

The Nigerian Writer, Chinua Achebe

An Eventful Life

Helen Fallon

Reading *Things Fall Apart* by the yellow light of a kerosene lamp I was struck by how much the village described in Achebe's novel resembled the village where I lived. It was 1990 and I was teaching librarianship at the University of Sierra Leone. One of my students had given me the novel.

Later, I learned that the villages in the hills around Freetown were settled in the early nineteenth century by different West African ethnic groups, including Igbo and Yoruba people from (what is now) Nigeria. Many of their descendants, among whom I lived, would have been from the same ethnic group, the Igbo, that Achebe belongs to. Thus the resemblance between the village he created and my village.

CHANGING TIMES

Things Fall Apart is set in the late nineteenth century and tells the story of Okonkwo, a proud Igbo man who lives in a traditional village where life is filled with myth, folktales, respect for elders and for the gods of their ancestors. These values would have been part of Achebe's own home village, Ogidi, four hundred miles east of Lagos. It was to this village that Chinua's father, Isaiah, returned with his wife, Janet, and five-year-old son in 1935. An evangelical minister, Isaiah, had spent the previous thirty years going from place to place setting up churches.

In retirement, he returned to the home of his ancestors where he built himself a house from galvanized zinc, as befitted a relatively prosperous man. His parents,

who died when Isaiah was a child, had worshipped traditional African gods and he was the first of his family to adopt the Christian faith. Janet had also become a Christian. Their son, Chinua, was christened Albert Chinualumogo, but used the shortened form of his middle name which means "May God fight on my behalf".

In *Things Fall Apart*, the existing order of village life is disrupted by the arrival of white people and the coming of new beliefs and attitudes. Okonkwo is unable to adapt to change. In the end, as the village's traditional way of life changes, his life disintegrates.

That novel was written in 1958, when Achebe was twenty-eight.

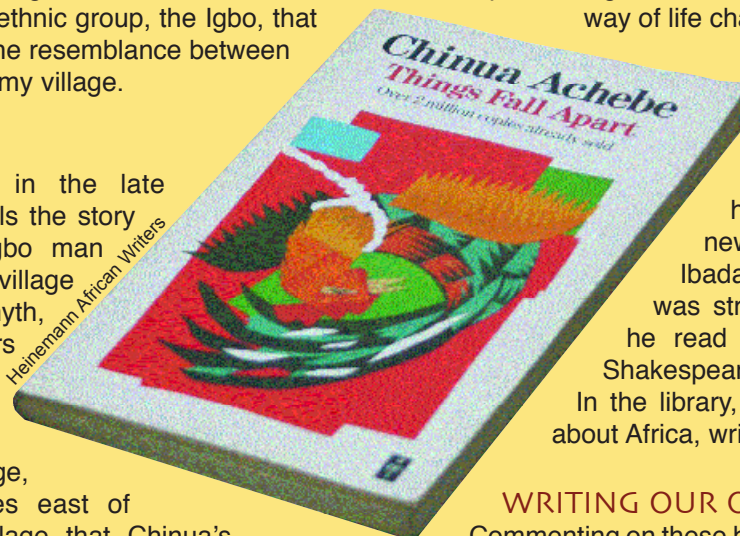
Six years previously he had graduated from the newly established University of Ibadan. Studying English, Achebe was struck by how all the writers he read were foreigners; Dickens, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Conrad...

In the library, he read adventure stories about Africa, written by white people.

WRITING OUR OWN STORIES

Commenting on these books he later said, "I did not connect the Africa in these riveting adventure stories even remotely with myself or with my homeland." His belief that the story his people had to tell could not be written by an outsider led Achebe to write *Things Fall Apart*. Published in 1958, it has sold over ten million copies and been translated into fifty languages.

Achebe left Nigeria in 1957 to study broadcasting at



the BBC in London. Met by his brother, who was in England studying engineering, he was amazed to be driven in a taxi by a white man and to see white people working as labourers. Coming from colonial Nigeria he had thought all white people held powerful positions, regardless of where they lived, by virtue of the colour of their skin.

Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, was published in 1960, the year Nigeria gained independence from Britain. In this novel Obi, the grandson of Okonkwo, returns from university in England. A well-educated young Christian, he takes up a post in the Nigerian civil service on the eve of Independence, and finds himself caught somewhere between the values and customs of his parents and village elders and those of a new Nigeria. Achebe, returning from Britain to take up the post of Director of External Broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, probably experienced first hand many of the problems Obi encountered.

Impressed by the writings of Achebe and other new African writers, Heinemann, the English publishers, initiated the African Writers Series and invited Achebe to become the founding editor. Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*, was published two years later. Set in the early twentieth century, it portrays the disruptive effect the colonial system had on the traditions and customs of the Igbo people.

ONE LEARNS AS ONE SUFFERS

During the 1967–'70 civil war in Nigeria Achebe supported those who unsuccessfully attempted to create a new Biafran state. In 1970 he left Nigeria with his family and lectured in African literature in America. He lived between the United States and Nigeria for a number of years until, in 1990 while in Nigeria, he was involved in a serious car accident which left him paralysed from the waist down. Speaking of his accident, he said, "One learns as one suffers and one is richer."



Chinua Achebe is one of Africa's most influential and widely published writers. He has received numerous honours from around the world and is a recipient of the highest award for intellectual achievement in his native country of Nigeria.

(Photo courtesy: The Nigerian Village Square)

Despite being confined to a wheelchair, Achebe continues to write and lecture. He is a professor at Bard College in the United States, where his wife Christie – also Nigerian – is professor of psychology. They have two sons and two daughters.

Achebe has received over thirty honorary doctorates from international universities and many other awards for his service to African literature.

In an interview Achebe talked about his desire to end his days at the place of his beginning: "When the time is right I would like to go back to my village. What I would most like would be to become an elder in my village." ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *Things Fall Apart* is published by Heinemann African Writers.