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## Speaking from the middle ground: contexts and intertexts

In 1954 a graduate, one year out of college, was recruited to the Talks Department of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS). By the age of twenty-eight, he was one of the most powerful media professionals in Nigeria. Before independence in 1960 he had established a second career as a fiction writer with the international publisher Heinemann – in due course, his first novel alone would sell an extraordinary ten million copies. Sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, he celebrated his thirtieth birthday by embarking on an international tour that would help to establish him as one of the most influential voices in contemporary world literature. How should Chinua Achebe's spectacular rise to prominence be understood?

In Nigeria in the 1950s, the cultural field was undergoing profound, multidimensional change, as practices, values and assumptions previously taken for granted by producers and consumers in the media and the arts were rapidly redefined. With the systematic withdrawal of the British from public institutions, opportunities presented themselves to that first cohort of Nigerian graduates that must have seemed incredible to their parents' generation. In this sense, from a historical point of view Achebe arrived on the scene at precisely the right moment. In broadcasting, the process of 'Nigerianisation' that preceded independence had produced an urgent demand for young, well-educated, home-grown talent, in exactly the form he exemplified. At the same time, in international publishing, decolonisation posed major challenges for big companies such

as Longman and Oxford University Press. Both were comparatively slow to respond to the reality that, especially in the educational field, postcolonial markets would present demands quite different from those of the colonial era. Heinemann, a comparatively smaller player with an aggressive and entrepreneurial attitude, was the first to recognise that African writing could be promoted to education ministries and examination boards as a new canon for the postcolonial world. Achebe became their standard bearer in a way no writer before or since was able to do.

Within five years of independence, his status within the African arts world was unparalleled. As consultant editor for Heinemann's ground-breaking African Writers Series, he became the gatekeeper to international attention for a generation of emerging writers. As Director of the Voice of Nigeria, the nation's international broadcasting service, he was the media professional most directly responsible for shaping Nigeria's image abroad. When the Society of Nigerian Authors partied into the night of 14 January 1966 to celebrate the launch of his fourth novel *A Man of the People*, therefore, it would have been easy to assume that Achebe's status was unassailable. From that moment, however, his position began rapidly to unravel. The new novel depicted a coup – overnight, one had taken place almost exactly as he had described. Nigeria's first attempt at democratic self-government was at an end, and the following weeks and months saw a rapid unravelling of its political fabric, with escalating ethnic violence against Igbo professionals and their families. The Achebes, who narrowly escaped with their lives, were forced to flee from Lagos to their native South East, while an estimated 30,000 Igbo, who were not so lucky, died in the pogroms.

From his first novel onwards, as we will see throughout this book, the image of Nigeria Achebe had created in fiction was always a deeply troubled and problematic one. In 1966, *A Man of the People* presented a nation in fundamental crisis, and events on the ground seemed to have confirmed that diagnosis. When his native East announced its departure from the Nigerian Federation and declared itself a sovereign state the following

year, Achebe made the decision to become a secessionist and a citizen of Biafra. In his new nation, as part of the rebel leader Emeka Ojukwu's inner circle, his writing would take a different turn, when he became the lead author of Biafra's defining statement of values *The Ahiara Declaration*. War was soon upon him and, as his memoir *There Was a Country* shows, this experience was also a defining one. As UK Commonwealth and Foreign Office records of the period show, Nigeria's violent response to the secessionists was energetically encouraged by the British who, anxious to safeguard their oil rights in the Niger Delta, supplied the Federation with quantities of armaments that were unprecedented in Britain's history as an arms trading nation. Their action enabled a complete siege of the rebel republic that cost over two million lives. Militarily overwhelmed, and in the face of mass starvation and disease, Achebe's new nation held out for three years before being forced to a comprehensive defeat. For him, from a creative as well as personal and political point of view, the experience was disastrous. Three years previously, he had had to abandon his fifth novel uncompleted, and in the event it was twenty years before he was able to find the peace of mind and emotional stability to complete *Anthills of the Savannah*. By that time, Nigeria had once again become his homeland. As that novel revealed, however, his relationship to it was as painful and difficult as ever.

## Growing up with Nigeria

Nigeria is a nation-state encompassing a range of cultures as diverse as those of Europe. Those cultures have never cohered particularly harmoniously under a single national banner, and in the periods in which Achebe was active in Nigeria as a broadcaster and writer, it is important to recognise that ethnic and regional agendas defined the political landscape in fundamental ways. In common with many of his contemporaries, Achebe's own relationship to Nigeria was, from the first, an awkward one. In his fictional and critical writings, anti-colonial sentiment is

everywhere to be found, and it is clear that he was strongly committed to seeing the end of British rule. As too few critics have recognised, however, his relationship to nationalism and to Nigeria itself is a rather different question. In an essay entitled 'What Is Nigeria to Me?', membership of the Igbo nation is offered as his primary affiliation:

My earliest awareness in the town of Ogidi did not include any of that British stuff, nor indeed the Nigerian stuff. That came with progress in school. Ogidi is one of a thousand or more 'towns' that make up the Igbo nation, one of Nigeria's (indeed Africa's) largest ethnic groups. But the Igbo, numbering over ten million, are a curious 'nation.' They have been called names like 'stateless' or 'acephalous' by anthropologists; 'argumentative' by those sent to administer them. But what the Igbo are is not the negative suggested by such descriptions but strongly, positively, in favor of small-scale political organization so that (as they would say) every man's eye would reach where things are happening. So every one of the thousand towns was a mini state with complete jurisdiction over its affairs. A sense of civic attachment to their numerous towns was more real for precolonial Igbo people than any unitary pan-Igbo feeling. This made them notoriously difficult to govern centrally, as the British discovered but never appreciated nor quite forgave. Their dislike was demonstrated during the Biafran tragedy, when they accused the Igbo of threatening to break up a nation-state they had carefully and laboriously put together.<sup>1</sup>

Although statist nationalism – in the sense of commitment to the One-Nigeria project – was a key channel for anti-colonial sentiment during his formative years, it does not seem to have been something that penetrated deeply into the lives of families like Achebe's. As his autobiographical writings make clear, the cultural dialectic that structured his upbringing was between the world of the Christian mission, on the one hand, and Igbo traditional culture, on the other. In an interview with Dennis Duerden in 1965, the author described some of the typical evangelising activities in which he was expected to participate

as a child (evidently pursued with less vigour than expatriate missionaries would have liked):

When I was growing up it was not very common to see people converted. I know we used to go out, every fourth Sunday, into the village – the Christians I mean – and sing and preach, you see, and the ‘pagans’ as they were called would assemble and listen. The idea was that way you could covert a few more, but I don’t remember that we met with any great success. In fact, many of the people who turned up were what you might call backsliders, some who had been in the church and given it up, and they put some rather embarrassing questions to the catechist or pastor.<sup>2</sup>

Achebe’s mother, the daughter of a village blacksmith, had worked as a servant for the principal of St Monica’s Girls School in Ogidi in exchange for an education. His father was a stalwart of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) based regionally at Onitsha, and travelled as a preacher between the surrounding towns and villages. The churches within whose ambit the Achebe family existed were staffed and congregated by local Igbo: white people, and people from outside the locality, were a comparatively rare sight. As Achebe makes clear in *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, then, the church and the Igbo community which surrounded it were the defining cultural contexts of his childhood. In political terms, the very idea of thinking of oneself in terms of ‘national’ identity, rather than as being from Ogidi or as an Igbo, was not even on the radar until introduced into his consciousness at Government College Umuahia. This is not altogether surprising: from a historical point of view the idea of dividing the whole of Africa into national political units was a comparatively recent development.

The name ‘Nigeria’ itself was first proposed by Flora Shaw (later Lady Lugard, wife of the first colonial Governor General) in a letter to *The Times* newspaper of 8 January 1897. Given the diverse and sprawling nature of, as she put it, ‘the agglomeration of pagan and Mahommedan states which have been brought by the exertions of the Royal Niger Company’, some common name needed to be agreed on so that people at all levels of the colonial

enterprise could properly understand which territories they were speaking of. Some in the Royal Niger Company favoured the name of 'Goldesia', in recognition of the colonial entrepreneur George Goldie, who had played a key role in subjugating the region to Britain's economic interests. Eventually, however, Shaw's less controversial proposal, taking the name of the Niger river, was agreed upon as the title for the area controlled by the company in the Southern territories. Later it was adopted as the nomenclature for a larger area, extending to the colony of Lagos and Britain's interests in the primarily Islamic, Northern region as well. Though perhaps incidental in itself, this story of naming has become emblematic of the arbitrary and haphazard manner in which the outlines of the modern nation were arrived at, for Achebe and many other Nigerians.

In 1914, while Achebe's father was building his reputation within the CMS, the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria was established, as a step toward amalgamating Britain's vast and unwieldy dominions in the area as a single administrative entity. Even at that time, however, the idea of creating structures to promote 'national' cultural cohesion were not on the agenda. As the historian Gary Diamond argues in his study *Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria*:

While the British established over Nigeria a common political authority, transportation grid, and monetary system, they did not rule it as a single nation. In 1900, separate protectorates were proclaimed for Northern and Southern Nigeria, and a Native Authority System was constructed to rule indirectly in the North through traditional authorities. Even after formal amalgamation in 1914, the British continued to rule Nigeria, in effect, as two countries. In the South, Western education and religion were vigorously promoted and English was employed as the language of administration. Elective representation was introduced there 25 years before it would appear in the North. By contrast, British officials administered the North through the Hausa language and, seeking to preserve that region's social structure and institutions, effectively sealed off the North, especially the Muslim emirates, from Western

influences, even in the person of Southern Nigerians. Those Southerners who migrated to the North were forced to live in segregated housing and to educate their children in separate schools, and were prevented from acquiring freehold title to land. Northern Muslims were forbidden on both religious and administrative grounds to associate with Southerners, whom they were taught to regard as 'pagans' and 'infidels'. As a crucial component of this policy, Christian missionaries were forbidden in the emirates and Western education was severely restricted ... This separate administration of North and South not only profoundly hindered the development of a common national identity but also generated an immense development gap.<sup>3</sup>

Without doubt, the establishment and administration of Nigeria by the British had, from the outset, far more to do with the expediencies of colonial economic policy than it did with fostering national development or cultural consensus among its peoples. Therefore it is unsurprising if – while anti-colonial sentiment steadily grew during the whole period of colonisation – mass enthusiasm about the 'national idea' did not manifest itself nearly so strongly or consistently. Because of the North's comparative cultural isolation from the South East and South West, because of its distinct Islamic identity, and also because Britain's policy was to keep local structures of power in place as far as possible, regional identity rather than a common bond of 'Nigerian-ness' emerged as the pre-eminent political force in the last phase of colonial control. In 1946, Britain's 'Richards Constitution' for Nigeria formalised the already-established divisions between the regions by establishing separate Houses of Assembly for each one; over the following decade, these acquired an increasing amount of power. Increasingly, therefore, the struggle for influence in these regions became the focus of political attention.

In the South East where Achebe grew up, as well as in the South West, the colonial education system was rapidly expanded in the 1940s and 1950s, partly in an effort to supply the civil service and other public institutions with clerks and

other workers. As Obi Nwakanma's account of the experience at Achebe's own school, Government College Umuahia, illustrates, the objective of the colonial education system at that time was a straightforward one: to produce functionaries, or intermediaries between the imperial centre and its subject populations:

It was conceived by the British colonial administration to educate a select category of 'natives' who were to be recruited into the colonial administration, following the loss of some of England's most talented young men in the First World War. Administrators of the empire created local equivalents of Eton, Harrow and Winchester, to train the elite who would assist in running the colony ... They had teachers drawn mostly from English men who themselves had been educated at Cambridge and Oxford. These teachers were employed through the colonial civil service as education officers rather than through the missions. Their mandate was to provide the best English education to a select elite, trained and prepared in the English mould.<sup>4</sup>

In the North, significantly, there was no such expansion: as Diamond observes, no 'higher' schools comparable to Achebe's were established there at all in this period. When he proudly enrolled as one of the first cohort of the new University College Ibadan in 1948, moreover, only 6 per cent of his fellow students were northerners, despite the fact that the Northern region accounted for four-fifths of Nigeria's landmass and more than half of its population.

During Achebe's education, the philosophy of democratic nation-statism certainly seems to have informed the curriculum he was offered, even if it was not presented in the form of 'political theory'. As Benedict Anderson suggests in his classic study of nationalism *Imagined Communities*, this was true throughout the colonised world. In French Vietnam, for example, it was considered normal for schoolchildren to learn about the 1789 Revolution as an aspect of general knowledge about France. Similarly, he argues, 'Magna Carta, the Mother of Parliaments, and the Glorious Revolution, glossed as English



national history, entered schools all over the British Empire.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, then, the idea that the independent, democratic nation-state was the political goal to be striven for would have been familiar to the generation who came of age with Achebe, as anti-colonial agitation in Africa was reaching its height.

During his time at Umuahia and then at University College Ibadan, political engagement among students was the norm, and it would have been unusual if Achebe had not taken a keen interest in Nigeria's progress towards independence. Judging by his own published output and the evidence provided by biographer Ezenwa-Ohaeto,<sup>6</sup> however, there is little sign that, as a student, he took any special interest in proselytising the Nigerian national project. Achebe's most active involvements during his time at the University College were in the Dancing Club and as a contributor of creative, critical and philosophical pieces to student periodicals. In his period as editor of the *University Herald*, his published pieces were strikingly a-political in tone:

There was a young man in our Hall  
Who said that because he was small  
His fees should be less  
Because he ate less  
Than anyone else in the Hall<sup>7</sup>

and

The behaviour of students during the performance of *Hiawatha* last Sunday was, quite frankly, disgraceful. Unintelligent and rude laughter, clapping and similar 'pit' reactions are out of place in a University. They exasperate the few who are prepared to appreciate great works of art in a sober manner.<sup>8</sup>

The nationalist rhetoric of the time was, as he says in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 'of a dream-Nigeria in which a citizen could live and work in a place of his choice anywhere, and pursue any legitimate goal open to his fellows'.<sup>9</sup> Almost a decade before the British withdrawal, however, it is clear that Achebe himself was already doubtful about the real prospects for this ideal. The idea of the nation uniting harmoniously at independence was, he

writes, 'an unrealistic dream at the best of times' even if 'some young, educated men and women of my generation did dream it'.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the major public figures in Nigeria were invited to speak to the student body while Achebe was at Ibadan, and he would have been exposed to the full cut and thrust of political argumentation in the period. Tellingly, he writes in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, for him the most memorable political moment of that time was the symbolic defeat of nationalism's leading proponent Nnamdi Azikiwe in the regional elections of 1951. 'Zik', editor of the radical *West African Pilot* and a long-time agitator for independence, had led an eight-month tour of Nigeria to build a national consensus around the campaign for self-government. According to the political historian Richard L. Sklar, however, by the beginning of the 1950s much of the political energy surrounding the Nigerian nationalist project had already dissipated. Indeed, the faltering of Zik's own career in this period neatly illustrates the way in which the political climate was changing.<sup>11</sup> In the 1950 elections, he had attempted – as an Igbo, brought up in the North – to become leader of the Western Region. If successful, his achievement would have provided an iconic achievement for the project of national integration. In actuality, as Achebe writes, his defeat had an enormous deflationary effect on the One-Nigeria campaign:

I was an eye-witness to that momentous occasion when Chief Obafemi Awolowo 'stole' the leadership of Western Nigeria from Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in broad daylight on the floor of the Western House of Assembly and sent the great Zik scampering back to the Niger 'whence [he] came.' Someday when we shall have outgrown tribal politics, or when our children shall have done so, sober historians of the Nigerian nation will see that event as the abortion of a pan-Nigerian vision.<sup>12</sup>

Nigerian nationalism – understood as a commitment to the establishment and maintenance of the Nigerian nation-state – was undoubtedly, in the early years, fuelled and defined by the powerful anti-colonial sentiment that Achebe and most of his

contemporaries shared. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Nigeria's genesis as a relatively recent, somewhat arbitrary and certainly unwieldy colonial construct meant that it was always locked in tension with deeply embedded regional and ethnic loyalties in the various territories it encompassed. In 1947, the example of India had demonstrated to all concerned that the geo-political *status quo* was not the only option for postcolonial nations: in response to pressure from the predominantly Islamic north, British India had been divided at independence into the separate sovereign states of India and Pakistan. In Nigeria before 1960, in the years when the nature of the independence settlement remained a matter of public debate, there was every reason to expect that a very similar pattern might be followed. The nation-state bequeathed by the activities of the Royal Niger Company, self-divided and problematic as it was in social and cultural terms, did not by any means represent the only possible political construction which could be imagined.

During Achebe's time as a student at Ibadan, when anti-colonial agitation was at its popular height, the proposition that a united Nigeria embodied the inevitable political destiny of the people was still, therefore, something that had to be argued and fought for by its political proponents. Indeed, as late as 1958, Zik was still having to plead to the divided interests of the Legislative Council, that One-Nigeria remained the region's best bet for independence:

This country, Nigeria, can no longer be regarded as a mere geographical expression. It is also an historical expression. The various communities or nationalities inhabiting this country have great traditions and a rich heritage of culture which, if pooled together, can make Nigeria great and enable her to take her rightful place among the family of nations. I have great respect for the Hausa-speaking peoples. Studying their historical background, which goes back through centuries of medieval and ancient history, one is proud of the achievements of the Ghana, Melle, Mellestine and Songhay empires. The same is applicable to the Nupe, the Tiv, the Kanuri, not to speak of the Yoruba, Ibo, Edo, Ibibio, Ijaw and other tribes and nationalities

forming the various communities in Nigeria. It is essential that ill-will be not created in order to encourage a Pakistan in this country. The North and the South are one, whether we wish it or not. The forces of history have made it so. We have a common destiny; so, too, have the East and the West. Any attempt from any source to create dissension and make the North feel that it is different from the South and the West from the East, or to make any particular nationality or tribe in Nigeria feel it is different from the others, should be deprecated. It is from these points of view that I feel that this House should place on record their condemnation of such a practice, and I have in mind the New Year's message of Your Excellency when you appealed to the various communities of Nigeria to appreciate the need to live in harmony so as to make Nigeria a worthy place for all to live in.<sup>13</sup>

Although, in 1960, the independence settlement brokered by the British did retain the one-nation model of Nigeria they had developed as the colonial power, it was one which in many ways enshrined, rather than transcended, ethnic and regional divisions. By then, according to Achebe's own account, the notion of a truly united Nigeria, in which all citizens could live and work where they wanted and where opportunities would be open to all regardless of ethnic or regional background, had been put aside as an 'unrealistic dream' for almost a decade.

Immediately after independence, being a free Nigerian rather than a 'British Protected Person' was undoubtedly intoxicating, especially if one travelled to other African states which were still governed by European powers. For Igbo people, even the youngest and most idealistic among them, however, the glamour of that new national identity was to be short lived. In his essay 'What Is Nigeria to Me?' Achebe writes:

At the time we were proud of what we had just achieved. True, Ghana had beaten us to it by three years, but then Ghana was a tiny affair, easy to manage, compared to the huge lumbering giant called Nigeria. We did not have to be vociferous like Ghana; just our presence was enough. Indeed, the elephant was our national emblem;

our airline's was the flying elephant! Nigerian troops soon distinguished themselves in a big way in the United Nations peacekeeping efforts in the Congo. Our elephant, defying aerodynamics, was flying!

Traveling as a Nigerian was exciting. People listened to us. Our money was worth more than the dollar. When the driver of a bus in the British colony of Northern Rhodesia in 1961 asked me what I was doing sitting in the front of the bus, I told him nonchalantly that I was going to Victoria Falls. In amazement he stooped lower and asked where I came from. I replied, even more casually, 'Nigeria, if you must know; and, by the way, in Nigeria we sit where we like in the bus.'

Back home I took up the rather important position of director of external broadcasting, an entirely new radio service aimed primarily at our African neighbours. I could do it in those days, because our politicians were yet to learn the uses of information control and did not immediately attempt to regiment our output. They were learning fast, though. But before I could get enmeshed in that, something much nastier had seized hold of us all.

The six-year-old Nigerian federation was falling apart from the severe strain of regional animosity and ineffectual central authority. The transparent failure of the electoral process to translate the will of the electorate into recognizable results at the polls lead to mass frustration and violence.<sup>14</sup>

Achebe's fiction in the 1950s and early 1960s, certainly, is strongly Igbo in focus, with little attempt to explore the differential experiences of, for example, the Yoruba, Fulani or Hausa peoples. Can the Igbo experience explored in these novels be taken as representative of Nigeria as a whole? Hardly, given that within six years of independence, ethnic conflict had escalated to a point that most Easterners no longer felt they could continue to exist as 'Nigerians', and a bloody civil war was on the horizon. Achebe's fourth novel *A Man of the People* is set more clearly in a 'national' space, a kind of not-Nigeria, and explores the national political scene with a sceptical, deeply questioning eye. Read as an exhortation to Nigeria to reform itself, to realise its

lost potential, this novel could be seen as a kind of sceptical dalliance with statist nationalism. Even if this is accepted, however, it is certainly very far from the nationalism of Benedict Anderson's 'deep horizontal comradeship'. In the wake of the political eruption that coincided with its publication, moreover, any ambivalent hopes Achebe may have harboured for the nation were shaken further. In 'What Is Nigeria to Me?' he recalls:

My feeling towards Nigeria was one of profound disappointment. Not because mobs were hunting down and killing in the most savage manner innocent civilians in many parts of northern Nigeria, but because the federal government sat by and let it happen. The final consequence of this failure of the state to fulfil its primary obligation to its citizens was the secession of Eastern Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra. The demise of Nigeria at that point was averted only by Britain's spirited diplomatic and military support of its model colony. It was Britain and the Soviet Union which together crushed the upstart Biafran state. At the end of the thirty-month war, Biafra was a vast smoldering rubble. The cost in human lives was a staggering two million souls, making it one of the bloodiest civil wars in human history. I found it difficult to forgive Nigeria and my countrymen and women for the political nonchalance and cruelty that unleashed upon us these terrible events, which set us back a whole generation and robbed us of the chance, clearly within our grasp, to become a medium-rank developed nation in the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

Nine years after the civil war, when military dictatorship was coming to an end, and the establishment once again recognised Achebe with the Nigerian National Merit Award, his commentary in the Lagos *Daily Times* showed a continuing ambivalence: 'I think I am on safe ground if I say that Nigerian writers are not planning to send a delegation to President Shehu Shagari to pledge their unflinching support. Flinching support is more in their line of business.'<sup>16</sup>

In the mid-1980s, during the preparation of *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe used the high profile Regent's Lecture at the

University of California, Los Angeles to address the question of his relationship to Nigeria. Once again, he took the opportunity to define himself in terms of Igbo traditions (Mbari and Afikpo), while questioning the possibility of a culture that could call itself 'Nigerian':

Who is my community? The *mbari* and the Afikpo examples I referred to were clearly appropriate to the rather small, reasonably stable and self-contained societies to which they belonged. In the very different, wide-open, multicultural and highly volatile condition known as modern Nigeria, for example, can a writer even begin to know who his community is let alone devise strategies for relating to it?<sup>17</sup>

As we see here, Achebe's own account of himself and his work in *The Education of a British-Protected Child* explicitly contradicts the thesis put by influential critics such as Simon Gikandi that his work can be read in terms of a consistent commitment to nationalism.<sup>18</sup> Instead, in this volume, Achebe situates himself in a very different way that usefully illuminates the strategies we find in his fiction. Neither an ideologue, nor an agitator in the foreground of political struggle, he wants to characterise himself as speaking from a 'middle ground', a space of negotiation between two poles: on the one hand, the culture bequeathed by colonialism and, on the other hand, the Igbo civilisation of his native South East. As Achebe writes:

That middle ground is, of course, the least admired of the three. It lacks lustre; it is undramatic, unspectacular. And yet my traditional Igbo culture, which at the hour of her defeat had ostensibly abandoned me in a basket of reeds in the waters of the Nile, but somehow kept anxious watch from concealment, ultimately insinuating herself into the service of Pharaoh's daughter to nurse me in the alien palace; yes, that very culture taught me a children's rhyme which celebrates the middle ground as most fortunate:

Obu-uzo anya na-afu mmo  
Ono-na-etiti ololo nwa  
Okpe-azu aka iko

The front one, whose eye encounters spirits  
The middle one, the dandy child of fortune  
The rear one of twisted fingers.

Why do the Igbo call the middle ground lucky? What does this place hold that makes it so desirable? Or, rather, what misfortune does it fence out? The answer is, I think, Fanaticism. The One Way, One Truth, One Life menace. The Terror that lives completely alone ... The middle ground is neither the origin of things nor the last things; it is aware of a future to head into and a past to fall back on; it is the home of doubt and indecision, of suspension of disbelief, of make-believe, of playfulness, of the unpredictable, of irony ... When the Igbo encounter human conflict, their first impulse is not to determine who is right but quickly to restore harmony. In my hometown, Ogidi, we have a saying, *Ikpe Ogidi adi-ama ofu onye*: The judgement of Ogidi does not go against one side. We are social managers rather than legal draftsmen. Our workplace is not a neat tabletop but a messy workshop.<sup>19</sup>

In this passage, Achebe playfully presents himself as a Moses figure, referring to the Old Testament prophet who would have been a recurring figure in his missionary education. To gloss this story briefly: in the book of *Exodus*, Pharaoh orders that all of the boys born to Israelite women should be cast into the Nile. Moses' mother cannot bear to drown her baby son, and instead sets him floating on the river in a basket of reeds. While bathing with her handmaids, Pharaoh's daughter sees the child and takes pity on him. Moses' sister, who is watching nearby, asks if she should call a wet nurse. Ironically, Moses' mother is then employed by Pharaoh's daughter to rear the boy until he is ready to enter Pharaoh's palace as her son. Moses grows up, to all appearances, as an Egyptian. His ultimate role, however, is to become the guide of his enslaved people. For Achebe, the very act of making a comparison between 'my own puny story' and that of the Israelite leader is, he is aware, 'sheer effrontery'.<sup>20</sup> What it does bring out, however, are important elements of the writer's self-conception. In the book of *Exodus*, of course, Moses is not a formulator of nationalist slogans, but a carrier



of messages between fearful authorities – Pharaoh and Jehovah – to whom his double-sided history gives him unique rights of access. He is not an architect of grand schemes and ideologies but a go-between, a broker between rival systems of power, a reader of tablets, a navigator across new and unknown times. Certainly, these are useful ideas to take to Achebe's fiction.

One thing that is clear here is that, in the analogy above, the 'people of Israel' whose freedom Achebe might help to realise are not the Nigerians but the Igbo. As he says in the essay 'What Is Nigeria to Me?' for him and his generation, growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, the idea of being a 'Nigerian' was, he says, only ever 'an acquired taste,' much like the colonial entertainment of ballroom dancing. Nationalism, in other words, even in the period of most intense excitement surrounding independence, was always more of a required performance than an ideological commitment. As he comments tellingly: 'I found, however, that once I had overcome my initial awkwardness I could do it pretty well.'<sup>21</sup> Should Achebe therefore be read as an Igbo nationalist? It is true that his works explore and, in some ways, celebrate the ethnic culture of the Igbo. As we will see in the following chapters, however, he is also very far indeed from ideologising the 'Igbo nation' as the goal or prize of struggle. Indeed, in *Arrow of God* particularly, Igbo culture is treated to quite a scathing analysis. In this sense, as we will see, it is much more useful to see Achebe's novels as questioning, troubling works which incite debate over questions of ethnic and national identity, rather than as expressions of political orthodoxy in themselves.

## Broadcasting

In the late 1950s and 1960s, as we have seen, Achebe emerged as a major figure in broadcasting and, at the same time, as an important presence in African writing and publishing. As I will argue below, these roles were inextricably related, in terms of the way they shaped his sensibility as a public intellectual. In this sense, I will be challenging the unexamined assumption made

by the vast majority of critics, that Achebe's role at the centre of the Nigerian media establishment, throughout the period of the country's emergence from colonial control, has nothing significant to tell us about him as a writer, commentator and critic. The aim of this section is to go some way towards redressing that critical tendency by exploring the field within which Achebe found himself as a broadcaster in these years, setting out some important ground work for the more detailed discussions of his writing offered in subsequent chapters.

Achebe's unexpected entry to the broadcast industry followed closely on the decision of Tom Chalmers, the British Director of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service in 1954, to begin concerted recruitment of Nigerian staff to his organisation. As independence approached, Chalmers recognised that a national broadcaster comprised entirely of colonial expatriates would soon lose leverage and credibility. Although there were many seasoned professionals working across the Nigerian media at that time, Chalmers' belief was that recruiting fresh graduates without previous experience, and training them in-house, would best fulfil the on-going aims of the service.

From its inception, as a relay for the London BBC's Empire Service in the 1930s, broadcasting had been seen by the British establishment as an instrument of effective government in its colonies: in Nigeria, as elsewhere, the NBS was developed as a collaboration between the BBC and the Colonial Office. From the end of the 1940s, efforts to develop the service proceeded with particular rapidity. As Charles Armour, head of the Schools Broadcasting Unit in Nigeria, says in a report on broadcasting developments during this period:

In 1949 the desire to take speedy counter measures against Communism provided a powerful, immediate inducement to enhance UK funds specifically for broadcasting developments. In the background was the rising tide of new forces in Africa – the new 'Africanism' described by Lord Hailey in his revised African Survey of 1956; but perhaps more realistically labelled 'African Nationalism' by Thomas Hodgkin whose ear was sympathetically tuned to the

elemental, revolutionary forces building up in post-war Africa. The writings, newspapers and utterances of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Kwame Nkrumah were having their impact and resonances outside Nigeria and the Gold Coast. Colonial Governments were pondering over their response; for some officials these nationalists could be dismissed as troublemakers. Riots in Accra in February 1948 sparked off a reaction, perhaps an excessive one in proportion to the small scale of the disturbances, but sufficient for [Secretary of State] Creech Jones in his May Circular to draw attention to the great potential value of broadcasting in 'correcting false impressions and rumours in times of civil disturbance' as recent events in the Gold Coast had underlined.<sup>22</sup>

In Ghana in 1951, Nkrumah's overwhelming victory for nationalists in elections to the new National Legislative Assembly further focused the minds of colonial governments on the need to develop broadcasting as a means of shaping African opinion. At that time, as Armour says, the clear view of Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech Jones was that broadcasting in Britain's subject territories would require 'close governmental supervision'.<sup>23</sup> From the point of view of the BBC, his insistence on direct political control of the service's output was seen as running entirely counter to its ethos of editorial independence, and the corporation was unwilling to operate in Nigeria on that basis. Instead, as a compromise, the BBC agreed to supervise and facilitate the development of a service which would be owned by the colonial regime, with the expectation that the corporation's own involvement would be time-limited, and that the new organisation would eventually be staffed entirely by Nigerians. From the early 1950s, therefore, 'the BBC now concentrated its energies on meeting the Nigerian requirement to establish broadcasting as a department of Government'.<sup>24</sup>

On the evidence of Armour's and others' accounts, recruitment to the service worked through the 'old boy' network and personal recommendation by senior expatriates. In Achebe's case, Professor James Welch from University College Ibadan, who had tried and failed to get his young student a postgraduate scholar-

ship at Trinity College Cambridge, put his name forward directly to NBS Director Tom Chalmers. Achebe started at the makeshift headquarters in Lagos, working within the Talks Department under the well-known broadcaster Angela Beattie. His responsibilities included both production work and interviewing for the radio. Key assignments for the service included hosting the 'Lugard Lectures', a series of talks by eminent Nigerians such as the Director of the National Archives at Ibadan, Kenneth Dike, whose chosen topic was 'One Hundred Years of British Rule in Nigeria'. The Queen's visit in 1956 and the regional elections of that year provided other important highlights. In *Another Africa*, Achebe recalls interviewing the legendary colonial anthropologist Sylvia Leith-Ross, who 'conceded the many good, new things in the country, like Ibadan University College, and asked wistfully: "But where is my beloved bush?"'<sup>25</sup>

In Lagos, a circle of recent graduates had begun to gather, occupying a number of civil service and media positions, and many of Achebe's contemporaries supplied content for him and his colleagues. As Ikpehare Aig-Imhokhuede, a *Daily Times* journalist within this group, describes: 'It was made up of a little circle of educated friends and colleagues; close peers really. Most of us were recently from the University College, Ibadan, and doing things in Lagos. I was writing leaders for the *Times*. Chinua was talks producer at NBC. Chris [Okigbo] was just busy having fun. He had moved to the Federal Ministry of Information. Ralph Opara arrived in Lagos and started in Radio ... It was an intense place.'<sup>26</sup> Supplementing his newspaper work, Aig-Imhokhuede provided book reviews for Achebe in the Talks Department and co-scripted the popular serial *Safe Journey* with radio announcer Ralph Opara.

Despite the quasi-colonial 'club' atmosphere all of this suggests, Achebe's role within the NBS also undoubtedly exposed him to the cut and thrust of Lagos politics in the mid-1950s.<sup>27</sup> The Talks Department had the responsibility of handling NBS coverage of all key broadcasts by government ministers and addresses by the Governor General. By the time Achebe commenced employment with the service, as media

analyst Ebele Ume-Nwagbo shows, these were already politically charged events. In 1953, for example, when in a statement of resistance Action Group politicians had withdrawn from the Western House of Assembly, the NBS itself became the subject of major political controversy. With flagrant bias, the service had given free airtime to the colonial Governor General John Stewart MacPherson, allowing him publically to denounce the Action Group, while denying the party any right of reply.<sup>28</sup> By the time of Achebe's appointment in the following year, the service's handling of all subsequent political developments had already become the subject of intense public scrutiny. According to Ian MacKay, who succeeded Chalmers at the head of the organisation, government expectations from the service were that it would not only provide entertainment and topical commentary, but also fulfil a broader cultural role, to 'raise standards and appreciation'.<sup>29</sup> As material from London was progressively supplanted by programming produced in Nigeria itself, the Talks Department was increasingly responsible for developing educational and literary content as well as maintaining coverage of the political sphere. As Achebe explains to Ezenwa-Ohaeto: 'Broadcasting at that point was a very exciting thing to do. And I learnt a lot by handling scripts. I was involved with the spoken word programme, although I was never an announcer but a producer. So I learnt a lot. We did short stories, short fifteen-minute talks, debates, current affairs and so on. But the short story was really my special interest and I encountered a lot of ideas just handling that.'<sup>30</sup>

This cultural role, umbilically linked as it was to the established modes of colonial paternalism that informed the whole of the service, was also shaped by a distinct political agenda. That agenda, pursued through programming both directly and indirectly, was to promote Britain's preferred, 'one-nation' model of post-independence Nigeria. As Ian MacKay, its last expatriate Director, writes in his study *Broadcasting in Nigeria*, the conscious intention of senior figures in the NBS was that it should 'play a dominant and vital role in spreading knowledge and understanding', including bringing pleasure to a wide variety

of listeners, but 'without losing sight of the *One Nigeria* ideal'.<sup>31</sup> While, as we have seen, there is little evidence to suggest that Achebe had any special, personal commitment to that particular model of independence for his area of West Africa, like all staff, he would have had to work within the organisation's priorities.

As the voice of the regions came to dominate the political agenda more and more powerfully in the run-up to independence, the broadcaster's role as a force for national cohesion was stressed increasingly strongly by the British establishment. From the start, as Ume-Nwagbo points out, it had been run directly from the Public Relations Department of the Nigerian government, with technical support from the Posts and Telegraphs Department, a division of the civil service. While the political climate in Nigeria during the 1950s forced the service to provide more and more regionally focused content – for example, in major regional vernaculars such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo – the organisation clung strongly to its core aim of disseminating centrally produced material 'intended to stress a sense of national unity'.<sup>32</sup> As part of the 'national programme', regardless of his personal affiliations or political perspective, Achebe's work within the Talks Department would have been essentially defined by that objective.

In 1954 a motion was put to the Federal House of Parliament by Alahaji Adegbenro, a subsequent premier of the Western Region, arguing that the only way to remove press criticism of the NBS as a puppet of the Nigerian government was to legislate for its complete abolition, and replacement by an independent corporation. The motion received widespread support and a period of negotiation began, concerning the structure and remit of the new broadcaster. This question was to dominate debate around the Nigerian media throughout Achebe's first three years in radio. Once again, the voices of the regions were a powerful influence, and when the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) was formally established in 1957, it was set up under joint control of the state and the regions, with the Northern, Western and Eastern arms of the organisation given a substantial amount of autonomy over programming in their

areas. Although the national organisation based in Lagos, where Achebe was employed, continued to supply a proportion of the broadcasted content across the whole country, it increasingly struggled to compete with the popularity of new, rival stations set up completely independently of the NBC in each of the three regions.

One of Chalmers' key strategies in attempting to build the credibility and resilience of this national service was to invest in the training of young Nigerian producers, including Achebe, who would increasingly be relied on to present the public face of the corporation. After a period of learning-on-the-job under senior British staff, each of them was sent to London for an extended period of training provided by the BBC. As Armour writes:

This gave opportunity for such trainees as Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Muhammadu Ladan, Victor Badejo (later the first Nigerian director general of NBC), Sam Nwaneri, the cousins 'Yinka and Michael Olumide, Joe Atuona and many others to establish personal contacts in Britain which had wider implications for building them up as Nigerian national figures than narrowly local experience and training might have yielded.<sup>33</sup>

For Achebe, the secondment to London in 1957 had the effect of fulfilling Chalmers' ambition to 'build them up as national figures' in a somewhat indirect way, in that the visit was to lead directly to the breakthrough that launched his literary career. Victor Badejo, his contemporary, was ultimately to take Chalmers' own position at the head of the NBC.

Returning to Nigeria after the secondment, Achebe was promoted to a senior position that, according to biographer Ezenwa-Ohaeto, had long been marked out by Chalmers. As Controller for the Eastern Region, his role was to manage the provision of programming aimed specifically at Igbo and other Eastern listeners, including in local vernaculars, while upholding the NBC's overarching ethos, to promote the 'One-Nigeria' ideal. According to J. F. Wilkinson, an expatriate programme officer in Northern Nigeria and later head of the BBC African Service:

The Regional Controllers and Regional Boards carried very considerable power and responsibility for the Regional services, each of which had their own particular interests and problems. The task ... was, first, to create a regional identity in the minds of the listener and try to widen the range of interest from purely local affairs ... and then to go on to try and use the NBC to create a national consciousness. The overall programme plan therefore involved opting in and out of the National Programme at frequent intervals each day.<sup>34</sup>

Arguably, fulfilling the NBC's ambition to be a significant unifying force for Nigeria was bound to be an uphill struggle for Achebe and his staff. Wireless sets remained too expensive for an average household at that time, with radio listening still largely confined to community centres and other public places, and the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the audience made programming inherently difficult. Despite the fact that the new corporation had been formed precisely to remove the criticism that the national broadcaster was simply an arm of central government, opposition towards the NBC continued to grow in the regions, while public interest in actually listening to its output remained quite weak. Revealing something of the challenge Achebe faced as the corporation's senior face in the Eastern Region, media historian Ebele Ume-Nwagbo writes:

It was not surprising that between 1959 and 1962 three rival broadcasting services, owned and operated by the regional governments, were established. And the speed with which the services sprang up and expanded was clearly indicative of how resolutely the governments had gone to dump the NBC.

The Western Nigerian government was the first to set up an independent service, the WNBC (Western Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation) in 1959.... Also out of favor with the NBC, the government of Eastern Nigeria formed the ENBS (Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Service) to handle its radio and television services. Earlier, the region's minister of Information and Welfare, B.C. Okwu, had remarked disparagingly that the NBC 'does what it likes



... and although it exists here to serve the Eastern Region, its position is rather innocuous.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, according to J. F. Wilkinson, the late 1950s and 1960s saw an exodus of skilled staff from the National Service, with the predictable result that the NBC's regional services were painfully squeezed. In his analysis, the inability of the NBC in the regions to check the growth and popularity of the new independent stations was a key strategic failure for the Nigerian project around the time of independence. While his conclusions might very well be questioned by subsequent historians of Nigerian politics in the 1960s, they are striking and interesting for the importance they ascribe to radio broadcasting, and the (failed) role of the NBC during Achebe's employment there, as an apparatus for holding the fragmenting nation together:

In the Nigerian Constitutional Conference leading up to independence it was decided that broadcasting should be a 'concurrent' subject, that is, it could be the responsibility of both the Federal government and the Regional governments. This resulted in the Premiers of the North, East and West setting up their own radio – and later TV – stations in Regional headquarters in parallel to and in competition with the regional stations of the NBC. The Sardauna of Sokoto, the Premier of the North, 'persuaded' practically all the talented NBC North Regional staff who had been assembled and trained over a period of years to resign and join his new station. The standard of NBC regional broadcasting tended to decline and the net result was that the divisive influences in Nigeria were given their head and allowed to ferment feeling through these new regional stations. It is my belief that this step, which undermined the unifying influence of a single Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, played an important part in leading Nigeria to the tragedy of the civil war from which the country is only now recovering. This development illustrates the power of radio and great importance of ensuring that it is in responsible professional hands.<sup>36</sup>

On a day-to-day level, according to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Achebe's role as Controller involved such responsibilities as intervening in

employment disputes between engineers and programme staff, helping to support the NBC staff canteen and hearing petitions for changes in working conditions and pay – including from one Christie Chinwe Okoli, a university student on a holiday placement, who later became his wife.

The programming he oversaw ranged from jazz and classical music through documentary pieces on such subjects as the Igbo caste system, children and women's programmes, cultural and religious features and coverage of current affairs. After three difficult years under Achebe's management, however, the NBC Eastern service had yet to find a mass listenership in the face of competition from the locally based ENBS, with its populist, regionalist stance. Whether for this or other reasons, Achebe was invited to return to Lagos as the Director of a new broadcasting venture, the Voice of Nigeria. If the objective of the NBC in the Eastern region had been to promote national feeling through regionally targeted programming, the corporation's ambitions for this new external service constrained its content even more closely to the national governmental agenda.

The service was targeted at African listeners outside Nigeria itself. As Director, Achebe's priority was to stress its credibility and commitment to journalistic values of independence and impartiality. Speaking on the programme *Nigeria Today*, he was keen to persuade listeners that 'Nigeria occupies a very important position in contemporary Africa, and what she says or does is of enormous significance, and ought to become known and understood.' He went on to stress that the service was 'not the voice of the schoolmaster but the voice of a friend. Our news broadcasts will strive to be accurate and our commentaries objective. We shall attempt to portray our country as truly as we can so that anybody who wishes to know about her may have a true guide.'<sup>37</sup> The potential for tension between these democratic aspirations and those of the service's funder, the federal government, is not difficult to see, however. Federal Minister of Information T. O. S. Benson's official broadcast to mark the establishment of the Voice of Nigeria struck a rather more didactic note, for example, asserting that its purpose was

'to ensure that the country's policies and views are better understood by her neighbours'.<sup>38</sup>

Achebe's own appointment as a (by then) recognised and established public figure was itself no doubt intended to bolster the impression that the external service would be more than an extended advertisement for Nigeria's domestic and foreign policies. However, there can be little doubt that in agreeing to take on the role, he would have to accept significant limitations on his own right to speak, especially on political affairs, and that the remit of the service itself would be tightly circumscribed. Certainly, the head of the NBC during these years, Ian MacKay, viewed the project in that light, arguing quite simply that 'the purpose of external broadcasting is to secure long or short term advantages for the originating country'.<sup>39</sup> While reflecting many of the liberal broadcasting principles of the BBC, and while being actively expected to represent a variety of voices from across Nigeria's cultural spectrum, the *raison d'être* of the service in the minds of senior managers and of the federal government was to promote Nigeria and its interests abroad.

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that in his contributions to public debates in this period, Achebe's tone is marked by a noticeably 'committed' and ambassadorial tone. In a much-quoted address to the Commonwealth Writers Conference in Leeds, England in 1964, for example, he distinguished his position sharply from what he regarded as the prototypical stance of the European writer who is both suspicious of, and an object of suspicion for, his society. For such a writer, he says disparagingly, '[t]he last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything'.<sup>40</sup> An African writer such as himself, he argues, must be prepared to assume greater public responsibilities in the task of public 're-education and regeneration'.<sup>41</sup>

In a perverse way, and arguably because of its attractive ideological clarity, this public address made by Achebe in the mid-1960s, and later published under the title 'The Novelist as Teacher', has become one of the most widely reproduced and anthologised of all his critical and political writings. A comparison with the fictional work he was developing at the

same time, especially the novel *A Man of the People*, however, shows a contrast of attitude that is very interesting indeed. In his novels, as we will see in the following chapters, we see such a questioning and troubled sensibility that it is almost difficult to believe that they were authored by the same person as texts like this address. Fiction, it seems, was the space where orthodoxy and 'commitment' were allowed to fall away.

In many critical interpretations that try to find a doctrinaire 'cultural nationalist' Achebe, this is the central tension or contradiction within his work that tends to be missed. As I will be arguing in this book, the reason why the development of Achebe's fiction in the 1960s should not be separated from the constraints of his high-profile position with the national broadcaster (as well as his privileged relationship to Heinemann) is not because his creative writing blindly reflects those organisations' priorities and predispositions, but rather because it does not. In the case of *A Man of the People*, what he presents seems to be precisely the image of Nigeria that could *not* be aired on the 'Voice of Nigeria', or offered to schoolchildren as a lesson in liberation struggle. If, in his role as a broadcaster and public commentator, Achebe was constrained to reflect a certain kind of affirmative political agenda in this period, in other words, it is clear that in his fictional writings, he felt no compunction whatsoever to do the same.

This is not to suggest that, within the overarching remit of representing Nigeria in a positive light to the outside world, and working on the understanding that the service should never acknowledge dissent from the country's official foreign policy, Achebe enjoyed no editorial freedom as head of the 'Voice of Nigeria'. A variety of prominent literary and cultural figures were invited onto the air, and the service endeavoured to promote intercultural understanding between Nigeria and the neighbouring countries of West Africa. As Director, one of his prime responsibilities was to recruit and train staff for international placements. Another was to manage the incredible technical challenges of establishing an international broadcasting service with a minimum of equipment in hastily acquired, temporary

studios and, for the first two years, a completely inadequate transmission infrastructure. By 1963, some of these initial difficulties had been surmounted and, as MacKay reported:

The pattern was now emerging. In the planning and content of programmes the NBC tried to publicize the policies, development, culture, and way of life in Nigeria ... Recruitment of qualified staff is always difficult in a multilingual service, particularly on a continent where rapid development in adjoining countries provides many opportunities. NBC concentrated on securing competent Nigerians with professional standards. People who could speak for the nation and be accepted in the country whose audience it wishes to attract.<sup>42</sup>

The driving context of these efforts was clear, however. In 1961, a Bill had been passed restoring formal ownership of the entire NBC to the national government, a radical centralising move which strongly accorded with MacKay's conception of the corporation as a force for promoting national cohesion. Defending his own record in the study *Broadcasting in Nigeria*, he 'unhesitatingly advocates a point of view which I battled for during my service with the NBC. I recall – and reject – the smiling admonition from a friendly Western Region politician who said, "Mr. McKay. You are before your time. The First Nigerian has not been born yet."<sup>43</sup>

Soon after the publication of *A Man of the People*, the contradictions between Achebe's role as a leading broadcaster and proselytiser of the Nigerian project, and his position as a writer forcing uncomfortable political truths onto the table of public debate, sharply manifested themselves. By the end of 1966 he had resigned from the NBC and returned to Onitsha amid Nigeria's mounting political crisis. Within a few months, war had commenced between the Nigerian Federation and his native East, now self-declared as the sovereign state of Biafra. As we will see in chapter 4, that conflict would propel Achebe to the upper echelons of the new republic, as one of Emeka Ojukwu's most trusted advisers. On 9 July 1967, less than seventy-two hours after the declaration of hostilities, it must have been with

bitter irony that Achebe heard the Voice of Nigeria's broadcast to the region:

A friend in need is a friend indeed. A more suitable adage can hardly be found for measuring the depth of the perfidy of some of Nigeria's so-called friends in the current situation. Foremost on the list of those who want Nigeria divided is the new clique led by Ojukwu. It is clear that without a group of misguided fellow travellers encouraging him, the rebel leader alone could not have single-handedly embarked upon his hopeless gamble ... But now external forces, some of them old friends of Nigeria, are not only deserting and playing the double game, some have even jumped on the band wagon of the rebel Ojukwu ... Nigeria, however, knows how the minds of these economic exploiters are working.<sup>44</sup>

As Ebele Ume-Nwagbo argues, one of the effects of the outbreak of civil war in relation to the NBC was to demonstrate how completely it had become the media mouthpiece of the Nigerian Federal agenda. During the conflict, courtesy of the British and the Soviets, Nigeria was to enjoy vast superiority of arms over Biafra. It was the infrastructure and culture developed under colonial stewardship and built up by Achebe and his colleagues, however, that facilitated the Federation's equally aggressive campaign for control of the international media agenda. As Ume-Nwagbo suggests, the civil war 'brought to maturity the use of broadcasting by leadership as an instrument of secular and national mobilization'.<sup>45</sup> For the following twenty-five years, all broadcasting in Nigeria was to remain a jealously guarded monopoly of the state government.

### The literary and cultural field

In critical introductions to his work, Achebe is routinely presented to students as the 'founding father' of African literature. Before his appearance, readers are encouraged to believe, Africa had been badly represented by colonial writers such as

Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary; with *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, Achebe broke new ground by presenting things from an African perspective. In this way, according to (for example) David Whitaker and Msiska Mpalive-Hangson, *Things Fall Apart* essentially created the field of postcolonial writing, becoming 'the progenitor of a whole movement in fiction, drama and poetry that focuses on the revaluation of traditional African cultures and the representation of culture conflicts that had their genesis in the colonial era'.<sup>46</sup> According to the critic Nahem Yousaf, similarly, 'Achebe began to create Nigeria's literary landscape in the years preceding Independence in 1960'.<sup>47</sup> Once again, in the critical essay that prefaces *Things Fall Apart* in Heinemann's new 'Classics in Context' edition, we are informed by the influential African American scholar Simon Gikandi that:

Achebe is that man who invented African Literature because he was able to show, in the structure and language of his first novel, that the future of African writing did not lie in simple imitation of European forms but in the fusion of such forms with oral traditions. Achebe is the conscience of African literature because he has consistently insisted on the power of storytellers to appeal to the morality and humanity of their readers and to give their life fuller meaning.<sup>48</sup>

As I will be arguing here, the assumptions that underpin these assessments of Achebe's significance are deeply unhelpful in terms of positioning his work in literary and cultural terms. Inadvertently, they help to reproduce a Western habit of perception about Africa as a *tabula rasa* or cultural vacuum before Europeans (in this case, Heinemann Books) discovered it. In fact, Heinemann were quite late on the scene. Certainly, interest in recovering and revaluating traditional cultures in Nigeria and elsewhere was a major intellectual preoccupation throughout the period of Achebe's upbringing and education. Publishing, in a variety of forms and genres, and for audiences both local and international, had also been a feature of Nigerian public life since its foundation in the early years of the twentieth century. Among notable literary forerunners, Pita Nwana's *Omenuko*

(1932), published while Achebe was still a small child, is regularly credited with the distinction of pioneering the novel in Igbo. Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, published by Faber in 1952, fused traditional tales drawn from Yoruba orature with European Modernist aesthetics in ways that excited substantial interest and controversy. Cyprian Ekwensi's work, depicting the energies of urban Lagos in a more popular idiom, had established a major fan base in Nigeria before being taken up by the international publisher Longman in 1954. With some notable exceptions, including Niyi Osundere and Stephanie Newell, the mainstream of Achebe criticism has generally failed to recognise the ways in which his work emerges from, rather than 'founding', this already established literary tradition in Nigeria.

In terms of early intertexts for Achebe's work, the first writer to represent Igbo culture widely in print was almost certainly the slave-turned-celebrity Olaudah Equiano, whose autobiographical *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* became an international bestseller after its publication in 1789. While for more than two centuries, Equiano's work was received as a 'founding' text in representations of slavery and the middle passage, subsequent scholarship cast new questions over it, with the emergence of baptismal and naval records suggesting that, rather than having been born in Igboland and surviving the Middle Passage as his text suggests, Equiano/Vassa may well actually have been born in South Carolina around 1747. Seen in a crude light, such revelations might seem to negate the value of his text. As Vincent Carretta suggests in *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, however, in fact this shift in our perception of the narrative's provenance can be seen as deepening and enriching our understanding of his text as a document of its time.<sup>49</sup> In this light, the *Interesting Life* can be seen as occupying an interesting in-between position, seeking to accord dignity and value to a culture with which its author became strongly identified but which he may never have known first hand.

An anti-racist *avant la letter*, Equiano represents the Igbo as a people who, though lacking some of the 'refinements'<sup>50</sup> of



Europe, deserve to be treated as the moral equals of Westerners. At the same time, his articulate performance as a writer works, in itself, to combat contemporary claims associated with such illustrious figures as Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the American *Declaration of Independence*, that blacks were incapable of uttering a thought 'above the level of plain narration'.<sup>51</sup> While he does often represent Africans as the *cultural* inferiors of Europeans, his fundamental contention is that all peoples are morally equal in the sight of God:

Are there not causes enough to which the apparent inferiority of an African may be ascribed, without limiting the goodness of God, and supposing he forebore to stamp understanding on certainly his own image, because 'carved in ebony?' Might it not naturally be ascribed to their situation? When they come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners, and customs. Are any pains taken to teach them these? Are they treated as men? Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire, and every noble sentiment? But, above all, what advantages do not a refined people possess over those who are rude and uncultivated? Let the polished and haughty European recollect, that *his* ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Did nature make *them* inferior to their sons? [A]nd should *they too* have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No.<sup>52</sup>

Regardless of how one assesses the (in some ways opaque) question of his early history, Equiano's writing makes an interesting comparison with Achebe's, in that both traverse an ideological 'middle ground' in which Igbo culture is partly refracted through the lens of Christianity. As critics like Rhonda Cobham have argued, the imprint of biblical motifs – such as the sacrifice of the son in *Things Fall Apart* – is unmistakable in Achebe's work. For her, Achebe's reading of Igbo culture in his first novel is inextricably shaped by his Christian consciousness and the need to 'find a way of synchronizing the qualities he wishes to represent with the values he has internalized'.<sup>53</sup> In Equiano's portrait of Igbo life, written two centuries before, this hybridisation is even more strongly marked, as the author

seeks to represent his ancestral culture in Edenic terms, as an unspoilt haven of Christian values. If in Achebe's novel the alien-ness of polygamy to Christian eyes is softened through his stress on the unique emotional bond between Okonkwo and Ekwefi, Equiano's account of marital customs strongly stresses the fidelity and monogamy of Igbo women, and the 'sacred ... honour of the marriage bed'.<sup>54</sup> If Okonkwo's honest industry is contrasted in Achebe's novel to the laziness and improvidence of his father, Equiano's account is keen to emphasise that 'we are unacquainted with idleness [and] have no beggars'.<sup>55</sup> If the deity Chukwu is characterised in *Things Fall Apart* as, in many ways, analogous to the Christian God-the-Father, in Equiano's work the complexity of Igbo cosmology is trimmed equally violently to fit with monotheistic, European assumptions:

As to religion, the natives believe that there is one creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun ... They believe that he governs events, especially our deaths or captivity.<sup>56</sup>

Like Achebe's, Equiano's writing is explicitly directed against colonial oppression, especially (in his case) in the form of the Atlantic slave trade. The enthusiastic take-up of Equiano's work by British readers was intimately connected to heightened public interest in relations between Europe and Africa, as debates over the ethical basis of slavery heated up in the late eighteenth century. As Akito Ito points out in an essay on Equiano's work, subscribers to his first self-published edition included the Prince of Wales, the Bishop of London and numerous members of the British aristocracy.<sup>57</sup> Vassa was a popular commentator in London newspapers such as the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Public Advertiser* in the late 1780s, and much of the appeal of the *Interesting Life* to his contemporaries may well be attributable to the skilfulness with which, in framing his own self-presentation as a multiply enslaved, multiply displaced black African, he negotiates the imperialist assumptions of his readership. The nature of Achebe's hybridity is clearly very different from this. Despite being separated by almost two centuries of history, nevertheless, something the two writers share is the way they

situate their work in a mediating position between colonised and coloniser, Igbo and Christian culture.

In Achebe's case, growing up within the fold of the Anglican Church Missionary Society, the anthropologist George Basden was undoubtedly a significant early influence. Basden's work in the church was closely associated with that of Achebe's father and he was held in high esteem throughout the Christian community in the Onitsha area. As biographer Ezenwa-Ohaeto records, Basden was Isaiah Achebe's tutor at Akwa College, where the latter trained to be a catechist, and later presided over his wedding to Janet Anaenechi, Chinua Achebe's mother. Basden was, in Ezenwa-Ohaeto's words, 'a welcome visitor and a man to treat with respect in the home of Isaiah Achebe' throughout the author's youth.<sup>58</sup>

As a college student interested in exploring the indigenous culture of his people, reading back over Basden's writings on the Igbo must have been a strange and painful experience for Achebe. Basden's *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: An Account of the Curious and Interesting Habits, Customs and Beliefs of a Little Known African People by One Who Has for Many Years Lived Amongst Them on Close & Intimate Terms (1921)*<sup>59</sup> is a pure sample of colonial anthropology, written with the same distinctive mixture of interest in 'native customs' and unshakeable belief in European superiority found in the work of contemporaries such as Sylvia Leith-Ross, whose *African Women*<sup>60</sup> was published by Faber in 1939. Basden may have been a familiar presence at the Achebe family table, but in his work the idea of Africa's opacity or inaccessibility to the white man, famously explored in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, remains a dominant motif. For him, as for Conrad, there is something inexplicable and threatening in the heart of the African, that turns itself against the European:

[I]t is a practical impossibility for the European to comprehend fully the subtleties of the native character. Some white men claim to have done this, but my experience leads me to think that the claim can rarely, if ever, be substantiated with definite assurance. The depths may be

sounded at times, but only by accident, and on most of such occasions the inquirer does not recognise that he has actually tapped the inner consciousness of the native. Let not this be thought strange, for the black man himself does not know his own mind. He does the most extraordinary things, and cannot explain why he does them. He is not controlled by logic: he is the victim of circumstance, and his policy is very largely one of drift. The will of the tribe or family, expressed or implied, permeates his whole being, and is the deciding factor in every detail of his life. It is a sort of intangible freemasonry; the essence of the primary instincts of the people. Men constantly act contrary to their better judgment, and, at times, even wrongly, because they firmly believe they have no alternative: they dare not oppose the wishes of their people. Consequently though there may be independent thought, there is seldom independent action, probably never where other members of the tribe or family are involved, however remotely. A further result, and one which must always be borne in mind by the foreign inquirer into primitive customs, is that the ideas of the native are indefinite. He has no fixed thoughts. He is under the influence of an atmosphere which emanates from the whole tribe. This subliminal consciousness, by which all his movements are controlled, becomes practically a sixth sense. It is inexpressible in words but, nevertheless, extremely powerful in action.<sup>61</sup>

Basden's admission that, after seventeen years of anthropological work, he remains 'puzzled'<sup>62</sup> by the Igbo does not, of course, prevent him from expounding on their culture and customs for some 300 pages. In chapter 1, the reader is invited to laugh with him at the violent treatment of Africans on transports along the West African coast, and the excitement of journeying up the swampy Niger Delta. In chapter 2, we are introduced to the British settlement at Onitsha, still at the time of his arrival 'an attractive field for investigation in which the native could be studied in his primitive environment'.<sup>63</sup> One can only imagine Achebe's response as a young man, reading Basden's accounts of his adventures into the surrounding area, replete with their sensationalist claims that 'cannibalism, human sacrifices and

other savage customs were real facts, and flourished within five miles of the outskirts of Onitsha'.<sup>64</sup> As an anthropologist but also a missionary, Basden's work oscillates interestingly between a tone of paternalist conservatism in relation to traditional culture, and outright celebration of its progressive erasure by colonialism. He applauds the progress made by Lugard's administration towards the 'complete upheaval of the political, economical and social affairs of the country. Every native institution has been shaken to its foundations.'<sup>65</sup> No other people, he argues, has been 'shrouded in so much mystery, or held in thrall by such powers of darkness',<sup>66</sup> and clearly, on one level, it is this occult fantasy that appeals to his evangelising consciousness. As a missionary, his own role is clear: that of leading the Igbo 'out of darkness and into light, and from the power of Satan unto God'.<sup>67</sup>

There can be little doubt, then, that Achebe's encounter with Basden's work while he was a student at University College Ibadan must have been difficult. At that time, however ignorant and misplaced in its judgements and assumptions, Basden's representation of the Igbo had come to be regarded as authoritative. To any reader without independent knowledge of the region or of Africa, his portraits of a people whose members included Achebe's own parents and grandparents might easily have been assumed to be faithful ones. In this sense, for the young Achebe, the impulse to expose and debunk his work must have been a powerful one. Although the figure of Basden may have informed his drawing of such characters as Mr Brown and/or the District Commissioner (an amateur anthropologist) in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's comments in interview suggest, however, that he provided just one of a range of sources and inspirations for the author's early fiction.

Among previous critics of Achebe's work, there has been considerable useful discussion of the importance of such colonial fictions as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), with its caricatured portrayal of the African-as-buffoon. C. L. Innes' *Chinua Achebe* is a particularly notable study in this respect.<sup>68</sup> Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* is also a frequently cited intertext. Achebe's own commentary in the essay 'An Image of Africa'

highlights what he succinctly calls the 'bloody racist' tendencies of Conrad's narrative, in which Africans are unrelentingly represented in crude and animalistic ways.<sup>69</sup> Probably an equal or greater influence which is seldom acknowledged, however, can be found in the upsurge of historical and archaeological research among Nigerians themselves, while Achebe was a young man, aimed at capturing the traces of vanished and vanishing indigenous traditions. If such colonial works as Sylvia Leith-Ross's *African Women* claimed of the Igbo that 'starting at scratch, they have nothing to unload ... no traditions',<sup>70</sup> formal and informal research by many of Achebe's contemporaries was in the process of building a raft of evidence to the contrary. In important ways, I would argue, Achebe's work needs to be seen not just in terms of, but as a contribution to, that collective effort.

Within academic institutions including University College Ibadan, the discipline of History was undergoing a process of radical re-evaluation. As early as 1951, while Achebe was still studying for his degree, one of Ibadan's most influential historians, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, had embarked on a comprehensive survey of documents in the possession of the colonial government, with the aim of establishing a state archive to support scholarly work on the cultural heritage of Nigeria's regions.<sup>71</sup> His recommendations provided the key impetus for the founding of the Nigerian Records Office in 1954 and the National Archive itself in 1958. Dike's seminal *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885*,<sup>72</sup> completed in 1950 and published in 1956, offered a powerful riposte to colonial historiography which tended, firstly, to focus exclusively on European expansion in Africa and, secondly, to perpetuate the myth that Africans themselves had no history worth exploring. As Toyin Falola says in *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*:

If the Europeans had presented Taubman Goldie as 'the maker of Nigeria,' Dike would present him as the 'maker' only of the Royal Niger Company ... If Europeans had presented Jaja of Opobo as a Nigerian chief who stood in the way of free trade, Dike and others would present him as a resistance hero, a patriot who did not want the British to cheat him in trade and deny him power.<sup>73</sup>

For Falola, the work of Dike and his contemporaries was instrumental in challenging the orthodoxies that had informed history teaching in Nigeria throughout the period of high colonialism.

One of the more disquieting conclusions presented by Dike's survey of colonial records, conducted between 1951 and 1953, was that the British administration in Nigeria had been far from responsible in their approach to preserving historical documents. In the late 1930s, the colonial governor had ordered a mass destruction of records on at least one occasion and incredibly, as Falola and Aderinto write in their study *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History*, the Director of the Geological Survey Department had destroyed all documents apart from a core of financial records:

Certainly, the poor state of government records is explicable in terms of lax administrative procedure and administrators' poor historical consciousness; the majority of these officials did not see such documents as integral components of the historical and cultural heritage of the colonial state ... Documents of great historical value were consistently destroyed or kept in conditions that allowed them to be highly susceptible to damage ... It was Dike's Records Survey that opened the eyes of the British colonial government to the extent and degree of ruin that had befallen the nation's valuable historical documents.<sup>74</sup>

Researchers working in the archives, whether amateur or professional, were forced to cope with these huge gaps and deficiencies as a matter of course, and it is unsurprising that alternative methods of documenting cultural heritage, especially from oral history, became very popular. As a student and, later, as a broadcaster working for the NBC, Achebe would have been highly aware of these developments in the historical excavation of Nigeria's indigenous cultures. Indeed in 1956, as we saw earlier, the Talks Department produced an entire radio series with Dike, exploring the history of British rule in Nigeria.

Other reclamation projects which attracted significant public interest and support included the archaeological investigations made by Thurston Shaw for the Nigerian Department of Antiquities at the site of the ancient Igbo civilisation at Nri, from the

late 1950s. Artefacts of remarkable artistry and sophistication of manufacture were dated to around the ninth century, using radiocarbon dating techniques.<sup>75</sup> Among Achebe's contemporaries, then, many had developing interests in questions of heritage and the representation of 'native' culture. Among these, a significant influence on Achebe was Adielo Afigbo who, having studied at Ibadan alongside him, went on to write a PhD there on the infamous policy of 'indirect rule' in Eastern Nigeria under Lord Lugard. As Robert Wren suggests, Afigbo's scholarship undoubtedly provides one of the most important intertexts for understanding *Arrow of God* in particular. His PhD was presented in 1964, the same year that Achebe published the novel, and as chapter 3 will show, it is interesting to compare the two books, written in the very different idioms of historical exposition and imaginative fiction respectively. Both explore, in revealing detail, the consequences of Lugard's mis-applied policy of indirect rule on Igbo communities. Afigbo's later work, much of it published after Achebe's, went on to illuminate the contexts of Igbo history in provocative and revealing ways. One notable study lays out extensive evidence of British tolerance towards the slave system, which continued to operate in a number of enclaves throughout the South East, as late as the 1940s.<sup>76</sup>

As Wren notes, the development of academic historiography associated with such figures as Dike and Afigbo comprises only a part of the surge of interest in questions of heritage and reclamation at the time Achebe was emerging as a novelist, however. The 1950s and 1960s also saw an exponential growth of interest in amateur history throughout Nigeria. Much of this work employed ethnographic research methods, including interviews with village elders, aimed at capturing detail about 'traditional' culture in the environs of the author's home village. The thriving culture of pamphlet production in regional centres like Onitsha ensured a life and readership for such work. By 1970, as Wren confirms from his own research, oral historiography of this type had re-crossed back to the academic domain, becoming a feature of the university curriculum, with undergraduates asked to compile histories of their own ancestral communities.



Arinze Ernest Agbogu's researches on the history of Ogidi at the end of the nineteenth century provide one key source for Wren's own work on the historical and cultural contexts to Achebe's writing.

### Publishing: the making of Chinua Achebe

As Stephanie Newell says in her study *West African Literatures*,<sup>77</sup> by the time of Achebe's appearance on the literary scene there was already a well-established tradition of fiction publishing in West Africa, albeit not necessarily in a form amenable to large-scale commercial distribution. Among the most celebrated centres for indigenous writing was Onitsha, a city on the Niger about six miles from Achebe's home village of Ogidi. For the author as a child, Onitsha was 'a magical place'.<sup>78</sup> Walking there from home at the age of ten was, as he writes, something 'looked forward to so eagerly and which I cherished'.<sup>79</sup> Popular authors of Onitsha market literature, writing to a predominantly young male readership, often included titillating sexual material in their works, whether or not combined with some form of moral exhortation. As Newell notes, female (as opposed to male) sexual predators are a recurring presence, and much room is given to airing the anxieties of the new class of literate, educated young men who inhabited Nigeria's urban centres. In the 1940s and 1950s, this literature was supplemented by Indian romance fictions written in English, which also enjoyed a wide readership. 'As early as 1937', Newell reports, 'advertises on the front pages of West African newspapers read, "This book offers *Sex Secrets* to men and women married or unmarried! No such book has ever been offered to the public! Secrets hitherto known only by doctors now laid bare to all!" (*African Morning Post*, 3 Dec 1937).'<sup>80</sup> Fiction published in Igbo, including Pita Nwana's *Omenuko* (1932)<sup>81</sup> and D. N. Achara's *Ala Bingo*,<sup>82</sup> had also built up an established readership by the 1950s. After independence *Omenuko* was to become, like *Things Fall Apart*, a staple of the school curriculum. Other writers, notably Cyprian Ekwensi, found themselves able

to bridge the gap between local and international publishing some years before the appearance of *Things Fall Apart*. Having established a strong reputation with such fictions as *When Love Whispers*,<sup>83</sup> published in Yaba, Nigeria in 1948, Ekwensi went on to garner international attention with his *People of the City* (1954),<sup>84</sup> partly thanks to the distribution opportunities made available by the London firm Andrew Dakers.

For Newell, the canonical status accorded to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by Western critics as the 'founding' or 'original' African novel tends to obscure the complexity and variety of the literary scene in this period. In particular, the rush to identify Achebe's text as the seminal expression of 'writing back' to the colonial centre has had a significant, distorting effect on critics' perception of the cultural field from which his work emerges:

Critics have tended to condense the decades before Achebe's emergence into an expectant, Achebe-shaped pause. Indeed, in some cases, commentators have used *Things Fall Apart* to dismiss Achebe's predecessors as irrelevant, flawed, or half-fledged as writers ... If elite authors in the empire were 'writing back' to the colonial centre at this time, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim for 'first generation' authors such as Achebe, many other West African writers were also writing novels, poems and plays for their own local communities, not primarily for metropolitan markets ... The Yoruba novelist, D. O. Fagunwa, who gained fame among Yoruba Nigerians for his work in the 1930s and 1940s, exemplifies the localism of this literature. Fagunwa's style of writing in the 1930s and 1940s inspired later international novelists, including Amos Tutuola, whose *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* drew many themes from Yoruba-language texts and tales ... Published six years before Achebe's anti-colonial *Things Fall Apart*, Tutuola's novel breaks all the rules set in place by the theory of 'writing back,' and for that reason it has failed to achieve recognition from critics until recently. Yet Tutuola was of the same literary generation as Achebe and his work offers a fascinating counterpart – or counterpoint – to the 'postcolonial' themes of his better-known compatriot ... Unfortunately, however, the 'starter' status conferred on

*Things Fall Apart* tends to obscure the literary contexts in which Achebe was situated when he started to write.<sup>85</sup>

For Newell, what is remarkable about *Things Fall Apart* from a cultural point of view is how it seemed to be able to speak to an international readership in a way it could 'hear and relate to'.<sup>86</sup> Its project of cultural reclamation and defiance of engrained colonial assumptions about Africa are framed, for her, in a form which accords with, rather than disturbing, European literary expectations. As she argues, '*Things Fall Apart* directly addresses the "unspoken", or "written upon" condition of Africa in relation to Europe. Other West African writers have no such interest in Europe or colonial history. Precisely these writers are hidden by the long shadow of Achebe's short novel over post-colonial literary studies.'<sup>87</sup>

The relationship of Tutuola's work to the colonial, anthropologising gaze does seem to me to be quite different from that of Achebe's, but not entirely in the way Newell suggests here. Indeed, in Nigeria itself, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* was denounced by critics for the way it seemed to pander to the very stereotypes of Africans they wanted to see challenged. In Europe and America, on the other hand, it was widely celebrated for its African 'primitiveness' and 'authenticity'. For Tutuola's London publisher Faber and Faber, as the critic Gail Low observes, the key concern with Tutuola's writing was establishing whether it was 'genuine' in its apparent naïveté.<sup>88</sup> Instead of sending his manuscript to critical readers, as would have been standard practice with literary manuscripts, Faber sought the advice of a professional anthropologist, Daryll Forde. As Geoffrey Faber wrote to Forde on 15 March 1951:

We have had submitted to us a highly unusual MS about which we are anxious to get a line from an anthropologist familiar with the workings of the West African imagination. [...] It is a long rambling ghost, spook and juju story by a West African native. [...] We think it possible that it might conceivably have something of a success if published here. But we should like to know whether it has its roots in *the common West African mind*.<sup>89</sup>

As Low reports, correspondence from the Faber archive indicates clearly that Tutuola's novel was considered by the publisher primarily as an anthropological curiosity, rather than as a serious work of literature. In a negotiation with the US publisher Norton, Director Peter du Sautoy characterised the novel as the 'unsophisticated product of a West African mind'.<sup>90</sup> Revealingly, when Tutuola requested that Faber proof his work to weed out irregularities in spelling and grammar, they were resistant, preferring to leave the text in an unpolished condition that, for any of their European writers, would have been regarded as amateurish. As Low's research shows moreover, even the title of Tutuola's book was altered by Faber – from *The Palm Wine Drinker* in his original manuscript to the irregular *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, which, it was felt by du Sautoy, would appear 'more colourful' to the reader.<sup>91</sup>

From the evidence provided by Alan Hill, the publishing entrepreneur who founded the African Writers Series, the relationship between Achebe and Heinemann was very different from that between Tutuola and Faber:

We published Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* on 17 June 1958, in a modest edition of 2,000 copies. It achieved instant acclaim in the British national press, with enthusiastic reviews by such critics as Walter Allen and Angus Wilson. The book came as a revelation to many of my colleagues in Britain, whose opinion of Africans as writers had been influenced by the works of Amos Tutuola – particularly his quaintly-told allegorical fantasies of Yoruba folk tales. I remember Fred Warburg telling me that Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (published in 1952 by Faber) was the only sort of African book that he would want on the Secker & Warburg list, as 'it represented the real Africa'. For this very reason, Tutuola's work was anathema to many educated Nigerians – to whom his linguistic virtuosity seemed plain illiteracy. In *Things Fall Apart* we now had something entirely new from Africa: a novel which affirmed permanent human and social values in the context of a traditional tribal society in crisis, and which expressed those values in terms which the Western-educated reader could understand.<sup>92</sup>

In fact, Hill's account of *Things Fall Apart's* critical reception in Britain is somewhat selective – prominent critics were by no means unanimous in their assessments. Writing in *The Listener*, for example, Honor Tracy congratulates Achebe for avoiding 'the dandyism often affected by Negro authors' but describes his critique of colonialism as ultimately 'facile'.<sup>93</sup> For her, Achebe's 'nostalgia for what was swept away' is 'mere sentimentality'. It would be pleasant to know how many of the bright negro barristers of our acquaintance, with their devotion to African culture, really wish they were back in those serviceable raffia skirts, tending the yams and keeping a sharp look-out for a demon or a witch. Would Mr Chinua himself, for that matter, prefer it ...?'<sup>94</sup> Even the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, who Hill quotes selectively, suspected the novel of some kind of hypocrisy, arguing that the novel's 'fascinating' representation of tribal society was weakened by its 'confusion of attitude' towards the arrival of missionaries in Africa.<sup>95</sup>

For Heinemann, too, Achebe's novel was initially the subject of some doubt. As the author recalls in a 2009 interview with David Chioni Moore and Analee Heath, initially the publisher 'seemed to me very quiet about the book. They were actually thinking of ending the title after the first print run of 2,000.'<sup>96</sup> Under Alan Hill's influence, however, it soon began to appear to them in a very different light. What Achebe came to represent for them – very differently from either Tutuola or Ekwensi – was a model of writing which could cater effectively to the tastes and assumptions of the European literary establishment, while *simultaneously* conveying a distinctively African sensibility capable of gaining credibility in the eyes of African readers. At that point, as Hill makes clear, if Achebe was recognised by Heinemann as a serious literary talent, he also began to be recognised as an outstanding business opportunity. In the late 1950s and 1960s, as a succession of nations gained independence for their former colonisers, the book market – especially in the educational field – was changing rapidly. As Hill saw, home-grown talent would be needed to reshape the content of school and college curricula, and there was money to be made by the

publisher who could both attract these writers to its list and offer the necessary infrastructure for mass production and distribution of their work. Even before *Things Fall Apart* had established itself as a success in the African market, Hill began planning the enterprise that would take form as the African Writers Series, and secure both Achebe's and his own place in the history of publishing:

It was now clear to me that I should visit Africa, in particular West Africa – and for more than one reason. Achebe was not an isolated phenomenon. He was a product of the newly-established University of Ibadan which – soon to be followed by other universities – was creating a new intellectual dimension in the life of West Africa. Then again, our new school books, particularly in science, were selling in large quantities in Nigeria ... At that time, Ghana under Nkrumah (whom I was later to publish) was in the first flush of independence – a country full of excitement and hope for the future. Nigeria similarly was in its run-up to independence the following year. Oil had not yet been discovered; Nigeria was still a traditional society, predominantly rural. The book trade in both countries had been for many years dominated by the two British publishing houses of Oxford University Press and Longman, with a few other publishers – particularly Nelson, Evans and Macmillan – claiming a share. The trade had grown up on the back of the imported European educational system – initially the mission schools, one of which my grandfather founded in the Cameroons. After the First World War the Colonial Office set up government secondary schools in Ghana and Nigeria. By the time I reached West Africa there was a flourishing school system, leading to British O and A Level examinations, and culminating in the new Universities of Accra and Ibadan. As I now discovered, the big British publishers regarded West Africa only as a place where you sold books, not where you published them ... [This] seemed to be commercially short-sighted. I determined to make an entirely new start – to show that on the basis of our African schoolbook business we could provide a publishing service for African authors. The time was

ripe. There must be other writers comparable to Achebe, awaiting a publisher with the confidence and resources to launch them on a world-wide market ... The plan was to start a paperback series, confined to black African authors; the books were to be attractively designed with high quality production, and sold at a very cheap price – as low as 25p at the outset. This price was achieved by giving small educational discounts. Since the African bookshops sold nothing but educational books, the mass market outlets were already there on these terms. Outside Africa, the books would sell at normal trade paperback terms. Secondly I needed a general editor ‘on the ground’. There was one obvious choice. I sent Tony Beal out to Nigeria to offer the job to Chinua Achebe. He accepted, and we were in business. His role was crucial. Not only did he read every MS, in some cases undertaking editorial work, but he would identify good new authors for the Series.<sup>97</sup>

As Clive Barnett argues in a revealing account of the development of the African Writers Series,<sup>98</sup> literary writers in Africa typically found themselves battling on two fronts in the late 1950s. On the one hand, they faced the patronising and exclusionary attitudes of the colonial literary establishment, and on the other hand, they had to negotiate the popular association of ‘high’ literary forms in general with elitism and cultural imperialism. For Barnett, the African Writers Series was particularly radical in its address to this twin challenge. By making a wide variety of high quality African writing available to metropolitan readerships, it reversed the cultural model that had defined colonial publishers’ practices until that time. At the same time, it explicitly aimed to supplant the canon of older, colonial writing that had formed the core of the education agenda before independence.

In important ways, I would suggest, Achebe’s involvement with Heinemann was to have a fundamental shaping effect on the reception of his own work and that of other authors. Undoubtedly, the African Writers Series gave him immense status, as the gatekeeper to international recognition for a generation of African writing. Through the highly successful efforts of Heine-

mann Educational Books to establish relationships with ministries of education and associated examination boards, the series also gave him access to book sales which dwarfed the experience of previous writers. However, Achebe's intimate relationship with the publishing agenda of Heinemann Educational Books can also be said to have shaped and constrained his relationship to African writing in other ways. Crucially, Heinemann Educational Books (as its name suggests) was an *educational* publisher. Its entire commissioning and marketing strategy in Africa was defined by the imperative of offering works by African authors to national and regional education systems in a form amenable for use in the post-independence classroom.

Much has been made by critics of the 1962 conference at Makerere University College, Uganda, at which Achebe and other writers were challenged by the critic Obi Wali on their use and promotion of English as the privileged means of expression for African writing.<sup>99</sup> Wali's central contention was that a literature which, in its every utterance, worked to entrench the hegemony of the colonial tongue, must be seen as an aesthetic and political dead end. As the evidence of the Heinemann archive shows, however, from an international publishing standpoint this entire debate was a non-starter. From the point of view of establishing the African Writers Series as a successful venture, the view of the company was that English was the only commercially viable medium to publish in. Even as late as the mid-1970s, proposals to publish in vernacular African languages were seen as 'very risky ... because it was impossible to keep costs down in the absence of a realistic expectation that books would be adopted on examination curricula', when most African states had opted to 'construct a version of nationalist education in which English [or another colonial language] was privileged as the medium of instruction'.<sup>100</sup>

At the 1962 conference, Achebe set out the first of two basic positions that have dominated critical assessments of his work since:

[T]he national literature of Nigeria and of many other countries of Africa is, or will be, written in English. This



may sound like a controversial statement, but it isn't. All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa. This 'reality' may change as a result of deliberate, e.g. political, action. If it does an entirely new situation will arise, and there will be plenty of time to examine it. At present it may be more profitable to look at the scene as it is.<sup>101</sup>

In 1964, at the first Commonwealth Literature conference at the University of Leeds in England, he set out the other position. His address 'The Novelist as Teacher', to which I referred earlier, explicitly identifies school and college students as his primary readership, and goes on to characterise his own role as that of an educator:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front ... I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite happy if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important, but so is education of the kind I have in mind.<sup>102</sup>

From Barnett's researches in the Heinemann archives, it is not difficult to see that the critical positions taken up by Achebe at these two, defining public events are inextricable from his commitment to Heinemann Educational Books and the African Writers Series as a publishing venture. Contrary to Obi Wali's contention, it was not subservience to colonial culture that ensured the series' commitment to English as the privileged language of expression for Nigerian writers after independence, but the commercial logic of school and college markets whose curricula were designed along national and regional rather than along ethnic lines. Similarly, if in statements such as 'The Novelist as Teacher' Achebe was willing to present his work in (unfashionably) didactic, pedagogic terms, this must be

viewed in the context of his enormous and growing stake in Heinemann's ambitious project, to supplant the European and American canon which had hitherto dominated the educational agenda, with works produced by Africans themselves.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am far from suggesting that this was not, in its own terms, a laudable aim. As a strategy, it was certainly a successful one for Heinemann Educational books, which under Alan Hill's direction was to become the largest educational publisher in the Commonwealth. As the publisher James Currey illustrates in his own account of involvement with the series, moreover, the project was by no means solely concerned with commissioning new writing. A key aim was also to acquire the rights to highly recognised existing work, for direct incorporation into the new canon that the series was designed to embody. In Currey's eyes, indeed, a key achievement of Achebe and his colleague Aigboje Higo, Director of Heinemann Educational Books in Nigeria, was not so much that they spotted and nurtured new talent, but that they 'captured, against several longer-established publishing rivals, many of the outstanding authors'.<sup>103</sup>

There is plenty of evidence that Achebe used his influence as General Editor of the African Writers Series to publish and promote a range and diversity of new writing by Africans that would not have been considered by Currey and his London colleagues without his influence. In this, the strength of sales of his own books on the education market – frequently accounting for half the series' profits – undoubtedly provided the 'moral' foundation for his insistence on keeping the series experimental and inclusive. James Curry, who at the time of the series' launch was working for one of Heinemann's rivals, recalls the incredulity of London publishers towards the idea that this approach could be combined with commercial success. 'When the Series was started', he writes, 'it could not be foreseen that the secondary-school examination boards would prescribe books by young living Africans. The exam boards were still based in Cambridge, London and Durham. Like Oxford University Press, they preferred their authors dead.'<sup>104</sup> However, as he goes on to say:

[I]n the heady years of independence, new examination boards were set up in Africa. WAEC – ‘Wayec’ as everybody came to call it – was the West African Examinations Council for Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone. EAEC was the East African Examinations Council for Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. We did not know that the examiners would so delight in raiding the African Writers Series to prescribe texts. In this they were far more adventurous than the English boards, where Gerard Manley Hopkins was as close as they got to a modern poet. Chinua Achebe’s encouragement of Heinemann to experiment paid off in a way that we London publishers, who had grown up among the dead poets of the English educational system, had never imagined it could.<sup>105</sup>

As Clive Barnett argues, the importance of the African Writers Series for Heinemann Educational Books went considerably beyond the book sales it accumulated. Under Achebe’s editorial influence it also came to stand as a guarantee of Heinemann’s long-term credibility with post-independence regimes in Africa. As late as 1994, the corporate view from Heinemann on the commercial significance of the series was that ‘the AWS is a backlist-led list. Chinua Achebe is perceived as the most important author on our list by the outside world. As publishers of this list we have entry to African educational markets and a kudos that other multinational do not have.’<sup>106</sup> Similarly in 1996, it was the view of executives that:

As the publisher of the African Writers Series we have entry into Ministries and a reputation and esteem in Africa which far exceeds our current market position. To stop publishing the series would have a huge negative effect and make entry into local publishing agreements much harder. We would be viewed as just another multinational but without the infrastructure and contacts that companies like Macmillan and Longman have.<sup>107</sup>

Certainly, there were concerted efforts by Africans to wrest control of publishing from large internationals during the 1960s, and Achebe himself was involved with many of these.

Well before the establishment of the African Writers Series, as we have seen, there was an active publishing scene in several cultural centres, including Onitsha. During Achebe's time at University College Ibadan, as Bernth Lindfors has shown, there was a vigorous culture of small-scale, collaborative publishing, which functioned as a proving ground for many subsequently influential writers.<sup>108</sup> From before Achebe was born, nationalist newspapers had given space to literary contributions by Nigerian writers alongside current affairs and, after the Second World War, the tradition of juxtaposing literature, critical commentary and journalistic features continued in such periodicals as *The West Africa Review*. In the late 1950s, the appearance of the major literary magazine *Black Orpheus* provided an important new focus point for promoting the production and discussion of black writing.

In July 1961, however, perhaps the most significant development in independent literary publishing in Nigeria occurred with the foundation of the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan. Convened by Ulli Beier and Wole Soyinka, with other influential figures including Achebe closely involved, the Mbari Club aimed to provide a platform for dialogue and creativity, on a basis categorically different from the conception of international promoters such as Alan Hill. As Toyin Adepaju writes, the club 'drew on the aesthetics of organic dissolution and regeneration represented by the Mbari art of the Ibo of Southern Nigeria, who created works of art only to let them decay and decompose, awaiting another season of creation. Coming to birth in the flux of the preindependence and immediate postindependence period in Nigeria, it brought together a constellation of artists whose work embodied the quality of transformation ... evoked by the Mbari tradition.'<sup>109</sup> As Abdul Yesufu suggests, the presence of the Mbari Club and its associated publishing arm Mbari Publications was that it offered Nigerians and other writers a platform for presenting their work to a wide audience, without being tied to the agendas and priorities of the large international firms based in London and Paris.<sup>110</sup> In practice, however, the initiative was to remain productive for only four years. Rights to works

by key writers such as Alex la Guma, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo were bought up by Heinemann, Oxford University Press and others, and the contrast between the long-term fortunes of Mbari Publications and the African Writers Series was a sharp one. In the eyes of James Currey, this could be attributed principally to one factor: Heinemann's strategic dominance of the education market. Without a lucrative education list and agreements guaranteeing regular adoption of titles as required reading for school and college students, Mbari lacked the financial muscle to rival the London firm's machinery for marketing and distribution. In one sense, of course, Currey's commentary here misses the obvious: that the relationship between creativity, transience and organicity that Mbari celebrated is almost antithetical to the imperative of 'market dominance' within which he sees the achievements of the African Writers Series. On another level, however, it usefully underscores the extent to which Achebe's own success in this period – including his efforts to promote a variety of new writing through the series itself – was entangled with commercial imperatives in international educational publishing towards which he must have felt a great deal of ambivalence.

As this book will argue, the terms within which his early work has too often been framed, marketed and taught – usually alongside essays like 'English and the African Writer' and 'The Novelist as Teacher' – tends to entirely miss that complexity. As a public intellectual whose emergence at the end of the 1950s became closely associated with ideas of resistance and independence, ironically Achebe himself was far from being a free agent. He was a broadcaster paid to produce programming that celebrated the One-Nigeria ideal favoured by his employer, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, and its colonial founders. He was a writer and editor working with the international firm Heinemann, which offered him unprecedented cultural opportunities, but also further constraints. As we will see in the following chapters, Achebe did find a means of escape from these pressures and demands – ideological, commercial and pragmatic. That was, of course, through his fictional works themselves. Far

from proselytising for one-nation Nigeria or producing formulaic models of liberation struggle for convenient use in schools, these are troubled and disturbing texts that are the opposite of programmatic. Perhaps now, after his death, we can begin to see the totality of his work in all its boldness and non-conformity.