

Notes From the Editor
Reading African Writing:
Fifty Years After *Things Fall Apart*
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Fifty years ago in 1958 Chinua Achebe's remarkable novel, *Things Fall Apart* was published. In the story of Okonkwo and his Igbo village at the moment of contact with colonization, Achebe created what Simon Gikandi has called "an archeology of the African past" (21). The life and rituals of the village, told from the perspective of Okonkwo and his family, are disrupted by the arrival of colonizers and missionaries, who win over many of the population to new customs. Achebe's novel is compelling, not only for subtle descriptions in its final chapters of how colonization dismantles—bit by bit—the apparently solid foundations of traditional customs, but also for probing considerations of internal tensions that made Igbo society especially susceptible to western influences. As David Hoegberg has pointed out, the Igbo village culture Okonkwo inhabits is not caught in a convention-bound stasis, unresponsive to change. The community reflects on its own actions and alters customs accordingly. Hoegberg puts it this way: "We might even say that there was a *tradition of* analyzing and adjusting certain traditions within the culture" (70 original emphasis). And yet, there persist other traditions that the village community seems unwilling to contemplate and evaluate: the taboo on twins that condemns infants to death by exposure in the forest; the over-valorization of masculine strength that drives Okonkwo to participate in the killing of a boy hostage. It is these tensions within the village of Umuofia that render it vulnerable to the teachings of the missionaries. Achebe's great achievement is his nuanced storytelling that powerfully portrays Okonkwo's pride, his courage and his fears, alongside the doubts, diffidence and apprehensions of others, including his own son.

I first read *Things Fall Apart*, like many in my generation, in the old orange, white and black edition of the Heinemann African Writers Series, illustrated with fascinating drawings by Uche Okeke. My 1972 edition notes that the paperback was reprinted every year from 1962 to 1972, and twice in three of those years—a strong testament to the wide readership of the novel. It was this pathbreaking series that introduced me to the contemporary literatures of Africa—first Achebe, then, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Flora Nwapa, Alex la Guma, Ayi Kwei Armah, Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta and others. During the early years of the 1970s what is now postcolonial literature—Commonwealth literature, as it was known as then—began to emerge as a discipline in university English departments, and it was the Heinemann series, where Achebe himself was an editor, that gave these early courses texts in African writing. That this innovative series was recently discontinued should not be interpreted as a lack of readership for African fiction. Quite the contrary. African writing is now sought after and published by mainstream trade presses and reaches a large readership around globe.

ARIEL is pleased to offer this issue as an exploration of Achebe’s legacy. Whereas *Things Fall Apart* articulated the tensions initiated and exploited by colonization, new African writing engages and represents issues of its own historical moment, often entangled with the residues of colonization, sometimes coming to light in the new alignments of a globalized world. The articles in *ARIEL* 39.4 range through urgent aesthetic, social and cultural questions: the urban spaces of post-apartheid Johannesburg in the stories of Ivan Vladislavic; the intersection of popular culture and narrative in the novels of Chris Abani and David G. Maillu; trenchant analyses of colonialist ideologies and the possibilities of Africa-centred alternatives in Lauretta Ngcobo’s *Cross of Gold* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Osiris Rising*; the struggle against apartheid and the white South African in Gillian Slovo’s *Every Secret Thing*; perspectives on North Africa in the fiction of Paul Bowles and Tayeb Salih; reflections on the situation of the refugee African writer by Nigerian poet Obi Nwakanma, now living

in the United States. Since its inception almost four decades ago, *ARIEL* has been the site of many discussions of African writing; the journal hopes and expects to continue these dialogues in the years to come.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1972.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe*. London: James Currey, 1991.
- Hoegberg, David. "Principle and Practice: The Logic of Cultural Violence." *College Literature* 26.1 (1999): 69–79.