[transcript]

CONVERSATION WITH CHINUA ACHEBE ABOUT HIS RETURN HOME TO NIGERIA

CONDUCTED BY EMMANUEL DONGALA

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Emmanuel Dongala [ED]:

I'm very flattered to share this platform with Professor Achebe. I met him 20 years ago, in 1979 in Berlin. There was a festival there for writers from Third World countries. I was just a beginning writer, and also I come from the French-speaking part of Africa so our literature was not very well known in the other English-speaking part of Africa. I approached him, and he was so kind, and before he left he gave me two copies of Things Fall Apart. And then later, when I was trying to get to the United States, he was kind enough to speak about me, to say nice words about me. And finally last year, when I wanted to apply for the Guggenheim Fellowship, he was kind enough to sponsor me, and I got the Guggenheim. So I'm flattered to be here with Professor Achebe. And we are here to hear him talk to us about what he has seen in Nigeria, about his hopes and doubts, etc.

And you have to excuse me because English is my fourth language. You know, in our part of the country we usually use French as the daily life language.

So, now, let's start our conversation, Professor Achebe. I would like you to tell us first what was your feeling going home, going back to Nigeria, to set foot in your country after nine years in exile. First of all, your feeling, and then also what do you think the people of the country, how did they greet you?

Chinua Achebe [CA]:

Thank you very much, Emmanuel, thanks a lot. It was a very emotional return for many reasons. But I think I should tell you first the relationship between me and Nigeria. It's somewhat strange, it's a love-hate relationship. If you'd like us to explore that later you can ask me, but let me just run through some of the incidents in my life.

Chinua Achebe

In 1961, at the beginning of my writing career, I was awarded the first Nigerian National Trophy for my second novel.

In 1966, soldiers of the federal government went to my office in Lagos, and they were drunk. This was after the second coup we had in 1966. They asked my staff where I was because they wanted to see which was stronger -- their gun or my pen. So my staff called my home and told me what was going on. I called our boss, the director-general, and asked, What is all this? And he said, Where are you? I told him, I'm at home, and he replied, you had better leave. Take Christie and the children and go at once. So I went into hiding. This was 1966. My crime? I had published a novel called *A Man of the People*.

Then the civil war began. Incidentally, even after that incident at my house, I still insisted on living in Lagos, which I called my capital. But things eventually got worse, so I had to leave at the start of the civil war, in which I was, I often say, on the "wrong side." I was on the side of those asking to secede from the country.

We lost the war, and at the end of it, fortunately, the federal government behaved reasonably well, for they could have rounded up all the key people who were in opposition and

executed them. One of the ministers said to me, "You gave us more trouble than the rest of Biafra"--not a very good recommendation in that kind of situation. But they didn't do anything awful at that time. They simply denied you things like a passport for travel--little irritations. By 1972, I'd had enough, and I decided to leave the country for the first time, to go into exile. I came to this country from '72 to '76.

In 1978, I wrote arguably the harshest book on Nigeria. It's called *The Trouble with Nigeria*. In 1979, I was given the country's highest honor for intellectual achievement.

In 1990, my university hosted an international symposium to mark my 60th anniversary. In 1990, I was involved in a very serious road accident and there was such an outpouring of affection.

So that's the kind of relationship I've had with this country. I've never really had any trouble with the people of Nigeria. I discovered it's more the rulers of the country that I was apt to have trouble with. The outpouring of affection, which came not only from Nigeria, but from all parts of the world actually, including this country, was remarkable.

So I was taken to Europe, to Britain, because the doctors in Nigeria could not cope with my injuries, and I was in hospital for 6 months. From there I came back to the United States, and I've been here at Bard ever since.

When we first arrived I thought I was going to be here maybe for one year. It

I didn't forget home. I was very well received here, but things in Nigeria were getting worse and worse and worse, one dictator after another, until we hit bottom. Except that of course the bottom is not where you think. If you hit bottom you find out there's more. That's what's happened to Nigeria.

didn't seem to me that I was going to spend almost ten years here. But the coming itself was so strange. I was discharged

from the hospital in the morning and took a flight from Heathrow Airport in the afternoon to come to New York. And I remember being met by Bard College dean Stuart Levine in alimousine -- a crazy drive that seemed to take all night. And Kingston seemed like Siberia to me. But that was the situation in which I arrived. I was extremely well received here, which is why we stayed so long.

But I didn't forget home. I was very well received here, but things in Nigeria were getting worse and worse and worse, one dictator after another, until we hit bottom. Except that of course the bottom is not where you think. If you hit bottom you find out there's more. That's what's happened to Nigeria.

But Nigeria is a very lucky place. I'm very superstitious about Nigeria. You know, whatever Providence figured out that country had something in mind. If you look at the map of Nigeria you'll find it's almost like a rectangle: two of the major rivers of Africa, the Niger and the Benue, coming from opposite sides of this rectangle and meeting in the middle of the country, and joining, and flowing south into the sea. The rivers form a giant 'Y' which cuts the country into three blocks: the northern block, the southwest block, and the southeast block. In each of these blocks Providence placed one of the major ethnic groups in Africa: the Hausa in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. And the idea of this is that Nigeria is like a tripod; it's got to stand on three legs, which is very stable.

But the Nigerian stool refuses to stand on three legs. It's constantly trying to stand on two legs and always falling down. If you read the foreign press about the country, they now talk about two dominant ethnic groups. This has become the current wisdom. It says there are two leading ethnic groups, the Hausa and the Yoruba. The Igbo have been forgotten. Now, Nigeria can't work with two ethnic groups alone. It needs the third for that stability. I'm not talking about the scores of minor ethnic groups--I'm just talking about the three big ones.

My feeling when I was leaving the U.S. was that no matter how bad things were, I simply had to go home to Nigeria. It was going to be very difficult. We took all the care we could, and we

set out. My children decided that they would go with us, the two of them from this country--one from Texas, the other one from Los Angeles. The one in England went right home from there to wait for us. So I was well protected. And I needed it.

Arriving at the Muritala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos was very depressing. You suddenly felt that something was wrong. You couldn't put your finger on it immediately. Maybe it was the lack of smoothness of the runway, I don't know. But you knew something was wrong -- it wasn't like that when I left nine years ago. And then worst of all was when it came time to disembark and there was no aisle chair, which I needed to be transferred into in order to go out. They simply said there wasn't any. Swissair should have carried one in any case on their flight. They didn't have one either. Why? I guess because they knew they were going to Nigeria, and normal rules could be ignored.

So then we began to create trouble, chaos. My son, who's a physician, really told them off when somebody came and said, Well, we'll carry him.

What happened next was worse, because when we made a lot of trouble an aisle chair appeared. So it wasn't that there was no aisle chair in Nigeria's major international airport; it was simply that nobody bothered to bring it. So this is a country that has ceased to work. You saw that everywhere. I saw that in Lagos. Millions of people milling around. The country has stopped working.

So that was my first impression. I think that's what you asked. If you want me to go on talking, I will. I think it may be better for you to ask another question.

ED:

We're here to listen to you, so I'm just giving some prompts. So that's your first impression. And then from Lagos did you go directly to your home?

CA:

To my village, yes. Well, first of all, we had planned this to be a quiet return. The plan was to slip in quietly into Lagos, spend a

night there and the next day, and then to set out for my home town, which would be 400 miles by road to the east. But our plan didn't work. Actually, the news had been circulating for weeks about my return. Some papers had announced weeks before that I was in the country. But on this particular day we thought we had beaten them. But one of the papers, The Guardian, somehow managed to find out. So we were pursued by the press for the rest of our stay.

One full day in Lagos, and then the long journey to my village. On a once excellent express road that is no longer maintained, now and again we saw beggars actually living by the roadside, not even near towns. And I wondered, who could stop here to give them anything? Anyway, we made this long journey and got to my village across the Niger, got to my village at dusk. And when we got to my gate there was a banner: "Chinua Achebe Welcome Home." I hadn't told anybody in my village, I hadn't told anybody in Lagos. And the leader of the village committee came forward and said that they'd been waiting all day for us, and they'd only just dispersed because it was getting dark. And as he spoke, we heard some cannon fire. I said, What's that? Somebody said, "It's to tell the community that you've come home, and to tell them that tomorrow morning they should all return." So that was how the quiet return began.

There were two things actually we had planned to do, and they were both religious. The first was a thanksgiving in the village church of St. Philip's, which had been founded by my father and another pioneer at the beginning of this century. The Anglican archbishop on the Niger preached a very generous sermon, and the choirmaster came to me at the end and said, "If you had told us you were coming we would have composed a special anthem." I kept hearing this the rest of our visit: If only you'd told us you were coming we would have done this, that, and the other. And they would have, too. It was an amazing return.

ED:
Did you stay inside your village or did you travel around?

CA:
The thanksgiving was on August 29th. The second event which

we knew about was a public lecture at the Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri. Now you might think that I have an obsession with archbishops. First an Anglican archbishop and now the Catholic archbishop. That's not an obsession--these clerics are playing a very, very vital role, I think, in the cultural life of our people from now on, and in the absence of a strong and tested political class. The Catholic archbishop is actually a literary scholar who had done his Ph.D. on my fiction. But now, in the other-worldly position of archbishop, he had set up a public lecture in the Igbo language -- the first time this had been done in Igbo land. We all speak Igbo, we converse in Igbo, and have small talk in Igbo; but to have an hour-long serious academic lecture in the Igbo language, that was something else, as I found when I began writing my lecture. But it was such a desirable thing in the end to be able to do it. And the reception which it had -- it was estimated by some that over 20,000 people were at this event on a huge field of the Catholic cathedral. I was escorted to a pavilion in the middle of this field. And there you faced tiers of seats, people on tiers of seats. On the right, on the left, are thousands and thousands, standing. The subject was "Echi di ime; taa bu gboo", translated roughly, "Tomorrow is Pregnant, Today is Early Enough."

http://www.ngrguardiannews.com/features/ft768402.htm
And what I did was to talk about the problem of the Igbo language itself and then the problem that the Igbo people have in Nigeria. Since 1970, when the Igbo lost the Biafran War, they have been slowly marginalized in Nigeria--the penalty for fighting a war of secession. That maybe understandable, but it doesn't mean that they've stopped being one of the three legs on which the Nigerian stool can stand.

They are rather confused politically. They are a proud and dynamic people. The British didn't like them at all, which is one reason they lost the Biafran War, because Britain fought very hard to keep their old colony the way they designed it. And so you had the extraordinary situation in which at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and Britain were supplying arms to the same party, the Federal Government of Nigeria, against a small portion called Biafra.

So the Igbos have had a lot of trouble, a lot of problems, and they needed someone to talk to them. That was the impression I got. They were waiting. It was like, Oh, you've come home. Come on, talk to us. That was a very rewarding experience.

ED:
If you compare it with the impression you had in Lagos, that this was a country that had ceased to work, do you think that in your village, in your region, that you have the same feeling, or do you think there might still be hope more than when you were in Lagos?

I think there is hope, even in Lagos. It is simply that if you have millions and millions of people who are unemployed, you get that hopeless impression. In the village there are not millions and millions of people, but the people are hungry. They are sick. But somehow you know the hopelessness will pass away.

CA:
Well, I think there is hope, even in Lagos. I think it is simply that if you have
llions and millions of people who are unemployed, you get that hopeless impression. In the village there are not millions and millions of people, but the people are hungry. They are sick. You look at people you remember were very strong when you left and they're all bent with arthritis and so on. There is hunger. But somehow you know the hopelessness will pass away. It's not something which is permanent or is going to be permanent.

There's the difference between my apprehension of the scene and, say, a journalist who flies in from New York. I know that this thing is systemic. The good news is that the people are still there, even though they're suffering. An old woman from my extended family who was unable to come to see me sent 50 naira, the equivalent of fifty cents to buy kolanuts to present to my guests. There were people who came because they knew I would feed them, but here was somebody that I wasn't feeding, who couldn't come, who sent money to me. So I think the

distinction is eally a temporary thing, except that if you let a ituation like this go on long enough, it might be difficult to get out of it. People get used to it. I'm afraid there are signs that some people are getting used to a life of confusion--the idea, for instance, that you can abduct policemen and kill them, which is almost unheard of in that part of the world.

ED:
To come back just for a second, to come back to what you're saying about Nigeria's three feet, what do you think, very briefly, of what's happening in Lagos, for instance, between the Hausa and…

CA:
There are two major problems in Nigeria: ethnicity and religion. Now, there's nothing wrong with ethnicity, there's nothing wrong with religion; but when bad politicians get hold of these factors, then you have a very, very explosive mixture. It is true that the Igbo, the third leg, which is my part of the country, are, as it were, not functioning now; so the other two have no one to gang up against, and so they fight each other. And this fight in Lagos I understand came out of squabbling over the market. So it's money, it's money.

People often think of ethnicity as inherently unhealthy. There's nothing unhealthy in being Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo. There's something unhealthy in saying that Hausa is better than Yoruba, or Igbo is better than either.

ED:
Let's move on with the report of your trip. Did you get any official greeting there?

CA:
At the lecture, the Igbo lecture I gave in Owerri, I discovered at the end that President Obasanjo had sent his Minister of Culture to represent him at the lecture and also his political advisor to bring me a letter welcoming me home and inviting me to visit him in Abuja--which is 400 miles away to the north.

ED:

Did you go there?

CA:

I did, I did, yes. Well, we had a big family meeting and decided it would be a mistake not to accept the invitation. So we went to Abuja, the new capital of Nigeria.

By the way, Abuja was created artificially at the exact geographical or geometrical center of Nigeria to be the site of the new capital. Before that it was Lagos, which is at the southwest corner, on the coast. Nigeria wanted to do something really exact, so they took whatever instrument it is you take and found the exact center of Nigeria. It fell on a small village called Abuja. So the federal government paid this little village and moved them about 30 miles to another site--they were quite happy; I believe they were well paid--and the new capital was begun. And I hadn't seen it in nine years. It was still patchy when I left, but now it's really a model, a fine modern city.

We went to Abuja, and on September 13 we had lunch with President Obasanjo, his vice president, and some of his ministers and advisors. He made a very generous speech. My reply was also generous, I think. And then we had a private discussion, just the two of us, a short private discussion in which I raised what I consider crucial issues like inclusiveness to insure that no part of Nigeria feels left out. He understood that. He told me some of the specific things he had done quietly in this direction.

I should tell you that of all the possibilities we have, I think President Obasanjo is probably the best at this time. His qualifications are many. He's been head of state before under the military. He understands the military and the military know him. He turned power over to civilians in 1979 and went into retirement. My problem with him at that time and before that time was that I thought he was too dictatorial. But then he was a general. When he retired, he began to instruct himself, I think. He set up seminars to which he invited people to go and discuss the problems of Nigeria with him. But the best qualification of all was that the hideous tyrant Abacha arrested him on charges of planning a coup and sentenced him to a long term in prison where he surely would have died if Abacha himself had not died.

So this is what I mean by Nigeria being fortunate with Providence--the point at which it seemed as if there was no way out, every road was blocked, suddenly people began to die. It's like somebody cleared the table and said, Okay, I give you another chance.

I don't think anybody can teach President Obasanjo what it means to live under tyranny. He has the experience. He's a very, very bright person, also. You may not immediately grasp it when you see him. He's extremely bright. He sometimes puts on this deliberate air of slowness, slowness of speech and so on, but he's very bright, he's very smart.

ED:
So this has opened a way to discussing more general themes, like democracy. So, do you have the feeling that people really think that this time democracy will flourish? Or even when you were in your village, do you think maybe in Nigeria, this cycle of civilian then military rule is broken? Before you answer, Nigeria has been having very good press right now. A few days ago, on the front page of The New York Times it was said that reforms aimed at corruption are going further than people thought. And then there was also an editorial about this. So right now do you think that there's really something going on?

CA:
I think something is going on, but I don't think we should be carried away. I kept saying that over and over again. After my meeting with Obasanjo, as he was seeing us out to the door, the press were there, and the first question they asked me with the microphone in my face was, What do you think of the first hundred days? Obasanjo was standing there at my back, and I said, "I think he's doing well."

Democracy is not an event. Democracy is a process. All we have done so far is turn around. We were facing the wrong direction before.

I said, "Next question." "So you endorse him?" I said, "No, endorsement is not the business of writers." Writers are not in the business of endorsing anybody or any administration. We

praise what we think needs to be praised and condemn what needs to be condemned. But democracy is not an event. Democracy is a process. All we have done so far is turn around. We were facing the wrong direction before. And if you want to go through that door and you are facing in the opposite direction, you can walk as long as you like--you won't get there. You have to reorient yourself. This is all we have done. And I kept saying that over and over again, like a cracked record, to everybody.

Okay, democracy, we've chosen democracy. I think democracy is a very, very difficult system to work. It doesn't mean it is beyond our capacity. As a matter of fact, the most democratic people in the world are the Igbos, my people. You may not have heard that before. You probably heard about the Greeks. But I tell you, there is no group, there is no culture that sets itself up better than the Igbos to understand democracy. You see, the Igbo idea of the individual is not that we're all made by the same god. That's not good enough for the Igbos. The Igbos say every single person, man or woman, is made by a specific and special god agent, so that you are just as unique as it is possible to be. You can't be more unique than that. They really believe this. So to talk about democracy being impossible for us is nonsense. But it is a difficult system to operate. The Igbos know this because democracy can easily turn to anarchy. So you are constantly watching the boundaries of democracy. But to say that democracy is a western import, which is what you hear some of our leaders --

ED:
Very, very often--

CA:
--when they want to hijack a nation, they tell you democracy is a western concept. It isn't.

ED:
Can I ask you one more question: The Biafra region is very rich in oil. There is concern about the degradation of nature and the ecosystem. What's your position on that?

CA:

It's a very serious problem. The problem we've been having in the Niger Delta, which is a region where the Niger breaks into hundreds of streams, that is where the oil is. Now there's been some kind of struggle in that region for the past 30 years. It's only now that the world is hearing of it because in the environmental movement in the West, we are finding somebody with a similar interest.

ED:
[inaudible question about Ken Saro-Wiwa]

CA:
Yes, well, I'll get into that. Because when you have a writer who is hanged, that immediately turns the attention of the world onto that scene.

The way that problem is being handled at the moment, it's difficult to get into it because if you are told somebody is hanged, you can't possibly say anything more. That really is the ultimate [...?], and it must be condemned. But the way -- For instance, I heard over the BBC a couple of days ago somebody who was introduced as a leader of a new movement in the Niger Delta. It appears that what he is demanding is for the federal government to give the oil in the ground to his people, and they would pay tax to the government. Now that is not the way the Nigerian constitution has worked for the last 100 years. There was a time when the source of power in Nigeria was coal, and coal was taken from under somebody's ground, and the whole country was run on it. The people at that time did not say, Let us take the coal and pay tax. The extremist rhetoric in the Niger Delta will not lead to a solution. See, Nigeria is not America. Any mineral found anywhere in Nigeria belongs to the State. The Nigerian constitution was designed that way by the British a hundred years ago. If we want to change it, we can, but we have not changed it yet. So the step which the government needs to take is to make a large transfer of funds to develop the delta region of Nigeria. They have been neglected in the past, since the 1950s. Flying across that area from Port Harcourt to Lagos at night, it's an amazing sight to see all the lights, the flaring of gas, all over that region. The sky at sunset in Port Harcourt, the major city there, is different from what it was 20 years ago because of all of

the gas they have burned into the atmosphere. So that's an ecological disaster area, and the Nigerian government has a responsibility to deal with it.

ED:

We've been talking for about an hour now. I'm certain you have many things to say, but I would like to give an opportunity to the audience. I'm sure they have some questions to ask you. Anybody want to ask something of Professor Achebe?

Q:

I recently read an article, I don't remember exactly where it was, about the people in Africa and it really broke my heart. It said 20 percent of Africans are infected with the AIDS virus.

CA:

I did not explore AIDS in Nigeria. I don't have the figures.

ED:

Let me ask you the same question but in a different way: When you look at Africa, Africa is the worst continent for AIDS--there are more infections than any other continent. Africa also has the greatest number of refugees in the world, of all the continents. There has been great cruelty in Sierre Leone, Liberia, and Rwanda, and parts of central Africa. What do you think? Are you pessimistic, are you optimistic? What do you think about the future of the continent?

CA:

In talking about Africa it is no longer fashionable to blame the outside world; it's best to take the responsibility for it. That's okay up to a point. But what happened during the Cold War in Africa bears a big responsibility for some of the problems, the problems of war, for instance.

Well, the continent is going through a very, very bad period, a very bad patch. The African continent has seen many bad patches in its long history. So I choose not to be a pessimist. I choose not to be a pessimist because, if I am an optimist, the worst that can happen to me is that I'll be disappointed at the end. If I am a pessimist I'll be miserable all the way. So the

situation in Africa is very bad, but the answer, the solution is not to say, "Oh my god, what do we do now? I'll have to start drinking," or something.

Africa has had a very rough history, full of droughts and famine and pestilence. But that's the challenge of leadership. And I must say, in talking about Africa it is no longer fashionable to blame the outside world; it's best to take the responsibility for it. That's okay up to a point. But what happened during the Cold War in Africa bears a big responsibility for some of the problems, the problems of war, for instance. Take Angola, and the Congo, surrogates of the Cold War in Africa, suffering the consequences to this day. So we mustn't get so disappointed by the performance of Africa. It's bad, but if you look at places like Uganda, Uganda is doing something about AIDS. Or Botswana and Mozambique are bright spots. Or South Africa itself.

http://www.earthtimes.org/jan/populationchinuaachebenigerianjan16_99.htmhttp://www.nasro-co-op.com/Policy/kofi_annans_astonishing_facts.htm

ED:

Okay, now. In a moment we'll ask another question. Many people don't know this, but you were nominated as a Goodwill Ambassador of the U.N. six months ago, I think. look to have your reaction to this: This was published by The New York Times: "Kofi Annan's Astonishing Facts-'Americans and Europeans spent $17 billion a year on pet food, $4 billion more than the total annual amount needed to provide basic health and nutrition for everyone in the world.'" Where do we get things like that?

CA:

Well, I just take as an interesting statistic. Somebody has a huge harvest of corn, or whatever, and decides to dump it into the sea--they're entitled to do it. If, however, they decide to give it to somebody who is hungry, that is better. That's as far as I will go.

ED:

Okay, any other questions?

Q:

[inaudible -- questions about cooperation between South Africa

and Nigeria]

CA:
Well, I think that cooperation is needed. There was a time when cooperation was high on the agenda, in the days of people like Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah said that the independence of Ghana--the first country to get independence in 1957--said the independence was meaningless unless it was accompanied by the independence of other African countries. But Nkrumah didn't get very far. People like him were squashed in the Cold War. The Cold War period was like a drought; it simply killed off all the seedlings of independence on the continent.

And so we're having a new beginning. I think we've wasted a lot of time in Africa. I think there may well be a chance to renegotiate our situation in Africa. I never put anything beyond what is possible. My novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, has at the end a child that is born, and there's a naming ceremony. And the old man there says, "Somebody has to bring this child up." So the hope is contingent on someone bringing this baby up. The hope will not simply come by itself. Someone has to do something about it. That's where we are.

ED:
Kofi Annan's Interesting Facts: "Americans spend $8 billion a year on cosmetics, $2 billion more than the estimated annual total needed to provide basic education for everyone in the world." So that's another astonishing Kofi Annan fact.

Next question.

Q:
I would like to ask a question which may prove slightly embarrassing to you, and if it is, I apologize. I notice that you have not published a new work of fiction since you came here, and I'm wondering if it is now possible for you to write again.

CA:
It might. It might be possible, yes. Actually, though, my engagement with fiction is quite interesting; I don't fully understand it. It will come when it will come. I think it's probably

on its way, but if it doesn't, I do other things. For this I hope Bard College doesn't feel badly because my way with fiction is quite extraordinary.

Q:
Could you talk a little about the role of the writer in society and how instrumental political problems are in the creative process?

The day the poet accepted the emperor's suggestion that poetry should be about daffodils and not about politics, he lost something very, very important.

CA:
I don't think that politics is detrimental to art. This is a matter of belief. It isn't in my system, unless of course you mean actual participation in the political process, which is time-consuming. If that's what you mean, then I would agree. But if you are talking about political subjects, political themes, I don't agree. I think that is one distinction between us--by us I mean non-Westerners--and the West. But I'm

not ready to challenge somebody who holds an opposite position. Whatever works for you, that's fine. But in my way of thinking, the day the poet accepted the emperor's suggestion that poetry should be about daffodils and not about politics, the day the poet accepted it, he lost something very, very important. Politics is very much at the enter. It is the way society is organized, the way human and environmental relationships are finally determined, and for this to be outside the scope of literary engagement seems to me to be such a mistake.

Q:
I was interested by your comments about the lecture you held in Igbo, and I was wondering if you could talk about the decision to write in English.

CA:
The decision. Well, it was not really a decision because that was the language available to me. I'd been learning it from quite early in my life. My education was in English, and so if I had to write in Igbo, to write a novel, if you will, that would have

required a decision--the decision that I'm not going to write in English. I didn't find that necessary because with the novel I wrote and the people I addressed it to, it did what I wanted it to do. Even today I'm not sure that I want to write a novel in Igbo. I would write poetry, which I do, in that language. In other words, I have two hands, and so I give them different things to do. Some of my friends don't agree. They think you should cut off one of your hands because it's somehow more loyal to be one-handed. But I don't think so.

ED:
Okay, two more questions.

Q:
I couldn't help but notice within your talks one of the differences between Nigeria and the United States. I realize that there are three things I noticed about the difference between these two countries: One is that in Nigeria, when writers come home they are celebrated as returning heroes, and I'm not sure that this is the experience that American writers have. The second is that natural resources, according to the Nigerian constitution, belong to the State, and presumably, potentially to the public, whereas in the United States they belong to a few large corporations. And the third is that apparently now, to become a valid presidential candidate in Nigeria, you have to have been once condemned to death; whereas in the United States, judging from [inaudible...?], you have to have condemned others to death. So it's possible that Nigeria may become the model for democracy.

CA:
That's a reading of my comments that I find quite interesting, yes.

ED:
Okay, let's take the last question.

Q:
When questions of democracy arise internationally, names like P.E.N. and Amnesty International are often mentioned. Would you speak to their effectiveness or lack of effectiveness?

CA:

Oh, I think those organizations are effective. They are doing what they can do. Amnesty International does fantastic work in exposing danger. There is no security for us, nobody can guarantee. There's nothing that anyone does that will guarantee safety at all times for all people. But we do what we can. And I think it's in that kind of way that I see the work of these organizations.

For instance, I personally founded The Association of Nigerian Authors in 1980, when it seemed to me that we were likely to get into very serious difficulties with our governments. I called all the writers I could find to Nsukka at the University of Nigeria, and I said to them, "Nobody's going to guarantee your safety, but I think that if we organize, we may improve our chances a little." Interestingly enough, Saro Wiwa became president of this association long after I'd gone. And so to get back to Amnesty and P.E.N., their work is very important, but it will not guarantee safety to artists in all situations.

ED:
Okay, definitely the last question.

Q:
I was interested to hear you talk about the effect of the Cold War in Nigeria and in Africa because I don't think it's heard a lot, about this. We effectively live now in the post-Cold War era, and it tends to be associated, I think, in people's minds, too, with a lot of instability and a lot different kinds of problems. But I wondered if you could say any more about that and about what the dangers or the opportunities are that have now come about because of this change with respect to Africa.

CA:
Yes, in the case of Africa we are working out not just the Cold War, but the longer period of colonial rule before that. That is what those who see Africa and throw up their hands and say, "things never work here," don't want to address. But for me, I don't over-address that either, because it's not going to do any good anyway. We've got a job to do. We've got to reorganize affairs on this continent. And how long it will take I can't tell you, because the damage is so deep. Look at Angola, look at what's

been going on there for how long? Thirty, forty years? And it was simply somebody's decision in the West that this country is not pro-Western, is not pro-capitalist, so we have to destabilize it.

A lot of the result of that, of the arms sold during the Cold War turning up in the hands of children. When we talk about Sierre Leone, these are kids. So I don't see any easy solution. But what I think we need to do is to face the problems squarely. And if it's going to take a hundred years, that's what it will take.

ED:
Okay. Would you like to say a last word?

CA:
Do I have a last word? Well, it's wonderful to see so many people interested in my journey home and back. I'm still very emotional about it so I may not have been very eloquent in presenting this extraordinary experience. But it's an experience I couldn't have missed. It was exhausting, because people just didn't want to let go. There were some relatives who came, and they were fed by Christie. The next day they came back to thank us for the feast of yesterday. And of course you had to find something for them again. But it's really a wonderful experience to visit the people who share this culture and this land with you, and who have been treated very badly by insensitive rulers.

There's something else I should tell you: the Igbo people are not completely passive. The people who waited for me with the banner when I arrived, they'd selected six young men to guard us during our visit because, alas, it is quite common for armed robbers to break into people's homes, especially if they hear you've come from America--they think you have dollars. But these ordinary villagers have taken into their own hands to secure themselves, and so they guard the town. Young people get up and guard the town.

And what is more, before we came, they had driven out of office and almost out of town, as it were, a committee that had been exploiting the common land, selling the people's land and pocketing the money and refusing to have new elections. These young people got up one morning and drove them out of the

town. So there is so much you can do to people, but after a point, they will begin to ask questions. And our people are beginning to ask questions. These are some of the signs of hope I see. Now, it doesn't make the headlines, but these are the things I think that really will tell in the end. These are democratic people, and they're not going to be terrorized by tyranny forever.

Thank you.