

HONORARY GRADUATE

CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe has been an inspiration to students and serious readers everywhere since the publication in 1958 of his wonderful and profound novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which deals with the impact of Western domination on his village in eastern Nigeria. The novel, which has sold more than eleven million copies in more than twenty languages, continues to be a 'must-read' for undergraduates around the world.

Achebe is fond of saying that the best way to be universal is to be local. This view is reflected not only in *Things Fall Apart* but also in his other influential novels, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*, a prodigious array of essays and poetry. Through these works he has illuminated the interplay and impact of alien historical, cultural, economic and political forces on the lives of people in Africa. In doing so, he does not overlook the very real choices and responsibilities of Africans who have had to adapt to these alien influences. By showing that the hopes and fears of average Africans are, at their deepest level, no different from those of people everywhere - Achebe has helped the rest of the world overcome its exotic and racially prejudiced views of African civilisation.

His focus on the triumph of human decency and dignity in the face of an unknown and often arrogant dominant minority has relevance far beyond the era of colonialism and apartheid. His works reflect many of the same fundamental concerns about the centrality of human equality that lie at the heart of President Mbeki's vision of an African Renaissance. A more people-centered approach to both economic and political development is also central to Achebe's ideas and ideals.

Few writers have had their self-avowed optimism as severely tested for as long as Chinua Achebe though there was little in his early years to prepare him for the traumas of later life. Born on 16 November 1930 in the village of Ogidi, near the prosperous eastern Nigerian commercial city of Onitsha, Achebe rose rapidly through the colonial education system. After successfully completing secondary school at Government College, Umuahia (1944-1948) he went immediately to the country's premier institution of higher learning, University College, Ibadan, graduating in 1953.

Initially the quick-witted and articulate Achebe pursued a career in the Nigerian Broadcasting Service. He began as Controller of eastern Nigeria's broadcasting service, based in the regional capital of Enugu (1954-1959). He then moved to the federal capital of Lagos to serve as Director of the Voice of Nigeria for three years. In 1961, the year of Nigerian independence, he married Christie C. Okoli and they have since raised four children. With the success of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe moved into a succession of academic appointments. He also became increasingly caught up in Nigeria's tumultuous and disastrous political life.

With the civil war looming, he returned to eastern Nigeria in 1967 to become Senior Research Fellow, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He remained there during the terrible war over Biafran secession which claimed over a million lives, mostly civilian casualties of the starvation that

later Achebe accepted a professorial appointment in English at the University of Massachusetts, and another at the University of Connecticut. He returned from the United States and resumed teaching and writing at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he has been Emeritus Professor since 1985.

Achebe watched with increasing alarm as the short-lived Nigerian recovery from the political and humanitarian disaster of civil war turned into a debilitating and increasingly dangerous decline toward ever more repressive military rule. Personally he continued to be fêted internationally for his literary achievements. But at home it became increasingly difficult under military rule for him to maintain the intellectual independence and financial viability of the journals and magazines he helped to edit and direct. In 1990 he was involved in a near fatal car accident which left him confined to a wheelchair with severe spinal injuries.

With the health care system collapsing in Nigeria as corruption and repression escalated, Achebe sought care abroad and from 1990 lived in exile first in England and then in the USA where he is currently Charles O Stevenson Professor of Literature at Bard College in New York. In the years that followed he remained active in a variety of international literacy and human rights organisations while teaching and writing. He also accumulated honorary degrees from several universities around the world, including Harvard, and, in January 1999, United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan appointed him goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Population fund.

After the return to civilian rule in Nigeria, the new government named him the first recipient of its National Creativity Award. Returning to Nigeria in September 1999 for his first visit in nearly a decade, he celebrated the return to democracy and praised the new civilian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, and other locally elected leaders but reiterated the themes of personal responsibility and social commitment that have marked his writings for more than four decades. In summing up his experience after criss-crossing the country for a month, visiting local communities, he declared: 'We have to be very careful to protect democracy here. There are threats...If we want to climb out of the hole we are in, it is a job for all the people.'

Today South Africa and Nigeria stand together as two of the brightest lights in Africa. Both share vital but still fragile commitments to democracy which must be nurtured and protected at all levels. Chinua Achebe exemplifies the best qualities in both societies. It is therefore a particularly propitious moment for this honour to be conferred upon him. It is also particularly fitting that it is this university which confers it. In 1983 Wits established the first African Literature Department in the country (under Professor Es'kia Mphahlele) and the works of Chinua Achebe featured prominently in the first syllabus, as they have done since.

It is with great pride and pleasure that the University confers upon Chinua Achebe the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.