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Callaloo, Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2026, pp. 88-103 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2026.a983240

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHINUA ACHEBE

Charles Henry Rowell

This interview originally appeared in *Callaloo* Volume 13, No. 1, 1990.

This interview was conducted in Mr. Achebe's quarters at the International House in New York City on Sunday, May 28, 1989.

CHARLES HENRY ROWELL: Mr. Achebe, here in the United States, those of us who read twentieth century world literature think of you as one of the most important writers in this era. We view you as an artist—and for us the word *artist* has a certain kind of meaning. In the African world, does *artist* have the same meaning as that conceptualized in the Western world? Or, more specifically, what do Nigerians conceive the writer to be?

Is he or she thought of as an artist, a creator of the kind that we think of here in the United States when we speak about writers?

CHINUA ACHEBE: Well, I think that there are obviously certain common factors when anybody talks about an artist, whether in America or in Africa. I think there are certain factors which would apply to either place—and so we can leave those aside, if you like. But there are differences definitely, in emphasis if not absolute, and it is these that one should draw attention to. The artist has always existed in Africa in the form of the sculptor, the painter, or the storyteller, the poet. And I suppose the role of the writer, the modern writer, is closer to that of the *griot,* the historian and poet, than to any other practitioner of the arts. But I think one can find, even from the other forms of art, fundamental statements, cultural statements, made about art in general which seem to me to be peculiarly African in their emphasis.

What I mean, for instance, is this. The ceremony, which is called *"Mbari"* among the Igbo people, is a festival of art, a celebration of humanity. It is not a festival of oral arts; it is more a festival of the visual arts, the plastic arts, though drama and songs are presented there as well. There you will find, I think, what our people thought of art-and that's the reason I am referring to it. Some of the statements made by *Mbari* are very profound. One is that art is in the service of the community. There is no apology at all about that. Art is invented to make the life of the community easier, not to make it more difficult. Artists are people who live in society. The professional artist, the master artist and craftsman, is a special kind of person, but he is not the only person who is expected to practice art.

For this celebration, this *Mbari* celebration, ordinary people are brought in to work under the supervision of professional artists, because we assume that everybody has art in themselves. So ordinary people are brought in, and they are secluded with the profes-

sionals for a period—months and sometimes even years—to create this celebration of life through art. So what this says to me is that art is not something up there in the rarified reaches of the upper atmosphere but something which is down here where we live. Art is not something which is beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. It is something which ordinary people not only can understand and use, but even take part in making. So these are ideas which I don't find very much in the West, you see. These are some of the ideas we have that one should specify and draw attention to. If one looked at what we do and compared it with what our contemporaries do in the West, these ideas would explain some of the differences and some of the puzzlement that certain Western critics have, for instance, when they encounter African literature and say: "Why do they do that? Why are they so political?" And they ask these questions to the point of irritation. If only they understood where we were coming from, then perhaps they would not be so puzzled. Perhaps they would even be open to persuasion on this score.

ROWELL: At the University of Virginia, last April [19, 1989], you responded to a question from the audience which I think describes further what you have just said or is related to it. I can't quote you directly. However, I do remember that you implied that art, in Nigeria, is intimately linked to social responsibility and that it is connected to that which is moral, that which is ethical, that which is right, or that which is good. I think you made that statement in response to a question about Joseph Conrad—and I'm not trying to get into a Joseph Conrad discussion here. *[Laughter.]* Will you say more about art?

ACHEBE: Yes. The festival which I have just been talking about, the *Mbari* festival, is commanded from time to time by the goddess of creativity, the earth goddess, called *Ala* or *Ani* by the Igbo people. This goddess is not only responsible for creativity in the world; she is also responsible for morality. So that an abomination is described as taboo to her, as *nso-ani.* That's the word for something which is not supposed to be done—not just a wrong-doing—but an abomination, something which is forbidden by this goddess. So obviously by putting the two portfolios, if you like, of art and morality in her domain, a statement is being made about the meaning of art. Art cannot be in the service of destruction, cannot be in the service of oppression, cannot be in the service of evil. We tend to be a little apologetic about that. You know, if you talk about "good," people will get uneasy. They become uneasy. I don't know why that should be so, but we work ourselves into all kinds of corners from which we then become uneasy when certain words are mentioned. That's not the fault of the words; there is perhaps something wrong with us.

So there is no question at all, in the view of my people, that art cannot serve immorality. And morality here doesn't mean "be good and go to church." That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about manifest wickedness like murder. There is no art that can say that it is right to commit murder. I remember, I think it was Yevtushenko who once said that "You cannot be a poet and a slave trader." It seems to me fairly obvious that you cannot combine those particular professions, because they are antithetical. And this is not something which only the Africans or the Igbo people know. I think it is there, embedded also, in the minds of other people. The difference is that our culture makes no bones about it, and I think this comes through too in our writing. It does not mean that

our heroes have to be angels. Of course not. It means, in fact, that heroes will be as human as anybody else; and yet the frontier between good and evil must not be blurred; it means that somewhere, no matter how fuzzy it may be to us, there is still a distinction between what is permissible and what is not permissible. One thing which is not permissible is to stereotype and dehumanize your fellows. That is not permissible in our art. You celebrate them, their good and their bad. You celebrate even rascals, because they abound in the world and are part of its richness.

ROWELL: You just said that this conceptualization of art comes through "in our writing." Will you talk about how this is exemplified in your own work or that of other African writers, either consciously or unconsciously?

ACHEBE: Well, I think if you took a tape recorder and went round African writers, I bet you will find them making rather large statements for what they do. You'll find them saying, for instance, "I am writing so that the life of my people will be better." I even found a modern story in Hausa which ended: "And so they married and they produced many sons and daughters who helped to raise the standard of education in the country." That's the way the story ends, imitating the format of the folk story but obviously turning it into something very practical for today, you see. And I said elsewhere, if anybody reads this story and says "oh now, this is an anticlimax," he could not possibly know anything about Africa, because the story of today has to do with raising the standards of education of the country, you see. We are engaged in a great mission, and we attempt to bring this into our storytelling. It is this mission that our storyteller brings into his tale without the slightest inclination to discuss it self-consciously in the way we are doing now. He instinctively felt a need for his story and supplied it. This is why we get letters saying, to me for instance, "Why did you let Okonkwo fail in *Things Fall Apart?* Why did you let a good man or a good cause stumble and fall?" At another time, I remember a letter from a woman in Ghana saying, "Why did Obi, in *No Longer At Ease,* not have the courage to marry the girl he loved instead of crumbling?" People are expecting from literature serious comment on their lives. They are not expecting frivolity. They are expecting literature to say something important to help them in their struggle with life.

That is what literature, what art, was supposed to do: to give us a second handle on reality so that when it becomes necessary to do so, we can turn to art and find a way out. So it is a serious matter. That's what I'm saying, and I think every African writer you talk to will say something approaching what I have just said-in different forms of words, except those who have too much of the West in them, and there are some people, of course, who are that way. But the writer I am referring to is the real and serious African writer. I think you will find them saying something which sounds as serious, as austere, or as earnest as what I have just said.

ROWELL: You've mentioned the *griot.* I have read many things about what a *griot* is. And sometimes these texts seem to contradict each other. What is a *griot?* The word itself sounds Francophone.

ACHEBE: It's a word that comes from somewhere; I don't even know where it comes from. I know it certainly is not a Nigerian word. It's not an Igbo word. But it is a word which concerns us, because we know roughly what kind of person we are talking about. We are talking about the traditional poet and historian. The function of this person would not be exactly the same thing in all cultures. Where you have a monarchical system, for instance, the chances are that the *griot* or the poet, this historian, would be connected with the history of the dynasty. This is supposedly where problems immediately arise, you know. How reliable, then, is this poet, who resides in the court of the emperor, reciting the history? There are problems there. And the greatest griots, I think, have managed to find a way around those problems. How they do it we cannot go into here. It suffices to remind us that 700 years after the life and death of Sundiata, the first emperor of Mali, the *griots* in West Africa were still reciting the story of his birth and life and death. It was only in the fifties, the 1950s, that this story was finally put down in writing. And the person who put it down in writing went to different and widely separated places and compared the versions given by various *griots* and discovered that the core of the story remained the same, you see. This is quite remarkable: over a period of 700 years ... because we tend to think that unless something is scribbled down on some piece of paper it cannot be true. I don't know who told us that. *[Laughter.]* And we have come to believe it ourselves, that our history should be measured in terms of paper. So whenever you don't have a piece of paper, somebody says there is no history. And we seem to be quite ready to accept it. So you would find our historians going to archives in Portugal, for instance, to see what some sailor from Portugal had said when he came to Benin in the fifteenth century. We don't ask the condition of this sailor when he was making his entry, whether he was drunk or sober. He is on a piece of paper and therefore reliable- and more reliable than what you might gather in the field by asking people: "What do you remember? What do your people remember about this?"

Anyway, I think we are learning. We know a little better now than we used to. Thanks to the work of people like the late Professor Dike, who helped to create a new historiography of Africa using the oral tradition. We know now that we can find some of the truth in oral traditions. Now, to get back to the problem of the *griot,* let me tell the story of one short fable in Hausa, which I think exemplifies the way a *griot* might approach his problem obliquely, because if you are dealing with the emperor who is so much more powerful than yourself, you have to have your wits around you. If you start telling a story which puts him in a bad light or bad mood, your career will be very short indeed! So you have to find a way of getting around this problem.

Now this is a story, a very simple animal story, from the Hausa language, which I encountered years ago. And I have used it again and again because I think it is a marvelous little story. In my own words, it goes something like this: The snake was riding his horse, coiled up in his saddle. That's the way the snake rode his horse. And he came down the road and met the toad walking by the roadside. And the toad said to him, "Excuse me, sir, but that's not how to ride a horse." And the snake said, "No? Can you show me then?" And the toad said, "Yes, if you would step down, sir." So the snake came down. The toad jumped into the saddle and sat bolt upright and galloped most elegantly up and down the road. When he came back he said, "That's how to ride a horse." And the snake said, "Excellent. Very good. Very good, indeed. Thank you. Come down, if you

don't mind." So the toad came down, and the snake went up and coiled himself in the saddle as he was used to doing and then said to the toad, "It is very good to know, but it is even better to have. What good does excellent horsemanship do to a man without a horse?" *[Laughter.]* And with that he rode away.

Now, the Hausa, who made this story, are a monarchical people. They have classes: the emir, the upper class, the nobility, etc., down to the bottom, the ordinary people, the *talakawa*. As you can see, the snake in this story is an aristocrat, and the toad a commoner. The statement, even the rebuke, which the snake issues is, in fact, saying: "Keep where you belong. You see, people like me are entitled to horses, and we don't have to know how to ride. There's no point in being an expert. That's not going to help you." Now that's very nice in that kind of political situation. And we can visualize the emir and his court enjoying this kind of story and laughing their heads off—because, you see, it's putting the commoner in his place. But also if you think deeply about this story, it's a two-edged sword. I think that's the excellence of the *griot* who fashioned it. To put this other edge to it, which is not noticed at first … this other side is that the snake is incompetent, the snake is complacent, the snake is even unattractive. It's all there in the story, you see, and the time will come in this political system when all this will be questioned. Why is it that a snake is entitled to a horse? Why is it that the man who knows how to ride does not have a horse to ride? You see. This questioning will come in a revolutionary time, and when it comes you don't need another story. It is the same story that will stand ready to be used; and this to me is the excellence of the *griot* in creating laughter and hiding what you might call the glint of steel. In the voluminous folds of this laughter, you can catch the hint of a concealed weapon which will be used when the time comes. Now this is one way in which the *griot* gets around the problem of telling the emperor the truth, you see. That is very, very important. Of course, if the *griot* is strong enough to say this to the emperor in his face, he will do it. But if he is not, he will find a way to conceal his weapon. Of course, there will be *griots* who sell out, but we're not talking about those, those who sing for their dinner.

ROWELL: After your reading-lecture at the University of Virginia last April, one of my graduate students, a native of Mauritania, said to me: "In this culture, meaning the Western culture, you meet knowledge, you meet erudition, you meet expertise, but not wisdom. Mr. Achebe speaks and writes wisdom." That was what the student, Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar, said, and I quote him directly.

ACHEBE: That was very kind of him.

ROWELL: What I would like to ask of you is this: Does this speaking wisdom characterize, in any way, the sensibility of the African artist?

ACHEBE: Yes, I think it does. Wisdom is as good a word to use, I think, in describing the seriousness I was talking about, this *gravitas* that I'm talking about which informs our art. We can be as jovial, as lighthearted, even as frivolous as anybody else. But everything has its place and its measure. When you are dealing with art of the level at which we are dealing with it, it's a serious matter, a matter of clarification and wisdom.

ROWELL: You are a teacher—in the United States we would say that you are a professor of literature. What is the status of teaching literature in Africa? That's to say, does the teaching of literature contribute positively or negatively in the development, for example, of the new Nigeria? In other words, what is the role of the humanities in the African context?

ACHEBE: Well, we as writers and artists have or should have a central role in the society. We are not necessarily carrying the day in that way of thinking. For instance, when I gave the National Lecture in Nigeria (which you give if you win the Nigerian National Merit Award which is our highest honor for intellectual achievement) ... the lecture I gave recently in Nigeria was entitled "What Has Literature Got To Do With It?" It was about the problem of development which concerns all of us. How do we develop, how do we raise our standard of living, how do we improve the life of our people, how do we modernize, and all of that which we aspire to like anybody else? How do we even raise the income per capita? All of these things are important. What I'm asking is: What has literature got to do with them? Has literature any relevance to all this or is it simply something we can perhaps forget for the time being? Are we to concentrate on the hard sciences, and then perhaps when we have become developed we can afford the luxury of literature. Is that what we want? There will be people who say so. There are attempts, for instance, to shift the emphasis in the universities in Nigeria from the humanities to the sciences, to limit the admissions for the humanities and increase the admissions for the sciences. Now all that, of course, may be necessary. I really don't know, but I think any people who neglect the importance of addressing the minds and hearts and the spirit of the people will find that they will be really getting nowhere at all in their development. One of the examples I gave was a story told us in Japan.

Some years ago I was taking part in a symposium in Japan. The Japanese would bring two foreign experts to Japan to meet with about half a dozen local experts in similar disciplines. They would talk and discuss for three or four days. On this occasion, the subject was culture and development. I remember the story which a Japanese professor told. His grandfather went to the University of Tokyo and graduated, he said, I think, about 1900. All of his notes, the notes he wrote in the university as a student, were written in English. His own father graduated about 1920. Half of his notes were written in English and half in Japanese. Then he, the man who was telling us the story, graduated in 1950 or thereabouts, from the same university. All his notes were written in Japanese. Now this profile is very interesting. The Japanese were becoming giants in the modern world, in technology and so on, surpassing those who began the industrial revolution. They were also, as it were, travelling back to regain their own culture through their language, you see. This is very important; I think this is an extremely important story. It says something about the relationship between technology and the humanities.

How far can you develop without dealing with certain humanistic problems, such as who am I, why am I here, what is the meaning of life, what is my culture? I believe that the relationship is close, important and crucial.

ROWELL: You teach literature courses. You told me that you teach African literature frequently. But when you teach a literature course that does not include an African literary text, what are some of the creative works or texts you select?

ACHEBE: No, I have never taught anything but African literatures, and I'm not really a professional literature teacher. The only reason I got into teaching at all is that I wanted to teach African literature. So I taught African literatures from the start. I guess I've not done anything else in my teaching career.

ROWELL: If you were teaching a course in twentieth-century literature, what are some of the texts you'd use? And why would you select them? I guess, ultimately, I'm asking this: What are some of the twentieth-century texts you consider to be important? For example, I couldn't imagine teaching a course in twentieth-century American literature without including Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* or Toni Morrison's *Sula.* In other words, what do you consider some of the most important texts for teaching twentieth-century world literature?

ACHEBE: Well, it's not really a question I can answer satisfactorily. The texts you mention are all very important—and there are other important ones as well. I wouldn't really be able to or want to rattle off a list just like that, but I would certainly try to cover the world. I would attempt to cover those writers who have written what you call "the landmarks" of the twentieth century. And I guess that would include people like T. S. Eliot, would include Ezra Pound, would include Faulkner, would include Hemingway. Then if you come nearer to our time ... yes, yes, *Invisible Man* is an outstanding novel by any stretch of the imagination—and I would include it for that reason and also for the reason that Ellison is writing from a history and a tradition which have a unique message for us. I would include one—at least one—Baldwin text. From African literature I would include *Ambiguous Adventure* by Cheikh Hamidou Kane, I would include Camara Laye and Amos Tutuola, I would include Alex LaGuma and Nadine Gordimer. Then I would attempt to find, even in translation, some Arabic writers from Egypt, Naguib Mahfouz and Alifa Rifaat, for example. Then I would attempt to include writers from India, Raja Rao for example. That doesn't cover the whole world. Then I would move to Latin America, you see. I would include Neruda and Marquez. Actually, some of the most interesting writing is taking place there. I would also go to the Caribbean which, for its size, is perhaps the most dynamic literary environment in the world in our time. There is a legion of people there I would want to include. So you see I would have really to end up with a very long list and then begin to pare it down. But the important thing I would attempt to do is not to limit myself to anybody's "Great Tradition," because that sort of thing limits you and blinds you to what is going on in the real world.

ROWELL: Are there other reasons that you would not include "anybody's 'Great Tradition'"? *[Laughter.]*

ACHEBE: No, no, I said I would go beyond anyone's "Great Tradition." Why? Because it is not the "Great Tradition." It cannot be. No way. One small corner of the world cannot wake up one morning and call its artifact the "Great Tradition," you see. *[Laughter.]* Our people have a saying that the man who's never traveled thinks that his mother makes the best soup. *[Laughter.]* Now we need to travel—with all due respect to our mothers—

we need to travel. So the question of a "Great Tradition" makes sense only if you're not aware of other people's traditions.

I had a very curious experience in Holland, where I was put up to run as president of International PEN. An older, much older, man, a French man, was put up also—or he put himself up after he saw my name. And he won. But the interesting thing is that he had no conception—and didn't want to have any conception—of the literature of Africa. He kept quite clearly and studiously avoiding any mention of African literature, and at some point he said something like this: "How can we expect the Third World, with all of their problems, to produce great art?" Do you see what I mean? Now this is the kind of mind or mentality I'm talking about. It remains alien to me though I encounter it frequently. It is alien to me because my whole life has been ordered in such a way that I have to know about other people. This is one of the penalties of being an underdog: that you have to know about the overdog, you see. The overdog doesn't need to know about the underdog; therefore, he suffers severe limitations, and the underdog ends up being wiser because he knows about himself and knows about the overdog. *[Laughter.]* So my reading list would be really catholic, would be catholic in every sense of the word. I haven't talked about the Far East, because I don't know enough, but I will try and find, for example, some good writers from Japan. One must read the Japanese novelists. Their own contribution to the consciousness of the twentieth century is unique.

ROWELL: Is the Third World writer presently participating in the ongoing revision of what one calls "the literary canon"?

ACHEBE: Oh yes, yes. By just being there. He/she is, in fact, the reason for the revision. He/she is the very reason for the revision. *[Laughter.]*

ROWELL: Isn't the Third World writer something else other than what we just said? The matter I'm thinking of here is linguistic. Let us assume for a moment that Percy Shelley was correct when he said that "the poet is the legislator of the world." The poet is indeed a person who shapes our vision of the world; he or she does that and provides us with a vocabulary, or new vocabulary, to describe it. I'm thinking of you and what you do for the English-speaking world as a writer, and what Jorges Luis Borges does, or did, for the Spanish-speaking world, and what Aimé Césaire does linguistically, for example, for the French-speaking world. In other words, does the Third World writer alter or adapt the medium and, through a destruction of what is out there as—I'll call it this—"the parent language or dialect" itself, revise or reinvest the medium?

ACHEBE: Well, yes. My answer to the previous question was rather brief, but it was really intended to contain all of this. This Third World creature comes with an experience which is peculiar, including the linguistic experience. The use of French, in the case of Césaire, is the use of a French that has been in dialogue with other languages, you see. In my case, it is an English which has been in dialogue with a very rich alien linguistic milieu—that is, you have African languages strong in their own right, and an African history and experience. An English which has had this particular encounter cannot be

the same as the English of Kingsley Amis writing in London. So this is something which the members of the metropolis have to deal with, and they don't always like it. But it is not really something for me to worry about. I know some people who are worried, and they say, "Look what they are doing to my language!" They are horrified.

We come with this particular preparation which, as it happens, actually enriches the metropolitan languages. But that's not why we do it; we're not doing it in order to enrich the metropolitan language. We're doing it because this is the only way we can convey the story of ourselves, the way we can celebrate ourselves in our new history and the new experience of colonialism, and all the other things. We have had to fashion a language that can carry the story we are about to tell.

It's not all so new, even though, perhaps, it's happening now on such a wide scale that we are paying more attention to it than before. But if you think, for instance, of all the great writers in English in our century, they are virtually all Irish. Why is that so? This is very important, and I think it is the same situation. James Joyce, of course, addresses it directly and talks about it in that famous passage in which Stephen Daedalus is talking about what the English language means to him and to his teacher who is English. He muses on the fact that every word he says means something different to each of them-any word, "ale" or "Christ"; no word can mean the same thing to me as it does to him. Why? Because we colonials and excolonials come to the English language with a whole baggage of peculiar experiences which the English person doesn't have. This is what has made the English language, in our time, such a powerful force in literature. This is why we're talking about the Caribbean literature and about African literature.

ROWELL: Will you elaborate on a statement you just made about using a new form of English? You said that it (the new form of the medium) was the only "way we can convey the history of ourselves." You said we use the language in the way we do because this is the only way we can convey the history or the story of ourselves. Apparently, you are talking about the nature of that revised form, or the new fabric, of English.

ACHEBE: Well, take Nigeria. Nigeria is a vibrant cultural environment. It has been for a long time. It has, literally, two hundred languages-not all of them important, but some quite big. The three main Nigerian languages are spoken by at least ten million people each, and some of them, like Hausa, cross beyond Nigeria's borders to other places. The English language arrives in Nigeria, then, and is thrown into this very active linguistic environment. Of course, it has the special privilege of being the language of administration, the language of higher education—the *lingua franca,* in fact, the language in which the various indigenous political and linguistic entities can communicate among themselves. Unless he learns the Igbo language, the Hausa man will communicate with the Igbo man in English. A Yoruba man communicates with a Hausa man in English. We're talking about Nigeria. And this has gone on for a number of generations. English, then, acquires a particular position of importance. You must recognize this, unless, of course, you agree with some of my friends who have said that we should ignore this history and ignore this reality and ignore whatever advantage of mutual communication English has brought to our very complex situation. Unless you were to accept that extreme position,

you would have to say, "What will we do with this English language that's been knocking around here now for so long? Our people don't allow anything as powerful as that to keep knocking around without having a job to do, because it would cause trouble.

This is the whole point of that *Mbari* phenomenon that I was describing earlier, in which anything which is new and powerful, which appears in the horizon, is brought in and domesticated in the *Mbari* house with all the other things that have been around, so that it doesn't have the opportunity to stay out of sight and scheme to overthrow the environment. This is what art does. Something comes along and you bring it in—and even if you don't yet fully understand it, you give it a place to stand. This is the way in which we have been using the English language to tell our story. It's not the only way we can tell our story, of course. I can tell our story in the Igbo language. It would be different in many ways. It would also not be available to as many people, even within the Nigerian environment. So this is the reality: This English, then, which I am using, has witnessed peculiar events in my land that it has never experienced anywhere else. The English language has never been close to Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba anywhere else in the world. So it has to be different, because these other languages and their environment are not inert. They are active, and they are acting on this language which has invaded their territory. And the result of all this complex series of actions and reactions is the language we use. The language I write in. And, therefore, it comes empowered by its experience of the encounter with me. One advantage it has is this: although it is thus different, it is not so different that you would have to go to school to learn it in America or in India or Kenya or anywhere English is already spoken. So it definitely has certain advantages which we can only ignore to our own disadvantage. It is a world language in a way that Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo are not. There is no way we can change that. Now that is not to say that we should therefore send these other languages to sleep. That's not what I'm saying. I am saying that we have a very, very complex and dynamic multilingual situation, which we cannot run away from but contain and control.

ROWELL: *No Longer at Ease* addresses the problem of communication in particular terms. There are moments in the novel when there's a lack of communication. This problem revolves around Obi, your central character. Will you comment on the issues related to language and its failure as a medium in modern society?

ACHEBE: Well, yes, language is of course a marvelous tool of communication. This is what makes us different from cattle, that we have language and we are able to communicate with the precision that language brings. But even this is not enough. We all know that. Sometimes we say, "I know what I want to say, but I just can't find the words to say it." In other words, language is not absolutely perfect; there are still things we struggle to express. Sometimes we approach fairly close to what we feel, what we want to say, but at other times no. So it's not surprising that there should be problems in communication, even though we've got language in the technical sense of just using words. But, of course, you can be using the same words and still not communicate, because of other blocks, of other factors. People can refuse to listen. People can for all kinds of reasons not want to accept the message.

That failure of communication, for instance, between Obi and Clara is interesting. They speak the same language but there is a communication breakdown. Obi is saying "just give me a little more time, my mother is sick, let's wait, we'll get married later on." Now, Clara cannot understand that, you see, and it's not because she's unreasonable. She's very reasonable. She's so reasonable that she had foreseen this problem before, and warned Obi about it, you see. She is not going to allow herself to be brutalized over and over again; this is why she'd taken the humiliating pains to say: "Do you know that you're not supposed to marry someone like me?" Obi says, "Nonsense, we're beyond that, we're civilized people." And now that Clara has invested her life in this civilization she's being told: "Let's wait a minute." So this is an example of my own view of the breakdown in communication because it's not that either party does not understand the words being used, it's just that no words can solve their predicament. There's no way you can resolve this particular problem in any kind of language, we are at an impasse, and it's now beyond language. But we have no better tool than language to communicate with one another. So when language fails, what do we do? We resort to fighting, but that, of course, is destructive. So language is very important, it is a hallmark of our humanity, one of the hallmarks of our humanity, but it is never enough, even that is not enough. We work at it, we give it all the patience we have, but we must expect that even when all is said and done there will always remain those areas, those instances when we are unable to get across.

ROWELL: What about Obi and communication with his family?

ACHEBE: Well, the same kind of thing is happening but not to the same degree, obviously. Between him and his mother there is a very peculiar relationship that has been built up from birth, which he's in no position to deal with at all. He can deal with his father quite abruptly, in fact, and overwhelm him, but he doesn't even try with his mother. This is a relationship we may not comprehend unless we come from a culture like his. There's no way he can argue with his mother when she says "well, if you're going to marry that girl wait until I'm dead. You won't have very long to wait." In some cultures they say "to hell with that, she's had her own life, this is my life." That's not the Igbo people, you know. There's no way Obi can respond like that. So that's communication again. One part of Obi knows that he can say "mother, I can't wait." Another part of him says "you can't say that to your mother."

ROWELL: Critics have often described Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* as representative of a kind of Aristotelian tragic hero. How do you respond to critics reading Okonkwo as a hero in terms of Aristotle's concept of tragedy?

ACHEBE: No. I don't think I was responding to that particular format. This is not, of course, to say that there is no relationship between these. If we are to believe what we are hearing these days the Greeks did not drop from the sky. They evolved in a certain place which was very close to Africa. Very close to Egypt which in itself was also very close to the Sudan and Nubia which was very close to West Africa. So it may well turn

out, believe it or not, that some of the things Aristotle was saying about tragedy were not really unheard of in other cultures. It's just that we are not yet ready to make these quantum leaps! For instance, it has been shown that one third of the entire vocabulary of ancient Greek came from Egypt and the Middle East. And so obviously there were links with us which the Greeks themselves apparently had no problem acknowledging. It was only later, from the eighteenth century, that the Europeans began to find it difficult to accept that they owed anything to Africa. In any event, I think a lot of what Aristotle says makes sense. Putting it in a neat, schematic way may be peculiar to the Greek way of thinking about the hero. But that idea is not necessarily foreign to other people: the man who's larger than life, who exemplifies virtues that are admired by the community, but also a man who for all that is still human. He can have flaws, you see; all that seems to me to be very elegantly under-lined in Aristotle's work. I think they are there in human nature itself, and would be found in other traditions even if they were not spelled out in the same exact way.

ROWELL: Would you agree that there are patterns of irony or an extensive use of irony in all of your first four novels, from *Things Fall Apart* all the way down to *No Longer at Ease?* If there are ironic situations or ironic characters, will you talk about that irony? I really don't like to ask writers to talk about their own work.

ACHEBE: I think irony is one of the most powerful (how does one say it?) ... one of the most powerful conditions in human experience. And anybody who is a storyteller—I see myself as a storyteller—will sooner or later come to the realization that ironies are among the most potent devices available to them. Irony can raise a humdrum story to a totally new level of power and significance simply by the fact of its presence, the presence of ironic juxtaposition. That's really all I can say. Your question seems to me almost like asking what do I think about metaphors. Well, you can't even begin to tell a story without saying *this thing* is like *that thing*. Or even *this thing* is *that thing*. Or, as in an almost grotesque proverb in Igbo: *the corpse of another person is a log of wood*. Of course, we know that somebody else's body is not a log of wood; but it could be so for all we care. We don't seem to be able to put ourselves inside that box. We do not say "there go I but for the grace of God." We lack the imagination to leap into that box. And if we didn't the world would have been a much more wholesome place. The oppression in the world would not be as great as it is. The inhumanity we practice would be greatly reduced. But because we lack the metaphoric imagination we are unable to make that imaginative leap from out of our own skin into somebody else's. And so our storytellers jolt us with metaphor and irony, and remind us that "there but for the grace of God go I." Without metaphor and irony things would be white or black, and not very interesting. It's only when you show that this white is also black that something very interesting and important begins to happen.

ROWELL: In this interview, you have, I've noticed, in more than one instance, used a tale to illustrate your point. You have also used the proverb. I suddenly remember the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* talking about the importance of proverbs in Igbo conversation.

ACHEBE: Proverbs are miniature tales; they are the building blocks, if you like, of tales. They are tales refined to their simplest form, because a good proverb is a short story. It is very short indeed. What it demonstrates, first of all—before we go on to the why—is the clarity with which those who made these proverbs had observed their reality. A proverb is a very careful observation of reality and the world, and then a distillation into the wisdom of an elegant statement so that it sticks in the mind. You see it, you know it's true, you tell yourself, "this is actually true, why hadn't I thought of it," and you remember it. And there is a whole repertory of these statements made by my people across the millennia. Some must have fallen out of use, others have remained and have been passed on from one generation to the next. And part of the training, of socialization of young people in this society, is to become familiar with these statements from our immemorial past. So that when we are dealing with a con-temporary situation, when we are dealing with here and now, we have the opportunity to draw from the proverbial repertory to support or refute what is said. It's like citing the precedents in law. This case before us is what we are talking about. But similar things have happened before; look at the way our ancestors dealt with them down the ages. So it gives one a certain stability, it gives one a certain connectedness, it banishes, it helps to banish the sense of loneliness, the cry of desolation: why is this happening to me, what have I done, woe is me! The proverb is saying no, it's tough, but our ancestors made this proverb about this kind of situation, so it must have happened to someone else before you, possibly even to a whole lot of other people before. Therefore, take heart, people survived in the face of this kind of situation before. So proverbs do many kinds of things. They are, just for their elegance as literary forms, interesting and satisfying; then they ground us in our "Great Tradition"; they tell us something about the importance of observing our reality carefully, very carefully.

ROWELL: We know you in the United States as a novelist mainly. But you're also a poet, a critic, and short story writer. Does the poem, or the essay, or the short story do something for you that the novel cannot do?

ACHEBE: Yes, I think so, I think so. Though, I hope you won't ask me what it is, because that would be more difficult. But suddenly I have not been writing short stories for some time, there was a period in my life when I wrote a lot of short stories. At that point I was not writing novels. There was also a period when I wrote much poetry, much for me, now I rarely write poetry and so it must mean these forms serve me at particular times or have served me at particular times. If I may be more specific, during the Biafran war, the civil war in Nigeria, I was not writing novels for years and years and years; after that I was not in a mood to write novels. I wrote most of my poetry at that period, many of the short stories. So without saying categorically that I only write poetry in times of war *[laughter],* I think that there is some connection between the particular distress of war, the particular tension of war, and the kind of literary response, the genres that I have employed in that period. I remember in particular one poem, "Christmas in Biafra," which actually came out of the kind of desperation which you felt hearing carols on short-wave radio and being reminded that there were places in the world where people were singing about the birth of the Prince of Peace and you were trapped in this incredible tragedy.

Now it's a very powerful feeling, a very powerful feeling indeed. It is analogous to that scene in *Things Fall Apart* just before those men kill Ikemefuna and they hear in the air the sound of music from a distant clan. I don't know how those men felt hearing it: the sounds of peace and celebration in the world and a horrendous event at home. So what I'm feeling at any particular time and what the world is doing impinge on the kind of writing I do, obviously.

ROWELL: Earlier you said, "I see myself as a storyteller." What do you mean?

ACHEBE: Well, that's just a manner of speaking, of again relating myself in the manner of the proverbs we are talking about to something that had happened before. So even though I don't think I'll ever be in the court of the emperor, telling stories to him and his courtiers, still I am in that tradition, you see. The story has always been with us, it is a very old thing, it is not new; it may take new forms, but it is the same old story. That's mostly what I'm saying, and we musn't forget that we have a certain link of apostolic succession, if you like, to the old *Griots* and storytellers and poets. It helps me anyway, it gives me that sense of connectedness, of being part of things that are eternal like the rivers, the mountains, and the sky, and creation myths about man and the world. The story was there from the very beginning. In the beginning was the word. The beginning was a story, it is the story that creates man, then man makes other stories, you see. And for me this is almost like Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* who before he performs important functions in his community has to go to the beginning and tell how his priesthood came into existence. He has to recite that story to his community to validate his priestly rites. They know it already but cannot hear it too often. This is how stories came into being, and this is what they did for our ancestors and we hope that they will continue to serve our generations, not in the same form necessarily, but the same spirit.

ROWELL: What is the role of the literary critic in the new Nigerian society?

ACHEBE: Well, that's a good question. I didn't want to speak for critics, but I dare say that there were ancestors of literary critics in the past; I mean spectators who might get up and say: I don't like that stuff! Obviously modern critics could claim a certain apostolic succession but quite frankly I don't think the role of their ancestors was as elevated as that of the original creators. Today when the thing is down in print on paper, I think the role of the critic has become a lot more complex and thus a lot more important. It is important because there is need for mediation. Since I'm not going to go around and meet the people and answer their questions as a storyteller would do in the past, actually meet them face to face and experience their support or disagreement, somebody else is called into existence to perhaps explain difficult parts, or per-form all kinds of functions of a mediating nature. Also, there is so much which is produced, there is so much that is written, all of it is not of the same quality and a certain amount of discrimination is necessary just to survive the barrage of production in the modern world, the sheer number of books. I think therefore the role of the critic is important. Also, I think the critic is there to draw attention to this continuity that I was talking about, to the tradition. How

does this new work relate to what has happened before, how does it relate to writers who were here before, how does it even relate to those who did not write their stories but told them? So I think there is a new and necessary and important role for the critic.

ROWELL: I'm going to ask one more question about art and literature. Then I want to turn to a handful of questions about your background. If you had to look back on your works and judge them, is there one text or one genre which allowed you to speak or write the best way you wanted to? Or is there one of them which is more representative of the kind of expression you wanted to make?

ACHEBE: Well, I think I can only talk about the genre, and the only reason I can talk about it is that I can lean on the simple fact of numbers. I've written more novels than I've done any other thing, and therefore that must be the one that as of now seems most congenial. But I really don't even try to think about that and even if I were tempted I would resist the thought. I would go out of my way to stop it because, as I've said, everything I have written has been useful to me at the time when I needed to write it, and I wouldn't want to say that this time is more important than that time. So apart from being able to say that obviously I have written more novels, I would not bother to rank my texts and genres, or award distinctions, even secretly.

ROWELL: Did your education at the University of Ibadan direct you in any way to-ward a career in creative writing? I guess what I'm ultimately asking is how did you come to write?

ACHEBE: Yes, well I think I grew up in Ibadan in a way that pointed clearly in the direction of writing. That was the period when I was able to reassess what I had read and all I had to go by at that point was the colonial novel written by white people about us. And so it was a very, very crucial moment in my career, that moment when I was reading these things again with a new awareness of what was going on, the subtle denigration, and sometimes not so subtle, that I had missed before. So in that sense it's at Ibadan that I grew up, and growing up is part of the decision to write. It did not give me the taste for writing; it was always there. Even in high school and before that, because the taste for stories was always there. I think it's simply encountering myself in literature and becoming aware that that's not me, you see. A number of texts helped; one of them was Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson,* and I suppose one of them was Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* There were a lot of other books not so well known and not worth remembering. But what I'm talking about is encountering the colonial ideology, for the first time in fiction, as something sinister and unacceptable. So if you add to this the weakness to stories anyway, you have the possibilities, even the incitement to become a writer, somebody who will attempt to tell his own story. Because we all have a story in us, at least one story, I believe. So in my case Ibadan was the watershed, a turning point.

ROWELL: At the present time we have only a bit of biographical or autobiographical public information about you, the man and the writer, and I've always wondered whether or not the Christian component of your background (your father was a mission teacher) extracted you from Igbo culture in any way?

ACHEBE: I think it intended to, but I don't think it succeeded. Certainly it had its moments of success. But with my curiosity, my natural curiosity, I didn't allow it to succeed completely. And so there I was between two competing claims but not aware of any discomfort as a child. I was certainly aware of curiosity about the non-Christian things that were going on in my community, and I was not really convinced that because they were non-Christian they were therefore bad, or evil. And even though I met a lot of Christians who seemed to operate on the basis that everything in the traditional society was bad or evil or should be suppressed, I think that slowly, little by little, they realized too that that was really a lost hope, a wrong kind of attitude to adopt. I could see that a bit in my father. I know that he became less rigid as he grew older. The things he would not tolerate, when I was very little, I saw him not pay too much attention to later on—like traditional dancing and singing, you know. I never had any problem with those things. I was in a peculiar and an interesting position of seeing two worlds at once and finding them both interesting in their way. I mean I was moved by the Christian message. I was moved by hymns in the church. I was moved by the poetry of Christianity. I was also moved by the thing that Christianity was attempting to suppress: the traditional religion, about which at the beginning I didn't know very much. But I was going to make it my business to listen and learn and go out of my way to find out more about the religion. This is how it happened. So I was not distressed at all by being born in that kind of crossroads. On the contrary, I thought it was one of the major advantages I had as a writer.