

Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe. Wren, Robert M. Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1980.

Covers in separate chapters:

Things Fall Apart (1958)
No Longer at Ease (1960)
Arrow of God (1964, 1974)
A Man of the People (1966)
Brief ^{with} biography
Brief Igbo history
Brief political history

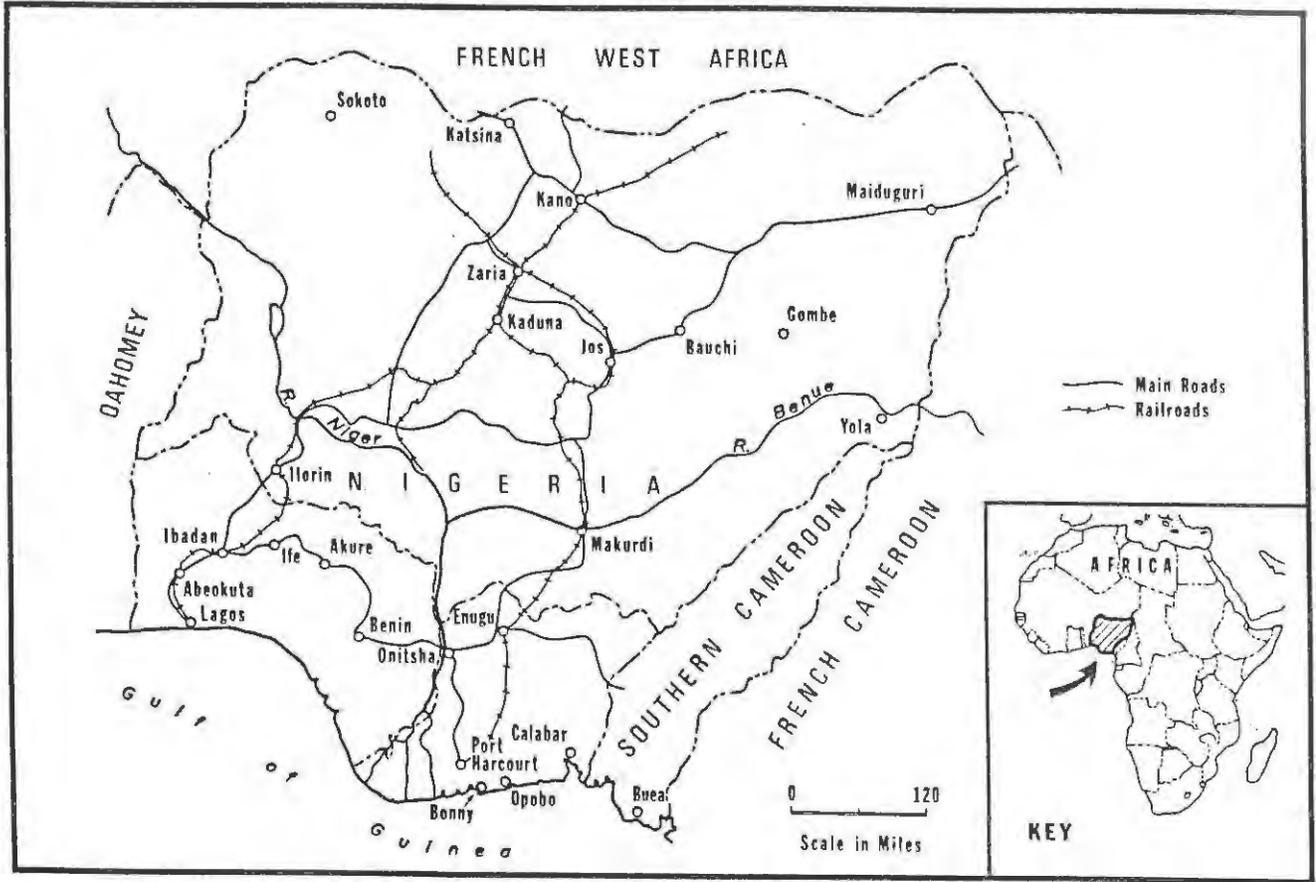
Includes:

Glossary
Notes on ...
names, money, pidgin
Photographs & maps
Bibliographies of ...
sources and publications
by and about Achebe
Index

Background and Biography

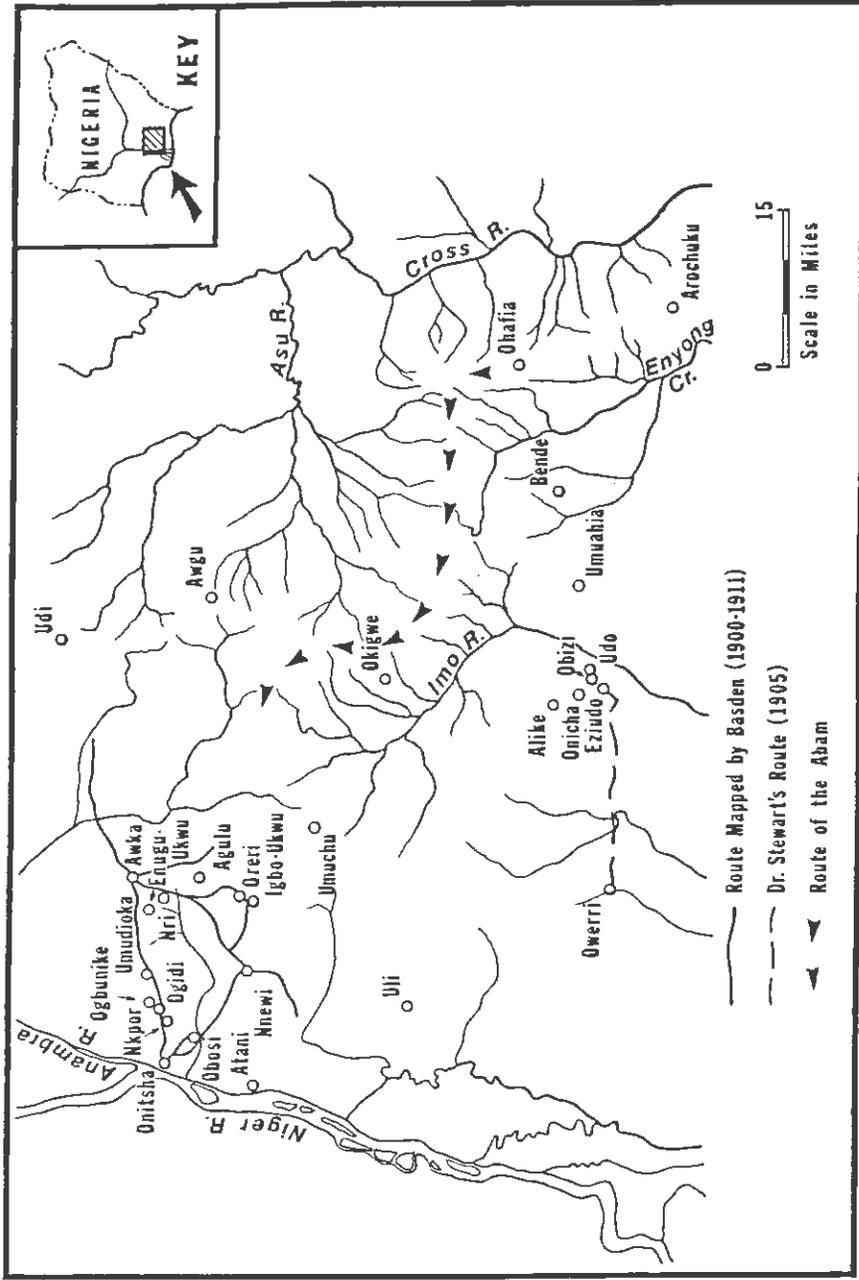
- o Born 16 November 1930 in Ogidi
 - o Father a catechist of the Church Missionary Society (Anglican)
 - o Infant's School (from ages 5 or 6 to 7 or 8) w/Igbo as primary language/language of instruction--taught reading, writing, counting, lessons in daily life and religion
 - o Standard instruction in English exclusively from about age 8
 - o Government College, Umuahia, at about age 14
 - o University College, Ibadan, to study medicine just before 18th birthday--college then affiliated w/University of London
 - o Switch in area of study to English, 1948-1953
 - o December 1950, first stories: "Polar Undergraduate," "In a Village Church"
 - o May 1952, "Marriage is a Private Affair" (anticipates Things Fall Apart)
 - o January 1953, "Dead Man's Path"
 - o Between January 1953 and January 1954, start of 12 years in radio broadcasting for Nigerian Broadcasting Corp. (NBC) and first job as "Talks Producer"
 - o 1953-1956, writing of single manuscript to become Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease
 - o 1957, first trip to England for BBC Staff School
 - o 1958, publishing of Things Fall Apart after return to Nigeria
 - o 1958, Controller of Eastern Regions of NBC
- (Nigerian Civil War: October 1965, begins (in effect) w/Igbo officers
January 1966, coup
July 1966, Gowon attempt to restore federal system
September & October 1966, riots & deaths of Igbos
October 1966, Ojukwu wants federation--loose confederation
March 1967, Gowon & Ojukwu talks break down, Gowon declares 4 regions 12 states
May 1967, Ojukwu creates Republic of Biafra
July 1967, full-scale war ensues
January 1979, unconditional surrender of Biafra)

China Achebe, 1974
 "I was baptized Albert Chinualumogu . . ."
 Morning Yet on Creation Day, p. 67



Nigeria, 1956

PREFACE



Achebe Country

Basden's route, mapped on walking tours as C.M.S. missionary, includes much of the heart-land Achebe writes about. Dr. Stewart's route is conjectural. The route of the Abam follows the highland ridge toward Umuchu and beyond; they travelled north to Udi as well.

One of my students at Lagos started me on the path that led to this book. He is Philip O. C. Umeh. We started one idle afternoon to see if it was possible to make me understand every word of *Arrow of God*—every word, every food, every plant, every name, even every grunt, as when Ezeulu replies to Edogo's greeting by saying merely "E-e-i!" That afternoon turned into countless hours as gradually Umeh enabled me to grasp the implications that I had not imagined—and often he had not imagined either prior to dealing with my curiosity. My debt to Umeh is easily the greatest single one, and what I appreciate most is that his enthusiasm for the project never flagged. Of all my Nigerian students, who taught me so much, he taught me the most.

For unanswered questions I turned elsewhere. Otu Abam Ubi, already a good friend, was archivist at the National Archives at Ibadan for a time and simplified my research there. Professor E. J. Alagoa helped to prepare for my work in the National Archives at Enugu, where the staff was helpful. At Ogidi, Achebe's home, the late Emmanuel Chukwuka Agulefo made himself my guest, sought out elders who could recall living memories or traditions I wondered about, and secured for me as a guide Ernest Arinze Agbogu, who coincidentally was at work on a history of Ogidi to 1891, prior to the coming of the white man. Long after I returned to the United States, Agbogu and I continued our correspondence. After Philip Umeh, I must credit Agbogu as my most valuable informant, and E. C. Agulefo as the most generous and thoughtful. Since my return to Houston, I have occasionally been called upon by my Nigerian students here for help. To Christian Odionu I am particularly indebted. Dr. Theo Vincent, visiting Houston on leave from the University of Lagos, gave last-moment help with the Glossary and the Index on Pidgin. He and Dr. Hilda Jaffe read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions.

In London, Rosemary Keen of the Church Missionary Society archivist was both helpful and imaginative, and the staff at the Public Record Office and the British Museum functioned with their customary efficiency. I made use as well of the New York Public Library's science collection, the University of Texas library at Austin, and the M. D. Anderson Library of the University of Houston.

The University of Houston provided me with a Faculty Development Leave for the Fall of 1972 in order to begin a quite different project in South Africa. When that nation's Ministry of the Interior decided that I was an undesirable person to whom no visa could be granted, I appealed to the Honorable Justice Clark at the University of Lagos. He agreed to my joining his staff for a year. Through the generosity of the Committee for the International Exchange of Scholars, acting through the United States Information Service, I was able to extend my period at Lagos through Spring 1975. A grant from the University of Houston enabled me to return briefly to Nigeria.

Hopes and Impediments

In a little nondescript coffee shop where I sometimes stop for a hamburger in Amherst there are some unfunny inscriptions hanging on the walls, representing a one-sided dialogue between management and staff. The unfunniest of them all reads – poetically:

Take care of your boss
The next one may be worse.

The trouble with writers is that they will often refuse to live by such rationality.

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THE NOVELIST AS TEACHER

WRITING of the kind I do is relatively new in my part of the world and it is too soon to try and describe in detail the complex of relationships between us and our readers. However, I think I can safely deal with one aspect of these relationships which is rarely mentioned. Because of our largely European education our writers may be pardoned if they begin by thinking that the relationship between European writers and their audience will automatically reproduce itself in Africa. We have learnt from Europe that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of society – wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. He is in revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything.

All that is well known, which is why some of us seem too eager for our society to treat us with the same hostility or even behave as though it already does. But I am not interested now in what writers expect of society; that is generally contained in their books, or should be. What is not so well documented is what society expects of its writers.

I am assuming, of course, that our writer and his society live in the same place. I realize that a lot has been made of the allegation that African writers have to write for European and American readers because African readers where they exist at all are only interested in reading textbooks. I don't know if African writers always have a foreign audience

First published in the *New Statesman*, London, 29 January 1965; subsequently in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Heinemann Educational Books, 1975.

incantation that conjured up scenes and landscapes of an alien, happy and unattainable land.

I remember also my mother's *Ije Onye Kraist* which must have been an Igbo adaptation of *Pilgrim's Progress*. It could not have been the whole book; it was too thin. But it had some frightening pictures. I recall in particular a most vivid impression of the valley of the shadow of death. I thought a lot about death in those days. There was another little book which frightened and fascinated me. It had drawings of different parts of the human body. But I was primarily interested in what my elder sister told me was the human heart. Since there is a slight confusion in Igbo between heart and soul I took it that that strange thing looking almost like my mother's iron cooking pot turned upside down was the very thing that flew out when a man died and perched on the head of the coffin on the way to the cemetery.

I found some use for most of the books in our house but by no means all. There was one arithmetic book I smuggled out and sold for half a penny which I needed to buy the tasty *elele* some temptress of a woman sold in the little market outside the school. I was found out and my mother who had never had cause till then to doubt my honesty – laziness, yes, but not theft – received a huge shock. Of course she redeemed the book. I was so ashamed when she brought it home that I don't think I ever looked at it again, which was probably why I never had much use for mathematics.

My parents' reverence for books was almost superstitious; so my action must have seemed like a form of juvenile simony. My father was much worse than my mother. He never destroyed any paper. When he died we had to make a bonfire of all the hoardings of his long life. I am the very opposite of him in this. I can't stand paper around me. Whenever I see a lot of it I am seized by a mild attack of pyromania. When I die my children will not have a bonfire.

The kind of taste I acquired from the chaotic literature in my father's house can well be imagined. For instance I became very fond of those aspects of ecclesiastical history as could be garnered from *The West African Churchman's Pamphlet* – a little terror of a booklet prescribing interminable Bible readings morning and night. But it was a veritable gold mine for the kind of information I craved in those days. It had the date of consecration for practically every Anglican bishop who ever served in West Africa; and even more intriguing, the dates of their death. Many of them didn't last very long. I remember one pathetic case (I forget his name) who arrived in Lagos straight from his consecration at St Paul's Cathedral and was dead within days, and his wife a week or two after him. Those were the days when West Africa was truly the

white man's grave, when those great lines were written of which I was at that time unaware:

Bight of Benin! Bight of Benin!
Where few come out though many go in!

But the most fascinating information I got from *Pamphlet*, as we called it, was this cryptic entry: 'Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, died 430.' It had that elusive and eternal quality, a tantalizing unfamiliarity which I always found moving.

I did not know that I was going to be a writer because I did not really know of the existence of such creatures until fairly late. The folk-stories my mother and elder sister told me had the immemorial quality of the sky and the forests and the rivers. Later, when I got to know that the European stories I read were written by known people it still didn't help much. It was the same Europeans who made all the other marvellous things like the motor car. We did not come into it at all. We made nothing that wasn't primitive and heathenish.

The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves. It suddenly seemed that we too might have a story to tell. 'Rule Britannia!' to which we had marched so unselfconsciously on Empire Day now stuck in our throat.

At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised *Mister Johnson*) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned.

Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son. But things happen very fast in Africa. I had hardly begun to bask in the sunshine of reconciliation when a new cloud appeared, a new estrangement. Political independence had come. The nationalist leader of yesterday (with whom it had not been too difficult to make common cause) had become the not so attractive party boss. And then things really got going. The party boss was chased out by the bright military boys, new idols of the people. But the party boss knows how to wait, knows by heart the counsel Mother Bedbug gave her little ones when the harassed owner of the bed poured hot water on them: 'Be patient,' said she, 'for what is hot will in the end be cold.' What is bright can also get tarnished, like the military boys.

One hears that the party boss is already conducting a whispering campaign: 'You done see us chop,' he says, 'now you see *dem* chop. Which one you like pass?' And the people are truly confused.



NAMED FOR VICTORIA, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

I WAS born in Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria of devout Christian parents. The line between Christian and non-Christian was much more definite in my village forty years ago than it is today. When I was growing up I remember we tended to look down on the others. We were called in our language 'the people of the church' or 'the association of God'. The others we called, with the conceit appropriate to followers of the true religion, the heathen or even 'the people of nothing'.

Thinking about it today I am not so sure that it isn't they who should have been looking down on us for our apostasy. And perhaps they did. But the bounties of the Christian God were not to be taken lightly – education, paid jobs and many other advantages that nobody in his right senses could underrate. And in fairness we should add that there was more than naked opportunism in the defection of many to the new religion. For in some ways and in certain circumstances it stood firmly on the side of humane behaviour. It said, for instance, that twins were not evil and must no longer be abandoned in the forest to die. Think what that would have done for that unhappy woman whose heart torn to shreds at every birth could now hold on precariously to a new hope.

There was still considerable evangelical fervour in my early days. Once a month in place of the afternoon church service we went into the village with the gospel. We would sing all the way to the selected communal meeting place. Then the pastor or catechist or one of the

elders having waited for enough heathen people to assemble would address them on the evil futility of their ways. I do not recall that we made even one conversion. On the contrary I have a distinct memory of the preacher getting into serious trouble with a villager who was apparently notorious for turning up at every occasion with a different awkward question. As you would expect this was no common villager but a fallen Christian, technically known as a *backslider*. Like Satan a spell in heaven had armed him with unfair insights.

My father had joined the new faith as a young man and risen rapidly in its ranks to become an evangelist and church teacher. His maternal uncle who had brought him up (his own parents having died early) was a man of note in the village. He had taken the highest-but-one title that a man of wealth and honour might aspire to, and the feast he gave the town on his initiation became a byword for open-handedness bordering on prodigality. The grateful and approving community called him henceforth Udo Osinyi – Udo who cooks more than the whole people can eat.

From which you might deduce that my ancestors approved of ostentation. And you would be right. But they would probably have argued if the charge was made by their modern counterparts that in their day wealth could only be acquired honestly, by the sweat of a man's brow. They would probably never have given what I believe was the real but carefully concealed reason, namely that given their extreme republican and egalitarian world-view it made good sense for the community to encourage a man acquiring more wealth than his neighbours to squander it and thus convert a threat of material power into harmless honorific distinction, while his accumulated riches flowed back into the commonwealth.

Apparently the first missionaries who came to my village went to Udo Osinyi to pay their respects and seek support for their work. For a short while he allowed them to operate from his compound. He probably thought it was some kind of circus whose strange presence added lustre to his household. But after a few days he sent them packing again. Not, as you might think, on account of the crazy theology they had begun to propound but on the much more serious grounds of musical aesthetics. Said the old man: 'Your singing is too sad to come from a man's house. My neighbours might think it was my funeral dirge.'

So they parted – without rancour. When my father joined the missionaries the old man does not seem to have raised any serious objections. Perhaps like Ezeulu he thought he needed a representative in their camp. Or perhaps he thought it was a modern diversion which a young man might indulge in without coming to too much harm. He

must have had second thoughts when my father began to have ideas about converting him. But it never came to an open rift; apparently not even a quarrel. They remained very close to the end. I don't know it for certain but I think the old man was the very embodiment of tolerance, insisting only that whatever a man decided to do he should do it with style. I am told he was very pleased when my father, a teacher now, had a wedding to which white missionaries (now no longer figures of fun) came in their fineries, their men and their women, bearing gifts. He must have been impressed too by the wedding feast which might not have approached his own legendary performance but was by all accounts pretty lavish.

Before my father died, he had told me of a recent dream in which his uncle, long long dead, arrived at our house like a traveller from a distant land come in for a brief stop and rest and was full of admiration for the zinc house my father had built. There was something between those two that I find deep, moving and perplexing. And of those two generations – defectors and loyalists alike – there was something I have not been able to fathom. That was why the middle story in the Okonkwo trilogy as I originally projected it never got written. I had suddenly become aware that in my gallery of ancestral heroes there is an empty place from which an unknown personage seems to have departed.

I was baptized Albert Chinualumogu. I dropped the tribute to Victorian England when I went to the university although you might find some early acquaintances still calling me by it. The earliest of them all – my mother – certainly stuck to it to the bitter end. So if anyone asks you what Her Britannic Majesty Queen Victoria had in common with Chinua Achebe, the answer is: They both lost their Albert! As for the second name, which in the manner of my people is a full-length philosophical statement, I simply cut it in two, making it more businesslike without, I hope, losing the general drift of its meaning.

I have always been fond of stories and intrigued by language – first Igbo, spoken with such eloquence by the old men of the village, and later English which I began to learn at about the age of eight. I don't know for certain but I have probably spoken more words in Igbo than English but I have definitely written more words in English than Igbo. Which I think makes me perfectly bilingual. Some people have suggested that I should be better off writing in Igbo. Sometimes they seek to drive the point home by asking me in which language I dream. When I reply that I dream in both languages they seem not to believe it. More recently I have heard an even more potent and metaphysical version of the question: In what language do you have an orgasm? That should settle the matter if I knew.

We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today; but when I was a boy one could see and sense the peculiar quality and atmosphere of

it more clearly. I am not talking about all that rubbish we hear of the spiritual void and mental stresses that Africans are supposed to have, or the evil forces and irrational passions prowling through Africa's heart of darkness. We know the racist mystique behind a lot of that stuff and should merely point out that those who prefer to see Africa in those lurid terms have not themselves demonstrated any clear superiority in sanity or more competence in coping with life.

But still the crossroads does have a certain dangerous potency; dangerous because a man might perish there wrestling with multiple-headed spirits, but also he might be lucky and return to his people with the boon of prophetic vision.

On one arm of the cross we sang hymns and read the Bible night and day. On the other my father's brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols. That was how it was supposed to be anyhow. But I knew without knowing why that it was too simple a way to describe what was going on. Those idols and that food had a strange pull on me in spite of my being such a thorough little Christian that often at Sunday services at the height of the grandeur of 'Te Deum Laudamus' I would have dreams of a mantle of gold falling on me as the choir of angels drowned our mortal song and the voice of God Himself thundering: This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. Yet, despite those delusions of divine destiny I was not past taking my little sister to our neighbour's house when our parents were not looking and partaking of heathen festival meals. I never found their rice and stew to have the flavour of idolatry. I was about ten then. If anyone likes to believe that I was torn by spiritual agonies or stretched on the rack of my ambivalence, he certainly may suit himself. I do not remember any undue distress. What I do remember is a fascination for the ritual and the life on the other arm of the crossroads. And I believe two things were in my favour – that curiosity, and the little distance imposed between me and it by the accident of my birth. The distance becomes not a separation but a bringing together like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully.

I was lucky in having a few old books around the house when I was learning to read. As the fifth in a family of six children and with parents so passionate for their children's education, I inherited many discarded primers and readers. I remember *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in an advanced stage of falling apart. I think it must have been a prose adaptation, simplified and illustrated. I don't remember whether I made anything of it. Except the title. I couldn't get over the strange beauty of it. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was a magic phrase – an

in mind. What I do know is that they don't have to. At least I know that I don't have to. Last year the pattern of sales of *Things Fall Apart* in the cheap paperback edition was as follows: about 800 copies in Britain; 20,000 in Nigeria; and about 2,500 in all other places. The same pattern was true also of *No Longer at Ease*.

Most of my readers are young. They are either in school or college or have only recently left. And many of them look to me as a kind of teacher. Only the other day I received this letter from Northern Nigeria:

Dear C. Achebe,

I do not usually write to authors, no matter how interesting their work is, but I feel I must tell you how much I enjoyed your editions of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. I look forward to reading your new edition *Arrow of God*. Your novels serve as advice to us young. I trust that you will continue to produce as many of this type of books. With friendly greetings and best wishes.

Yours sincerely,
I. Buba Yero Mafindi

It is quite clear what this particular reader expects of me. Nor is there much doubt about another reader in Ghana who wrote me a rather pathetic letter to say that I had neglected to include questions and answers at the end of *Things Fall Apart* and could I make these available to him to ensure his success at next year's school certificate examination. This is what I would call in Nigerian pidgin 'a how-for-do' reader and I hope there are not very many like him. But also in Ghana I met a young woman teacher who immediately took me to task for not making the hero of my *No Longer at Ease* marry the girl he is in love with. I made the kind of vague noises I usually make whenever a wise critic comes along to tell me I should have written a different book to the one I wrote. But my woman teacher was not going to be shaken off so easily. She was in deadly earnest. Did I know, she said, that there were many women in the kind of situation I had described and that I could have served them well if I had shown that it was possible to find one man with enough guts to go against custom?

I don't agree, of course. But this young woman spoke with so much feeling that I couldn't help being a little uneasy at the accusation (for it was indeed a serious accusation) that I had squandered a rare opportunity for education on a whimsical and frivolous exercise. It is important to say at this point that no self-respecting writer will take dictation from his audience. He must remain free to disagree with his society and go into rebellion against it if need be. But I am for choosing

my cause very carefully. Why should I start waging war as a Nigerian newspaper editor was doing the other day on the 'soulless efficiency' of Europe's industrial and technological civilization when the very thing my society needs may well be a little technical efficiency?

My thinking on the peculiar needs of different societies was sharpened when not long ago I heard an English pop song which I think was entitled 'I Ain't Gonna Wash for a Week'. At first I wondered why it should occur to anyone to take such a vow when there were so many much more worthwhile resolutions to make. But later it dawned on me that this singer belonged to the same culture which in an earlier age of self-satisfaction had blasphemed and said that cleanliness was next to godliness. So I saw him in a new light – as a kind of divine administrator of vengeance. I make bold to say, however, that his particular offices would not be required in my society because we did not commit the sin of turning hygiene into a god.

Needless to say, we do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our name. If I were God I would regard as the very worst our acceptance – for whatever reason – of racial inferiority. It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us.

Let me give one or two examples of the result of the disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races. I remember the shock felt by Christians of my father's generation in my village in the early 1940s when for the first time the local girls' school performed Nigerian dances at the anniversary of the coming of the gospel. Hitherto they had always put on something Christian and civilized which I believe was called the Maypole dance. In those days – when I was growing up – I also remember that it was only the poor benighted heathen who had any use for our local handicraft, e.g. our pottery. Christians and the well-to-do (and they were usually the same people) displayed their tins and other metalware. We never carried water pots to the stream. I had a small cylindrical biscuit-tin suitable to my years while the older members of our household carried four-gallon kerosene tins.

Today things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe. Three or four weeks ago my wife, who teaches English in a boys' school, asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the harmattan. He said the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn't have thought,

would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do. How can this great blasphemy be purged? I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry.

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. You have all heard of the 'African personality'; of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them any more. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better.

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front. For he is after all – as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his *African Image* – the sensitive point of his community. The Ghanaian professor of philosophy, William Abraham, puts it this way:

Just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, African historians go into the history of Africa, African political scientists concern themselves with the politics of Africa; why should African literary creators be exempted from the services that they themselves recognize as genuine?

I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive. In a recent anthology a Hausa folk-tale, having recounted the usual fabulous incidents, ends with these words:

They all came and they lived happily together. He had several sons and daughters who grew up and helped in raising the standard of education of the country.¹

As I said elsewhere, if you consider this ending a naïve anticlimax then you cannot know very much about Africa.

Leeds University, 1965

superiority over those pamphlet writers has nothing to do with a vision of 'literature in the service of itself', but arises out of a richer imagination and a more soundly based moralism. For while they are offering a half-baked ethic of escapism from the pressures of modern township living, he has his two feet firmly planted in the hard soil of an ancient oral, and moral, tradition.

Of course Tutuola's art conceals – or rather clothes – his purpose, as all good art must do. But anybody who asks what the story is about can hardly have read him. And I suspect that many who talk about Tutuola one way or another are yet to read him.

The first two sentences in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* tell us clearly enough what the story is about:

I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life.²

The reader may, of course, be so taken with Tutuola's vigorous and unusual prose style or beguiled by that felicitous coinage, 'drinkard', that he misses the social and ethical question being proposed: What happens when a man immerses himself in pleasure to the exclusion of all work; when he raises pleasure to the status of work and occupation and says in effect: 'Pleasure be thou my work!?' *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a rich and spectacular exploration of this gross perversion, its expiation through appropriate punishment and the offender's final restoration. That's what the story is about.

Tutuola does not waste any time exploring or elaborating on the offence itself. The offender/protagonist/narrator states the case simply and bluntly in those two short sentences on page one, gives an equally brief and precise background to it, and proceeds to spend the rest of the book on the punishment he undergoes in atonement for his offence and then a fairly brief coda on his restoration.

This disposition of emphases might appear somewhat uneven to the 'modern' reader brought up on lengthy psychological interpretations of guilt. But Tutuola belongs primarily to humanity's earlier tradition which could say simply: 'Thou shalt not commit murder', without necessarily having to explore what motivations might lurk in murky prenatal experience! But he also knows perhaps instinctively what the moderns are all about and so makes a gesture to them in this seemingly harmless piece of family background:

But when my father noticed that I could not do any work more than to drink, he engaged an expert palm-wine tapster for me; he had no other work more than to tap palm-wine every day.³



WORK AND PLAY IN TUTUOLA'S THE PALM-WINE DRINKARD

A YOUNG Nigerian woman doing a higher degree in America said to me when I taught there in the 1970s, 'I hear you teach Tutuola'. It was not a simple statement; her accent was heavy with accusation. We discussed the matter for a while and it became quite clear that she considered *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* to be childish and crude and certainly not the kind of thing a patriotic Nigerian should be exporting to America. Back in Nigeria a few years later I also noticed a certain condescension among my students towards the book and a clear indication that they did not consider it good enough to engage the serious attention of educated adults like themselves. They could not see what it was about.

Now, if I were one of those who hold the view that literature does not have to be about anything I would have been able to tell that young woman and those students of mine not to worry – that 'this tall devilish story' (as Dylan Thomas called it) should be enjoyed solely for its own sake, as 'literature in the service of itself', as the work of 'a writer without problems'.¹

'Problems' in this context, we must understand, is the apparently misguided and old-fashioned desire on the part of some African writers to prove a point or teach a moral in their writing which some advanced critics tell us is so unworthy! Actually Tutuola does have 'problems'; he is the most moralistic of all Nigerian writers, being fully as single-minded in the matter as the chap-book authors of the Onitsha Market. His

The first Equiano Memorial Lecture, University of Ibadan, 15 July 1977.

Again Tutuola has packed into a simple and brief statement a huge social and ethical proposition: A man who will not work can only stay alive if he can somehow commandeer to his own use the labour of other people either by becoming a common thief or a slave-owner. Thanks to the affluence of a father (he 'was the richest man in our town'), who is willing to indulge his son's outrageous appetite, the Drinkard is enabled to buy a slave and to press him into a daily round of exploitative and socially useless work. The point is therefore made quite clearly – lest we be tempted to dismiss the Drinkard's love of palm-wine as a personal drinking problem – that refusal to work cannot be a simple 'self-regarding act' but is a social and moral offence of colossal consequence.

Tutuola's moral universe is one in which work and play in their numerous variations complement each other. The good life, he seems to say, is that in which business and pleasure, striving and repose, giving and receiving, suffering and enjoyment, punishment and reprieve, poverty and wealth, have their place, their time and their measure. We *give* work and struggle; and in the end we *take* rest and fulfilment.

Nothing in all this is particularly original. What is so very impressive is Tutuola's inventiveness in creating new and unexpected circumstances for the unfolding of the theme. For example, to make the point that those whose personal circumstance shields them from the necessity to work are really unfortunate and deprived and must do something to remedy their lack, Tutuola creates the rather dramatic and mysterious, and in the end quite terrible, personage, the Invisible Pawn, otherwise known as Give and Take, who comes to the Drinkard out of the night and tells how he has always heard the word 'poor' without really knowing it and asks for help in order to make its acquaintance. Simbi, a character in Tutuola's later book, has, like the Drinkard, a much too easy childhood and deals with it herself by going out in search of hardship. The Drinkard has too much appetite and too little wisdom to recognize his predicament unaided and has to be forced into dealing with it. I think that one should make the point here that Tutuola's conception of poverty as creative experience is very different from the view which gave rise in the past to the profession of poverty in certain religions or in societies where the poor are encouraged to make a living out of the mendicant's bowl. I suspect that Tutuola would consider these manifestations as gross and mistaken. For he is concerned not with poverty as an alternative way of life nor with affluence as necessarily evil. The creative potential of poverty in his vision is really no more than its ability to expose to the world of work those who might otherwise escape its rigours. The romantic fad of patched and dirty

jeans among the young of affluent societies today which fakes poverty rather painlessly would not seem to fall into Tutuola's scheme either.

Even a moderately careful reading of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* reveals a number of instances where Tutuola, by consistently placing work and play in close sequence, appears quite clearly to be making a point.

In the episode of the Three Good Creatures we see how music relieves the Drinkard and his wife of the curse of their half-bodied baby. They have just danced non-stop for five days and find themselves unexpectedly rid of their intolerable burden. But right away they also realise that after the dance the life of struggle must be resumed and its details attended to:

Then after we had left these creatures and our half-bodied baby, we started a fresh journey ... But we were penniless ... then I thought within myself how could we get money for our food etc.⁴

And so the poet/drinkard who has just sung a lofty panegyric to the three personifications of music, and danced for five days without pausing even to eat, now suddenly becomes a practical man again concerned with money and 'food etc.'. He carves a paddle, turns himself into a canoe and his wife into a boatman. At the end of the first day they have garnered seven pounds, five shillings and three pence from ferrying passengers across the river. (One small point here: the reformed, or rather reforming, Drinkard is a magician and from time to time does exploit his supernatural powers, but he always has to combine this ability with honest-to-God work. So although he can turn himself into a canoe, he still needs to carve a real paddle!)

If this episode were the only instance in the book where Tutuola makes the point of restoring the ascendancy of work after a hinge one would probably not be justified in attaching particular significance to it, striking though it certainly is. But we do find Tutuola returning again and again to the same motif. In fact later in the book there is another 'special occasion' involving Drum, Dance and Song again. This time the merriment is to celebrate the deliverance of the Red People from an ancient curse and the founding of their new city. On this occasion even Drum, Dance and Song surpass themselves. Such is the power of their music that 'people who had been dead for hundreds of years rose up and came to witness':

The whole people of the new town, the whole people that rose up from the grave, animals, snakes, Spirits and other nameless creatures ...⁵

join in the merriment. The cosmic upheaval unleashed by the three

primogenitors of music is only quelled and natural order restored after they have been banished permanently from the world so that only the memory of their visit remains with mankind. Quite clearly the primal force of their presence has proved too strong for the maintenance of the world's work. Immediately after their gigantic display and banishment Tutuola switches abruptly and dramatically to the theme of work to clinch the point:

So when these three fellows (Drum, Song and Dance) disappeared, the people of the new town went back to their houses ... After I had spent a year with my wife in this new town, I became a rich man. Then I hired many labourers to clear bush for me and it was cleared up to three miles square ... then I planted the seeds and grain.⁶

One could give other examples of Tutuola's juxtaposition of work and play in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Indeed it becomes possible, I believe, to see the proper balance between them as a fundamental law of Tutuola's world, and the consequences of its infringement as the central meaning of the book.

In addition to the primary balance between work and play in the grand design of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* we notice also a subordinate or secondary system of interior balance between particularly harsh sectors of the Drinkard's ordeal and recuperative periods of rest. Compared to the sectors of hardship the periods of respite are few and brief – suggesting a deficit of rest which is however fully justified by the Drinkard's previous life of indolent frivolity. But though brief and sporadic these intervening episodes of rest/play manage to stand out in arresting prominence, as in the episodes of the White Tree, Wraith Island and Wrong Town. Of these the White Tree yields the richest harvest of interpretation and I should like to examine it a little closely.

The episode of the White Tree occurs immediately after the Drinkard and his wife have endured at the hands of the sadistic inhabitants of Unreturnable-heaven's Town the most savage torture of the entire journey. It thus seems quite appropriate that after such suffering the travellers should now enjoy their most elaborate rest. But the ease and luxury they do encounter in the White Tree surpass all expectations. Free food and drink in a cabaret atmosphere and a gambling casino are among the amenities of this European-style haven of conspicuous consumption. Predictably the Drinkard very quickly relapses into his old addictions:

I began to lavish all the drinks as I had been a great palm-wine drinkard in my town before I left.⁷

And naturally also he loses the will for the quest, so that when Faithful

Mother tells him that it is time to resume his journey, he begs to be permitted to stay in the Tree for ever. When she tells him that this is impossible, he makes a second plea – for her to accompany them to the end of the journey. Again she says no. Totally disconsolate the Drinkard then contemplates a third possibility: death. But even that escape is also impossible for him or his wife because they have already sold their death.

I think that what Tutuola is saying here is very important for an understanding of the meaning of the story. The three ways in which the pilgrim might seek to evade the rigours of a dangerous quest are taken up in turn and rejected: he may not prolong the interlude of rest and enjoyment at the inn; he may not be assisted to arrive at his destination without the trouble of travelling; he may not opt out of the struggle through premature death.

As the Drinkard and his wife resume their journey there is even an oblique suggestion that their recent interlude in the White Tree has been of the insubstantial nature of a dream:

... it was just as if a person slept in his or her room, but when he woke up, he found himself or herself inside a big bush.⁸

If we accept this suggestion the implication may well be that play, though a necessary restorative, is not only a temporary but even an illusory escape from the reality of waking life which is work with its attendant pain and suffering.

The Drinkard's fault, as we said earlier, is that he attempted to subvert the order of things and put play in the place of work. He does this because he has an appetite which knows no limit or boundary. His punishment is exact and appropriate. He is launched on a quest in which he is obliged to wage adequate struggle to compensate for his previous idleness. While he is undergoing this learning process he is shown many positive examples from other people of what his own life should have been. We have already referred to the visit made to him one night by Give and Take. Then there is the example of Death himself at work in his garden; and there is the king of Wraith Island who neglects to invite the smallest creature in his kingdom to join in communal work and is compelled to offer apologies to the little fellow for the slight.

But perhaps the most striking object lesson for the Drinkard is the terrible son born from his wife's swollen thumb. Although the Drinkard may not know or acknowledge it this child is like a distorting mirror reflecting his father's image in even less flattering proportions. He is really Palm-Wine Drinkard Junior, in other words. He has the same insatiable appetite, the same lack of self-control and moderation, the

same readiness to victimize and enslave others. He is of course an altogether nastier person than his father but the essential ingredients of character are the same.

There is a secondary theme which runs beside that of work and play and finally meets and merges with it. This is what I shall call the theme of boundaries. A few incidents in the novel will elucidate this.

As the Drinkard and his wife leave Wraith Island we see the friendly inhabitants come out and accompany them to the frontier, and then stop. And we are told quite explicitly by the Drinkard that

...if it was in their power they would have led us to our destination, but they were forbidden to touch another creature's land or bush.⁹

Similarly at the end of the sojourn in the White Tree the travellers, disinclined, as we have seen, to resume their arduous quest, ask Faithful Mother to lead them to the end of the journey: 'But she told us that she could not do such a request because she must not go beyond their boundary'.¹⁰

There are numerous other instances in the book where boundaries play a decisive role in the plot. For instance a monster may be pursuing the travellers furiously and then suddenly and unexpectedly stop at some frontier such as a road. And we have a variant of the same basic prohibition in the case of Give and Take who 'could not do anything in the day time' – thus observing a boundary erected in time rather than space. And finally the Drinkard is to learn on setting foot at last on Dead's Town that 'it was forbidden for alives to come to the Dead's Town'¹¹ – an example of what we might perhaps call an existential boundary!

What all this means is that here in this most unlikely of places, this jungle where everything seems possible and lawlessness might have seemed quite natural, there is yet a law of jurisdiction which sets a limit to the activity of even the most unpredictable of its rampaging demons. Because no monster however powerful is allowed a free run of the place, anarchy is held – precariously, but held – at bay, so that a traveller who perseveres can progress from one completed task to the domain of another and in the end achieve progressively the creative, moral purpose in the extraordinary but by no means arbitrary universe of Tutuola's story.

This law of boundaries operates more subtly but no less powerfully at other levels in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. A boundary implies a duality of jurisdictions both of which must be honoured if there is to be order in the world. Tutuola suggests that promise and fulfilment constitute one

such duality, for a promise is no less than a pledge for future work, a solemn undertaking to work later if you can play now. Consequently we find that Tutuola never allows a broken promise to go unpunished. There are quite a few examples of such breach and punishment in the book but we shall only refer to the case of the Drinkard's father-in-law. We may recall that this man has promised that if the Drinkard rescues his daughter he will direct him towards the goal of his quest. The Drinkard performs his part of the bargain, but the man, not wishing to part from his daughter, who has in the meantime married the Drinkard, begins to prevaricate. Consequently the Drinkard tarries in his father-in-law's town for three years. It is during this time that a terrible scourge of a child is born to the young couple, a child who begins straight away to terrorize the town. He causes so much havoc that the community conspire to burn him to ashes. After this experience the old man needs no further persuasion to give his son-in-law the information he has withheld for years in breach of his promise.

The principle of unfulfilled promise explored in this episode and elsewhere is developed further and given a new twist in the activities of that strange personage called Give and Take. You will recall that when we first encounter him he is meekly seeking to enlarge his experience by knowing poverty at first hand. The Drinkard obliges him by setting him up to taste the bitter life of an indentured labourer. Later we learn to our great surprise that Give and Take is no ordinary fellow but 'the head of all the Bush-creatures ... and the most powerful in the world of the Bush-creatures'. This mysterious monarch of the jungle does get the experience he seeks but in the process establishes the principle behind his name: that a community which lets some invisible hand do its work for it will sooner or later forfeit the harvest. Give and Take proves a merciless exactor; for the labour he has given he takes not only the people's crops but, in the conflict that ensues, their lives as well.

Finally we can also apply the concept of boundaries to the dual jurisdictions of work and play. Because the Drinkard's appetite knows no limit or boundary he takes and takes without giving and allows play not just to transgress but wholly and totally to overrun the territory of work. His ordeal in the jungle of correction changes him from a social parasite to a leader and a teacher whose abiding gift to his people is to create the condition in which they can overcome want and reliance on magic, and return to the arts of agriculture and husbandry.

'Relevance' is a word bandied around very much in contemporary expression, but it still has validity none the less. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* Tutuola is weaving more than a tall, devilish story. He is speaking strongly and directly to our times. For what could be more

relevant than a celebration of work today for the benefit of a generation and a people whose heroes are no longer makers of things and ideas but spectacular and insatiable consumers?

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DON'T LET HIM DIE: A TRIBUTE TO
CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO

CHRISTOPHER Okigbo could not enter or leave a room unremarked; yet he was not extravagant in manner or appearance. There was something about him not easy to define, a certain inevitability of drama and event. His vibrancy and heightened sense of life touched everyone he came into contact with. It is not surprising therefore that the young poet/artist Kevin Echeruo, who died even younger, soon after Okigbo, should have celebrated him as *ogbanje*, one of those mysterious, elusive and often highly talented beings who hurry to leave the world and to come again; or that Pol Ndu, who was to die in a road disaster, every gory detail of which he had predicted in a poem five years earlier, should call Okigbo a seer.

Okigbo's exit was, for me, totally in character. I can see him clearly in his white 'gown' and cream trousers among the vast crowd milling around my bombed apartment, the first spectacle of its kind in the Biafran capital in the second month of the war. I doubt that we exchanged more than a sentence or two. There were scores of sympathizers pressing forward to commiserate with me or praise God that my life and the lives of my wife and children had been spared. So I hardly caught more than a glimpse of him in that crowd and then he was gone like a meteor, for ever.

That elusive impression is the one that lingers out of so many. As a matter of fact he and I had talked for two solid hours that very

Preface to *Don't Let Him Die*, eds. Chinua Achebe and Dubem Okator, Fourth Dimension Publishing Company, Enugu, 1978.