of the audience for which you write? I know in terms of African musicians there is a strong identification with the audience. In fact the audience is usually participating, and, therefore, the performer is very closely linked with the audience, and I wonder if this affects you as a writer or whether you know how it would affect other writers?

ACHEBE: Well as far as I know, my audience is first in Nigeria, then in Africa, and then in the rest of the world. And the figures which my publisher has

*Kane Hall, April 6, 1973

given me indicate, at least three or four years ago, that there were four times as many readers in Nigeria than in the rest of the world put together, and this rather pleased me. So I can rest easy on the question of audience.

Of course, this raises a big question of national language, what does a country like Nigeria do for a national language? And this is not simply a literary question. It is a political question; it is perhaps even more a political question. As I was saying this afternoon to another group, I don't really mind what we decide to do. We could decide for instance to repudiate the last hundred years in Africa and say, "No, we just don't recognize anything that happened--the Berlin Conference, 1884, and all that. We repudiate the boundaries that were created for us by the British and the French and the Portuguese and the others, and we return to the state of Africa before all this happened." Well, that will raise more problems than it solves, but it is a line that could be taken, and I don't rule it out completely. If we do that then a new situation would arise, but if we don't, if we like to keep the boundaries we've got, then it looks as if we have to make do with the colonial languages, in addition to some of the African languages that are big enough. Well, you wouldn't know, but there is a lot of literature in African languages already; this is not something for the future. There is a Yoruba novelist who wrote six full length novels in Yoruba, the late Chief Fagunwa. So this is not something entirely new; it is happening. I would like to see it happen more, of course.

PARTICIPANT: I'd like to ask you, in the educational system in your country, how much did you actually learn in terms of history as to the situation of blacks in America: how we came to be here, the type of treatment we received, and just the whole picture of slavery? I'd like to know how it was treated as a part of your education in your country.

ACHEBE: Well when I was growing up, the educational system was very odd, to put it mildly. We did not

study anything that had to do with us. The whole purpose of education seemed to be to tell you about other people so that the geography we did was the geography of England, the history we did was the history of England, and the constitution, well, even up to this day students take exams called "British Constitution." Then the French side was even worse. They had primers that began "Our ancestors the Gauls . . ." So in that kind of setting there was no room for talking about slavery and that kind of thing. The first American book I read was in high school, and it was a sad book. It was *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, and this was a sad book, and that was all. Today I think it is different. Fortunately I think the educational system is much more rational, much more related to ourselves. Perhaps not as much as it ought to be, but it is certainly better than twenty years ago.

PARTICIPANT: I have a three part question. First of all, do you think there is a problem with relevance in African writers today: most African writers today are writing about revolutionary movements, relating African history to revolution? The second part, is there any difference between the material content of East African as opposed to West African writers? And the third part of my question is that African drama has been traditionally linked with African music; would you comment on the separation of those two disciplines in terms of, say, major African dramatic works that really don't relate to African tradition but sort of use a concept inherent in African culture?

ACHEBE: I don't remember the first [laughter] or the second, so maybe I'll take the drama. It is true the idea of the drama, as far as we had it in our tradition, was a combination of various art forms, including even sculpture; the carver had something to do with it, and dancing, music, all that. And this was also a reflection of the total concept of culture. There was no real separation between religion and history and politics; it was an attempt to pull together. Now what the dramatist is doing today is, of course, the very early stages of trying out new forms,

new ways of handling this. And I think the best of them are aware of this need to bring in certainly music and dancing. I think you will find it whether it is in Soyinka or even the people you don't know about, the popular dramatists; like there is an incredible man called Hubert Ogunde in Lagos who has a most popular theater group. He has been going for twenty, thirty years, and it is a lot of dancing. There is a message, a political message. In fact, he is so political that at the height of the crisis in Nigeria in 1964 he was banned, his group was banned from Western Nigeria. So you can see. So he is pretty close to the tradition, and, if I may digress a bit, he was able to solve some of the new problems; problems of logistics and, you know, that kind of thing, in a very interesting way. He found that he couldn't retain his actresses long enough because in Africa women want to marry, and so after a year or so this woman would get married. So he hit on the excellent idea of marrying all his actresses [laughter] so that they stay in the cast and so this was one way in which he has been able to solve it.

Now what was the second question? [restatement] No, I don't think there is a fundamental difference between East and West Africa. I don't know of any fundamental difference. Except that West African writing started earlier in English. There was an older tradition of writing in Swahili, of course. There were important poets like Shabaan Robert in Tanzania who was writing long before I thought of writing; he is dead now. But apart from that, I think the basic concerns are the same. I don't have any problems reading them, and I have traveled there, and many of my readers have also said to me: "We fully understand what you are saying; this is our story." So I don't think there is any difference in content.

And the first? [restatement] Well, as I said last night, I don't really want to prescribe what any of us should write. This would be encroaching on a writer's human rights, his fundamental human rights. But all I would say is I do not exclude anything. I do not accept the view that a particular subject is for literature and another subject is not. That is

as far as I can go, and if modern writers, the young writers, want to write about any particular thing--about liberation, about freedom--then that's what they want to write about, and they will write about it anyway. [question restatement] The function of literature in Africa is that it should be useful to Africans. Does that answer your question?

[restatement] I know what you want, but I prefer not to legislate because having said that I think everything is possible, every theme is possible, then I won't say that somebody who takes a different view from me is not entitled to it. If somebody wants to write a poem on the rose, on daffodils, I would probably say "I think you are mistaken," but that is as far as I would go. I would not crucify him.

But what I was going to say you talk about pure literature I don't know really what that means. What I know is that you can have a good idea, like saying "I want my people to be free," but that's not a good poem, that's not a novel. So there is something else you have to bring to it if you want to write about it and make it a poem or a novel. Do you see the point I'm trying to make? This is where your craft or art comes in; you have to work that out for yourself. Some people imagine that simply saying "revolution," that is a poem. It's not. You have got to make your poem about revolution also move people, also excite people, and that is not something on which I can legislate.

PARTICIPANT: You don't necessarily have to excite people through the medium of being published or printed or anything like that, but you could just through the medium of contact with other people.

ACHEBE: Oh yes, you might be a dramatist, you don't need to publish--just get a live crowd and talk to them.

PARTICIPANT: We are told that you are a great African writer. This gives you responsibility. I think it's wrong for you to say you won't encroach upon a writer's supposed rights to write about anything he

wants when you're being promoted as the greatest African this or that. When Africa is today still under imperialism and people are suffering, you can't say people can write about anything. You can't forget about whom the writer is supposed to serve. [shortened]

ACHEBE: I know that argument; we are not on opposite sides at all even though you sound as if we were. When I say I do not want to legislate, I mean it. I mean I cannot tell you "This is what you are going to write about." All I can say is that you are entitled to write about anything. You are entitled. There is really no way you can alter that; you can talk about imperialism and colonialism; this is what we, what I, have been writing about. If you want to say that because I have some sort of a reputation I should become a kind of dictator as to what should be written in African literature, I just don't want to. I don't think anybody has any right to do that. I don't know that I can add anything more to that.

PARTICIPANT: As one of the forefront leaders in African literature, young black people look up to you. They are influenced by your works but look up to what you say, and it's really impossible for you to be in a position without taking a position per se. In the sense that I read your books, I am influenced by what you say. You really have to say, "I think African literature should do this," whether or not people go by what you say; it is important to know what your feelings are because this is, I think the most important fact, especially for young Africans who are constantly searching for ideas like that from their leaders.

ACHEBE: All I want to do, in spite of your persuasive tone, is to remove inhibitions from writers, not to add inhibitions. To remove. In other words, if somebody says literature is not supposed to be dealing with politics or with liberation, I say this is nonsense. Literature can because literature is a political thing. Now having said that, you want me

to sit down and say, "Look, you write about this and that." I just don't see that it's called for. It is unnecessary and won't work even. And if you require it, that kind of statement, you won't get it from me because I know precisely what I am saying. I know what I am writing. If you want to be influenced by my writing, then you read my works. But if you want me to come and tell you "Write like me or write like so and so," I say no. This is what I said last night. Many people are misled in trying to write like other people, trying to write about problems of other people. All I say is look at your problem, find out what the needs are, and once you know that, then go ahead.

PARTICIPANT: How can you say that education in Nigeria has improved? It is still dominated by the English system. I know this for a fact from attending school in Lagos. [shortened]

ACHEBE: Well I should ask you, when did you leave Lagos? [response] Oh, you should know more than. Well all I would say there is that there has been an improvement in the content of education from the days when I went to school. The differences, as you say, are not enough. Of course, people who live in capital cities are a special case all over the world. They tend to think that the world ends there. In Lagos, I used to live there too, I know people who didn't know that there was anything beyond Carter Bridge within Lagos. [question restatement] Well I don't know, you seem to be in the mood today for forcing people. [laughter] Well I didn't bring you here. How can I force you to go somewhere else? All you can say and all you can demand is perhaps to insist that the educational system should be constantly under review, should be improved--that a child brought up in Nigeria should know first about Nigeria before he knows about anywhere else, and we are just at the beginning stage of this, but you should have seen what my older brothers studied. You would be amazed about how much things have improved. When I was little I used to pick up school books, and everything was about the Vale of Evesham in England, and these

are places that you would probably never get to, but that was education. And I think we have made a certain progress; it is not enough obviously. In some countries things are rather better than in others. I would say, for instance, that if you went to Tanzania I suspect you would find that there is a greater awareness of what's going on in the world there than, say, in Nigeria. It is a matter of political leadership and it is not something you can solve in a lecture.

PARTICIPANT: Does industrialization pose the same problem for city dwellers in Nigeria as for those in the U.S.? Does it create ghettos in the same way?

ACHEBE: Well we have ghettos, but I don't think they were necessarily created by industrialization. Urbanization, perhaps. Industrialization as far as I know is really in its infancy in most African countries, but we have had problems of ghettos and slums. Not so much ghettos as slums in Africa. The industrialization is going to be the same way. For one thing, it is the same people who own the industries here who own the industries in Africa. Somebody was asking me the other day, "Do you know my friend from New York who owns the flour mills in Lagos?" I didn't know that the flour mills in Lagos were owned by a New Yorker. It is this kind of thing. I think eventually it is going to be the same kind of problems, unless we do something about it now.

PARTICIPANT: As an African writer who had looked at the problems in his country and, of course, problems that tend to deal with Africa and who had compared and spent some time in the Western world, are there any differences between the African world view and the Western world view?

ACHEBE: That is very big that is enormous. Where does one begin? Let me just take one example, religion, and I'll go into the past when the missionaries first came to, say, the Igbo people in Nigeria. In my village they came to my great grandfather and he

said (I wasn't there), "These people are talking about a different god. We already have so many so obviously we can add one more [laughter], so it's all right." He said, "You can go there and do your thing there, sing there." Eventually he drove them away, not because of their theology but because of their bad singing. [laughter] He said it was so depressing that his neighbors might think somebody had died. He said "Go somewhere else, I am with you in spirit." Now he did not suspect that this religion was a very jealous one, "the way, the truth, and the life" kind of thing. I think if he had suspected he probably would have shown greater opposition because such a concept as "I am the way, the truth, and the life" was just blasphemy. Nobody can be so sure as to claim this. In fact we have a proverb which says, "You may serve one god to perfection, Ojukwu [Ojukwu is a god], and Udo will kill you." Udo is another god. So you have to be at peace with all of them. The Yorubas had four hundred and one gods, according to their legend. So putting one more there didn't make any difference. So the attitude, to talk about a world view, is a more relaxed, more accommodating one than a rigid "I know my way is better than yours." So if you insist, that's what I would suggest is the basic difference.

PARTICIPANT: What constitutes the definition of a good life?

ACHEBE: I never thought of that. The good life. Well, let us say you are talking about somebody and you say "he's a man." That means the good life in my culture. He is honest, you can rely on his word; if he tells you "stand" it means "stand," it does not mean run away. He should also be able to take care of his wives and children. In other words he is not destitute, because we have a proverb which says that a man who is in rags speaks words that are in rags, ragged words. So you are also to be to a certain extent successful, in a material sense. So both spiritual and material.

You couldn't take the titles in my culture if you were a thief. You couldn't. There is no way

you could become a titled man if you were known to be dishonest in that sense. Also you were not allowed by this society to become too powerful, either politically or even economically. And the way they insure that you did not become a millionaire--we have no concept of millionaires--the way they insured this was to say to you, "If you want to prove that you are wealthy, then you must take titles." And so you say, "Oh yes, this is a very good idea; I'll take titles." Now the title taking will insure that you spend all your money. And this money will then go back into the community. You would feed the village for a number of days. You would give out money to those who had taken the title before you--a kind of social insurance. And by the end of this title you are exhausted. This is just the first title.

Now if you are still ambitious after that, you want to take the second, the next one, then in another five years they will say, "Fine, but these are the things you will do; you will feed the village for one week, and you will bring five cows"--or whatever it is--"to those who have this particular title." So you do that and by the end of this ceremony you are again at par with your neighbors. So in this kind of way you make sure that nobody becomes too powerful.

In fact the Igbos have a story about how they used to have the fifth title, the title of king, once in their system and the reason this title went out of use was that you were required to pay the debt of every member of your community before you could become their king. [laughter] Once you do all the other things, then, as the last stage in this ceremony, all the community would come one at a time and tell you how much they owe, and when you paid their debt then you became their king. This is a very profound political statement. [laughter]

PARTICIPANT: What is the dominant religion of the Igbo people?

ACHEBE: It has no name, it is just religion. [question restatement] It is now a mixture of all kinds; Christianity is there, bits of the old religion.

When I say it has no name, I really mean it has no name because there is no such thing as an irreligious man. So there are bits of the old, bits of the new, and, of course, a large number of people who don't profess any religion seriously.

PARTICIPANT: What about human sacrifice?

ACHEBE: No, it doesn't exist. That would be a crime today. It would be a crime to have a human sacrifice. That stopped long ago. But, of course, don't imagine that you don't have human sacrifice in your own culture because you did and still do. It just takes other forms. [applause]

PARTICIPANT: Is there a stronger tendency towards nationalism or more of a pan-Africanism or is there something to compare with the European Common Market in Africa?

ACHEBE: Well pan-Africanism is not very strong. It ought to be much stronger than it is. There are steps in the direction. You have heard of the Organization of African Unity? That is the first stage. It has all kinds of committees dealing with all kinds of things. I hear somebody hissing at the back. I applaud that sentiment because the Organization of African Unity is not very effective. And one of the reasons why it is not effective is that it cannot deal with important issues. It cannot deal with such issues as the economy because strictly speaking the economy of most African countries is not really in the hands of the Africans, and there are some leaders who will not want to touch it at all. They probably fear that if they did they would not stay one day longer. As you know, some powerful countries can decide who will be president in another country. Not just countries but even companies can decide that, so this really makes the situation very difficult.

The result is that when you have the Organization of African Unity meeting, they only talk in generalities, like the kind of thing we were saying here; they would call for the liberation of Africa.

Now I don't believe in calling for anything because it means nothing will be done, and everybody will go away after that. You know: "We have called for the liberation of Africa." But not one inch of Africa gets liberated by this call. The moment you begin to act, act in your economy, then something might happen. It is possible that you won't live to see it happen if you start, but until that happens, all "calls" are an absolute waste of time.

PARTICIPANT: Are you suggesting that organized movement is probably the better thing?

ACHEBE: Organized movement by people, first of all, people who have the same kind of thinking. It may sound like a retrograde step, to polarize the continent again between those who want to move and those who don't want to move. And I suspect that we were closer to something happening when we had two sides, the so-called Monrovia group and the Casablanca group. One was radical, the other conservative. Then we tried to cure this by having one voice, and this is where we are today, and it seems to me we might have to get back to the earlier stage of saying who is where, who is on this side, and who is not. Well that's a layman's view on politics.

PARTICIPANT: First of all, I would like to know in your opinion how strong the role of the traditional storyteller is today, not necessarily throughout all Africa, but more among the Igbo. Is the tradition still very much alive or is it dying because of people like yourself who are now instead not doing an oral tradition but more a literary tradition?

ACHEBE: The Igbos didn't have that professional storyteller kind of thing at all. Well, everybody was supposed to know the story of his people. This was part of his education. Of course some people were better than others. I said "professional" because in some African societies you had the *griot*, for instance, the man who went from place to place and earned a living out of praising other peoples'

ancestors, you know. We didn't have that kind of thing. It was part of your education to know the story of your people.

My father told us from his head the genealogy of the entire village from the man who founded it, knew everybody, the number of children they had, and how they all related down to the present day. So you could tell how all your neighbors were related to you. My brother recorded all that information, and five years later he checked, and my father gave him exactly the same thing again. So that was the way people were trained. Once you begin to write and to keep diaries you lose the capacity to remember, so that's what happened. I caught a glimpse of that generation. Even if they were Christians, like my father, they carried it over into their preaching, the oratory.

We were talking about the good life--you were supposed to be a good speaker. Not only among the Igbo but among the Gikuyu the word for chief is "a good speaker," so you are also supposed to know how to speak because this is very important, to get out of difficult situations, to steer the community out of peril. Today I don't think it exists in the same form because we are not entirely an oral tradition anymore. We're a mixture.

PARTICIPANT: What is the role of pidgin English in African literature today? What do you think the role should be? [shortened]

ACHEBE: I have used pidgin. I think that pidgin has a possibility in a particularly limited sense. I do not think it has enough flexibility to carry all that I want to say. I can see its possibility on the stage. I can see its possibility in certain forms of dialogue, not just the dialogue of any particular class of people, because it goes through all classes of Nigeria. A man who spoke standard English would use pidgin for a certain purpose, and I think it can be used in that way in literature. You also probably know a couple of poems written in pidgin. I think you can do that, but I don't think you can sustain a novel in pidgin. I doubt it.

PARTICIPANT: What is the reason for this?

ACHEBE: Because language is a tool, and pidgin English is not sufficiently sharp.

PARTICIPANT: Is Igbo?

ACHEBE: Yes it is. There are things, of course, that you could not convey in Igbo so you would have to invent or borrow words, but the structure and style of pidgin, I think, is limiting. I think it can only be used in certain areas. I remember the version of a book of the Bible which was translated into pidgin in the Cameroons long ago. All that it did was make you laugh. [laughter] Now this is not the intention of the Bible. So you see, there is a kind of limitation.

PARTICIPANT: Has the role of the Nigerian woman changed much in the last fifty years or so? Have Nigerian women been affected at all by women's liberation?

ACHEBE: I don't think that they really need to be affected by it. I suspect, I don't know, but it seems to me that Nigerian women were liberated long ago. I have not really encountered, I mean I've heard a few particular people grumble about particular things, but I don't really know that it is a burning issue. I'm not talking about the Muslim areas. That's a different story.

PARTICIPANT: Last night you talked of a ceremony with the earth goddess in which the priests chose common people, apparently at random, to build a temple under the guidance of master craftsmen. The resulting temples were superb. Bernard Leach, the English potter who was trained in Japan under one of the great masters, has written in several books of the relationship between the master craftsman and the common man in the production of art. He has discussed the tension between tradition and the freedom to innovate, between the communal aesthetics and the secular individualism that confronts the artist of today in a

developing country. Leach seems to find a real problem in that few artists have the genius to assimilate foreign and rapidly changing traditions with those of the traditional community. He suggests that almost all artists should have the humility to acknowledge their limitations and work under master craftsmen until they have themselves mastered their own traditions. Then they might attempt to assimilate foreign and new ways, but they must always be ready to admit that they probably lack the rare genius that can integrate the best of the new with the best of the old. Leach seems to feel that usually all that is gotten is the lowest common denominator. Yet he says that fine works were produced by ordinary men when they worked under great craftsmen, just as ordinary men produced great temples in your country. Would you develop more the relationship, as you see it, between the master craftsman and the common man. between the old discipline and the new desire for individual freedom? What might be the role of the master craftsman?

ACHEBE: Well, I think that the role of the master is to show by example, to transmit some of his experience, and it becomes a matter of competence. The kind of thing which you can gain by long practice. If you're a writer, you might find that by the time you've written your third, fourth novel, you've learned some short cuts. It couldn't be much really but you save yourself so much extra work. These are the things that maybe you can teach. Beyond that I don't know, and in the kind of society I am talking about, the craftsmen were sculptors, blacksmiths, etc. And you sat there and you watched. You saw the master perform and then you tried, and over the years you perfected your own style, and people said, "This man's mask is better than this man's." But the point I am trying to make is you did not have a very rigid separation. Most people would try their hands at these art forms; most people would try to carve a door. The attempt was to try and spread it, spread the knowledge, spread the competence through the community. This is what I was talking about.

PARTICIPANT: What would be the role of the master in the rapidly changing tradition--where one has to assimilate cultures very fast and try to make much or just some of them your own? For instance, what would be the role of the master craftsman in Nigeria when his people read James Joyce, Dostoevski, or Proust, and yet have a strong literature of their own? Or what might be the role of the masters in the temple building for the earth goddess ceremony when Arab and western architectural styles are beginning to be assimilated, yet the old is still strong. If a master has studied under Frank Lloyd Wright, what is now his role in building the temple?

ACHEBE: Well, the same kind of thing; the master would have to know his job first of all. I mean, presumably he would be better at the assimilation than a novice, and the novice would learn by watching the master. I don't know of any other way.

Maybe my own natural inclination in this doesn't help. I think there is a limited amount you can teach. You can help bring out, you can create a situation in which people want to perform, people want to participate. I think the important thing is really to create the environment in which many people want to sing; not sit down and listen to somebody else sing; create a situation in which people dance, and our culture did this. If you went to a funeral, you had to dance. It wasn't a question of watching a master performer. You had to dance. You may be an indifferent dancer but you still have to go there and if you don't dance well, the shame is yours.

I think it is a question of creating the environment, and in a highly organized, stratified, communal society, this doesn't happen any more because you have a job which keeps you busy all day. You have your own job, and you pay me for my services, so you begin to have the specialist, and this specialist is a mixed blessing. You might argue that you achieve a certain peak only in this system, but I would prefer to have art permeate society rather than have one or two people who will never be reproduced in the whole history of the world.

PARTICIPANT: We have in France a very traditional intellectual elitism. Do you feel the French-African writers are more in that direction than English-speaking African writers?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, I think they tend towards a more philosophical bent--in the Western sense. When Senghor talks, he talks about Cartesian rationalism; when Camera Laye talks, he talks about Cartesian logic. I think they tend to talk more about it, and this is not to put them down in any way because some of the finest things have come out from there. It's also true that when the reaction to them sets in it also sets in the same kind of philosophical way. Yambo Ouolguem could only come as a reaction to Camera Laye and his style. So I think this is obviously a clear case of the dominant metropolitan culture having its effect on the colonized people.

PARTICIPANT: Do you think that they are less involved because of that?

ACHEBE: I think, how should I put it, they tend to escape into philosophy when they are confronted by something that requires action. This is my suspicion. I mean I go to Senegal, this is the impression I get.

Look at Camera Laye; he is a very good example. He did a very good first book, *The Dark Child*, which is a beautiful recreation of his past. Well, there is no mention of Frenchmen, hardly, there. Then he does another excellent book which lifts the whole thing out into outer space, *The Radiance of the King*. It is not about any particular place, except some white man in some generalized Africa. When he tries to do something that relates to Guinea, it is a deplorable failure. His third book, *A Dream of Africa*, I think it is an embarrassing failure, not only because he evades issues. I think that he is basically a conservative, and he doesn't like the change, the change which is coming with independence. It is a very curious situation for an African to be in, but it is true. He doesn't really like this change, and so he can't handle it. What is happening is terrible

to him, and I'm not surprised that he finally left and went to live in Senegal.

PARTICIPANT: The U.S. has what you might call "the problem of youth." Do you have the same thing in Nigeria?

ACHEBE: It's not the same thing. I know the problem. I know why you should have it [laughter] but some of the manifestations are just simply astounding. The craving for poverty. This is the only way I can describe it. You know. Somebody who can well afford a good pair of pants buys a patched one so that it looks old and so on. This is some kind of rebellion. But it's playing at being poor. Those who are really poor don't play at it. They don't really have time to play at it. They want to escape from it; so, you see, your problem is one of affluence. We cannot have it. It is impossible. Our youth, you know, our young people in Africa want to wear good clothes. But they are just as opposed to their parents, I think, as any young people anywhere else. It takes different forms. They are more serious minded, serious in quotes. I mean if they went to school, they would say to themselves, "I am very lucky to be here, because there are many others who are not," so they would tend to work harder.

PARTICIPANT: I was very interested in your criticism last night of Armah. Would you say something about Soyinka who in his plays uses Western forms in plays which are a bit abstract compared to Nigerian storytelling, for example in *The Road*.

ACHEBE: Well, I think he makes a cult of obscurity, especially in his later work, which to my mind is unnecessary and unfortunate. It's got to a point, I think, when he's almost embarrassed if you talk about his earlier, or not earlier necessarily but simpler, plays, like the *Trials of Brother Jero*, which people like. I think he will prefer to be remembered by *The Road*, which is interesting, if you are ready to work at it. But the thing with him is that he has a gift

for words which gets him out of trouble so that even if you don't know what is going on, you suspect that something is being said and . . . [laughter]

PARTICIPANT: Could you maybe name some young writers whom we should get to know? I have yet to find a book by an African woman.

ACHEBE: Well I can give you one right away. Flora Nwapa; she has written two novels and a collection of short stories.

PARTICIPANT: Do you think it's a bad thing for people to lose their tribal feelings and languages for those of one nation? [shortened]

ACHEBE: Yes, that opposition, that separation, that dichotomy, whatever you like to call it, between tribe and nation is one that I think is absolutely ridiculous. People, whenever you talk about Africa, talk about tribes. I mean, think about the *New York Times*. They don't talk about Africa much, maybe once in two weeks. But it's always about tribes. And tribes are irrational people rushing around, throwing spears. When they have conflicts, it's not like the Irish and the English. It is something "tribal." You see? First of all let's get that out of the way. This differentiation between nations and tribes is in the minds of people. When you talk about the Igbo tribe, I talk about the Igbo people. When you talk about the Yoruba tribe, I talk about the Yoruba people. We've gotten used to manipulating words to make ourselves different.

Somebody was telling me the other day, "What about all the superstitions in Africa?" So I said, "Well, I've seen more superstitions here than I ever saw in Africa." She said, "Well, you know, we have our religious beliefs." [laughter] You see the words: "religious beliefs" and "superstitions"? Well, having got that off my chest, what was the question? [laughter]

I don't think that "nation" is good and "tribe" is bad. That's an oversimplification. Nation is good,

modern, European; tribe is primitive, bad, reactionary. I don't think it is true. They are just different forms of political organizations, and if you create out of a number of what you call tribes another unit which you might call state or nation, then what you should do is to think about what you should put into it so that all these people that you have drawn into the new unit will have a stake in it. It's your job to do something about it. You don't do so by saying "let's dissolve the other units." How do you do it anyway? You have to be able to do it somehow. Perhaps I am saying it because I am not a head of state, but this is what must be done, to make people feel they want to sacrifice their lives if necessary for this other unit, because it is so exciting, so powerful, so strong. I don't know what you should do, but until that is done we just have to . . . but don't get it into your mind that the answer is to break something down. It doesn't work that way. Just as you have towns, town loyalties, you have counties, some kind of county loyalty. You can carry it on until you get to the universal, to the United Nations. You don't have to break down any of them in particular so as to achieve the next.

PARTICIPANT: You were criticizing Armah's novel last night. I was wondering if you think his inability to relate to Ghana, to the high-life, his changed attitude, or his poor vision, if that could be related in any way to his having lived in the West, to his attending Harvard. Do you think that has had an effect on his imagination, on his sensibility, or is it more a conscious attempt to be a success to the rest of the world because the novel was very well received in this country? And then, secondly, is there any change? I haven't read the second novel, *Fragments*, but is there any change?

ACHEBE: That worse than the first [laughter] and the third is worse than the second. This is generally why I started talking about him. I don't really have too much to quarrel with in his first novel, quite frankly. I had to pick on him because I think he's

got a lot of talent. This is why he interests me. But what you said about his training does have something to do with it. I think it started even before Harvard. He was caught young, and I think he himself is aware of the problem. He told a mutual friend of ours that after the next novel he would have worked all of this out of his system, and he would begin to do something else; so he knows there is something wrong; not wrong, I mean there is something happening.

PARTICIPANT: Do you think he actually cannot see the vision; is it impaired?

ACHEBE: I think his vision must be impaired. I suspect he would be a person of integrity. But integrity is not enough. Integrity without common sense is not only useless it can even be dangerous; so with honesty. He should be honest, of course, but he should also understand what's going on in the world.

PARTICIPANT: What is causing the separation among Africans as far as Africans, in the religious sense, using the African science juju? Some African brothers that are becoming more educated become separated from the use of juju and developing it as a science?
[shortened]

ACHEBE: Juju's another word that introduces a lot of confusion because no two people mean exactly the same thing. Some people will use juju as a word even for medicine, herbs, because the doctor says some incantations before he administers the herb; so it is juju. Now we have in my village the oldest mission hospital in that part of Nigeria, and if you went there the first thing you were put through was prayers; before a nurse even gave you a card you had to pray; they had the catechist and the pastor; so you had to go through prayer. That is not regarded as juju, see. Now having said that, there is such a thing as herbs, and there were ways of treating diseases which our people had and perfected. Some of them were not very effective; some of them were. They had quacks, and they had good doctors. In the area of psychiatry, for

instance, they seemed to have developed a fairly satisfactory way of dealing with the problem, and it's only now that some Western-trained Africans like Professor Lambo have been able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the traditional ways of treating lunacy. So there are a whole lot of other things in that area that can be done, that can be looked at. But there are also genuine superstitions.

PARTICIPANT: Why is the separation coming about, like Westernization and separation from childhood through life?

ACHEBE: I don't know what you call a separation. I don't quite understand. It's one of the facts of life. I don't know why it is, but if people lose their religion, they often keep some of the worst aspects of it. They no longer believe in the gods, but they might stick to some of the superstitions, and this happens to everybody. It is not just an African phenomenon; it happens to everybody. You'll find people who say, "We no longer believe in God," but there are things they believe in. There are always other things.

PARTICIPANT: Okay, but it was my impression that Jomo Kenyatta, that his movements incorporated the use of juju. I don't understand why juju is being lost. The African brothers I meet around here, and sit down and talk to them about the real sense of the words, and they don't want to have any part of it. I don't understand it.

ACHEBE: Well, I don't really know what you said. . . .

PARTICIPANT: Juju is being used for medicine and curing the insane. . . .

ACHEBE: What I am saying is that's not juju. That is medicine.

PARTICIPANT: Okay then it's a science. I agree with that. But what about its revolutionary use?

ACHEBE: I don't know too much about this area. I cannot give you a satisfactory answer. I was going to pick up on what you said about Jomo Kenyatta. I don't think that even Jomo Kenyatta admits to having very much to do with the movement you are talking about. This seems to me to be the situation today. I suppose that if he had anything to do with it he's ashamed of what was said about the way it was done. I suppose so and I suppose the press in the civilized world talked about the hideous and the bestial things that happened and so they decided to repudiate them. But this is speculation because I am not a Kenyan and I don't know what really happened, but perhaps you have some inside knowledge.

PARTICIPANT: I'm often concerned about Africans coming from a culture that doesn't assume certain inferior things about you because of the color of your skin and coming into a country that does. I wonder how you are briefed about those kind of things that might happen, that may be insulting or uncomfortable for you. [shortened]

ACHEBE: No, I've never been briefed. I brief myself [laughter]; I just try to find out what I can. If anybody started briefing me, I would feel insulted. That's the way it is with me. On the other hand, if I go to a place where I feel uncomfortable and I'm not in the mood to put things right, then I will simply leave.

This is not the only country that has this problem. In fact, the first place I encountered discrimination was in Rhodesia. That was my very first experience. It's true, what you say, that in West Africa we are lucky, but don't imagine that we didn't have any. Even there, we also had it.

Now, my first experience in Rhodesia was quite startling. I knew there were problems and so on but that didn't help. I walked into a bus and took a seat. This was in 1961. Then suddenly I was aware of something funny: I was sitting next to the driver, and then I was suddenly aware that some strange feeling was existing in that bus. Before that I had seen

a number of people, both black and white, waiting outside the hotel. So now I looked back, and I didn't see any more black people, and obviously the white people were looking at me. That was the strange feeling I had sensed. When I turned back they all looked out the window. [laughter] I noticed then, the first time I took a look at the bus, that it was partitioned and that had never occurred to me. So I said, "Well, just too bad." I don't know what I would have done if I had known in advance that this was partitioned. I just don't know. Anyway, I stayed there, and the driver came and drove off.

We were going to see the Victoria Falls, and by then my ears were very sharp, and I heard a movement at the back, a bolt move, and then a door open. The ticket collector came in and was shocked to see me. He was African. So he came first to me and asked, "What are you doing here?" I said, "What am I doing here? I am going to Victoria Falls." [laughter] He said, "You should be in the back; don't you know you should be in the back?" I said, "No, I didn't know I should be in the back. This is where I like to sit." He said, "Where are you from?" I said, "Really, I don't think it is important, but since you want to know, I'm from Nigeria." So he left me and didn't say another word. He left me. He didn't take my money. He took money from the others quickly and fled back into the back of the bus.

So at the end of the trip when we got to Victoria Falls, there was a guard of honor formed by the people who were sitting in the back, cheering! I'm not used to that kind of position, so anyway I was most uncomfortable, but it was the kind of thing that would make me leave a place. Going back I deliberately went into the front again, and this time nobody said anything to me; they took my money. [laughter] I meant to spend two weeks, I spent three days. So I briefed myself as far as that was concerned. The same goes for any place.

PARTICIPANT: A very important question was asked a while back which I don't think you answered. There's a contradiction between saying you are for the

liberation of African people and saying an African writer can write about whatever he wants. [shortened]

ACHEBE: The contradiction is not in my mind as far as I can see but in yours. If you asked the question about relevance I would have talked about relevance, what I consider is relevance. This is what I was talking about yesterday, about what I regard as being relevant. You were asking me what should an African writer write, and now what I'll tell you is that he is free. He must be free from the inhibitions which say, "This is not art. This is not this." I don't see the contradiction. I know my position is not as neat as you would like it to be, but that's the way I see it.

PARTICIPANT: Do you get any trouble from the Nigerian government?

ACHEBE: Not really. I have had petty harassments, but I have not had any serious problems. I have had certain personal problems which suggested to me that I should travel for a year or two. [laughter]

PARTICIPANT: What do you mean by harassment?

ACHEBE: I mean harassment. I mean harassment. I don't want to tell you this story. It is boring. Just petty harassment.

PARTICIPANT: But you did leave Nigeria.

ACHEBE: Yes.

PARTICIPANT: So it was due to harassment, right?

ACHEBE: These lawyers we have here! [laughter]

PARTICIPANT: Maybe I talk to you later.

ACHEBE: Oh, do, do that. This is one thing that is quite clear: I have not been persecuted. If I had been, you would have heard. You wouldn't need me to

say so. But I have been harassed.