

# Objection to a portraiture

Idowu Omoyele



**Ezenwa Ohaeto, CHINUA ACHEBE: A BIOGRAPHY, James Currey, Oxford & Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997, 326pp**

I must, from the outset, state the first objection clearly - that Ezenwa Ohaeto, Chinua Achebe's first biographer, does not discern anything disturbing such as to warrant comment in Diana Speed's appreciation of Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* - whose remarks he reports - where she claimed that 'not since *Mister Johnson* has a novel about West Africa written in English shown such love and warmth for its subject as this first novel by a young Nigerian author...' (p.69). The biographer obviously is so carried away by Speed's praise of Achebe to bother about the specifics - and underlying connotations.

For to compare Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is to insult, in no small measure, the novelist's credibility as a faithful recorder of history and the culture of his people. Achebe's 'love and warmth' in that initial work was geared towards counteracting the stereotypes that the likes of Cary in *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* have assumed about Africa and



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her peoples. Cary's recreation of West Africa in Fada, that spatial setting in *Mister Johnson*, is depicted as the very parody of civilisation.

I am especially glad that a biography, long overdue, has come, owing to the subject's place as a pioneer of modern African fiction in English. And this offering bears the authentic mark of the novelist's approval and contains Achebe's portraits, beginning with the 1959 photograph in which he appears with Alex Olu Ajayi and the poet Christopher Okigbo, through

to the caricatures....

Ohaeto carefully portrays the histories that shaped the society out of which the writer emerged. He also attempts a reconstruction of his subject's times, from the early life and education of 'the catechist's son', through his broadcasting and literary careers, painstakingly recording his many awards, honours and travels and then to barefaced historical chronicling, describing the circumstances that initiated his rock-solid belief in the cause of Biafra. Achebe's *Legacy* covers five major novels: *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966) and

*Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). *Chike and the River* (1966) was his first writing for children. There are in addition *Beware Soul Brother* (Poetry, 1971), *Girls at War* (short fiction, 1972), *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (essays, 1975), *The Trouble with Nigeria* (political treatise, 1983) and *Hopes and Impediments* (essays, 1988).

In 1962, Achebe becomes the founding editor of Heinemann's African Writers Series, eventually founding the journal of new writing, *Okike*, whose

maiden issue appeared in April 1971 -

'The most significant aspect of the September 1972 issue of *Okike*', reveals Ohaeto, 'was the publication of the young Nigerian writers: Osmond Enekwe, Maxwell Nwagboso and Odia Ofeimuna' (p. 168).

One further shortcoming of this otherwise epochal publication is the incompleteness of painted pictures. I would suggest that he left out materials in a few key areas that should have given a rounded, picture. Take the report

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<< on the Negritude issue for example where he writes that: 'Soyinka, while criticising Negritude, made the remark which has haunted him, that the tiger does not proclaim his tigritude' (p.90). Then, on the next page, cites Lewis Nkosi's report on the African Writers Conference at the Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda in 1962. Nkosi observed that while the 'older writers like the South African, Ezekiel Mphahlele and the Nigerian, Chinua Achebe, looked by far the calmest, most disciplined and trustworthy, in what appeared to be a company of literary cut-throats, out to get one another at the slightest provocation... (t)he young Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka, went so far as to invent a 'negritude' poem on the spot, while addressing the conference, in a sudden astringent parody of Senghor's poetry and its preoccupations with the African personality, an act of creation which succeeded only too well for it enraged the delegates from French West Africa' (p.91)

Follow-up materials supplied in Janheinz Jahn's *Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing* are absent where the issue is revisited following a 1964 Berlin meeting. There the commentator was reported to have said, 'As Aime Cesaire said, it is quite common for things to be quoted out of context and

for portraits to be issued by foreign critics and even by African interviewers which end up by a little bit of distorting the real image. The point is this that, to quote what I said fully, I said: "A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces". In other words: a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: "I am a tiger". When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see the skeleton of the duiker, you know that some tigritude has been emanated there. In other words: the distinction which I was making at this conference (in Kampala, Uganda, 1962) was a purely literary one: I was trying to distinguish between propaganda and true poetic creativity. I was saying in other words that what one expected from poetry was an intrinsic poetic quality, not a mere name-dropping.'

A work of this significance and nature in my view is an opportunity to balance out and set records straight, particularly where the novelist's peers are concerned.

This also goes for the references in the book to the Charles Nnolim debate when the critic announced that he had found a source for 'Arrow of God.' Ayi Kwei Armah also suffers in the procession of Ohaeto's poor and imbalanced portrayals.

• A young Nigerian-born writer, Idowu Omoyele lives in London.

## Inhospitable streets

Report by Pius Adesanmi

Georges Herault, Pius Adesanmi, Eds.  
JEUNES, CULTURE DE LA RUE ET  
VIOLENCE URBAINE EN AFRIQUE,  
French Institute for Research in Af-  
rica, Ibadan & African Book Builders  
Ltd., Ibadan, 1997, 419 pp.

**R**EACTING to a 1996 report which estimated the number of street children and youths in Nairobi, Kenya at about 100,000, Jinmi Adisa, a United Nations consultant on conflict resolution, exclaimed jocularly that Nairobi is now taking 'giant strides' in the production of street children in Africa! Comical as it may appear on the surface, Adisa's remark draws powerful attention to a phenomenon which has become one of the cornerstones of contemporary social discourse and political action in this *fin de siecle* - the phenomenon of urbanisation with its concomittant effects of demographic hyper-explosion, economic stasis and social dysfunctionality in the modern African polis.



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Design by Rosalie-  
Ann Modder

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