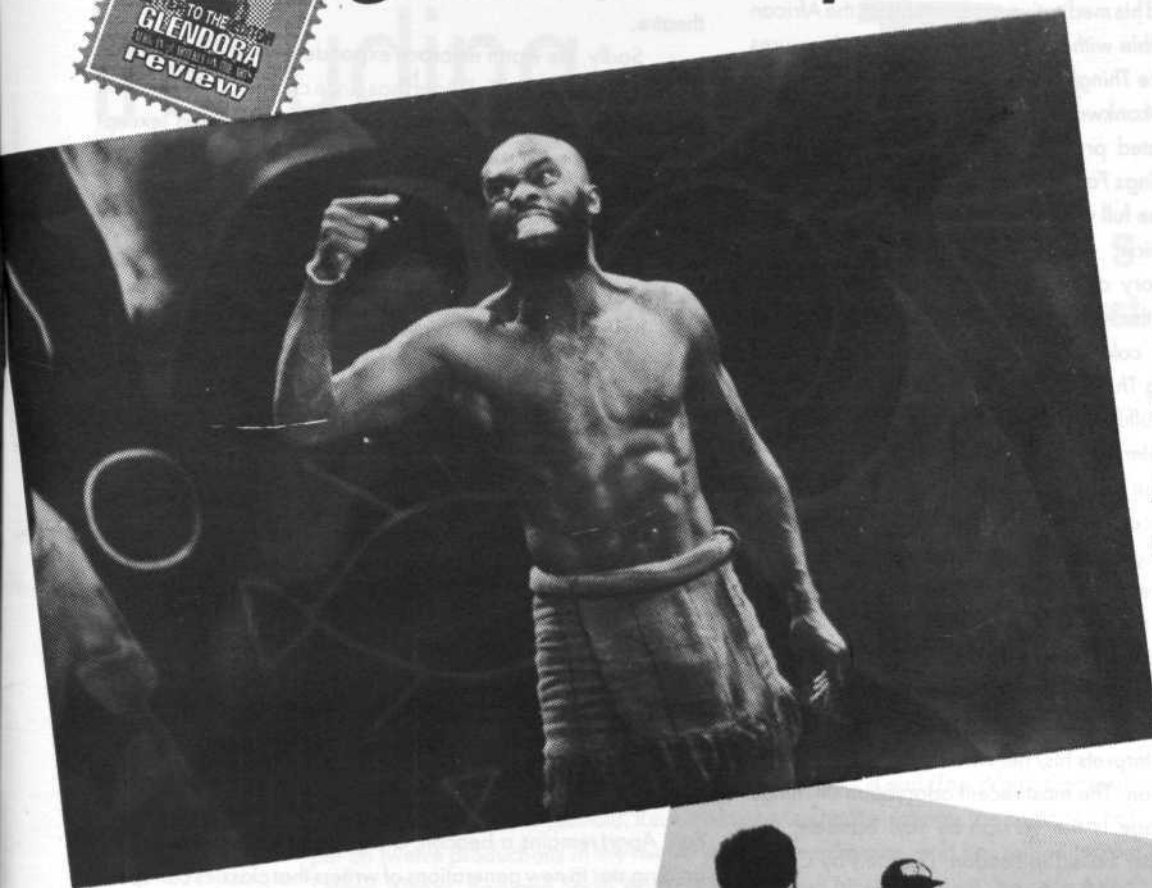




# Things Fall Apart at 40



(picture left)  
**'Okonkwo' in the original production by the London International Festival of Theatre and the West Yorkshire Playhouse. The production was manned in association with the Royal National Theatre Studio and Collective Artistes, Nigeria, supported by The Performance Studio Workshop.**  
(below) Music rehearsal before the West Yorkshire Playhouse production of **'Things Fall Apart' at Leeds.**

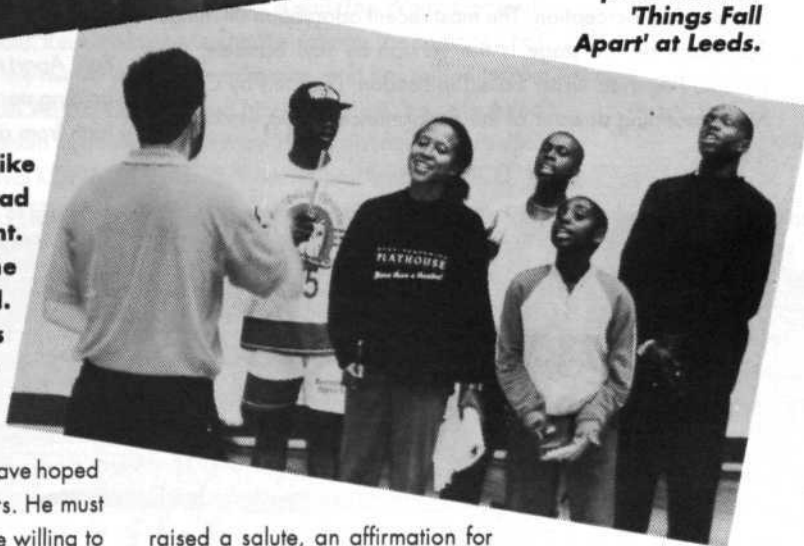
Tribute by  
**Toyin  
Adewale**

**PERHAPS** it was a day like any other. Perhaps he had to write it by candle-light. We certainly know he wrote it in long-hand.

**Computers were still a luxury and today's writer-friendly electronic notebooks were still to come.**

On the auspicious day Chinua Achebe began the writing of *Things Fall Apart*, he could only have hoped the manuscript would not gather dust in his drawers. He must have hoped for interested publishers who would be willing to risk their money on an unknown writer from a colonised Nigeria.

His dream bore fruit in 1958 when *Things Fall Apart* was published. Proudly holding the book in his hands, he could not have dreamed that it would sell one million copies by 1978. Nor could he have foreseen that *Things Fall Apart* would become a double-edged machete clearing the heartlands of Letters for African literature. Beyond literature, *Things Fall Apart*



raised a salute, an affirmation for Africa and carved a turf on which we could fight the battle of the mind - that arena where our ancestors were vanquished with whiskey, mirrors and beads - against colonisation.

Acclaimed by critics and readers all over the world as a classic of modern literature, *Things Fall Apart* is acknowledged to have heralded the arrival of modern African writing. Buoyed by the awesome, enthusiastic response to *Things Fall Apart*,

Heinemann and other publishers would go on to publish many more African voices.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe ignited his eventual rhetoric fanning it into flame in *Arrow of God*, *No Longer At Ease*, *A Man of the People* and his meditative assessments on the African condition in *The Trouble with Nigeria*. No other book assures the Achebe legacy like *Things Fall Apart* and no reader forgets the encounter with Okonkwo, Obierika, Ikemefuna and those deliciously transliterated proverbs, 'the palm oil with which words are eaten'. *Things Fall Apart* is the towering platform of the Achebe canon, the full wine from which readers will never tire of slaking their thirst.

The riveting story of an African village and its hero, Okonkwo, caught in the web of destiny, in the tide of change, in the killer-grip of colonialism; it has sparked a train of creativity, transmuting *Things Fall Apart* into different media on stage and in film by culture practitioners. Unforgettable are the Hollywood feature film by the Calpenny company starring Johnson Sekka and the late Orlando Martins and the thirteen-episode serial produced by the Nigerian Television Authority. Controversy however greeted the latter production which was considered a defective adaptation in certain quarters. Achebe reportedly disowned the production.

This is not surprising as world classics and indeed original literary materials are prone to distortions and transmutations. Every artist, every reader, every director chooses his/her own truth in a work and interprets his/her own meaning in the light of individual perception. The most recent adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* for the stage is the version by Biyi Bandele, the prolific, Nigerian writer based in London. Directed by Chuck Mike, founding director of the *Performance Studio workshop*,

with a multi-cultural cast, the Bandele adaptation would play to enthusiastic audiences in the UK, Europe and America hopefully in February 1999. It has received rave reviews describing it as 'magnificent, groping, haunting and utterly essential theatre.

Sadly, the warm embrace expanded to African literature on the birth of *Things Fall Apart* has since cooled. The economic decline of several African states has made publishing (except for textbooks and self-serving biographies) an unattractive business venture for most publishers. Publishers outside Africa no longer consider Africa a significant market worth investing in. The economics of the bottomline profit barely provides publishers like Heinemann, Longman and Macmillan, a presence in Africa. The business mergers and downsizing trends in the world economy have worsened the scenario. And several young and new writers in Africa today are forced to retreat into vanity publishing rather than watch their manuscripts gather dust over the years.

But *Things Fall Apart* strides on, secure in its pioneering stature in contemporary African literature, influencing different generations of African writing and African writers, emboldening them to speak with a voice that is utterly African, as we see in *The Voice* by Gabriel Okara and *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa. *Things Fall Apart* is a central feature on the Nigerian school curricula and now the world over. Recently it was also included in the prestigious Millenium Library Project celebrating seminal classics from around the world.

As the curtain is drawn on the Twentieth century, *Things Fall Apart* remains a beacon, a sign-post to a new millenium, guiding star to new generations of writers that classics can spew forth from a pen unafraid to dream. **GR**



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