

Francis B. Nyamnjoh

Prof Francis B. Nyamnjoh,
Department of Social
Anthropology, University
of Cape Town.

E-mail:

nyamnjoh@gmail.com
francis.nyamnjoh@uct.ac.za

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa53i1.7>

ISSN:0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica •
2021 53(1): 129–137

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



Being and becoming African as a permanent work in progress: inspiration from Chinua Achebe's proverbs

African Literature Association (ALA) Lecture, Cape Town, January 23, 2021¹

Introduction

This lecture explores what we could learn about being and becoming African as a permanent work in progress from how Chinua Achebe adopts and adapts Igbo proverbs in his writing. Being African is often claimed and denied with expediency. While all claims and denials may have foundation, not every claim is informed by the same considerations. If being and becoming African were compared to shopping at a supermarket, one could argue that some are flexible in what they put into their shopping baskets while others are picky, even when invited to buy a lot through attractive offers, sales and discounts. And some have products thrust down their consumer palates through the power of aggressive advertisement or for lack of purchasing power. I am particularly interested in how being African is claimed and denied in history, socio-anthropologically, and politically. In this connection, I have found much inspiration in Chinua Achebe's use of proverbs as words of salience and significance in crafting the stories and essays that have made him

¹ This lecture can be viewed on the ALA YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaYYHGM8iraoQF48xeCnMKw>

a household name on the continent and globally. Achebe has found in proverbs a powerful resource of complicated repertoires from which he has drawn repeatedly to nourish his characters and oil their experiences and relationships, depicting their multifacetedness and celebrating their humanity.

Proverbs, as condensed wisdom drawn from human experience, provide a rich resource for understanding, *inter alia*, how African communities have, through the ages, negotiated and navigated questions of being and belonging through a myriad of encounters with one another, as well as with people from elsewhere and those they have come to know and relate to through their own mobility. Proverbs are cherished repertoires of humans as dynamic and creative innovators in conversation with the geographies and environments that continually feed their individual and collective selves and their appetite for the nuanced complexities of being human.

Like Achebe, I find it compelling to think with proverbs, which, far from being confined to so-called nonliterate or preponderantly oral societies as some have had the habit of insisting erroneously, are “condiments of speech” (Ukwuaba 2015: 2). in every society, regardless of the degree of modernity claimed by the society in question. Let me share a proverb with which many of you are already familiar, from Chinua Achebe’s novel *Arrow of God*: “The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place (Achebe 1974: 46).” The proverb in the novel is slightly adapted from that in circulation in everyday Igbo language: “*Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene mmuo*, ‘You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade’” (Achebe 1988: 65). Commenting on this proverb, Achebe notes: “The Igbo believe that art, religion, everything, the whole of life are embodied in the art of the masquerade. It is dynamic. It is not allowed to remain stationary” (Achebe 2012: 59). I would like to adapt the proverb slightly as follows: “*Africa* and being *African* are like a mask dancing. If you want to see them well, you do not stand in one place.” To buttress the point with a proverb common among the populations of the Cameroon Grassfields – a proverb about which I have written – “a child is one person’s only in the womb” (Nyamnjoh 2002: 111-138). As products of culture in its dynamism, proverbs and language cannot but live up to the dancing mask image of that which has parented them. Nimble-footed realities, flexible identities and belonging require nimble-footed and nimble-minded spectators. And nimble-footed and nimble-minded students of Africa and Africans need to bring historical ethnography into conversation with the ethnographic present.

The ideas that hold this lecture together are: *Incompleteness, Mobility/Motion, Encounters, Compositeness, Debt and Indebtedness, and Conviviality.*

Proverbs in motion and their mobilisation by Chinua Achebe

If one applies the Achebe proverb referenced above – “The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place” (Achebe 1974: 46) – to the meaning of a proverb, one could argue that the proverb is like a mask dancing, and one does not understand it in its fullness by standing in one place and sticking to a frozen idea of what a proverb is.

Not only are proverbs universal in their use to express emotions, thoughts, experiences and challenges, they are also universal in the very fact of the mobility of humans, ideas and language across geographies. The power of the proverb lies in its eternal incompleteness of meaning, that constantly opens itself up to improvisation and creative innovation in usage with and across cultural communities.

There is an Akan proverb to the effect that “when the rain beats the leopard, its fur becomes wet, but its spots do not wash away” (Bhebe and Viriri 2012: vii). If colonialism was the rain, and African languages the leopard, what in African languages has proven to be the spots? Central to a language are the figures of speech and idioms, of which proverbs are integral. If Africa’s unequal encounters with European colonialism meant the imposition of colonial European languages, any meaningful claims to independence and decolonisation entailed, at the very least, a reinvestment in and prioritisation of linguistic repertoires endangered by colonialism as a zero-sum pursuit (Nyamnjoh 2020: 89–98). Chinua Achebe understood this very well, and his novels are exemplary on just how to go about achieving that in creative writing. Achebe maintains that the use of proverbs helped him make words more palatable, likening proverbs to the palm-oil with which words are eaten: “Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe 1958: 6).

Achebe’s creative rendition of Igbo proverbs in the English language enriches both languages, and demonstrates that a true measure of a living language is in its capacity to reach out and embrace the new figures of speech, idioms or proverbs that come with new encounters with and experience of difference. For, while proverbs “represent the wisdom of the past used in a new situation to justify current behaviour, condition or thinking”, this by no means should imply that the past is an insensitive dictator of the present. The teachings, warnings, consolations, satire and advice of existing proverbs make sense only to the extent that these proverbs and those who employ them are sufficiently flexible and accommodating of the listeners as creative and discerning beings (Achebe 1958: xiii–xv). Providing for change and continuity in proverbs is the humility needed through a constant alertness to the fact that “One who does not travel assumes

that only his/her mother cooks the most delicious dinner” (Obiakor, Okoro and Mukuria 2017: 15). This celebration of Achebe through a conversation with how he marshals proverbs to make good bedfellows of change and continuity is also a tribute to his domestication of a colonial language, through his “ingenuous use of the English language” that has come to serve as “a model for creative writers in situations where English is a second or foreign language” (Emenyonu 2014: 2).

Proverbially, Achebe has shown the way to contemporary African writers on how to embellish their art “with oral resources such as folktales, proverbs, sayings, festivals, songs, riddles and myths”, whether or not they write in a colonial European language or in an endogenous African language (Emenyonu 2014: 4). To stress that African writers must dance the dance prevalent in their time in a nimble-footed world of myriad encounters and influences by no means should be mistaken as the wholesale embrace of colonialism or the ambitions of dominance of some over others, nor should it surprise anyone – in the manner that it appears to have surprised Bruce Gilley (Gilley 2016: 646–663) – that Achebe should find something positive to say about the legacies of British colonialism in Nigeria, even as he was highly critical of the hierarchies of humanity that underpinned colonial encounters and served to excuse the systematic devaluation of Africans – body, mind and soul.

Proverbs as palm oil

Proverbs lend themselves to be used by all and sundry – regardless of gender, class, status, age and location. A socially lowly ranked person is just as able to draw on proverbs in driving home their message as would a person who is hierarchically superior. This would explain why in Achebe’s novels proverbs come in handy to characters of different social categories and across the broad spectrum of society. In a patriarchal context that is sensitive to hierarchies of various forms, women, the young, the enslaved, the outcast and the underachievers among men may be reprimanded for using proverbs daringly, but seldom for using them. In recognition of an individual’s freedom to speak democratically, the Igbo invite anyone present at a gathering to “speak his own mouth” (Achebe 2000: 15). Proverbs afford otherwise passive and voiceless victims of the status quo in a patriarchal society and related contexts of inequalities and injustices to reassert themselves and reclaim the voice otherwise denied them in the spaces and places of formal enactment of power and privilege. In *Home and Exile*, Achebe calls on us always to remember what proverbs are meant to achieve in a communicative act with these words, “the extravagant attire which a metaphor wears to catch our eye is merely a ploy to engage our hearts and minds” (Achebe 2000: 16–17). Proverbs encourage persuasive communication by laying emphasis on the

force of argument and not the argument of force. For, as an Igbo proverb goes, “He who will hold another down in the mud must stay in the mud to keep him down” (Throwing mud African proverb n.d.). The “belief that one man is as good as another, that no condition is permanent” engenders “self-confidence”, highly “competitive individualism”, and an “open society” that make the Igbo “receptive to change”, adventurous, inventive and dynamic (Achebe 1983: 66–69).

Gluing change and continuity with proverbs

The invitation by Achebe to flexibility and humility in how we claim, and articulate, identities speaks of a writer who used his Igbo identity more as a vantage point for understanding the universal than as a fixation or a birthmark (Achebe 2012). To Achebe and thanks to his proverbs, Igbo identity is open-ended and inclusive. His use of proverbs demonstrates that communication is a process in which meaning is multiple, layered and infinite, and where context is cardinal to understanding. Proverbs in Achebe’s works also demonstrate that there is no essentialised Igbo identity, as social and political encounters and transformations fashion different ways of knowing and being Igbo, a point superbly buttressed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her remarkable short story, “The Headstrong Historian” (Adichie 2009), which I have analysed elsewhere (Nyamnjoh 2013b: 671–673). Being Igbo in an interconnected world of ever increasing possibilities of encounters with other people from other places and spaces, and with other ways of seeing and doing, far from being a hardback book with a definite introduction, body and conclusion (thank goodness Achebe published in paperback!!!), is always a process of becoming, best understood as flexible, fluid and full of ellipses – an unfinished and unfinishable story. Being Igbo or claiming whatever identity is all about disabusing oneself of fixations with a single story, however compelling and imposing its appeal might appear. This speaks to the potential in proverbs to contribute significantly as epistemologies of decolonisation, especially in Africa where European colonialism and its zero-sum cultural logic tended to impose silences and to whip alternative worldviews and ideologies of personhood into ridiculous defensiveness with infantilising menus of mimicry and one dimensionalism (Dei et al. 2018).

Achebe acknowledges change as a permanent feature of being human in a world of continual struggle and motion (Achebe 2000). He is inspired by the Igbo concept of existence at the heart of which are motion and agility, a cosmology best embodied by the dancing masquerade in Achebe’s opinion: “No condition is permanent” (Achebe 1988: 64–65). While it is important to master and respect customs and traditions if one is to participate in and evaluate them effectively, it is just as important to understand that in the course of human mobility and

encounters, new questions arise to which old answers are not quite suited. For, one must bear in mind that “A disease that has never been seen before cannot be cured with everyday herbs” (Achebe 1974: 233-234). This might require making things up as one goes along, but an old broom, however experienced and thorough, cannot sweep with quite the same effectiveness as a new broom in a new context. Far from being an invitation to abandon the past for the present, it is rather a call to creatively blend the past with the present in the interest of the future. In his writings, Achebe invites his readers to contemplate the intricacies of being and belonging, through the characters he creates, for whom these are not matters with easy choices. If his public pronouncements on his own life are anything to go by, being and belonging to Achebe as an individual are no easy matters either. He recognises that his “life has been full of changes” that have shaped the way he looks at the world, and that renders complex “the meaning of existence and everything we value” (Famous quotes of Prof Chinua Achebe 2013). The challenge of being and becoming African or anything else, is not so much identifying with people, places and spaces one is familiar with, but especially with spaces, places and people one is yet to encounter or to become familiar with. In other words, it is about embracing and celebrating incompleteness, and the humility and open-mindedness that this calls for.

Achebe the dancing mask humbles death

Achebe was a consummate composite being, who “was positioned at the crossroads of history, the intersection between the Igbo tradition and the colonial structure”, and who was propelled “by the desire to tell the story of Africa ‘from the inside’ as opposed to the misrepresentations of European writers” (Okolo 2007: 35). There was always room in him to open up and take the outside in, bring it into conversation with what he had internalised and come to consider almost as a natural or traditional part of his being, and in his intellectual, creative and physical nimble-footedness take the outcome of such conversations along with him for further encounters with and enrichments by composite beings in other places and spaces, local, distant and global.

Achebe – true to the dancing mask that he was – died on 21 March 2013 in Boston at the age of 82 following a brief illness. “He had been living in the US since 1990 after a car crash left him partially paralysed and in a wheelchair, returning to Nigeria infrequently” (Nigerian author Chinua Achebe dies 2013). Here, just like elsewhere, Achebe had a proverb handy: “When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool” (Chinua Achebe Quotes n.d.). Achebe was buried on 23 May 2013 in his home village of Ogidi, almost as if to prove that a son had returned

to assume his final resting place in the soil where his umbilical cord was buried. He had danced the world over, been of service in many capacities, including as professor of English at the Universities of Massachusetts, Amherst, and at the University of Connecticut, Storrs in the USA, and received many distinguished awards, including over 30 honorary doctorates from universities in Nigeria, South Africa, England, Scotland, USA, Canada and beyond (Chinua Achebe: why Google honours him today 2017; Okolo 2007: 35-36). Achebe authored five novels, namely: *Things Fall Apart* (1958); *No Longer at Ease* (1960); *Arrow of God* (1964); *A Man of the People* (1966); and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), short stories, poetry and many essays. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, published on 17 June 1958, translated into 50 languages, sold over 12 million copies, and in 2007, won the coveted Man Booker International Prize (Msiska 2008: 1). His life, works, deeds and nimble-footedness (Achebe 2012) made him an exemplary personification of the proverb “a child is one person’s only in the womb” (Nyamnjoh 2002: 111-138).

Critical of a contrived universalism narrowly informed by Eurocentric indicators of what qualifies as good storytelling, Achebe was relentless in urging Africans to write back to the West as a way “to reshape the dialogue between the colonized and the colonizer” (Achebe 2012: 55; see also Achebe 1988: 93-99). The story and achievements of the Heinemann African Writers Series of which Achebe was a pioneer (Currey 2008), and of similar initiatives to promote African literature in Francophone Africa (Fouet and Renaudeau 1976; 1984), provide a window into how far Africa has come in writing back (Currey 2008). He insisted that such narrowly informed universalism could only begin to make sense to the colonised by disabusing itself of extravagant claims of superiority with the humility to take seriously traditions of storytelling that such blinkered universalism had silenced with conquering impunity. As he put it: “My kind of storytelling has to add its voice to this universal storytelling before we can say, ‘Now we’ve heard it all’” (Achebe 2012: 55).

Now that Achebe has metamorphosed into an ancestor of inclusive storytelling, storytellers across Africa and the world beyond, can, like the little bird in one of Achebe’s proverbs, dance daringly in the middle of the road, knowing that they have a worthy drummer in the nearby bush of ancestors. For, to quote Achebe, in the Igbo concept of existence characterised by motion, agility and humility, “No condition is permanent”, not even death (Achebe 1988: 64-65). Achebe wrote:

So potent is motion stylized into dance that the Igbo have sought to defeat with its power even the final immobility of death by contriving a funeral rite in which the bearers of the corpse perform the *abia* dance with their burden, transforming by their motion the body’s imminent commitment to earth into an active rite of passage.

This body, appropriately transfigured, will return on festival or ritual occasions or during an enhanced presence and authority in the affairs of the community, speaking an esoteric dialect in which people are referred to as bodies: "The body of so-and-so, I salute you!" (Achebe 1988: 66).

And so shall it be. We expect Chinua Achebe in his eternal nimble-footedness as a dancing masquerade to continue to make himself available at academic and cultural arts festivals, scholarly conferences, seminars, workshops, lecture halls, publications and palavers on social media, as well as effect related enhanced presences and authority in the affairs of Igboland, Nigeria, Africa and the world, speaking an esoteric language, addressing and encouraging those who appeal to him for wisdom and guidance in negotiating and navigating being and becoming.

Bibliography

- ACHEBE C. 1958. *Things fall apart*. Oxford: Heinemann (African Writers Series).
- ACHEBE C. 1974[1964]. *Arrow of God*. Oxford: Heinemann (African Writers Series).
- ACHEBE C. 1983[1977]. *An image of Africa and the trouble with Nigeria*. London: Penguin Books.
- ACHEBE C. 1988. *Hopes and impediments: selected essays*. New York: Anchor Books.
- ACHEBE C. 2000. *Home and exile*. New York: Anchor Books.
- ACHEBE C. 2012. *There was a country: a personal history of Biafra*. London: Allen Lane.
- ADICHIE AN. 2009. *The thing around your neck*. London: Fourth Estate.
- BHEBE N AND VIRIRI A. 2012. *Shona Proverbs: palm oil with which African words are eaten*. Gweru: Booklove Publishers.
- CHINUA ACHEBE QUOTES. n.d. *BrainyQuote*. Available at: www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/chinua_achebe_2.html [accessed 21 July 2013].
- CHINUA ACHEBE: WHY GOOGLE HONOURS HIM TODAY. 2017. 16 November. *Aljazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/chinua-achebe-google-honours-today-171116065724595.html> [accessed 9 August 2020].
- CURREY J. 2008. *Africa writes back: the African writers series and the launch of African literature*. Oxford: James Currey.
- DEI GJS, DARKO IN, McDONNELL J, DEMI SM AND AKANMORI H. 2018. *African proverbs as epistemologies of decolonization*. New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b11366>
- EMENYONU EN. 2014. Introduction. In: Emenyonu EN and Nnolim CE (eds). *Remembering a legend: Chinua Achebe*. New York: African Heritage Press.

- FAMOUS QUOTES OF PROF CHINUA ACHEBE. 2013. *Nairaland Forum*. 22 March. Available at: www.nairaland.com/1233528/famous-quotes-prof-chinua-achebe [accessed July 23 2020].
- FOUET F AND RENAUDEAU R. 1976. *Littérature Africaine: L'Engagement*. Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines.
- FOUET F AND RENAUDEAU R. 1984. *Littérature Africaine: Le Deracinement*. Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines.
- GILLEY B. 2016. Chinua Achebe on the positive legacies of colonialism. *African Affairs*. 115(461): 646-663. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adw030>
- MSISKA M-H. 2008. Introduction. In: Achebe C. *Things fall apart*. Oxford: Heinemann (African Writers Series).
- NIGERIAN AUTHOR CHINUA ACHEBE DIES. 2013. *BBC News*. 22 March. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21898664 [accessed 21 August 2013].
- NYAMNJOH FB. 2002. A child is one person's only in the womb: domestication, agency and subjectivity in the Cameroonian grassfields. In: Richard Werbner (ed). *Postcolonial subjectivities in Africa*. Zed Books: London.
- NYAMNJOH FB. 2013b. Fiction and reality of mobility in Africa. *Citizenship Studies* 17(6-7): 671-673. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2013.834121>
- NYAMNJOH FB. 2020. "Amos Tutuola as a quest hero for endogenous Africa: actively Anglicizing the Yoruba language and Yorubianising the English language," *Acta Academica* 52(1): 89-98. <https://doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa52i1/KN>
- OBIAKOR FE, OKORO D AND MUKURIA GM. 2017. *Life lessons of African proverbs*. Milwaukee: Cissus World Press.
- OKOLO MSC. 2007. *African literature as political philosophy*. London/Dakar: CODESRIA/Zed Books. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350218154>
- THROWING MUD AFRICAN PROVERB. *The African Gourmet*. Available at: <https://www.theafricangourmet.com/2016/05/throwing-mud-african-proverb.html> [accessed 11 August 2020].
- UKWUABA OK. 2015. A linguistic study of proverbs and language identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. MA thesis. Lagos: University of Lagos.