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**LIVING OUR STORIES IN AFRICA:
FICTION, FICTIONALITY AND
THE WISDOM OF UNCERTAINTY**

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LIVING OUR STORIES IN AFRICA: FICTION, FICTIONALITY AND THE WISDOM OF UNCERTAINTY.

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir,

Our individual and collective lives in Africa today are shaped in significant ways, not just by the nature of our natural and social environments but also by the actions resulting from the stories we tell ourselves and the ones told or written by others about us and our continent. Wherever these stories originate from- gossip, folklore, history, newspapers or social media, writers of fiction; their effects on us depend on how our minds have been trained to recognize and appreciate the distinction between stories that enhance our reverence for all human life through pleasurable entertainment and those that carry with them infectious germs of prejudice, hate and exclusion. What is indisputable is that human beings create, read and listen to stories which in one way or the other, help to direct the course of their lives.

A colleague once asked me why I think that staying in the comfort of air-conditioned rooms and telling, writing or discussing stories should attract the same rewards as saving lives in the hospitals, building badly needed infrastructures under difficult conditions or spending so many hours night and day in the laboratories searching for the solutions to pressing scientific problems. I simply said that I do not know of any reliable scale for measuring the values of different human occupations especially as some of them like

housekeeping and raising children, however crucial they are for the society, do not attract any public reward. However, I went on to say that I consider very important for the society, the fact that I work hard trying to impress upon many simple minds I encounter every day, in the classrooms and elsewhere, the necessity, for their complete wellbeing, that they acquire through the reading and study of stories from diverse minds and cultures, an attitude of mind that creatively responds to the complexity and diversity of human situations. Believing and acting as if the single story through which we see the world, however adequate we find it, is the only one for all mankind in all cultures for all time, limits our development, and makes us full of prejudices and unhappiness. What is more, the more we read well-made stories from a variety of sources and cultures, the more we realize that as important as the comforts of technical civilization, good jobs and healthy environments are, it is from good stories we may learn how to successfully free our minds from powerful impositions and oppressive relationships and cope with problems created by greed, dishonesty, jealousy, religious and social prejudices and broken hearts.

My experience teaches me that these noble values of stories are easier to inculcate in people with a positive sense of the cultural identities they would live their lives trying to develop. These are people capable of understanding the need to learn how to retain some willpower to choose, reject, absorb on their own terms values

that would be helpful for their authentic development as Africans. There are not many people like these in Africa where for centuries, a technically superior civilization, exploiting the human weaknesses we find in all human groups, justified its quest for expansion of political influence and acquisition of natural resources with stories of taking salvation to the benighted peoples of a dark continent who were only fit as articles of trade.

It is possible that most Africans today live their lives as if in acceptance of these stories as expressing the inevitable and right course of history. Thus, diverted from their natural paths of development for a very long time, many Africans remain alienated from their lands and on the margins in other lands. Schools have retained the colonial outlook, the best equipped and most expensive taking pride in producing students best prepared for export to the western world. The true answers to the questions; 'What is Africa? 'Who is a Nigerian?' are very difficult to formulate. Despite the efforts of modern storytellers like Ayi Kwei Armah, most Africans are living under the powerful influences of the stories created for us by vested foreign interests and popularized by alienated minds in different positions of power over us. The result is that majority of Africans are living lives, the core values of which cannot be described as African.

It is often said that the major problems facing Africa are poverty, disease and ignorance. One way of understanding why these

problems are not being seriously tackled as is done in other places may be through a consideration of how African traditional conceptions about how to improve lives on earth through the powerful imagination of a relationship between the living, the dead and the unborn, was replaced by the fearful conceptions of last judgment, heaven and hell. In this mix of diversions, transplants and confusions created by the privileged positions of foreign languages, religions and values, the people who can retain a positive sense of their identities have to depend on instinctual memories and exposure to folklore and humane experiences to continuously navigate and negotiate their way to an authentic African life. Only few of their representatives in African fiction have succeeded in that adventure. The body of work in which their stories are told constitutes the 'laboratory' for me and my students and is scattered among novels, novellas, short stories, science fiction, literary and online magazines and blogs, film and drama scripts. What is common to all of these stories is their origin in the inventive capacity of human creative imagination, which enables their creators explore in prose and through experimental human and animal characters, themes emanating from facts and mysteries of human existence. Many people can tell good stories but only a few can write good literary fiction. We have great storytellers in people like Abubakar Imam (*Ruwan Bagaja*, 1934) one of the earliest examples of fiction in Hausa language and still very popular today, Pita Nwana, whose Igbo novel, *Omenuko*, published

in 1932, won prizes, D. O. Fagunwa, whose Yoruba stories are well known in Yoruba land; Amos Tutuola's stories, especially *The Palmwine Drinkard*, published by Faber & Faber London in 1952, and was so highly regarded by Chinua Achebe, Thomas Mofolo whose novel *Chaka*, originally written in Sesuto, Said Ahmed Mohammed, whose contemporary novels in Swahili are widely appreciated. All these stories display some of the important elements of fiction: themes we can relate to, characters brought to life by skills in the use of language and conventions, suspense, and humour.

Science fiction deserves a special mention. As earlier mentioned, it shares the same origin with all other forms of the human artistic endeavour: the creative imagination. What sets it apart is its basis in man's knowledge of science and technology as it predicts, points to undiscovered possibilities, imagines alternative societies, warns against dangers to man from the abuses of that knowledge and in all of these using as characters: aliens, robots or technologically enhanced humans or other imagined beings. Because of its scientific basis, its influence on human life can be easily observed and measured, unlike other kinds of imaginative works like literary fiction dealing with the perennial human traits like greed, envy, love and hate. Think of how air travel, the internet and cell phone, Skype and video conferencing were once only in the human imagination but are now transforming the way we live in the real world. However, although the material aspects

of our lives may have been made easier for a minority of our increasing populations, the nonmaterial but crucial aspects of human and group relationships are not easily amenable to change with scientific and technological gadgets. Writers of literary fiction, our main subject matter in this lecture, will continue to imagine different ways of handling them for different times and cultures and in addition to their love of storytelling, must possess consummate skills in the use of language and an eclectic knowledge of the conventions of narrative fiction acquired from in-depth and wide reading of fiction from different cultures of the world.

FICTION AND FICTIONALITY.

In 1978, I was a final year undergraduate student and was in this hall as Chinua Achebe, a foremost African novelist, standing on this very spot, delivered a convocation lecture titled “The Truth of Fiction” on the occasion of the award to him by this great University, his first Nigerian honorary degree. In that brilliant and memorable lecture, Achebe builds on Frank Kermode’s definition of fiction as ‘something we know does not exist but which helps us to make sense of, and move in the world’ but goes on to make the important distinction between what he calls ‘beneficent’ and ‘malevolent’ fiction. In his words, “What distinguishes beneficent fiction from such malignant cousins as racism [and men are superior to women] is that the first never forgets that it is fiction

and the other never knows that it is”. I use the term ‘fictionality’ to refer to beneficent fiction’s never forgetting that it is fiction. Achebe explains how beneficent fiction through imaginative identification, leads us to “encounter the heroic and the cowardly in our own psyche” making for “human connectedness at its most intimate” In his own words, “My theory of the uses of fiction is that beneficent fiction calls into full life, our total range of imaginative faculties and gives us a heightened sense of our personal and human reality”. It is important to note that in this theory, both the writer, through the careful artistry of the text and the reader, through close imaginative reading, work together to produce the power of fiction.

What all of this amounts to is that on a general day to day basis, we all create fictions to explain our failures and disappointments, to justify our actions, and our love or hatred of others. Whether these fictions are beneficent or malevolent, one thing is clear: since in addition to holding on to them, we also share them with others especially younger ones, they have tremendous power because they shape the way we live in and view life. We should therefore be careful how we exercise that power especially if at a higher level; we become recognized in the public realm as good writers of fiction.

Take the example of the Malian writer, Yambo Ouloguem who wrote a very controversial novel with the title *Bound to Violence*. It

was celebrated in the West and was awarded prizes. It is in many ways a good novel to read but no one can miss its malevolent undertone: the Nakem Empire, meant to represent traditional Africa, has no redeeming values. The people or the 'niggertrash', are simply zombies in the hands of war thirsty Saifs. Many African readers came to Ouloguem's defence, saying 'Yes, truth is bitter: what does hundreds of years of African History without the white man have to show the world except wars and wars?' This endorsement of the colonial mission remains today as a big obstacle to the development of belief in self that Africans need for their genuine development. Anyone who has read *Things Fall Apart* knows the inhuman practices in Umuofia, which is a good portrayal of traditional Igbo society, but also knows the beautiful aspects of personal and communal lives there. So it is understandable that Achebe ended his convocation lecture with these words:

“...when a desperate man wishes to believe something however bizarre or stupid, nobody can stop him. He will discover in his imagination a willing and enthusiastic accomplice. Together they will weave the necessary fiction which will then bind him securely to his cherished intention. The fiction which (beneficent) imaginative literature offers us is not like that. It does not enslave; it liberates the mind of man. Its truth is not like the canons of orthodoxy or the irrationality of prejudice and superstition. *It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience*” (emphasis added)

I was highly impressed by Chinua Achebe's lecture. Looking back now I think it laid the foundation for my interest and subsequent development as a student and teacher of fiction. The expression, 'adventure in self-discovery' may have planted a seed in me which germinated and led to my later extensive study of individualism, especially as the novel's growth and development is believed to be dependent on the rise and development of individualism in Europe.

As I read and reflected on Achebe's novels, I saw how his idea of imaginative identification explains his creation of characters that came to life for his readers and admirers throughout Africa and the rest of the world. We are each of us, in varying degrees and on different occasions, Okonkwo, (*Things Fall Apart*), who single-mindedly and fanatically defended his people's way of life against the invading colonial culture; Ezeulu, (*Arrow of God*), who was more sophisticated than Okonkwo but could not separate his personal convictions from the demands of his public office as the leader of his people; Obi Okonkwo, (*No Longer at Ease*), who was western educated but let pride and people's expectations and family pressures lead him to a loss of focus as he gradually succumbed to corruption. The characters, Odili Samalu (think of our Aluta student union leaders) and the man of the people politicians like Chief Nanga, (*A Man of the People*), are not strange to us. Perhaps not so well known are people like Beatrice (*Anthills of the Savannah*), who have taken the best out of

white man's education, have remained connected to the best of their cultural traditions and are quietly working to transform those traditions to meet the demands of the present time.

It is in *Anthills of the Savannah* that Achebe awards the eagle feather to the storyteller in preference to those who make the events that the storyteller uses in his stories. We are told in justification that

“It is the story that outlives the sound of war drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we own the story; rather, it is the story that owns us and directs us.”

Achebe, through the old man as the storyteller then tells the following story to support this pre-eminent position of the story in our lives. I tell it here because it is very brief and because it illustrates the important point about fictionality and the lack of orthodoxy in beneficent fictions.

“Once upon a time, the leopard, who had been trying for a long time to catch the tortoise finally chanced upon him on a solitary road. Aha! He said; at long last! Prepare to die. And the tortoise said: Can I ask one favour before you kill me? The leopard saw no harm in that and agreed. Give me a few moments to prepare my mind, the tortoise said. Again the leopard saw no harm in that and granted

it. But instead of standing still as the leopard had expected, the tortoise went into strange action on the road, scratching with hands and feet and throwing sand furiously in all directions. Why are you doing that? asked the puzzled leopard. The tortoise replied: Because even after I am dead, I would want anyone passing by this spot to say, yes, a fellow and his match struggled here”.

That was the end of the story .The storyteller in the novel ended with the comment to his listeners in this way:

‘My people, that is all we are doing now. Struggling. Perhaps to no purpose except that those who come after us will be able to say; True our fathers were defeated but they tried’.

Now, none of us believes that what this story says about the leopard and the tortoise actually happened such that as may be the case in science fiction, we may one day see a tortoise scattering sand furiously in all directions. It is a fiction invented with the human imagination. The point about fictionality of fiction is its never leaving any doubts in our mind that its aspiration is not the true representation of what happened in life, being mere manipulations of facts of existence for the special purpose of improving human life. Like the hypotheses that drive our scientific experiments in the laboratories as we search for a solution to a problem, fictions may lead us to find a way to deal with human problems. And just like the solutions we discover are not true and adequate forever even in similar situations and can be replaced by new findings, fictions will continue to be written for contemplating

changing realities. The problems of human life and relationships will continue to remain in different new forms in different circumstances.

What is the purpose of this story? In the first place, let us note that the storyteller does not tell us whether the leopard went ahead to kill the tortoise. That is left to our imagination. What the story teller is interested in is how we must understand that how our life story affects those we leave behind is of primary importance. We can only take that away from the story if we imagine that the leopard went ahead to kill the tortoise. But since the story does not say that, we are free to imagine that, as is usually the case with stories concerning the tortoise, it has once again outwitted its enemy, leaving it deflated by the possibility of people thinking that the tortoise is equal to the leopard. In that case what we are likely to get from the story is how intelligence is superior to brute force. That if we think and act wisely, we can overcome our enemies and oppressors; that the western economies may have great power over us but that with intelligence, commitment and planning, we can free ours for genuine independence and development. One reading of the story is as valid as the other. So long as we derive relevant beneficent readings from a piece of fiction, it is not wise to insist that there is only one certain, true reading of it. Indeed ,in certain cases, the readings may contradict each other because of the paradoxes of human existence which lead all good fiction writers, as James Wood puts it , to "simultaneously enact and atone for the

manipulations of fiction-making, in eternally dialectical contradictions”

Let us take another very brief story, this time from a very different cultural tradition.

“Two travelling monks came to a ford in a river where a beautiful young maiden was helplessly waiting to cross. The man of Zen picked her up in his arms, waded across, and set her down on the other bank. His companion, an orthodox Buddhist, was obviously distressed and as they walked on their way, he at last broke out in reproach: ‘You know perfectly well that we monks are not even permitted to touch a woman and here, you have held one in your arms!’ To which the other replied, ‘I set her down by the river; are you still carrying her?’”

Again we are not told the outcome of this exchange; did the Buddhist monk feel angry and insulted? Did he brush off his friends question and continue the journey with him in peace? Does the knowledge of whatever followed matter as we try to make something of this story? Is the point not that orthodoxy has its limits, that the spirit of the law should count more than the letter of the law? Yes, but who determines the limits? I leave it to you to use your different imaginations and moral sense to pursue the different possibilities.

This leaves me to summarize the ways Achebe’s essay may have inspired the subsequent course of my academic career.

- 1) I wanted to explore through the study of African fiction what African writers make of individualism in the African contexts.
- 2) His discussion of malevolent fiction may have awakened in me an interest in how African writers use their fiction to aid the process of decolonization in Africa. Indeed my current interest is in how we have ignored the fact that most developed countries of the world, as a matter of policy, vigorously resisted the education of their youth in foreign languages.
- 3) I wanted to find out what kind of wisdom Achebe thought a good novelist should strive to attain in addition to the possession of the love and skills for storytelling and mastery of the language and the conventions of fiction making.

WISDOM OF UNCERTAINTY

It has gradually dawned on me over the years from reading and teaching fiction that uncertainty is not the same thing as indecision or procrastination. We can act very decisively in any given situation even as we know that others will act differently and that our best intentions and the knowledge at our disposal do not guarantee that our own decisions and actions are the best responses for the situation. In real life, we cannot wait until it is proved beyond any reasonable doubt that no decision or possible action is better than ours before we act. It is this uncertainty about the

ultimate rightness of our actions that should endow them with some kind of manner, the language a peculiar tone and the point of view, a wider scope that in all, are likely to disarm, if not convince others who disagree with us.

In other words, it is wise to accept and be at peace with uncertainty not only because it is inescapable in our lives due to the complexity of the human person, the mysteries of life and death and so much of the natural phenomena beyond human control, but also because it is necessary for the work of discovery and acquisition of knowledge. This acceptance of uncertainty, which I suggest, can be sustained from the variety of exposures to beneficent fiction with its multitude of characters and situations, has come to encapsulate for me, important aspects of what Achebe referred to as ‘wisdom and humane conscience’.

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS.

Individualism and the African Novel.

My PhD research topic was “Individualism in the African Novel: A heuristic paradigm”. My interest in individualism led me to Ian Watt’s popular book, *The Rise of the Novel*. His submission in that book that the rise of economic individualism and the middle classes brought about by the industrial revolution and complex changes in the social position of women among other factors helped the rise of the novel in Europe led me to think of what kind of individualism we have in Africa.

Reflecting on and comparing the African novels I had read with the European ones, I had the initial impression that the creation of characters is based on different orientations. I thought that whereas the western novel is saying see how this individual is suffering in this community or society, the African novel is saying see how the community or society is suffering because of the activities of these individuals. So I set out to study the most important novels written in English across Africa. I began to see how the writers, coming from fairly similar historical and sociological backgrounds created characters according to how the major characters located the source of the conflicts between them and their communities. Three patterns emerged from my study: the first includes those who located their problems in the society, not themselves. So they adopted messianic, highly individualistic approaches in their struggles. The second group understood that they are conflicted, problematic and alienated heroes whose individualism becomes perverted in ways that lead to inauthentic, escapist and irrelevant lives. The third group include those individuals whose actions arise, not from the thoughts of the lonely hero seeking to lead his or her people to salvation; rather it is action arising from the collective will to freedom. It struck me how these patterns seemed to conform to Frantz Fanon's analysis of the moments of the colonized consciousness. After an exhaustive study of the novels I came to the following conclusion:

“..the African novel aspires towards the union of true community and true individualism. The aesthetics whose guiding principle is growth through sharing, as different from personal development may come to be one of the hallmarks of characterization in the African novel...The abortion of true individualism by the combined effects of colonialism, capitalism and its indigenous exploiter classes in the lives of characters like Ezeulu, Udomo, Ofeyi, Karega and others testify to the pervasive power of this phenomenon on the mental structure of African novelists. If characters in the African novel live their lives in a world with a powerful reality of its own impinging on them, it is perhaps the African novelists' way of stressing the urgent need for Africans to lend their hands in the restructuring of the overpowering reality. In this way, the African novel is contributing to the search for a better way to develop human lives in Africa by imbuing that search with a sense of collective destiny”.

As I waited for the publication of this work into a book form, I developed some aspects of it into two publications, (*Changing Demands on the Individual in a Developing World*, 1984) and (*Beyond Individual Dare: Soyinka's Fiction and the Problem of Individual Vision*, 1994)

If African novelists at the time of my work did not devote their craft to creating great love stories of highly individualized characters like Hardy's Tess (*Tess of the D'Urberville*), Anna Karenina of Tolstoy's novel of that title, or Dorothea of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, it was not due to lack of skills or absence of

love in African life. Such writing would almost be regarded as running after a rat fleeing from a house on fire! Every writer's hands seemed to be needed to put out the immediate danger threatening not just Africa's overall wellbeing but the creative impulses themselves so that writers can be free to pursue their personal themes. There were often complaints by western critics and some Africans educated in the western world about how African writers bore them with only stories of colonialism and other political themes. Part of what came out of my work was the argument for the need to develop criteria for the evaluation of African fiction that recognized that apart from the universal criteria used to explain the appeal of good fiction, adequate attention must be paid, in evaluating African fiction, to the indigenous, social and political contexts of characterization. I later on developed this argument in full in my "Criticism and the African Novel", in 2002.

Fiction and Decolonization

My focus gradually shifted to issues concerning the decolonization of Africa from the point of view of African fiction. An earlier publication, "Achebe and The Truth of Fiction" (1990), had deployed Achebe's essay earlier discussed, to examine his novelistic practice in *Anthills of the Savannah*, devoted to exposing the abuse of power by Nigerian leaders, especially the military ones, the complexity of the human person, and the indispensable roles of women, especially the educated ones still connected to

their roots and the special role of the storyteller/writer in bringing about social transformation. In a later essay, first presented at Nsukka during the celebration of Achebe's 60th Birthday in 1990 and later published as "The Tortoise and the Lion: Achebe and Ngugi on the Struggles of Africa", (2005), I examined the ideological inclinations which influence the writings of these two important African writers as they push for the decolonization of African minds; reform (Achebe) and revolution (Ngugi) and came to the conclusion, borrowing from the Igbo maxims of *egbe belu ugo belu...*, and *onye na nke ya, onye na nkeya*, (that is, 'let the eagle perch and let the kite perch also... and Everyone and his own.) that "it remains true that the complex and paradoxical caver of Mother Idoto, will always welcome all those who worked well according to their gifts. In there, Karega and Ikem, the lion and the tortoise, will have their places not likely to be placed, one above the other". This view is developed in full in a monograph "Literary Perspectives on Governance in Contemporary Africa" (2007) published by the Institute for Development's Occasional Paper Series of Cornell University, USA, in which I selected novels by Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe to show how each author represents an important perspective in the search for solutions to the problems of governance in contemporary Africa.

At some point in this on-going work, I became interested in the fates of Africans depicted in African fiction who became totally

disoriented by their experience of living in the Western world. One of the most touching depictions, which is found in a deeply philosophical small novel, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962) is that of Samba Diallo, a very brilliant young Senegalese son of the chief of the Diallobe. Samba Diallo was sent to school in Paris to learn because, as his aunt, The Most Royal Lady recollected and argued:

“A hundred years ago, our grandfather, along with all the inhabitants of this countryside, was awakened one morning by an uproar arising from the river. He took his gun and, followed by all the elite of the region, he flung himself upon the newcomers. His heart was intrepid, and to him, the value of liberty was greater than the value of life. Our grandfather, and the elite of the country with him, was defeated. Why? How? Only the newcomers know. We must ask them: we must go to learn from them the art of conquering without being in the right. Furthermore, the conflict has not yet ceased. The foreign school is the new form of the war which those who have come here, are waging and we must send our elite there, expecting that all the country will follow them. It is well that once more, the elite should lead the way. If there is a risk, they are the best prepared to cope successfully with it because they are the most firmly attached to what they are. If there is good to be drawn from it, they should also be the first to acquire it.”

That was why her brother, the Chief of the Diallobe sent his son to Paris. How wrong the Most Royal Lady's vision and advice turned out to be! Samba Diallo gets to Paris immerses himself into the study of Western philosophy. His understanding of it renders him incapable of praying, the way he was brought up to do. He is completely at a loss about how to harmonize in himself the two worlds he has come to understand very well. His father orders him to come home, where he dies in the hands of a fanatic or fool who, even though with similar experience, thinks he can forcefully bring Samba Diallo back to his old self.

We find a similar story in the very successful novel of the Zimbabwean lady, TsiTsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* published in 1988. Here, the head of the extended family, Babamukuru takes his family to London. His young daughter, Nyasha picks up the values and mannerisms of her host community; she cannot speak Shona, her indigenous language and when the family gets back home, often got into heated arguments with her father over eating, smoking and dating habits. She gets so angry with her mother for not rebelling against her father's patriarchal values. On one occasion, the argument got so bad she slaps her father. At the end of the novel, she breaks down and has to receive psychiatric care.

These two novels evoked such passion in me as I wrote a book chapter titled "Modern African Diaspora: The Nervous Conditions

of Ambiguous Adventures” for Africa World Press (2008), on the lives of these two characters and agonized over the fates of African youths risking their lives to go to places from where they may never return as whole human beings. The experience of other lands and cultures is healthy, productive and indeed necessary for those with powerful and healthy indigenous instincts about what values and practices of those places can be harmonized with theirs for the purpose of a wholesome and fulfilled life. The crucial active agent must be developed from the progressive aspects of one’s culture.

Fiction in Indigenous Languages

My current research interest is indeed on one such active agent: language. This is not the moment to delve into the troublesome question of whether fiction written in foreign languages should be regarded as African fiction. The closest we have come to an acceptable answer is the adoption of Achebe’s view that both indigenous and foreign language literatures, should co-exist. Achebe himself, apart from the work on his novels, did not take a lot of serious measures to ensure that the indigenous languages grow in power as landlords not tenants in their own houses.

One of the greatest theorists of fiction, the Russian philosopher of language, Mikhail Bakhtin, stresses the dialogic nature of language such that writing fiction is essentially engaging in language practices that are characterized by his terms, dialogism, polyphony and heteroglossia. For him, as Andrew Robinson sees it:

“Discourse does not logically unfold...but rather interacts. Consciousness is always a product of responsive interactions and cannot exist in isolation. There is no single meaning to be found in the world but a vast multitude of contesting meanings. Truth is established by addressivity, engagement and commitment in a particular context...To exist is to engage in dialogue and dialogue must not come to an end. Humanity is fundamentally indeterminate and unfinalizable. People constantly struggle against external definitions of their thoughts and actions which have a deadening effect on them. There is something within each concrete person which can only be actualized through free discursive acts. Authentic human life is an open-ended dialogue”.

Bakhtin’s open-endedness provides support for the idea that there is wisdom in uncertainty. Participants in an authentic dialogue do not go into it certain of the eventual outcome. They go in with what they consider as unassailable positions and the readiness to successfully confront all imaginable forms of opposition. The eventual outcome depends on so many other factors participants cannot control beforehand and is, in itself, only a useful resting point from which other dialogues will ensue. Dialogues exist within the same language practices, between languages, between classes in the society, between cultural groups, between nations .and between generations. If Bakhtin is right, as I believe he is, considering that such views have also been powerfully propounded by important philosophers like Martin Buber in his book, *Between*

Man and Man, my fear is that as many of us and the coming generations lose the grasp of our indigenous languages, the active agent on the other side of the dialogue in the writing and living of our lives gradually disappears, leaving us with a corruption of the dialogue into a monologue.

One of the most important reasons why Achebe's fiction will endure has to do with how a genuine dialogue exists, especially in his novels of Igbo traditional life, between English and Igbo languages and worldviews. Things may have turned out differently for Umuofia, if Rev. Brown had stayed longer to continue the dialogue he was having with the people. Biodun Jeyifo refers to this aspect of *Things Fall Apart*'s significance in his essay 'Umofia and Nwofia': Locality and Universality in *Things Fall Apart* (2008). Authentic dialogues should also exist in indigenous language fictions which should continuously receive encouragement and active support through government policies.

When I presented a paper on this serious matter in Accra in November last year titled "Catching them young for Africa: What kinds of books should we be writing and in what languages for our school children?" I reminded the audience that Professor Babatunde Aliyu Fafunwa and his formidable team of educators from this university, had devoted a lot of resources, human and material, to a project that worked out in practice, how we can ensure the education of our primary school children in indigenous

languages without making them unable to live and compete effectively with others in English in the modern world. I challenged participants to consider how most developed economies of the world, especially Japan, put up a spirited struggle through vigorous policy implementations to ensure that their youth are educated in indigenous languages and that people learnt English only for commercial purposes and not as a lingua franca. The paper was well received; indeed other more powerful voices spoke in the same vein. In the end everybody seemed to give in to the idea that the task is herculean because of the number of indigenous languages we have and how the funds for successful implementation of such an ambitious project are not available. So, although we have made considerable progress in providing our children with stories in English which reflect their own social and natural environments, their proficiency in indigenous languages will continue to decline. Some educated parents encourage or even demand that the teaching of indigenous languages be taken seriously in our primary and secondary schools, but majority think, against well- established scholarly opinions, that this will interfere with their children's acquisition of English language skills, but would not take the same view with the teaching of French!! It is not surprising that the departments of African Languages and Literatures in Nigerian universities only manage to mount a few programs in the local indigenous languages. Do not be surprised if you find that Yoruba, Hausa, Shona and Swahili are better taught

in the Department of African Languages in University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA. Meanwhile courses in Comparative Literature and World Literature go on in most Universities without literary texts written in African indigenous languages either in the original or in translation.

Cultural Nationalism

But to get back to the work before the present time, the bulk of my published papers can be said to belong to what, for want of a more accurate term, is often referred to as cultural nationalism. By this I mean papers which look at how African writers portray the flaws as well as the positive aspects of African cultures, showing in the process, that they are not only 'bound to violence' but also indeed possess what Ousmane Sembene of Senegal calls Gods bits of wood. Let me mention ten examples in the chronological order of their publication.

In "Duality and Resilience in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" (2007), published by *Philosophia Africana*, of DePaul University, USA I suggest that duality and balance constitute the two philosophical pillars on which the resilience of Umuofia rests. Okonkwo's failure to respect the balance his people's world view establishes between the male and female principles led to his downfall. In "Tradition and the Traditional in the African Novel" (2008), I argue with examples from selected African novels that traditional elements can change to meet new demands and still be

considered to belong to a tradition. In 2008, *The Global South* journal published my essay “The Global North in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of A yellow Sun*” where I compared the roles of the agents of the globalizing cultures and engaged the problem of the dialectic of the global and the local in which Africans lose the power of control over their portion of the earth and its economy. *

In another 2008 essay, “One Against the Other: Conflict of Histories in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*” first delivered at Africana Studies and Research Center of Cornell University, USA and revised for publication by the *Ife Journal of History*, I re-affirmed the authenticity of the Igbo culture portrayed by Achebe in his novels and took a swipe at Yambo Ouloguem’s distorted image of African history which supports the Africa found in Western literary texts like Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. However, I had in an earlier book chapter titled “The Cracks in the Walls and the Colonial Incursion: *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* as novels of Resistance”, examined the Igbo contributions to its own enslavement, without letting the colonizers off the hook. But just so that the argument in that essay is not understood to be strictures on the entire Igbo worldview, I continued the argument in another essay published by the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) and titled “History in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*”, where I argued that Umuaro’s

submission to the Christian religion was not an admission of the inferior status of their religious beliefs but a survival imperative.

One of the important rhetorical tools of a good fiction writer is irony. I devoted a book chapter titled “Listening to the gentle voice: Rhetorical Strategies in *Things Fall Apart*” to the study of Achebe’s mastery and deft deployment of irony and the Igbo principle which states that when something stands, another thing will stand beside it, in his novel. In 2014, I applied the knowledge gathered from scholarly and field studies of pre-colonial African societies to the study of sexuality and religion in the writings of the South African, Zakes Mda and the Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie for a book chapter I titled “Religion and Sexuality in two Contemporary African Novels”. I argued in the essay that the pre-colonial and traditional moral and religious orders constituted healthier contexts for women’s sexual development and empowerment than the contemporary ones.

During my stay in Peking University Beijing, China, discussions with colleagues and students revealed that the traditional societies of Africa and Nigeria in particular, and those of China, have so much in common because of the this-worldly orientation of Chinese beliefs in the roles of ancestors, gods and goddesses, spirits and priests. That encouraged me to write an essay titled “The Igbo and African Worldviews in Chinua Achebe’s Fiction” translated into Chinese and published in both languages in

International Social Sciences Journal, Chinese Edition in 2016. In the same year, my delivery of a paper titled “The Future of Traditions” at the International African Literature Conference at Zhejiang Normal University, China earned me an appointment into the membership of the Advisory Committee of the Faculty of Arts of the University.

But perhaps the most influential of the publications in this group is the essay I titled “Mbiti and Achebe on the Forward Movement Through the Past” for the special international issue of Cleveland State University’s *The Journal of Traditions and Beliefs* to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the publication of Rev. John Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophies*. The monthly report of its download and use by scholars across the world is quite impressive. In the paper, I saw Achebe’s characterization of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* as the materialization of Mbiti’s idea that the unrealized potentials of the past must continually try to come to full realization by absorbing the knowledge available now for a full life in the present. That way, the future would have been taken care of. It is a view of life inspired by the belief in heaven on earth.

Another aspect of my work concerns helping to make the knowledge of fiction accessible to the younger students of the subject. In this regard, I had my essays “An Introduction to the Novel” and “Literary Criticism from the Classical to the Present

Time” published in the two volumes of *The English Compendium* edited by Fakoya and Ogunpitan in 2001. “Learning English through Literature” also appeared of in *Use of English: A Manual on Communicative Skills for Tertiary Institutions*, edited by colleagues in my department in 2012.

Earlier in 2010, I was invited to contribute an entry on the Igbo concept of “Chi”, a notion central to the Igbo world-view, for publication in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought* edited by Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo for Oxford University Press. Two years later, I was again invited to contribute an entry on Cardinal Francis Arinze for the six volume *Dictionary of African Biography* edited by Emmanuel Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates and also published by Oxford University Press. There were of course many published reviews of books, notable among which were, “African Philosophy: Problems and Prospects”, being a 2005 review of Messay Kebede’s *Africa’s Quest for a philosophy of decolonization* and a 2008 review essay of Derek Peterson’s *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* which was published in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*.

Finally on the matter of publications, Kehinde Ayoola and I edited the proceedings of the 2008 International conference we organized with colleagues from our department to mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and got

Heinemann Educational Books to publish it under the title *Blazing the Path: 50 years of Things Fall Apart*.

TEACHING, OUTREACH AND ADMINISTRATION

The favourite part my work is discussing fiction and critical essays with genuinely interested students in very interactive settings. It is always amazing how such students take advantage of our discussions to engage the texts in personal ways and coax from them very interesting readings. Once in a while I have had disagreements with my heads of department on the matter of submitting model answers or marking guides! I do not ask my students for correct answers, I ask for valid arguments derived from materials in the fictional world of the texts. If the text is a good one, a reader may discover something new with each re-reading. My approach has worked well not only in my classrooms here in Ife but in other places as well including our outreach program. I once taught *Things Fall Apart* to Primary six pupils in my wife's school and was amazed at their responses. One unforgettable one was from a girl who asked what Okonkwo's fuss about his father was all about, since they both end up in the evil forest! They also responded well to the abridged edition of Wole Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. We should do many more abridgements of important African texts for our children. That was an experience that taught me how much we can do with our

children if we want to build a strong foundation for our country's genuine and sustainable development.

We had started an outreach program which was coordinated by me in the department and designed to bring in high school literature students at the senior level into residence for about two weeks. The aim was to subject them to intensive interactions with lecturers in the department on the prescribed texts for the school certificate examinations, in an attempt to wean them from the unwholesome influences of emergency authors draining life from literature by making the study of the subject, nothing but memorization of summaries and model answers for examinations. Queens College Lagos enjoyed the program for many years until costs and other factors forced us to discontinue it.

Between 1997 and 2000, I was on secondment to the Senegalese government as a participant in the Federal Government of Nigeria's Technical Aid Corps scheme. Teaching at Gaston Berger University, Saint Louis was a new experience for me as I taught in English and tried to learn French. I found myself in a similar situation many years later, when I was learning to speak Chinese at the same time that I conducted lectures in English. Three of the students in Saint Louis ended up choosing to work with me as their supervisor. I have on the whole in my career successfully supervised three PhDs, one MPhil, and over twenty MA degrees all of them awarded after oral examinations. I have also gone to

examine PhD students in other universities and have been the external examiner to the English departments of two universities.

With the active support of my wife, I have donated books every other year since 2012 to the library of the high school in my village, Ula Ekwulobia, Anambra state, Maduka Memorial High School and will continue to do so, to ensure that the library is well equipped and up to date. This has led to the conferment on me of a chieftaincy title, Odenigbo of Ekwulobia by the Igwe, Eng. E. O. Onyeneke, Ezejiofor of Ekwulobia and the Ekwulobia Traditional Supreme Council in 2016.

A vice-chancellor of this university some years ago asked me why it is that Ibadan, Nsukka and Lagos universities are producing writers of note and Ife is not doing so. I informed him that he is not exactly correct, that Ife produced Biyi Bandele and that others are on the way. I am happy that it is possible I made a little contribution towards the emergence on the world literary scene of Ayobami Adebayo Famurewa whose debut novel *Stay With Me*, is at the moment, making the rounds in all literary circles of the world in three different English editions and four other international languages. I supervised Ayobami's work at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and have watched with active interest, her development as a writer. I think we will hear more from her. Sam Omatsheye, Toyin Adewale, Ife Adeniyi were also my students and have written good works of fiction.

I have tried to provide sources of inspiration for those who may have the vocation for writing, but have not built up the courage to come out with their attempts. In addition to the organization of seminars, I invited Chimamanda Adichie to this University in 2007 to read from her works and interact with students, members of staff of our faculty and other interested members of the university community. She came along with another Kenyan writer, Binyavanga Wainaina and both of them made it a great literary occasion. Many of my former students, like Drs. Chijioke Uwasomba, Charles Patrick and Arthur Anyaduba are opening up new areas of African fictional discourse and carrying on the work we started here, as academics and teachers, here in Nigeria and in other parts of the world. Others have made their marks in investigative journalism and different forms of advocacy in labour and human rights organizations.

I spent two years teaching mostly African Fiction at the Africana Studies and Research Center of Cornell University, USA and during the period was invited to deliver lectures at other universities. In 2014 I attended a conference at China's premier university, Peking University Beijing, on the language of African literature. After the conference, I was invited to come and spend a year introducing African literature in English, especially Achebe's works, to the graduate students in the department of African and Asian studies. I had a very productive year doing a lecture tour and attending conferences at other Chinese Universities. When I

returned to Ife, I started the teaching of the translations of works of famous Chinese writers like Lu Hsun and Mo Yan in my department.

One of the factors that contributed to my joining the academic staff of my department in 1980, was the robust discussions we witnessed as students at our departmental seminars. It was always a feast on different, sometimes opposing ideas, defended with such passion by our teachers and other interested participants from elsewhere. When I became the acting head of the department in 2012 I struggled with limited success to recreate that very educational atmosphere. But I succeeded in setting up a postgraduate seminar room and supervising the University's setting up of ultra-modern language laboratories for the department.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir,

Some people may ask, if the powerful stories we live our lives by make us appear inferior to others or are not helping to bring out the best that is possible from us, for us and our communities, can we change them, and if we can, do we have the power and the inclination to do so? That is the crux of the matter. I have presented to this distinguished audience, an account of how my professional career has been driven by the idea that the production, reading, teaching and promotion of literary fiction is necessary for

our educational development if we are to inculcate in many people, open, inclusive, progressive and diverse views of human life. I tried to show that good works of fiction are not meant for the teaching of eternal truths, but on the contrary, are created to open up for readers, the possibilities, complexities, even contradictions in the values human beings live by and the likely consequences of the choices made in the light of those values. Ayi Kwei Armah of Ghana is one writer who in many of his creative fiction, has delved into Africa's long past and tries to connect what he found so valuable and humane there to the present time. Zakes Mda of South Africa has done similar work. Each one of them, like Achebe, does not glorify Africa's past.

I hope it was also clear from my presentation that one of my greatest concerns is how African voices are weakening and disappearing in the dialogues and polyphony of the language practices of fiction making in Africa because of the decline in the use of and competence in indigenous African languages. It is clear that the ideological orientations of entire educational systems need radical transformations. Schools should liberate us to understand what and how to learn from other cultures when necessary for the development of our own cultures. Is it an exaggeration to say that many departments of law, philosophy and music, to take a few examples, in African universities are still so beholden to the Eurocentric theories and practices of their disciplines?

If the works of Thomas Mofolo, Pita Nwana, D. O. Fagunwa flourished under colonial rule, does it not bother us that after sixty years of the so-called independence, that tradition of writing, rather than growing and waxing stronger, is only struggling to survive? The Onitsha and Kano market literature tradition is crying for modern day heirs. Those who are satisfied that Africa Magic, gossip blogs and sensational journalism of the social media have replaced them, have to explain how, leaving the question of value aside, these modern cyber-space phenomena cater for the masses of potential readers of fiction in shops without television, electricity, and constant source of data, not to mention those regularly travelling long distances on business trips.

I also pointed out how science and technology, believed to be more exact than the arts because of their ability to repeatedly demonstrate the proofs of their claims, have not abandoned the uncertainty principle. Scientific studies and research continue to advance because scientific truths are provisional and are capable of being overturned or modified. Science fiction therefore looks ahead through human imagination at all kinds of future possibilities, some of which are extremely impossible to us now. The truths which good readers absorb from good fiction, also provisional, cannot be demonstrated as in science, but lie implicitly revealed through the deft and profound explorations of human behaviour in the stories of good writers and made manifest in the lives of good readers. And so long as we are not certain that

all the writers have imaginatively explored all the possibilities in the world as we know and conceive of it, both good and evil, the writers' work will continue.

A profound sense of uncertainty about what could happen would therefore appear to be an indispensable motivation for work. I am inclined to conclude that the wisdom arising from living in a creative relationship with uncertainty is very important for those who know that the truths they live by may be subject to change because of the discovery of new knowledge or radical change of circumstances. I have one final little story. But before I tell it, please permit me to use this opportunity to say thank you to a few people.

I wish my parents James and Njemmala Anyadike were here today. I thank God that they are happy where they are. I also thank God for my late grandmother Ugonnwa and her children, especially my mentors Oliemezie and Nkemdiche; I also remember with gratitude my late uncle Udoye Anyadike.

I am very much indebted to my teachers, Professors Oyin Ogunba, G.G. Darah, Ariadne and Bill Sanford, Professor Biodun Jeyifo, who has also over the years, become a senior brother, my colleagues in the department especially Profs Wale Adegbite, Segun Adekoya and Gbemi Adeoti who have consistently demonstrated good comradeship. I learnt so much from my students who made teaching a fulfilling occupation. Dr. Dipo

Fasina, thank you for remaining a good friend through all these years. I also acknowledge the love and support of many close friends; Professor Bayo Lamikanra, Lolu Akingbola and Dr. Sam and Chinwe Anyakora are good examples of the many whose names time will not permit me to read out here. I thank my siblings, the Igbo community in Ile-Ife and my sons-in-law, HRH the Amadabo of Brass Kingdom, Oton Efebo and Mr. Ernest George for their love and support. I give special thanks to all those who travelled to Ife just to attend this lecture. God bless you and protect you as you go back to your homes.

Finally, I thank God and Ile-Ife for making it possible that I met my wife, Dr. Adebisi Adewumi Anyadike, a woman of substance and an intellectual in her own rights, a true companion and soul mate, who most of the time brought in sunshine as we developed our careers and raised a happy family. Our children, Agbomma, Usondu, Nkolika, Sobechi and Unoaku will continue to shine wherever they go.

And now to my concluding story:

A blind man had not seen for some time his friend of many years who lived a few blocks away. He had learnt to visit this friend if he had to, by feeling his way during the day. So, this day, he set out for his friend's house. It turned out his friend had been very sick. That made him spend more time than he should have considering that it was getting dark outside. But when he insisted

on going home, his sick friend too sick to take him home, lighted a lamp and gave him saying, "The lamp is not for you, but to prevent others from bumping into you as you feel your way home". Not long after the blind man left for home, someone bumped into him and he shouted at the fellow "Didn't you see my lamp?" And the fellow informed him that there was no light in his lamp.

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, We are all groping and searching in one aspect or the other in our lives on the way home. If by any chance I have lighted any lamp for anyone in this hall, let the person please understand that I am uncertain that the lamp will provide light when it gets dark on the way home. If the person thinks the lamp is of any use, then it is his or her responsibility to ensure that there is always some oil in it. I have no way of relighting the lamps and it is not my intention that anyone bumps into anything, especially if such a thing is more dangerous than other human beings.

THANK YOU FOR COMING AND BEING SUCH A GOOD AUDIENCE.

GOD BLESS US ALL!!!

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