

Chinua Achebe in Jamaica: Speaking His Mind

by
Barbara Ellington

In his first interview after arriving in Jamaica to participate in events to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the end of the forced European transport of African people across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean, *Jamaica Gleaner* newspaper (www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20070103/news/news6.html) lifestyle editor Barbara Ellington spoke with renowned author Chinua Achebe about issues concerning Africa, Pan Africanism, the significance of the Jamaica National Bicentenary Committee commemoration, and his literary achievements [the original article was published January 3, 2007, titled the 'Conversation With: Chinua Achebe – Renowned Author Speaks His Mind', thus the content herein is reprinted by permission of The Gleaner Company Limited via Mavis Belasse, the manager of the Information Systems Department and Sheree Rhoden, the research assistant in the Information Systems Department at the same company, with copyright remaining with The Gleaner Company Limited in Kingston, Jamaica].

I begin at a time when on January 1, 2007, as Caribbean people, it concerns us that events in Darfur are horrendous. Just this morning, Somali Islamists were chased out by the Ethiopians following years of conflict. Share thoughts on events as they concern the instability on the African continent and the fact that our people live in subhuman conditions, face inevitable death from starvation or wars, are constantly chased away from home, and all the ills that attend Africans today.

I appreciate your use of the word 'us' in your question because that's what I'm about. What happens to us happens to us all wherever it may be, and Jamaica is as much involved as Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria or anywhere else in Africa. There are some who don't see it and if you don't, you have missed the point and if you miss the point you cannot possibly understand the link to the transatlantic slave trade. And it's the remnants of that influence and meaning that are now unfolding. That's where I begin.

Disappointed

We all are disappointed that things are not going well in Africa now. But we understand why, and one of the reasons is the nature of independence that was granted to the various colonies. Africa was the only continent that was completely taken over, carved up and served to different European countries.

The result of that is a period in which every square inch of the African continent was owned by somebody else. Africans have not been silent on this; they have struggled against it in different ways. Jamaica was quite notorious for its struggle too. That's good.

Today, that part of the story is behind us but the story of the abolition did not end slavery, the exploitation did not end, it just slowed things down. So it was not independence, it was just a ploy because in some ways, Europe did better after independence than she did before in Africa.

The weaknesses specifically built into the newly created independent states are now showing. For instance, Britain was involved in manufacturing a census for Nigeria that told us how many people we were. This was directed to leave room for them to continue to manoeuvre an independent nation.

I say all this because we must not all get into the habit of saying, 'what's wrong with Africa?' What's wrong is that she is battling with a struggle that no one else has ever handled. People say China and India are doing well, what about Africa? China and India were not transported across the Atlantic. No one else suffered that huge compulsory movement of people and the destruction of a continent that followed. It is that destruction that we are seeing today in Darfur, Somalia, Nigeria and other troubled areas

It's a question I ask in anger often as I watch civil wars, hunger and displacement unfold on television. I went to Zimbabwe a couple years ago, and came away feeling disappointed, embarrassed and saddened by the plight of people under the tyranny of Robert Mugabe, and I often wonder whether the region's leaders and by extension black leaders everywhere have the vision and the will for self-governance?

We have not been lucky with the leadership we have had since independence. Part of it is deliberate. Part of the hoax called independence, is to give us leaders who do not understand what happened to us. As long as they are running things, they run Africa to the ground. We have to understand leadership more broadly than just one person in one country.

Leaders ought to be a group of educated people moved with great passion. The danger and destruction you see in Africa which has so much human and material resources and spiritual resources, is as a result of misguided leaders. Look at the wealth of our culture; we have taught the world that mankind began there. If you don't have leaders which understand this, you are doomed.

Don't Despair

The answer is that in spite of the dark picture we must not despair. There is no sense in saying there is nothing else we can do. We have been doing a lot throughout the ages. There have always been people in Africa who understood that something fishy was going on and they would not allow it to continue.

People of intellect like Marcus Garvey understood the nature of what happened. So, while recognizing what happened, we should not give up the task of struggle.

Things Fall Apart *is almost 50 years old, it's been translated into over 50 languages, over 10 million copies have been sold, and it is still studied in schools. I am curious as to whether you consider it your finest work, is it your favorite book or so the one you are proudest of? Did another book hold any special place in your hearts?*

Things Fall Apart was a special book because it was when I began to see and understand the problem, and to grasp that it would not be easy in Nigeria. The book told the story differently from inside. I was there and I was growing up at the time.

That leads me to ask how much of Okonkwo's (the main character), experience is yours and how much of the book is autobiographical?

I was living in that culture at the point and it was revealing things to me. My parents were Christian converts. I lived in a home where we read the Bible day and night, and sang hymns all day and yet, there were some of us in that same community who felt we should follow the religion of our ancestors. My uncle was one of them. I was put into a position where you had to understand that there were two things the missionaries were teaching us, the way truth and the light.

But Whose Truth?

That's right. We recognized the difference and **Things Fall Apart** had a lot of burdens placed on it, so I told myself I had to deal with the work of fiction truthfully. I must not make concessions to please anyone. I must follow the story. The others that followed all had a mission. So it's difficult to choose a favorite. It's like asking me about my children. We don't make favorites; they are all there to do different things. The question of the merit or how well each book did, I leave to critics.

Are you currently working on any books?

Yes, one is my own translation of **Things Fall Apart** into my mother tongue Ibo. English is the language we were given by colonization and since I have spent my life learning it, I have decided to use it in a conversation with my mother tongue and let them talk. I will sit and listen to what they say.

Is there a date for its release?

Yes, it is three years ago but it will be done.

Anything else in the works?

Yes, I am working on a novel too because I think there is a gap and where you see one, you go in and fill it. We need many novelists and visionaries because the story of the African continent is not finished.

The reason you are here as the first internationally recognized guest of the JNBC, at the end of the year --- what lessons would you hope that Jamaica, Haiti and the rest of the region would have learnt from it all. We still struggle with our own demons of the past; there may not be overt racism here but classism is alive and well; we still look at shades of skin with a notion in some cases, and a genuine belief in others that lighter is better, so what do we need to learn?

We need a change of perception of what is happening to us and, where it's coming from. The falsehoods that we were fed on, the whole system of so-called education we had was flawed and given to us by people who had an interest in what resulted.

As I understand it, Jamaica was never passive at any point of its history, and more active given the size of the population. That is remarkable when you compare its size to Nigeria. We wonder how you could accomplish as much as you have done. I hope that the next 200 years will not see a dilution of this concern and commitment to the truth.

It should be stronger now when we have a sense of ourselves. The world should also change as we reject some of the falsehoods. For instance, the falsehoods that Africans sold their brothers. No matter how long it takes.

What do you make of the Tony Blair stance on Britain's responsibility in the whole issue?

They are not understanding how things happened and it's not difficult to find; it's all there in the libraries. We must go to libraries to get the story, in those early days; we did not keep libraries in Africa and if you don't keep libraries, your story will be changed if it's not recorded. We must have a situation like that again, knowledge and the storage of it helps people understand who they are, and why they have an identity that they can be proud of regardless of shade of skin.

Secondly, I think that Jamaica's understanding of the position of Haiti in this whole year of activities is so gratifying. The makers of our problem swore that Haiti must never succeed. These people (Haitians), who dared to challenge Europe and defeat the army of Napoleon without any arms, are very bad examples to be left lying around for others to copy. So let us make sure that these people never make it.

We must understand that. When we had trouble in Nigeria, one side broke away. The first country to recognize this new state was Haiti. The letter sent by the President began like this; "I am speaking from the pinnacle of the black race." And he was. So Haiti is not a place to make fun of, never mind the problem they are having. These problems were put there, so there is still a lot of work to be done.

As Caribbean people we have often been told (and many believe) that coming here as we did, we were held as less than worthy to call ourselves Africans. We are not true blooded; we have been diluted as a result of the rape and advantages taken of our women by our colonial masters. Yes, we have stood with the South African struggles but there are still feelings that we are not true Africans. Having lived in the West so long, how do you feel about this?

That is part of the intention of the makers of the problem to ensure that the plan is carried out. There is no such thing as bloodline. Human is human. The people of Africa do not say, 'I think therefore I am'. That is the European way. The African says, 'a person is a person because of other persons,' not seeing himself as less than anyone else.

Attempts to discourage the Caribbean is the same as the attempt to discourage any strong fighter for freedom and independence. If you look at the series of Pan African conferences held in the last 100 years, they have been led by people mostly from the Caribbean and also America. Africans were ground into the soil by the devastation of moving populations, so before we gathered stability to join the race and struggle, the Caribbean and Haiti had been in it. So anyone who tells you, you are not worthy, tell them to go to hell.

Africans in Africa have to come and learn from Africans in the Caribbean that you have experiences that we need. Africa is your home and you must not allow anyone to make you feel any sense of not being one of us. A good mother does not disown her children. All of that is ignorance and deliberate friction.

Share your thoughts on the U.S. Iraq conflict, the hanging of Saddam Hussein, the ugly acts of terrorism worldwide, the fact that the rest of the world is now at the mercy of America's hostile foreign policy, international travel is now a big hassle and we all seem to be just waiting for the next big anti-American terrorist act.

I am not responsible for or supportive of America's role in the world. When I was younger, America was very popular abroad. As a student in university, we did not enjoy the anti-America jokes the British liked to make about the quality of American education; Nigerians jumped to their defense. When we heard America was a free country and they respected freedom, we thought they were our blood brothers.

But it's not so today; they have squandered their advantage with the rest of the rest of the world. To me, it's unbelievable that any government would go as far as they did in the war and in fact, now they are trapped and we must worry about it. The war has brought lack of safety to everywhere and I am sorry it is happening now and diverting our attention from what we as Black people must be doing to advance ourselves, elsewhere in the world.

What lessons should we learn from year of events to mark the bicentenary?

I will leave my motto which is 'Don't give up, don't despair and don't listen to those who say you can't achieve your goals'.