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Ezenwa-Ohaeto,. *Chinua Achebe: A Biography.* Oxford: Indiana University Press, 1997. 326 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33342-1.

Reviewed by Suzanne H. MacRae (English Department, U. of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701)
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A Nigerian businessman's comment – he "stings but he's beautiful –(183) epitomizes the complex paradoxes of Chinua Achebe and could serve as the motto for this biography of the renowned teacher, administrator, poet, essayist, and fiction writer. His life and work exemplify the rich African synthesis of disparate and multiple perspectives in quest of a greater truth. Achebe celebrates traditional Igbo values yet embraces modernity. His serene, unpretentious personality is also confident and polemical, passionate yet ironic. His writings embody aesthetic beauty as well as moral and political resonance. All these qualities are unified by Achebe's unshakable personal and artistic integrity and are beautifully documented in this book. Ezenwa-Ohaeto says that it was Achebe's becoming a moral and literary benchmark for Africans as well as for the entire world that motivated him to write this biography. His intent is to place Achebe's life and professional career in their historical, political, cultural, and literary context and to celebrate Achebe's exemplary character (xii). These goals are vigorously and meticulously accomplished. The book might be termed a kind of praise poem in prose.

Other unstated but obvious motives are the author's profound personal reverence for his former teacher at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and his pride in the achievements of a fellow Igbo, which dilute the ugly stain of colonial ignorance and racism. He copiously records the numerous accolades, honorary degrees, and prizes Achebe has received. But Ezenwa-Ohaeto's approach, however deferential, remains scholarly and detailed in documentation. He intends to establish the comprehensive record of Achebe's career, particularly his educational, administrative, and literary work in Nigeria and his travels throughout the world as literary and political ambassador. Also of great significance is Achebe's heroic political work to promote virtuous leadership in Nigeria, secure human rights, and achieve justice for Biafra. Much less attention is granted to Achebe's purely private life although some family matters are described. Ezewa-Ohaeto's written and oral research resources are extensive: Achebe's writings and secondary critical works in addition to both published and unpublished interviews with Achebe and with his friends, colleagues, and admirers.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto is a prize winning, widely published poet and short story writer as well as columnist, critic, and scholar. He holds a doctorate from the University of Benin and has taught at various colleges and universities in Nigeria and Germany. In 1984 Ezenwa-Ohaeto began working on the book (as far as I know the only biography of Achebe) after Achebe granted him permission but declined to engage actively in the process himself. The project occupied thirteen years. The book covers the period from Achebe's birth in 1930 through 1993, its eighteen chapters centered on discrete segments of time averaging about four years. Each section has a topical focus either on Achebe's personal growth and development, such as "The Catechist's Son" for Achebe's first five years or on dominant historical events such as "The Idea of Biafra 1967-9." This structure makes it easy to consult a particular period although the materials in some sections are more heterogeneous than the rubrics might suggest.

Several features enrich the text itself and are extremely helpful: personal photographs of the Achebe family and friends, witty newspaper caricatures of Achebe, two regional maps of Nigeria, a thorough and accurate index, reference notes for each chapter, bibliographies of Achebe's works categorized by genre (including miscellaneous essays and talks), a list of published interviews with Achebe, and numerous secondary materials.

Ezenwa-0haeto also documents some aspects of Achebe's career of which some readers may be less familiar – Achebe's tireless work of establishing, editing, and writing for a number of literary journals, beginning in his school years and continuing throughout his adult life. These journals introduced numerous novice or unknown African writers to the public. Achebe also gave inspiration and personal mentoring to students and young

artists, including now well known writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Flora Nwapa. In addition, after his first two novels became part of the Heinemann Educational Books publications in 1962, Achebe became general editor of the African Writers series and finally a director for the entire educational series.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto details the pervasive influence of Nigerian culture in molding Achebe's intellectual and moral values. Achebe's strong commitment to family and community was nurtured by a traditional village upbringing filled with myth, folktale, and masquerade festivals. His devoutly religious parents, particularly his catechist father, and his excellent mission school education provided a strong Christian heritage. Achebe cherishes the African belief that storytelling, the essence of both literature and education, conveys community values and creates social cohesion. Achebe's insistence that we need multiple, complementary perspectives to comprehend truth originated in his African culture. Similarly, Igbo wisdom taught Achebe that dialogue fails when the parties do not respect and listen to each other. The destructiveness of colonialism rested on its disparity of power in which Africans were neither consulted nor heard by white masters who deemed them lesser human beings.

Achebe took as the paradigm for his professional career the Igbo concept of mbari art as communal endeavor rather than personal promotion or commercial venture. Mbari art creates sculptures and murals to appease or invoke the protection of the earth goddess or the god of thunder. Images and figures of deities, humans, animals, and scenes from daily life are placed in a special building where the public view and evaluate them. By continually incorporating images of new and powerful persons or events, the art works construct a dynamic pageant of Igbo life. Through its communal rituals mbari sustains the moral center of life, invigorating human creativity to cope with all aspects of human life whether beneficial or destructive. The political dimensions of Achebe's life are also essential to this biography, which provides a synopsis of Nigerian history during the 1960s and '70s, particularly the instability of its nascent democracy, the Biafran revolution, and the consequent civil war. The personal suffering of Achebe's family, friends, and colleagues epitomizes the larger tragedy. Achebe barely escaped with his life; his family became refugees and lost a baby through miscarriage. Close friends such as Christopher Okibo were killed; federal soldiers destroyed the university at Nsukka campus after using it as a camp. This school, the pride of the Igbo, was left without infrastructure or resources – no water, electricity, or lodgings, and worst of all no library. The middle class of Biafra was financially ruined as the federal government confiscated Biafran bank accounts which had operated during the civil war.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto goes beyond the mass media images of personal horror and starving children to detail the more subtle yet wanton mayhem which transgressed conventional military strategy and was intended to execute cultural genocide. Government soldiers systematically destroyed the cultural infrastructure which had been assembled with such pride and toil. Such acts were designed to break the spirit of the "rebels" and garrote their intellectual and spiritual future.

Yet in the midst of this devastation, Biafrans rallied bravely. After the war the university at Nsukka began anew amidst great privation. Under the leadership of Achebe and others the National Guidance Committee produced a magnificent human rights document – the Ahiara Declaration – espousing the principles of the sanctity and dignity of human life, peaceful coexistence, egalitarianism, social justice, and governance as public service rather than self-aggrandizement.

Some of Achebe's most fascinating and significant contributions to intellectual and political life have been his polemical speeches and writings, the "sting" alluded to in the businessman's comment. Although a peaceful man who prefers to solve problems through brisk dialogue and thoughtful compromise, Achebe still exercises his powerful wit, irony, and rhetoric to argue issues of conscience and public welfare. As a man of integrity, Achebe has often found himself embroiled in academic politics and directing his verbal rapier to castigate self-serving, ignorant faculty and administrators and at times lazy students. He aims even more savage and biting rebuke at the corrupt, nepotistic, parochial, or merely mediocre politicians undermining the common good of Nigeria. *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983) is the most famous example of this genre. Such attacks are motivated neither by personal vanity or vendetta but rather as harsh medicine to regenerate the social wound. Achebe also has taken on major conflicts concerning the role of artists and their art, particularly with regard to African literature. He has argued eloquently for the freedom of artists to explore and experiment without either discarding traditional forms and values or slavishly following them and to use either or both European and African languages in their writing, perhaps evolving a style which draws from both. Achebe defends art against being deformed by procrustean rules.

Yet Achebe reminds artists that freedom entails

solemn responsibilities; they should not write out of idiosyncratic self-indulgence or personal aggrandizement. Instead they must be honest spokespersons writing from and to their own cultures, neither censoring negative aspects nor dwelling on them disproportionately. Ultimately their work should nurture human creativity, justice, and integrity. Clearly Achebe's artistic and political values coincide.

This biography speaks eloquently to a universal audience – African and non-African. Nothing teaches so well as a story, and this real life story compels us with its realistic, tough, ethical implications. Even though its author has a partisan̂s relationship with its subject, the narrative rings true as scholarship and history.

Before I read this book, I thought it impossible to respect Chinua Achebe any more than I already did. I was wrong. If it reads like secular hagiography, it should.

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