

CHINUA ACHEBE ON THE POSITIVE LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM

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ABSTRACT

The late Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was a key figure in the rise and persistence of anti-colonial ideology in Africa. Yet in his final work, Achebe made a clear statement about the positive legacies of colonialism, praising the British project of state formation and nation building in the lower Niger basin. A careful study of his writings and comments from 1958 until his death in 2013 shows that Achebe was never the simple anti-colonial figure that most assumed, and that his seeming reversal could be read as the culmination of a lifetime's meditation on African history and politics. Achebe's final views have significant paradigmatic implications for the knowledge relevant to national identity formation and state building in Africa today.

THE BEST-KNOWN OF AFRICAN WRITERS, Chinua Achebe, published in 2012, a year before his death at 82, a mournful recollection of the Biafran war that tore his native Nigeria apart between 1967 and 1970.¹ Given Achebe's stature and his recent death, *There was a country* attracted more than the usual number of reviews, most of them paying homage to the man and his legacy. While the book is mainly a personal memoir of war, it is also a longer meditation on the history of Nigeria and the reasons for its weakness as a state and nation. Achebe's arguments about the failures of the country's political leaders are familiar ones. However, what is surprising is that Achebe also argues that a key reason for the weakness of the Nigerian state is that it repudiated too much of the colonial legacy inherited from the British. A man best known for his anti-colonial views claimed in his final work that colonialism in the lower Niger River area left legacies that remain both beneficial and relevant, alongside its harmful ones.

Perhaps more surprising, no one seems to have noticed. Virtually all of the reviewers of *There was a country* ignored or downplayed Achebe's

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1. Chinua Achebe, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra* (Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2012).

murmurings about a revalorization of British colonialism, reaffirming his identity as an anti-colonial hero.² This suggests that more is at stake here than the final thoughts of a man who insisted that his intention was ‘not to provide all the answers but to raise questions, and perhaps to cause a few headaches in the process’.³ Rather, the book has provided an unexpected lesson in the paradigmatic status of anti-colonial thinking in African affairs and its malign implications for state building and national identity.

This article argues that while Achebe was a critic of the forms that the colonial encounter often took, he also believed that the challenge of modernity put to Africa by colonialism was a healthy one. Moreover, while he decried the ways that colonialism disempowered African societies, he believed that re-empowerment required embracing, not spurning, many of the same forms of governance practised under colonialism: educational, administrative, and social. In other words, Achebe’s work is a reminder that amidst the theorizing on pathways and sources of state capacity in Africa, scholars have overlooked the positive aspects of the most obvious one: the colonial legacy itself. At a time when arguments for ‘going with the grain’⁴ or ‘developmental neo-patrimonialism’⁵ have revitalized discussions of indigeneity as the best approach to state building in Africa, reclaiming Achebe’s views on the positive aspects of the colonial legacy could not be more important.

The article proceeds in four stages. The first section summarizes Achebe’s reputation as a paradigmatic critic of the colonial legacy in the context of contemporary debates on state building and nation formation. The second takes up Achebe’s positions on colonialism in *There was a country*, and the third considers whether these positions represented a decisive break with his earlier ones. The fourth section considers the paradigmatic implications of a more nuanced understanding of Achebe’s views and its relevance for contemporary research on political development and state building in Africa.

2. Biodun Jeyifo, ‘First, there was a country; then there wasn’t: Reflections on Achebe’s new book’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 48, 6 (2013), pp. 683–97; Ogaga Ifowodo, ‘Chinua Achebe – the novelist as revolutionary’, *All Africa*, 3 April 2013; Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, ‘The Achebean restoration’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 48, 6 (2013), pp. 698–709; Emmanuel Ejiogu, ‘Chinua Achebe on Biafra: An elaborate deconstruction’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 48, 6 (2013), pp. 653–70.

3. Achebe, *There was a country*, p. 228.

4. Tim Kelsall, ‘Going with the grain in African development?’ *Development Policy Review* 26, 6 (2008), pp. 627–55.

5. Richard C. Crook and David Booth, ‘Conclusion: Rethinking African governance and development’, *IDS Bulletin* 42, 2 (2011), pp. 97–101.

Achebe as colonial critic

Research on state building in Africa has moved between institutional (democracy, rule of law, constitutions),⁶ developmental (growth, education, trade),⁷ and ethno-political (ethnic identity, nation building, coalition building, conflict management)⁸ aspects. What all of these approaches generally share is a view that colonialism had a malign effect. On this view, state structures and policies put in place by European rulers destroyed indigenous forms of rule, developmental trajectories, and social arrangements, creating perverse incentives that stymied progress.⁹ Nations cobbled together by cartographers lacked coherence, while the resistance to the colonial state carried over into an aversion to the public sphere itself, except as an object of plunder. The policy implication of this view was summed up by the Guinea-Bissau nationalist Amílcar Cabral: 'It is our opinion that it is necessary to totally destroy, to break, to reduce to ash all aspects of the colonial state in our country in order to make everything possible for our people.'¹⁰

As a result, Africanists have been particularly averse to policy solutions that seem embedded in the colonial past, preferring instead to resuscitate indigenous solutions. Tim Kelsall's 'going with the grain' approach, for instance, explicitly repudiates the 'imported ideological, legal and governmental system founded on a strong separation between public and private that has never existed in Africa', replacing it with an 'opaque' system of Big Man rulers delivering resources through 'personalized clientelistic networks'.¹¹ Richard Crook and David Booth argue for the efficacy of governance that is 'informalized and penetrated by local arrangements and pay-offs, deals and political clientelism' in contrast to 'Northern' notions of governance.¹²

Of all the iconic figures in this anti-colonial approach to political, economic, and social change in Africa, none perhaps is more important than Chinua Achebe. *Things fall apart* (1958) has been widely cited to affirm

6. Mengisteab Kidane and Cyril K. Daddieh, *State building and democratization in Africa: Faith, hope, and realities* (Praeger, Westport, CT, 1999); Alice Hills, 'Somalia works: Police development as state building', *African Affairs* 113, 450 (2014), pp. 88–107.

7. Kate Meagher, 'Smuggling ideologies: From criminalization to hybrid governance in African clandestine economies', *African Affairs* 113, 453 (2014), pp. 497–517.

8. Crawford Young, *The postcolonial state in Africa: Fifty years of independence, 1960–2010* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 2012); Alemseged Abbay, 'Diversity and state-building in Ethiopia', *African Affairs* 103, 413 (2004), pp. 593–614.

9. George Klay Kieh, *Beyond state failure and collapse: Making the state relevant in Africa* (Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2007); Olufemi Taiwo, *How colonialism preempted modernity in Africa* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2010).

10. Robin Cohen, 'The state in Africa', *Review of African Political Economy* 3, 5 (1976), pp. 1–3, p. 1.

11. Kelsall, 'Going with the grain in African development?', p. 636.

12. Crook and Booth, 'Conclusion', pp. 99, 98.

the depredations of colonialism as *the* central fact of Africa. The European, the main character declares in the novel, 'has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart'.¹³

Anti-colonial interpretations of *Things fall apart* have dominated discussions of the book since its publication.¹⁴ It has been cited to show that colonialism 'destabilized societies working out their destinies along peculiar paths of existence'.¹⁵ A 2011 book reaffirms this enduring interpretation: 'Achebe created a narrative that placed the African at the historic centre of the colonial encounter, with the imperialistic Europeans as the usurping outsiders, whose intervention brings about cataclysmic upheaval for the traditional African civilization being colonized.'¹⁶ Merely typing 'Achebe' into an Internet search will deliver a barrage of anti-colonial material.

To be sure, throughout his long and distinguished career Achebe held views critical of colonialism. His 1974 essay 'Colonialist criticism', originally a lecture given to American scholars, accused European writers, especially Conrad, of representing Africa in ways that justified plunder and subjugation.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, he chastised the British writer Iris Andreski for concluding from fieldwork in Nigeria that colonial rule had made the world safer for African women, a finding which, despite its empirical grounding, was out of step with the radical anti-colonial ethos of the 1970s.¹⁸ 'Nigerians were taken out of our history and dumped into somebody else's history' by colonialism, Achebe told an interviewer in 1980.¹⁹ In a 1988 interview with the American journalist Bill Moyers, Achebe described colonialism as 'the most extreme form of totalitarianism'.²⁰ This theme of colonialism as disrupting the habits and traditions of self-rule and resulting in weak states was a consistent one throughout his life. In 2003, he told an interviewer: 'We were considerably damaged by colonial rule . . . Colonial rule means that power, initiative is taken away from you by somebody else who makes your decisions. If that goes

13. Chinua Achebe, *Things fall apart* (Heinemann, London, 1958), p. 125.

14. Catherine Lynette Innes, *Chinua Achebe* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990); Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *African literature in defence of history: An essay on Chinua Achebe* (African Renaissance, Dakar, 2001).

15. Isidore Okpewho, 'Introduction', in Isidore Okpewho (ed.), *Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart: A casebook* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), pp. 3–54, pp. 14–15.

16. David Whittaker, 'Introduction', in David Whittaker (ed.), *Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart: 1958–2008* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2011), pp. i–xx, p. xi.

17. Chinua Achebe, *The education of a British-protected child: Essays* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2009), pp. 85–8.

18. Iris Andreski, *Old wives' tales: Life-stories from Ibibioland* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1970); Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on creation day: Essays* (Heinemann Educational, London, 1975), p. 5.

19. Bernth Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS, 1997), p. 58.

20. Bill Moyers, *Chinua Achebe, a world of ideas* (WNET, New York, 1988).

on long enough, beyond one generation, then the habit of self-rule is forgotten.²¹

In these respects, Achebe was critical of the illegitimacy and the disempowering nature of the colonial encounter. From such remarks grew his reputation as a pantheonic source of the anti-colonial perspective on African state building.²² His books were interpreted by Robert Wren as showing that ‘colonial authority replaced tradition in governance’ and ‘intensified ethnic conflict’ with the result being ‘a decisive weakening of the power of the community to control private behaviour’.²³

As a result, in his subsequent fictional indictments of post-colonial Nigeria – especially *A man of the people*²⁴ and *Anthills of the savannah*²⁵ – Achebe’s views were interpreted as blaming not the post-colonial leadership but colonialism. His ‘negation of independence’, as Onyemaechi Udumukwu called it,²⁶ was a negation of the idea that Nigeria had actually achieved independence from ‘neo-colonial’ forces. For Annie Gagiano, while Achebe insisted that ‘the disastrous state of many parts of the continent resulted largely from local faults and failures’, these ‘could not be disentangled from exertions of political and economic power from the West and some of its leaders and representatives, whether during colonial or neo-colonial times’.²⁷

When Achebe died, this identity was re-emphasized in virtually every obituary, especially those published in Africa. Achebe, wrote Emeka Chiakwelu, ‘judiciously and categorically rejected colonialism in all its forms. Achebe stuck out his neck and went after the source of many African problems which is chiefly colonialism.’²⁸ He was described

21. Holger Ehling, ‘No condition is permanent: An interview with Chinua Achebe’, *Publishing Research Quarterly* 19, 1 (2003), pp. 55–70, p. 55.

22. Sun-sik Kim, *Colonial and postcolonial discourse in the novels of Yom Sang-sop, Chinua Achebe, and Salman Rushdie* (P. Lang, New York, NY, 2004); Romanus Okey Muoneke, *Art, rebellion and redemption: A reading of the novels of Chinua Achebe* (Peter Lang, New York, NY, 1994); Chima Anyadike, ‘The cracks in the wall and the colonial incursion: *Things fall apart* and *Arrow of God* as novels of resistance’, in Remi Raji and Oyeniyi Okunoye (eds), *The post-colonial lamp: Essays in honour of Dan Izevbaye* (Bookcraft, Ibadan, 2008), pp. 237–78; Raphael Njoku, ‘Chinua Achebe and the development of Igbo/African studies’, in Gloria Chuku (ed.), *The Igbo intellectual tradition* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013), pp. 249–66.

23. Robert M. Wren, *Achebe’s world: The historical and cultural context of the novels of Chinua Achebe* (Three Continents Press, Washington, DC, 1980), pp. 49, 103.

24. Chinua Achebe, *A man of the people* (Heinemann, London, 1966).

25. Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the savannah* (Heinemann, London, 1987).

26. Onyemaechi Udumukwu, ‘Achebe and the negation of independence’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 37, 3 (1991), pp. 471–92.

27. Annie Gagiano, ‘Illuminating Africa: Commemorating and reassessing the work of Chinua Achebe (1930–2013)’, *Development and Change* 45, 5 (2014), pp. 1074–92, p. 1083.

28. Emeka Chiakwelu, ‘Achebe’s *Things fall apart* – an agent of change’, *All Africa News*, 8 April 2013.

approvingly by Ogaga Ifowodo as a 'revolutionary' and a 'true red' for his anti-colonial fervour.²⁹ Is'haq Modibbo Kawu wrote that 'the whole sweep of anti-colonial struggle provided the backdrop for the great oeuvre'.³⁰ A book of tributes salutes 'his legacy as one of Africa's most vocal voices against the ravages of colonialism and its long-term effects on Africa'.³¹

One might summarize Achebe's critique of colonialism simply enough: politically, it represented an illegitimate and disempowering form of rule that set bad precedents by being undemocratic and manipulative; socially, it institutionalized forms of ethnic hierarchy and division that undermined community. If this constituted the totality of Achebe's views on colonialism, then state builders should follow Cabral's advice and reject the colonial legacy in all its forms. Yet, throughout his life, Achebe also expressed a multitude of positive views on the political and social consequences of colonialism. The place to begin the excavation of these views is *There was a country*.

There was a colony

At the beginning of *There was a country*, the reader finds several anti-colonial claims. The European scramble for Africa, Achebe writes on the opening page, 'did violence to Africa's ancient societies and resulted in tension-prone modern states'. The breakdown of Nigeria's young democracy was caused by 'tragic colonial manipulation' by the British during the founding regional (1956) and federal (1959) elections.³² In these places, the book seems to conform to the orthodox expectations of Achebe as anti-colonial writer. But they do not reflect the dominant tone of the book, which far more than previous works articulates a positive view of colonialism and thus a more nuanced view of the reasons for the travails of post-colonial Nigeria.

For a start, Achebe is far more frank than in previous works about his voluntary self-colonization (the common historical pattern in which indigenous peoples moved closer to areas of more intensive colonization). 'My father had a lot of praise for the missionaries and their message and so do I. I am a prime beneficiary of the education that the missionaries made a major component of their enterprise.'³³ He attended Government College in remote Umuhia for secondary school because 'its status as a

29. Ifowodo, 'Chinua Achebe – the novelist as revolutionary'.

30. Is'haq Modibbo Kawu, 'Chinua Achebe's undying place in our memories', *All Africa News*, 28 March 2013.

31. Nana Ayebia Clarke and James Currey (eds), *Chinua Achebe: Tributes and reflections* (Ayebia Clarke Publishing, Banbury, 2014). Jacket copy.

32. Achebe, *There was a country*, pp. 1, 51.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

“government college” set up by the colonial government, reassured my parents’.³⁴ The educational system met their high expectations: ‘As a group, these schools were better endowed financially, had excellent amenities, and were staffed with first-rate teachers, custodians, instructors, cooks and librarians. Of course today, under Nigerian control, these schools have fallen into disrepair and are nothing like they were in their heyday.’³⁵ Later he wins a full scholarship to a new university for West Africa set up by the British:

I grew up at a time when the colonial educational infrastructure celebrated hard work and high achievement and so did our families and communities As a young man, surrounded by all this excitement, it seemed as if the British were planning surprises for me at every turn, including the construction of a new university!³⁶

The sense of optimism and progress brought by the late British colonial period is palpable. Achebe notes that his generation was a ‘very lucky one’ and ‘my luck was actually quite extraordinary’:

The pace of change in Nigeria from the 1940s was incredible. I am not just talking about the rate of development, with villages transforming into towns, or the coming of modern comforts, such as electricity or running water or modes of transportation, but more of a sense that we were standing figuratively and literally at the dawn of a new era.³⁷

Later he recalls feeling that ‘The possibilities for us were endless, at least so it seemed at the time. Nigeria was enveloped by a certain assurance of an unbridled destiny, of an overwhelming excitement about life’s promise, unburdened by any knowledge of providence’s intended destination.’³⁸ In other words, the Nigeria that Achebe remembers was not one where things were falling apart. Rather, as Douglas Chambers comments, it was one where ‘things were coming together’.³⁹ More broadly, Achebe at several points engages in an explicit revalorization of the colonial period. The most explicit is prefaced with the breath-drawing phrase: ‘Here is a piece of heresy.’ He continues:

The British governed their colony of Nigeria with considerable care. There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country. This was not something that the British achieved only in Nigeria; they were able to manage this on a bigger scale in India and Australia. The British had the experience of governing and doing it competently. I am not justifying colonialism. But it is important to face the fact that British colonies were, more or less, expertly run.⁴⁰

34. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

39. Douglas B. Chambers, ‘There was a country: Achebe’s final work’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 48, 6 (2013), pp. 752–9, p. 753.

40. Achebe, *There was a country*, p. 43.

Several concrete illustrations are then offered. One is of taking a lengthy car trip from Lagos to Ibadan to visit friends and then driving on to Asaba to visit relatives. 'There was a distinct order during this time,' he recalls. 'One was not consumed by fear of abduction or armed robbery.'⁴¹ In another, Achebe recalls how the publication of *Things Fall Apart* was made possible because of the mentoring of a British English professor, the recommendation of a sympathetic English editor (Alan Hill), the risk taking of a major British publisher (Heinemann), and the good offices of a friend from the BBC. His greatest praise is reserved for a more prosaically: the British postal system, through which he sent the sole copy of the manuscript in 1956 for typing and editing in London:

One had a great deal of confidence and faith in the British system that we had grown up in, a confidence and faith in British institutions. One trusted that things would get where they were sent; postal theft, tampering, or loss of documents were unheard-of. Today [in Nigeria], one would not even contemplate sending off materials of importance so readily, either abroad or even locally, by mail.⁴²

While *There was a country* is primarily about the Biafran war, not British colonialism, the two cannot be separated. Achebe's judgement of British colonialism depends on constructing a feasible counterfactual of how the historically rivalrous peoples of the lower Niger river basin would have proceeded amidst the pressures of globalization and modernity either without colonialism or with an even longer colonial period. His long meditation on the causes of the war provides a grisly benchmark for constructing such counterfactuals. The thing that has fallen apart is not Nigerian society but colonial rule itself.

The book, then, presents a contrast between attempts by the British to form a coherent political community and functioning state among the disparate peoples of what became Nigeria and the rushed termination of that project by what Jeffrey Herbst has called the 'UN decolonization machine'.⁴³ British rule, Achebe writes, was a 'great success' in northern and western Nigeria although 'far more challenging to implement' in the eastern Igbo homeland.⁴⁴ Even decolonization was orderly: 'There was a certain preparation that the British had undertaken in her colonies. So as the handover time came, it was done with great precision.'⁴⁵

In other words, the book might have been titled *There was a colony*. What Achebe shows through the Biafran war, with its one to three million dead, is that there *was* no country, not a Biafra and certainly not a

41. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

43. Jeffrey I. Herbst, *States and power in Africa: Comparative lessons in authority and control* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. 257.

44. Achebe, *There was a country*, p. 2.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Nigeria, only a colony trying to create a country. Decolonization thrust this nascent political community into self-rule long before there was a reasonable chance of success. What is important about Achebe's 'articulation of the unsayable', as the Malawian scholar Mpalive-Hangson Msiska calls it,⁴⁶ is not the superficial point that the British governed Nigeria better than the Nigerians. Rather it is that the British project of a lengthy tutelage of state and community formation in the lower Niger river basin was a more viable route to modernity than the rushed "national liberation" that ensued.

Achebe probably overstates the role of the Igbo in this process: 'The original idea of one Nigeria was pressed by the leaders and intellectuals from the Eastern region. With all their shortcomings, they had this idea to build the country as one'.⁴⁷ After all, the idea of Nigeria began with the British amalgamation of north and south in 1914. Still, the bigger point is that Achebe is now affirming the 'colonial' project of forging a united Nigeria. Msiska is the only reviewer who has noticed this and thus his analysis is worth highlighting:

From the perspective of the postcolonial moment, Achebe views the colonial national formation as a more efficient and ordered society This revalorization of the colonial period by an ardent nationalist may seem a contradiction in terms. However, it may be understood as a rhetorical device for highlighting the extent to which postcolonial Nigeria has fallen below the expectations of decolonization. So his quest for a return to the colonial moment is not to colonial rule as such, but to the forms of governmentality that ensured a measure of an ordered community. It is the *colonial national formation as a habitable community* that is one of the countries the memoir seeks to recover . . . Achebe counter-identifies with the dominant nationalist critique of colonialism.⁴⁸

Whether such a habitable community would have been forthcoming in the absence of British colonialism is the great silence left by Msiska. But at least he identifies what is at stake in Achebe's final book: a late-in-life reckoning with the imperatives of state formation and political community that would have descended on the lower Niger basin with or without Lord Lugard.

Achebe, then, in this final work completes the circle of a lifetime's attempts to render the complexity of colonialism's legacies. In 1975 he described *Things fall apart* as 'an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son'.⁴⁹ In that work, he was atoning for his voluntary self-colonization as a youth. With *There was a country*, Achebe undertakes an equal and opposite act of atonement. Now he

46. Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, 'Imagined nations and imaginary Nigeria: Chinua Achebe's quest for a country', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, 2–3 (2014), pp. 401–19, p. 413.

47. Achebe, *There was a country*, p. 51.

48. Msiska, 'Imagined nations and imaginary Nigeria', pp. 413–14, italics added.

49. Achebe, *Morning yet on creation day*, p. 123.

atonement for fifty years of anti-colonial agitation and perhaps excessive idealization of the non-colonized Nigerian counterfactual. This is then the ritual return and homage to colonial rule. From this final vantage point, Achebe views Nigeria as anti-colonial in a bad sense. It has magnified the vices while eschewing the virtues of colonialism.

Larry Diamond argued in 1989 that Achebe had moved away from revolutionary anti-colonialism (the need for revolution in order to combat the colonial legacy) to embrace liberal anti-colonialism (the need for democracy in order to combat the colonial legacy) with his scathing critiques of 'revolutionary' Nigeria.⁵⁰ But in this final work, Achebe adds another more dramatic shift. Here he shifts from liberal anti-colonialism to liberal colonialism – the need for democracy in order to reclaim the positive aspects of the colonial legacy. One could even suggest a further 'heresy': at times in this final work, Achebe the Igbo 'traditionalist', as Blessing Diala called him,⁵¹ embraces elements of conservative colonialism with his frequent praise of British-era elitism, law and order, religion, and benign paternalism. Irrespective of how nuanced his views on colonialism had become by the time of his death, one thing is clear: these final words represent greater complexity in a figure often one-dimensionally understood as an obsessive anti-colonial advocate.

Giving the devil his due

Achebe's late-in-life revalorization of colonialism suggests that we revisit his earlier writings and comments. When we do, we find that despite the relentless thrust of anti-colonial interpretations that grew up around the man after 1958, his complex views of colonialism were evident from the start.

The place to see this first is in *Things fall apart* itself. The book has often been criticized for going too easy on the colonialists, even for having 'gone so far' as to suggest that the education and development brought by colonialism was a welcome intrusion into Igbo society.⁵² The title came from Yeats and in the book the modern world is presented as alluring and puzzling rather than evil. Indeed, the book was first interpreted as pro-

50. Larry Diamond, 'Fiction as political thought: *Anthills of the savannah* by Chinua Achebe', *African Affairs* 88, 352 (1989), pp. 435–45.

51. Blessing Diala, 'Achebe the traditionalist: A critical analysis of *No longer at ease*', in Ernest Emenyonu and Iniobong Uko (eds), *Emerging perspectives on Chinua Achebe* (Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, 2004), pp. 167–73.

52. Willene Taylor, 'Igbo and European cultures clash', in Louise Hawker (ed.), *Colonialism in Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart* (Greenhaven Press, Farmington Hills, MI, 2010), pp. 88–95, p. 93; Wren, *Achebe's world*; Eustace Palmer, *An introduction to the African novel* (Heinemann, London, 1972), pp. 51–2.

colonial.⁵³ Achebe was arguing that the Igbo were bound to have a difficult encounter with modernity with or without colonialism and that the colonial manner in which it came actually helped them to hold together.⁵⁴ The colonial encounter as portrayed in the book, Donald Wehrs argued, 'sets in motion a productive dynamic . . . of a more just society'.⁵⁵ For these reasons, some anti-colonial writers have been scathing, calling *Things fall apart* complicit and approving of colonialism.⁵⁶ As three Pakistani scholars wrote:

The colonialist culture and ideology are presented as better alternatives. No resistance is portrayed to either the colonialists or their ideology. The narrative reinforces the superiority of the colonialist culture. *Things fall apart* cannot be categorized as a literature of resistance.⁵⁷

Achebe's second novel, *No longer at ease*,⁵⁸ meanwhile, has a distinctly sentimental feeling. Achebe evinces nostalgia for the departing colonialists in the witty repartee on Graham Greene, the tennis and drinks at the British Council, and the careful civil service rules on leave and car purchases with which the protagonist, Obi, has to comply. Achebe would frequently return to his admiration for Greene, whose mixed views of empire were grounded in a view of universal human weakness.⁵⁹ Achebe, an Igbo elite, was also an Anglophile, and his love of Britain's elitist administrative, educational, and literary cultures was palpable. That is why radical critics called him an 'encrustation of the colonial mentality'.⁶⁰

Writing of Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*,⁶¹ Muoneke argued that Achebe 'is not a fanatical opponent of colonialism' since his main concern in that novel is the follies of all rulers rather than those of British rulers in particular. Indeed, Muoneke claimed that Achebe had by this time already come to admire how the British state-building project had unintentionally created a Nigerian nationalism. This was 'about the best thing that the

53. Jago Morrison, *The fiction of Chinua Achebe* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2007), p. 21.

54. Neil Ten Kortenaar, 'How the center is made to hold in *Things fall apart*', in Isidore Okpewho (ed.), *Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart: A casebook* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), pp. 123–46.

55. Donald R. Wehrs, *Pre-colonial Africa in colonial African narratives: From Ethiopia unbound to Things fall apart, 1911–1958* (Ashgate, Aldershot, and Burlington, VT, 2008), p. 165.

56. Ode Ogede, *Achebe and the politics of representation: Form against itself, from colonial conquest and occupation to post-independence disillusionment* (Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, 2001).

57. Mamuna Ghani, Mohammad Ayub Jajja, and Irshad Hussain, 'Things fall apart: Chinua Achebe writes back to the centre', *Journal of Educational Research (Pakistan)* 16, 1 (2013), pp. 95–105, p. 104.

58. Chinua Achebe, *No longer at ease* (I. Obolensky, New York, NY, 1961).

59. Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, p. 131.

60. Onwuchekwa Jemie Chinweizu and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the decolonization of African literature* (Fourth Dimension, Enugu, Nigeria, 1980).

61. Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (Heinemann, London, 1964).

British did, though unknowingly'.⁶² While anti-colonial interpretations dominated Achebe studies throughout his life, these more complex renderings grew up on the margins. A 2009 Nigerian conference book on his work was aptly titled *Themes fall apart*.⁶³

Revisiting his earlier works, it is clear that Achebe, like many writers of his generation, was centrally concerned with colonialism. But it was the ideas and issues raised by colonialism, not its material impact, that he believed were most important. Achebe understood that colonialism was the impetus for cultural and national articulation in Nigeria and that the challenges that it brought were inevitable. After all, the Yeats poem from which *Things fall apart* took its title describes as natural (not tragic) the decline of a dominant world culture that cannot meet new challenges. In 1980 Achebe said:

The Igbo culture was not destroyed by Europe. It was disturbed. It was disturbed very seriously, but this is nothing new in the world. Cultures are constantly influenced, challenged, pushed about by other cultures that may have some kind of advantage at a particular time But as I said initially, a culture which is healthy will often survive. It will not survive exactly in the form in which it was met by the invading culture, but it will modify itself and move on So there is a need for a culture to be alive and active and ready to adjust, ready to take challenges. A culture that fails to take challenges will die.⁶⁴

As such, he was a vocal critic of the purifying Négritude response.⁶⁵ He also resisted attempts to call him anti-Western: 'I don't think it's a question of protest against Europe or simply protest against local conditions. It is a protest against the way we are handling human society,' he said in 1976.⁶⁶ Or in 1981: 'I am not concerned with which is better, the old or the new, the African or the European; both have possibilities, imponderables, and ambiguities'.⁶⁷

Unlike other impact-response historiographies of the Third World that placed the West at the centre,⁶⁸ Achebe rejected the centrality of the material or structural impact of colonialism, at least as the major explanation for post-colonial Nigeria. Ultimately, agency and choices resided with Africans, not Europeans. In this sense, Achebe really did break with Eurocentric explanations of Africa in a way that anti-colonial scholars and activists did not. 'I intend to take a hard look at what we in Africa are

62. Muoneke, *Art, rebellion and redemption*, pp. 44, 54.

63. Joe Ushie and Denja Abdullahi, *Themes fall apart but the centre holds: 50 seasons of Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart (1958-2008)* (Association of Nigerian Authors, Lagos, 2009).

64. Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, pp. 66-7.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

68. Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering history in China: American historical writing on the recent Chinese past* (Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1984).

making of our independence,' he said in 1967.⁶⁹ In 1980 he warned that 'the Igbo people are in many ways today doing as much as, or more than, the British ever did to destroy their own culture'.⁷⁰ He described *The trouble with Nigeria* (1983) as an indictment of 'the chaotic jumble of tragic and tragi-comical problems we have unleashed on ourselves in the past twenty-five years'.⁷¹

As Nigeria's post-colonial history lengthened, Achebe returned more often to the colonial period as a contrastive lens. 'Before, justice may have been fierce but it could not be bought or sold There were titles and distinctions, but they were gained by hard work Now all that is changed,' he complained in 1962.⁷² In a 1966 interview, his identification with the British nation-building project in Nigeria is clear:

These nations were created in the first place by the intervention of the British which, I hasten to add, is not saying that the peoples comprising these nations were invented by the British And I believe that in political and economic terms . . . this arbitrary creation called Nigeria holds out wonderful prospects. Yet the fact remains that Nigeria was created by the British – for their own ends. Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small scattered ones before.⁷³

His appreciation of the positive legacies of colonialism was also evident in a 1967 interview:

I am not one of those who would say that Africa has gained nothing at all during the colonial period. I mean, this is ridiculous – we have gained a lot. But unfortunately when two cultures meet . . . [w]hat happens is that some of the worst elements of the old are retained and some of the worst of the new are added, and so on But again I see this as the way life is. Every society has to grow up, every society has to learn its own lesson.⁷⁴

Achebe, then, might be described as a complex thinker about the colonial encounter as it actually occurred in Nigeria. Like other writers of the period, as Brian May has argued, Achebe *embraced* the general challenge of modernization put to Nigerians by British colonialism.⁷⁵ In 2008, he spoke as if everyone knew this:

69. Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, p. 23.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

71. Chinua Achebe, *The trouble with Nigeria* (Fourth Dimension Publishers, Enugu, Nigeria, 1983), p. 62.

72. Ohaeto Ezenwa, *Chinua Achebe: A biography* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1997), p. 88.

73. G. D. Killam, *The novels of Chinua Achebe* (Heinemann Educational, London, 1969), p. 4.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

75. Brian May, *Extravagant postcolonialism: Modernism and modernity in Anglophone fiction, 1958–1988* (University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC, 2014).

I had a friend who I thought admired my work, but it turned out that he didn't. He was resentful that I did not give adequate recognition to the service, to the work, of the Europeans in Africa; he thought that they deserved better treatment. So I was disappointed, because for years I thought we agreed on that role of nationalism and the role of colonialism in our history – in my history.⁷⁶

Achebe's self-identification with the British modernization project was also evident long before *There was a country*. He expressed admiration for the meritocratic elitism of British education.⁷⁷ He was not a student activist against British policies during his college days from 1948 to 1953 at University College Ibadan (affiliated with the University of London), even as nationalists rioted around him.⁷⁸ He especially rejected criticisms that he should not have offered his first novel to a "colonial" publisher. 'Without the intervention of Alan Hill and Heinemann, many of the writers from that generation may not have found a voice,' he noted.⁷⁹

His own life reminded him constantly of the benefits of the colonial inheritance. Despite the vigorous debate on his use of English, Achebe's various attempts to have *Things Fall Apart* published in the Igbo language had come to naught by the time of his death. There was no demand among Igbo readers, and unlike his experience with the British literary world, there were no mentors, no editors, no publishers, and, of course, no reliable postal service. And while Western universities showered him with honorary degrees, Lagos State University was forced to cancel his honorary degree in 1988 because of Yoruba opposition.

The car accident that left him partly crippled in 1990 occurred after he had flown back to Nigeria to intervene in a bitter leadership dispute within his Ogidi tribe. The axle of the car snapped on the ill-maintained roads, throwing him into a ditch. The British Council and British Airways facilitated his transfer to a hospital in England where he was rehabilitated.⁸⁰ Those Western systems, institutions, and organizations so despised by the anti-colonial imaginary saved his life. It seems to have been a turning point. His 1993 lecture at Cambridge was entitled 'The education of a British-protected child', the term 'British-protected' being a reference to the British protectorate under which he grew and to the status that was emblazoned on his first passport. Achebe invoked the term ironically since no one had asked Nigerians whether they wanted to be protected, which

76. Jack Mapanje and Laura Fish, 'Chinua Achebe in conversation', in David Whittaker (ed.), *Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart: 1958–2008* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2011), pp. 3–9, p. 8.

77. Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, p. 100.

78. Phanael Akubueze Egejuru, *Chinua Achebe – Pure and simple: An oral biography* (Malthouse Press, Ikeja, 2002), p. 35.

79. Nasrin Pourhamrang, 'Things fall apart now more famous than me, says Chinua Achebe', *Daily Trust*, 8 September 2012.

80. Egejuru, *Chinua Achebe*, p. 78.

was at the heart of his view of colonialism's disempowering consequences. At the same time, Achebe recognized that the protectorate did indeed offer many protections that would otherwise have been missing. He called the work of colonial-era British officials in improving education and commerce 'a great human story'.⁸¹ At his death, his family declined a traditional Igbo funeral, holding it instead in the Anglican church founded by his father.

Looking back at his various collections of non-fiction essays – *Morning yet on creation day* (1975), *The trouble with Nigeria* (1983), *Hopes and impediments* (1988), *Home and exile* (2000), and *The education of a British-protected child* (2009) – there are more than occasional hints at the complex views of colonialism that would eventually bloom fully in *There was a country*. In a 1973 essay, Achebe allowed that his upbringing in British schools set him 'at a crossroads of cultures' that made him 'lucky' to have books and provided a 'dangerous potency'.⁸² A 1993 essay wonders 'what prompted the British colonial administration in Nigeria . . . to set up two first-class boarding schools for boys' as well as a national university, and suggests that these provided the basis for the affirmation of a shared humanity 'primarily in the camp of the colonized, but now and again in the ranks of the colonizer too'.⁸³ Six months before his death, when pressed to condemn colonialism by Iranian journalists, he demurred: 'The legacy of colonialism is not a simple one but one of great complexity, with contradictions – good things as well as bad.'⁸⁴

In other words, a careful observer would have seen it coming. By the time he wrote *There was a country*, Achebe had spent a lifetime grappling with the complex legacies of colonialism and with the counterfactual of what would have ensued without colonialism. His mixed rendering of the colonial legacy is not new to scholarship on African politics and history, of course. Some have found that economic growth and health indicators were better for the countries that were colonized earlier and for longer,⁸⁵ or which lived within imperial trade systems.⁸⁶ Others have found that these modernizing effects – courts, land tenure systems, banking services, transport infrastructure, urban expansion, export development, and

81. Chinua Achebe, 'The education of a "British-protected" child', *Cambridge Review* 114, 3 (1993), pp. 51–7.

82. Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays, 1965–1987* (Heinemann, London, 1988), pp. 34–5.

83. Achebe, *The education of a British-protected child*, pp. 19, 23.

84. Pourhamrang, 'Things fall apart now more famous than me, says Chinua Achebe'.

85. James Riley, 'The timing and pace of health transitions around the world', *Population and Development Review* 31, 4 (2005), pp. 741–64; D. K. Fieldhouse, *The West and the Third World: Trade, colonialism, dependence, and development* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1999).

86. Kris James Mitchener and Marc Weidenmier, 'Empire, public goods, and the Roosevelt corollary', *Journal of Economic History* 65, 3 (2005), pp. 658–92.

education – were colonialism’s most enduring positive legacy.⁸⁷ Göran Hyden argued that colonialism provided the foundations of political modernity through disembodied and impartial institutions, and of economic modernity through the incorporation of labour, entrepreneurship, technology, and capital into a public sphere.⁸⁸ Some recent scholarship shows that these modernizing influences were particularly strong in places like Nigeria that experienced direct colonial rule over a society that was heterogeneous to begin with.⁸⁹ Camille Lefebvre argues that the so-called ‘artificial’ borders created by colonial rulers in Africa were a positive impetus to creating what Peter Ekeh long ago called the ‘civic public’ of African modernity.⁹⁰

It is not the merits of such claims that are of interest here. Rather, the point is that Achebe’s views on colonialism are consistent with what remains a dissident literature in African studies. Coming from a pantheonic figure in anti-colonial ideology, this has wider paradigmatic implications.

Paradigm shift and the colonial foundations of stateness

It is difficult to overstate the importance for studies of Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa more generally, as well as other former colonial countries, when a figure of the stature of Chinua Achebe ends his life by explicitly affirming his view that the colonial legacy needs to be rethought not as a simple object of resistance but as a complex history and resource that Africans should engage more seriously. Achebe cannot be recast as a supporter of colonialism, which would be a serious disservice to his views. Yet he *can* be recast as someone who took seriously the claim that most great questions have complex answers, including the question of the legacies of colonialism in Africa.

87. Lewis H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1969); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The rise and demise of the British world order and the lessons for global power* (Basic Books, New York, NY, 2003).

88. Göran Hyden, *No shortcuts to progress: African development management in perspective* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1983); Göran Hyden, *African politics in comparative perspective* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006).

89. Leander Heldring and James A. Robinson, ‘Colonialism and economic development in Africa’, *NBER Working Papers* 18566 (2012); Joseph Mangut and Terhemba Wuam, *Colonialism and the transition to modernity in Africa* (2012); Matthew Lange, *Lineages of despotism and development: British colonialism and state power* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2009).

90. Camille Lefebvre, ‘We have tailored Africa: French colonialism and the “artificiality” of Africa’s borders in the interwar period’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37, 2 (2011), pp. 191–202; Peter Ekeh, ‘Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: A theoretical statement’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, 1 (1975), pp. 91–112.

For literary theorists, such as the dozen contributors to a *Massachusetts Review* symposium on Achebe in 2016,⁹¹ the continuing need to cast Achebe as a hero of anti-colonialism carries little cost, since his role is simply to provide imaginative material for their ideological endeavours. But for social scientists tasked with thinking about hard policy choices, this misuse of the Achebean legacy will not do. Achebe's final work ventures the view that many aspects of colonialism supported attempts to create a livable political community in the lower Niger river basin. In Kuhnian terms, Achebe is recognizing that there is a crisis in research on Nigeria because of its failure to come to terms with events such as the Biafran war, which is a classic anomaly. With the nation freed of British "oppression" and euphoric about a united Nigeria, the war should not have happened. A rival paradigm, liberal colonialism as it has been called here, might explain the anomaly: the hasty end to British rule subverted the formation of political institutions and community needed to avoid such a war and to support good governance.

Colonialism never fully measured up to the standards of today's good governance agenda. In many ways, it was precisely the sort of practical hybrid of tradition and modernity – a 'developmental neo-patrimonial' state that empowers local problem solving – that authors like Crook and Booth advocate.⁹² In this sense, Achebe's views of the need to reclaim certain administrative, developmental, and meritocratic facets of colonialism while rejecting its cultural, unaccountable, and disempowering aspects, is partly consistent. The one clear point of difference is that Achebe, in the end, still believed in the *civic* public promoted by the British, an approach that recent indigenous approaches have largely abandoned.

Achebe, the old Igbo traditionalist, discovered in his late years the elective affinity between certain aspects of British administrative, educational, and literary culture and the hopes for a livable political community in Nigeria. Such a community could have been made possible by a selective embrace of that legacy by Nigerian groups rather than the blanket resistance that precipitated a catastrophic civil war and then decades of gargantuan misrule. Achebe is calling for a creative engagement with the colonial legacy so that its virtues can be reclaimed and its vices eschewed. National identity formation is needed, but should not entrench the dominant status of any group. Meritocracy is to be valued, but not at the expense of inclusion. Traditional ruling systems can be used but they must also be modernized. Better administration must come with better

91. *Massachusetts Review* 57, 1 (2016), pp. 7–90.

92. Crook and Booth, 'Conclusion', p. 101.

accountability. Public investments in roads and health systems should be rolled out, but only through the offices of local agency.

Prospects for state building (as well as economic and social revival) in Africa may improve when societies selectively draw upon the ideational resources of effective state episodes in their past, in this case their colonial pasts. Indeed, it is just such a process that Berny Sèbe observes in several African countries.⁹³ He describes how the figures of European colonialism (Livingstone in Zambia, Lugard in Nigeria, and de Brazza in Congo) are enjoying a resurgence of both official and social respect in Africa after decades of execration. The reason, he argues, is that their role as state builders is suddenly useful and praiseworthy as the failures of post-colonial leadership lead populations to search the colonial period for a 'livable political community', as Achebe did. In these countries, Sèbe notes, 'national origins should no longer lie in a more or less mythical pre-colonial entity, or a glorified force liberating from the colonial yoke, but quite simply from the European founder of the colony'.⁹⁴ Achebe's final appeal suggests the need for new research on these aspects of the colonial trajectory abandoned at independence.

93. Berny Sèbe, 'From post-colonialism to cosmopolitan nation-building? British and French imperial heroes in twenty-first-century Africa', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, 5 (2014), pp. 936–68.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 955.