

FEATURES, IDEAS, INTERVIEW / CHINUA ACHEBE
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Going home was a sad awakening

Marjorie Coeyman, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. - Living in exile, it is easy to begin to forget the simple things. "The sounds of the morning are different," says Chinua Achebe of the way it feels to greet the day in his native region in Nigeria. "To hear the birds." And, of course, he adds, "To be surrounded by the Ibo language."

These pleasures had not been available to the famed Nigerian novelist, the author of the 1959 classic "Things Fall Apart" - for nine years since leaving his country in 1990.

A serious car accident and the need for Western medical attention first prompted him to leave and then a repressive five-year military regime kept him out.

Shortly after leaving, Mr. Achebe settled in New York's Hudson Valley region where he has since been teaching literature at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson.

This summer, however, three months after the inauguration of a new civilian government, Achebe was able to return home for a visit. The journey aroused so many emotions that even Achebe, a man famed for the power of his narratives, says he cannot yet find the words to frame them.

In a dialogue with the Congolese novelist Emmanuel Dongala - also teaching at Bard while he lives in exile from his country's civil war - Achebe spoke recently in front of Bard faculty and students about what he felt and saw while in his homeland.

Nigeria has 'ceased to work'

"There is great sadness," says Achebe. "This is a country that has ceased to work." And yet, he adds, "I kept fighting to see the good in us as well." Especially at home in his own region, among the Ibo people, he says he found hope and vitality. "The ordinary people are not passive. They are viable, even humorous."

The writer flew into the country's former capital of Lagos, but went almost immediately to his home region 400 miles to the east. He also, at the invitation of the government, traveled to the new capital of Abuja to meet with President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Speaking at Bard, Achebe stopped short of wholeheartedly endorsing President Obasanjo. "Writers are not in the business of endorsing anybody," he says. But he did call Obasanjo "the best of the possibilities that we have right now," adding that he is "a bright man," with "many qualifications."

Yet a return to civilian rule is only a beginning point for the troubled country, Achebe points out. "At least now we have turned and are facing in the right direction," he says. "But that is all that we have done."

Achebe says it was impossible not to be troubled by the poverty and decay evident in his country. "Even arriving at the airport in Lagos is depressing," he says. "You suddenly felt that something was wrong. There was a lack of smoothness in the runway."

Despite having booked his flight on a respected international airline, Achebe was concerned to realize on landing that there was no wheelchair on board. "Regulations say there should always be a wheelchair on board," he says. "First, you wonder why this airline would disregard the rule on this flight. Then you realize - it is because they are going to Nigeria."

Once off the plane, the drive along a crumbling highway with beggars sleeping by the wayside was also deeply troubling, says Achebe.

But perhaps the point that concerns him most about the future of his country is its unresolved issues of ethnicity and the consequences for his people, the Ibo. "There are three major ethnic groups in Nigeria," he explains. "The Hausa, the Yoruba, the Ibo. But the Ibo have been forgotten."

Destruction of native culture

Achebe is the author of five novels, some poetry, and several collections of essays. But he is most renowned for "Things Fall Apart," a novel that depicts with heartbreaking simplicity the destruction of native culture by the arrival of Europeans. The book has sold 8 million copies, been translated into 50 languages, and is frequently assigned reading in US high school and college classes.

There is today a certain sad irony to the plot of "Things Fall Apart." The novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, must pass some years in exile from his tribe. When he returns, he finds the old ways have been eroded and that he can no longer find his way without the old customs.

But for Achebe, the relationship with Western culture has always been more complex. He was raised in a family devoted to the Anglican religion and educated in English. While he has sometimes been criticized for the decision to write his novels in English rather than in Ibo - a language he sometimes employs for poetry - he says, "English is the language that was available to me."

He acknowledges, however, that some colleagues disagree with that decision. "I have two hands," he says. "They do different things. Some of my friends think you

should cut off one hand out of loyalty to the other."

It has been 12 years since Achebe has produced a novel, and he won't say when another is likely to emerge. "My engagement with fiction is quite interesting, and I don't fully understand it," he says. The next novel "will come when it will come."

As for the future, Achebe has no doubts about the course he would like to follow. When the time is right, he says, "I would like to go back to my village." Although he has taught on the university level most of his life, both in Nigeria and abroad, it is not an academic career that Achebe is dreaming of today. "I would like to go back and retire," he says. "What I would most like would be to become an elder in my village."

What happened to our people?

"Perhaps I have been away too long," Okonkwo said, almost to himself. "But I can not understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?"

"Have you not heard how the white man wiped out Abame?" asked Obierika.

"I have heard," said Okonkwo. "But I have also heard that Abame people were weak and foolish. Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and machetes? We would be cowards to compare ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land."

"It is already too late," said Obierika sadly.

- From 'Things Fall Apart,' by Chinua Achebe

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