African voices

by Wiebe Boer in the April 18, 2001 issue

Home and Exile by Chinua Achebe

"Once there was a wizard. He lived in Africa. He went to China to get a lamp." As a youngster growing up in colonial Eastern Nigeria in the 1930s, this was one of the earliest phrases Chinua Achebe, the celebrated Nigerian novelist, read about the Africa in which he lived. For the most part, however, Achebe read and learned about the world of the Europeans who ruled his village, Ogidi. This literature and education was in Africa, but not of or about it. Everything considered civilized and worthy of study came from outside.

At the same time, Achebe learned about the history and traditions of his Igbo people by listening to the informal conversations that took place on the front porch of his father's tin-roofed, and therefore modern, retirement home in the village. He later put to use both the formal Western education of the school and the informal front-porch education of his retired Anglican evangelist father's home to write some of the most widely read novels ever to come out of Africa.

Although the book's publishers describe *Home and Exile* as Achebe's "first fully autobiographical work," the book is as much the story of African literature as a whole as it is the story of Achebe's literary journey from joy to disgust, reclamation and finally success. Though Achebe does at times indulge in rambling and disconnected reminiscing, this book, like his fiction, has a depth belied by its surface simplicity.

The young Achebe was entranced by classic European adventure stories like *Treasure Island* and *Gulliver's Travels*. While studying English at Nigeria's University of Ibadan, he read the same works as his counterparts in England--the writings of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Hemingway and Conrad, among others. Added to that list was the work of Joyce Cary, a former colonial district officer in Nigeria who had become an acclaimed writer. His 1952 novel, *Mister Johnson*, received accolades from all over the Western world. *Time* magazine described Cary's book as "the best novel ever written about Africa."

But to Achebe and his fellow students, this book about Nigeria was not their story, even though the central character was a Nigerian. They could not identify with the book. After 500 years of a literary exploitation of Africa that exoticized the continent and its people to provide justifications for slavery and colonialism, Cary's novel was the straw that broke the camel's back. Achebe and his fellow students began to realize that liberating their people from the yoke of colonialism required taking back their own narrative and writing their own stories.

While the Western literary world was praising the work of apologists for colonial domination like Cary and Elspeth Huxley, another Englishman in the early 1950s published a less-heralded book called *West Africa*. Its author, F. J. Pedler, not only predicted the rise of a real African literature but also criticized those who aided colonialism by colonizing Africa's stories. He challenged Africans to take back their narrative, a challenge that Amos Tutuola was the first to take up. Tutuola publishing the classic *The Palm Wine Drinkard* in 1952, a book that took three days to write. This opened the floodgates for other Africans who began to write their stories--Laye Camara of Guinea, Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono of Cameroon, Cheikh Hamidou Kano of Senegal, Cyprian Ekwensi and of course Chinua Achebe of Nigeria. At the beginning of the '50s, the only Western-style literature written by Africans consisted of two short stories. By the end of the century so many great African writers had emerged that African literature itself became an entire field of academic study even in the most renowned Western universities. In 1986 Wole Soyinka of Nigeria became the first African to win a Nobel Prize for Literature.

To gain international appeal African literature had to become a marketable product. In the late 1950s, a manuscript from an unknown Nigerian arrived at the British publishing company of William Heinemann. At first the company did not even know what to do with it. One of its directors, Alan Hill, recognized the novel's potential, and in 1958 Heinemann published what became Africa's best-selling book ever, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Armed with nothing but the promise of another novel from Achebe, one from his countryman Cyprian Ekwensi, and a third from Zambian nationalist Kenneth Kaunda, Hill took a further gamble and launched Heinemann's African Writers Series.

The series was a huge success, and it made the works of African writers available to the entire world--and most important, to Africans themselves. Chinua Achebe became an international literary figure and Alan Hill later became Heinemann's director. In recognition of his services as the man who helped "the empire write

back," Queen Elizabeth in 1980 made him a Commander of the British Empire, though there was by then no empire left to command.

The work of reclaiming Africa's narrative is not yet complete, however, and European cultural domination continues. There is still a sense that Western is better, and some Third World writers such as V. S. Naipaul of Trinidad and Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria unfortunately have become apologists for this trend, just as Cary and Huxley were apologists for political domination. Cary's and Huxley's novels about Africa have been made into major motion pictures, while those of Achebe and his counterparts have not. Africa's people and culture are still denigrated in popular entertainment and the news media, and others still appropriate their narrative. More Alan Hills and Chinua Achebes are needed to help Africans reclaim their voices in the international arena.