



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Chinua Achebe

Producer: Gail Pellett

Executive Producer: Jack Sameth

Executive Editor: Bill Moyers

A production of Public Affairs Television, Inc. 356 West 58th Street, New York, NY 10019.
A presentation of WNET/New York and WTTW/Chicago. Funding provided by the John D.
and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Copyright (C) 1988 by Public Affairs Television, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This
transcript may not be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. Transcript produced
by Journal Graphics, Inc., New York, N.Y. Transcript charge: \$3.00.

To obtain information about how to obtain videocassettes of this series, send a self-
addressed, stamped envelope to: Moyers' Videotapes, c/o Journal Graphics, 267
Broadway, New York, NY 10007

Chinua Achebe

BILL MOYERS: *[on camera]* Good evening, I'm Bill Moyers. One out of every eight people in the world lives today in Africa. And the population of that continent is increasing faster than anywhere else on earth; triple the rate of North America, ten times faster than Europe. That alone should be reason enough to pay attention to Africa, to listen to African voices. But there's another. Listen to the storyteller, as my guest this evening tells us, and you'll hear the music of history, you'll weave the fabric of memory. And you may just rock the Emperor's throne as well. Tonight a conversation with Chinua Achebe.

[voice-over] Back in his village in Nigeria, Chinua Achebe is president of the town council, a job which brings him more headaches than honors. But honors he has, anyway; eleven honorary degrees from universities around the world, and awards galore, including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Achebe wrote his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, at the age of 26. It sold over 3 million copies and has been translated into more than 30 languages. His latest novel is titled *Aniella of the Savannah*. He's also written many children's stories and political essays. Shortly before his return to Africa, I talked with Chinua Achebe at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he's been teaching the past year.

[Interviewing] There's a proverb in your tradition which says, "Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it." How do you interpret that?

CHINUA ACHEBE: It means that there is no one way to anything. The people who made that proverb, the Ibo people, are very insistent on this: that there is no absolute anything, even good things. They are against excess. Their world is a world of dualities. It is good to be brave, they say, but also remember that the coward survives the brave man. And so this is what it's saying.

MOYERS: So if you have your God, that's alright because there must be another God as well.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes. If there is one God, fine, there will be others, as well.

MOYERS: —two cultures.

ACHEBE: If there is one point of view, fine. There will be a second point of view.

MOYERS: Has this had any particular meaning for you living as you do in two worlds, between two worlds?

ACHEBE: Yes, yes. I think it is one of the central themes of my life and of my work.

MOYERS: —certainly of your literature.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes. And this is where I think the first conflict with those who came to improve us developed — the missionaries — because, you know, they came with the idea of one way, one truth, one life. You know, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. And this is something from which my people, traditionally, would consider so extreme, so fanatical, that they would recoil from it.

MOYERS: Wasn't this one of the reasons that missionaries, the colonial administrators, the Westerners, have often not ever penetrated the reality of the African society because you could embrace — the African could embrace the Christian God while still holding on to a sense of tradition, to the gods of old, in one sense? Is that right?

ACHEBE: Yes, and I think it was not necessary to have thrown overboard so much that was thrown overboard in the name of Christianity or in the name of civilization. It was not necessary. I think a lot of the damage, not only to the material culture but to the mind of the people — you know, that we made nothing, our thoughts were evil, our religions were not really religions; it was paganism or hedonism. And so this created a problem in the mind of the people.

MOYERS: You once said that if you are an African, the world is turned upside-down. Explain that to me.

ACHEBE: I look at the world and the space allowed me in the way the world is organized is inadequate — wherever I look, whichever direction I look — and I don't want to stay in that space because it is stifling. Racism, for one, even on our own continent — all kinds of mistreatment. The most recent, for instance, is the dumping of the toxic wastes from the industrialized world in Africa.

MOYERS: Many people are not aware of this —

ACHEBE: They are not even aware —

MOYERS: —recently reported phenomenon that many American and Western companies and countries are dumping their toxic wastes in African countries, and often bribing governments to let it be done.

ACHEBE: That's right. Yes, yes, they'll do that, too, yes. So, that's what I mean by saying that the world is upside-down. The world is not well-arranged. It is not well-arranged, and therefore there is no way that we can be happy with it — no way, even as writers. Sometimes our colleagues in the West suggest that perhaps we are too activist, we are too earnest, you see. "Why don't you relax," you know, "This is not really the business of poetry." The point is this. A poet who becomes — who sees poetry in the light in which I am suggesting, is likely to fall out very seriously with the Emperor, with the Emperor. And whereas a poet in the West might say, "Oh, no, we have no business with politics; we have no business with history; we have no business with anything, just what is in our own mind," well, the Emperor would be very, very happy.

MOYERS: So that's what you meant when you said once that storytelling is a threat.

ACHEBE: It is a threat, yes.

MOYERS: A threat to anyone in control.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes. Because a storyteller has a different agenda from the Emperor.

MOYERS: You've certainly done your share of offending the Emperor. In fact, you draw a devastating picture of government in Africa; ministers living in princely mansions while the peasants and the workers live in shacks. You've talked about the corruption of democracy, the bribery, the vulgarity, the violence, the brutality, the rigged elections. Aren't you concerned that in these novels which are gaining a growing audience in the West, that you are reinforcing the stereotypes of many Westerners toward your own people?

ACHEBE: Well, I can see that danger, but that doesn't really bother me because I am not concerned primarily with those I am concerned with the people whose story I am telling, and if I am a bit harsh, that harshness, I think, comes from concern. It is not that I hate my people, or that I hate those rulers even. I don't even hate them. But I don't know, when you look at the possibilities, the opportunities that we have squandered in a country like Nigeria, you know, it is really so painful because so much could have been achieved. So much assistance could have been given to — not just to the poor in Nigeria but even outside of Nigeria, because providence has been so prodigious in its gifts to a country like Nigeria. And so when you look at that possibility and what was achieved, one feels very, very bitter, indeed.

MOYERS: You're pretty tough when you write, "We have given ourselves over so completely to selfishness that we hurt not only those around us, but ourselves even more deeply, that one must assume a blunting of the imagination and a sense of danger of truly psychiatric proportions." That's a harsh judgment on your own.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes. You have examples, scores and scores of examples of people who care away the wealth of their nations, you know, to Europe, to Swiss banks. You have examples of more officials who take money so that toxic wastes can be dumped in their territory. I mean, this is the kind of thing I am talking about, and really you can't — it is impossible to think and contemplate that kind of situation without being very, very bitter.

MOYERS: It was a great gamble that Nigeria and other new nations in Africa took when leaving colonialism they embraced democracy, because democracy offers the possibility of infinite corruption — leaders promising benefits to the electorate if they are only returned to power again. It takes a great deal of discipline, institutional building and tradition to make a democracy incorruptible; and, of course, no democracy is incorruptible.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes. Well, I think you are right. And I think it goes even beyond that, because when people say, for instance, that we failed to practice democracy in Africa, for instance, they assume that we were taught democracy during colonial rule, and that we somehow betrayed our education. That is not the case. That is not true at all. The colonial regime itself was not a democratic system. It was a most extreme form of totalitarianism. The colonial governor was not responsible to anybody in the territory. He might be responsible to a minister in Paris or in London, but he was certainly not responsible to the people on the ground. And so there was no model of democracy. We were not practicing Westminster model in Nigeria under colonial rule. We were practicing colonial dictatorship. And so, the colonial people really had no experience, even of this so-called democracy that they were supposed to have inherited. They did not inherit

anything of the sort. So, it was, again, you know, more than simply a question of people not living up to expectations. They really were not prepared. They were not trained for this.

MOYERS: Well, so candid an admission, once again, can play into the hands of the enemies of black Africa because so many Westerners argue that, "Well, that's right. Mr. Achebe is right"—that Nigeria was not ready for democracy, and because it can't handle democracy we've gotta stick with South Africa because they know how to keep order, to keep stability, to prevent Communists from rising to power, whereas the governments of Africa and other black countries have not proven themselves up to the test.

ACHEBE: Yes, well, that is, of course, totally spurious. The question of being ready, I would like to take that on, because what I am saying, really, is that you cannot become ready under colonial rule, because colonial—there was no attempt, there was no way, there was no—it was not part of the program to inculcate democracy. There is no way you can inculcate democracy through dictatorship, you see. So, the colonial system, in itself, was the very antithesis of democracy. So no matter how long you stayed on that, you would not learn democracy. There was de-mocracy in many parts of Africa before colonial rule came, you see. So to say, "Oh, let's keep ruling them until they learn democracy"—it's really fraudulent.

MOYERS: Well, that's what is said in South Africa.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes. And, of course, to say that the South Africans are doing it right and let's support them, since they're the only ones who understand democracy, comes down to not accepting that Africans are people. Because if you accept that Africans are people, you cannot possibly say that a handful of white people, a tiny minority of white people, should impose their will to the extent of depriving even elementary rights of self-expression. All the rights we know in so-called democracies are denied, positively denied in this regime. But, I say it is analogous to, perhaps, analogous to the Nazi regime in Germany. Now for anybody to say, "That's the right thing for Africa," of course, shows that that person does not grant full humanity to Africans. And we know that there are such people, but we are not really going to listen to them, and they are not ultimately going to determine what happens in Africa.

MOYERS: You mentioned Africa before the colonial powers came. There's the opening line of your children's story, *The Drum*, which begins, "In the beginning, when the world was young...." Does the artist in you ever wish you could start the whole story all over again, that you could go back?

ACHEBE: Yes, yes, well, that is the whole strength, I think, of stories, and especially of children's stories. I am happy you raised that because we do need to learn, all of us, to learn to become like children again once in a while. We become so stiff. We are weighed down by so much, so much knowledge, so much possession, so much special interest, that we lose the ability, the flexibility, of children. Children can fly, and everything is possible to a child. This is something that children's stories can do for us, and this is something I think we ought to learn again. We ought to keep ourselves young in that particular way.

MOYERS: You took a period of your life away from writing novels and wrote for children. Why?

ACHEBE: Well, because I thought it was very important. It is very, very important. I had some very interesting, and very strange experiences, too, bringing up my own children that really confirmed my fears about the danger, the predicament, we were going through in not telling our children stories, you see. Our fathers did. Our grandfathers did. But once writing came, we more or less forgot that responsibility to tell children stories.

MOYERS: So what happened? What changed?

ACHEBE: So what happened was that all kinds of bad stories, all kinds of junk, again—this is like toxic waste again, you know, being dumped—and I noticed that my daughter—we were very young parents so we really had no experience and we used to go into the supermarket in Lagos and pick up a glossy, nice, big-looking, colorful story. We never read children's stories ourselves so we didn't know what was in them. But then we discovered, my wife and I, that our daughter was beginning to have very strange ideas, you see. It was at that point that we began to look carefully into what she was reading, and really, there was a lot of poison. There was a lot of poison there, stories full of racism, full of ideas of Africa, again, as the other place, as the back of the world. And this is what we were feeling.

MOYERS: So you decided to—

ACHEBE: So we decided, I decided then— well, I didn't decide then to write, but I knew then the importance of children's stories and I knew that we were failing as parents in not bringing round the children after dinner as our forefathers did to tell them stories. I had not written any before. I didn't know how it was going to work, but I was ready to try, and that started me in that direction.

MOYERS: The power of reminiscing is very important to you.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes.

MOYERS: Why?

ACHEBE: Well, if you look at the world in terms of storytelling, you have the warrior, you have the war drummer; the man who drums up the people first of all, the man who agitates the people, I call him the drummer. And then you have the warrior, who goes forward, you know, and fights. But you also have the storyteller, who takes over to recount the event. And this is one who survives, who outlives all the others. It is the storyteller, in fact, that makes us what we are, that creates history.

MOYERS: The memory. The continuity of the generations.

ACHEBE: That's right. The memory which the survivors must have, otherwise their surviving would have no meaning.

MOYERS: The knowledge that others have suffered and died—

ACHEBE: —have suffered here, and battled here. That is very, very important. And that is the meaning of *Anthills of the Savanna*, you see. It is this memory, the memory that is necessary if surviving is going to be more than just a technical thing.

MOYERS: What is it? The anthill survives in order next year—

ACHEBE: —so that the new grass will have memory of the devastation of the savanna.

MOYERS: —of the fire.

ACHEBE: Yes, of the fire that happened in the savanna in the previous dry season.

MOYERS: So the anthill carries the memory to the new grass, to the new generation—

ACHEBE: —yes, yes—

MOYERS: —and weaves together a collective memory.

ACHEBE: Yes.

MOYERS: So, what you're saying is every survivor has an obligation to remember.

ACHEBE: Yes, yes.

MOYERS: What's that old Jewish saying? That in remembrance is the secret of redemption.

ACHEBE: I'd say they're damn right. Yes.

MOYERS: Is that why you write?

ACHEBE: Well, I didn't put it that way. I mean, I write partly because I enjoy it. But also, I think, because I knew that somebody had to tell my story. There's really— for me, you know, we were at the period which is so different from anything else that happened, that everything that was presented to us had to be looked at twice. I went through university, the first university in Nigeria, we went and did a course in English literature and we were taught the same kind of literature that British people are taught in their own universities. They recommended books for us to read. But I began to look at these books in a different light. I realized suddenly that I was, in fact, one of the savages. When I had been younger I had read these adventure books about the good white man, you know, wandering into the jungle, of the danger and the savages were after him, and I would instinctively be on the side of the white man, the good white man. This is what fiction can do. It can put you on the wrong side if you are not developed enough. In the university I suddenly saw that these books had to be read in a different light. Reading *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, which was a very, very highly praised book, and it is still very highly praised, and, I mean, it wasn't—

MOYERS: It's considered a classic in the West.

ACHEBE: —and I realized that I was one of those savages jumping up and down on the beach. I was not on Marlow's steamer, you see, as I had thought before. And once that kind of enlightenment comes to you, you realize that you need to write a different story, that someone has to write a different story. And since I was, in any case, inclined that way, why not me? And so, what I'm saying is there was a certain measure of seriousness in addition to the pleasure, just the pleasure of creating stories, of telling stories— but there was a serious intention. And so when somebody gets up and says, "Oh, but literature, or poetry, should have nothing to do with

society or with heavy things like politics," I just can't understand.

MOYERS: Well, they do all the time. They shape our image of the world, right or wrong, true or false.

You once said that Africans hope the West, and America, in particular, will listen. If we listen, what will we hear? What does Africa have to say to the rest of the world?

ACHEBE: Well, first of all, we are people. We are not funny beings. We are not funny beings, you know. If you take up any newspaper here, you probably wouldn't see Africa at all mentioned for months. Then perhaps one day a year it is some strange, some strange story—it has to be that kind of story that we have come to associate with Africa. I would simply say, "Look at Africa as a continent of people." There are people there — just people. They are not devils; they are not angels; they are just people. And listen to them. We have done a lot of listening ourselves. This is a situation where you have a strong person and a weak person. The weak person does all the listening. Up to a point the strong person even forgets that the weak person may have something to say, you see, because he is simply there; he is a fixture, you simply talk at him, you see. A governor, a British governor of Southern Rhodesia, once said, "The partnership between us, the whites, and the blacks, is a partnership of the horse and its rider." And he wasn't trying to be funny. Seriously he thought so. Now that's what we want the West to get rid of, because we lack imagination when we cannot put ourselves in the shoes of the person we oppress. If we were able, if we had enough imagination to put ourselves in those shoes, things would begin to happen. So it is important that we listen, that we develop the ability to listen to the weak, not only in Africa but even in your own society. The strong must listen to the weak.