

Tanure Ojaide

Tribute

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Chinua Achebe (1930–2013)

Chinua Achebe's place as one of Africa's greatest writers is not contestable. He bestrode the African literature world like a colossus and he would be remembered not only by us but by generations to come in Africa and elsewhere. In his work he restored pride to the African whose postcolonial condition had tried to rob him of human dignity because of Western colonial policies denigrating African culture. In fact, one of his most impressionable convictions was that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; [...] their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty [...] they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity." He thus inscribed African culture boldly on the world literary stage. And he spent his writing career exhorting his African society to regain "belief in itself" since colonialism attempted to strip its self-confidence away. At the same time, he castigated his Nigerian society for its obsessive corruption and ineptitude that made a nation so abundantly endowed to be still wallowing in poverty. To him, the major problem with Nigeria was that of lack of good political leadership. He inspired African writers to write not art for art's sake or pure art as done by Western writers but "applied art" to make them "teachers" working towards changing their societies for the better. He thus espoused a transformative ideology of art. He was our champion wrestler in the global literary stage and the Eagle on the Iroko made us very proud.

While I have always been familiar with Achebe through his work—novels, essays, and poetry—that I have to read as a student, teacher, and writer, I had the opportunity to be very close to him on one major occasion. It was when I won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Africa Region in 1987 and we were together in London at the Queen's reception for Commonwealth leaders and poetry award-winners from different regions of the world. I experienced Achebe's admirable humility. An iconic writer he already was and I a "budding" poet, he related to me as if like a comrade of equal status. He was cheerful and always exuded subdued humor with his trademark shy smile. When the Queen quoted him in her speech, he turned to me, smiling shyly and said: "Tanure, you are my witness!" Now I am his witness and bear testimony

to the great man known all over the world and respected by the Queen of Great Britain and the Presidents and Prime Ministers present. All his life, he remained humble and those young and old who came to him always testified to the humility that made him tower so high today in my memory.

Chinua Achebe taught me to be principled and truthful, especially as a writer, since one is bound to be involved in controversies. He was not controversial for the sake of being so or to gain cheap popularity but he said things and took actions based upon deep conviction. His anti-colonial stance made him write a counter narrative to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and other works of European writers who portrayed Africans as one-dimensional characters. Achebe insists that Africans are a people who are neither angels nor devils. His stand during the Nigerian Civil War should be seen in the context of one with a keen sensibility who responded to events following the pogroms of 1966. He was an emissary of Biafra, the secessionist state, and worked for it and was never apologetic about his role during the war. His last book, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (New York: Penguin, 2012), has been controversial in Nigeria and has offended many groups and people on the opposite side—including me—during the war but he aired his views frankly. He was a courageous man who did not hide his position on crucial issues.

A great inspirer who sparked the literary imagination of young Africans to take writing seriously, Achebe was among the chief writers who blazed the trail of modern African literature. His writings have helped to build a canon of modern African literature that younger writers are today working hard to reinforce with their respective works. There has been so much talk about his not winning the Nobel Prize for Literature but that should not in any way diminish his literary reputation. Literature is a cultural production and one does not expect him to be rewarded by the culture whose literary philosophy and cultural genocide he denounced by pricking the conscience of the West on colonialism!

Achebe was not just an Ogidi man, an Igbo, a Nigerian, an African; he was a man with a deep humanity. He has joined the ancestors but will forever be with us in spirit.