

University of Massachusetts Boston

## ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

---

Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series

Africana Studies

---

12-2002

### Ijelè: Welcoming the King of Modern African Letters to Massachusetts

Chukwuma Azuonye

University of Massachusetts Boston, [chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu](mailto:chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs)



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Azuonye, Chukwuma, "Ijelè: Welcoming the King of Modern African Letters to Massachusetts" (2002). *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series*. 18.

[https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs/18](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/18)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Africana Studies at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

# **Ijelè: Welcoming the King of Modern African Letters to Massachusetts, 2002**

*A Welcome Address Presented to Professor Chinua Achebe, Novelist, Poet, Essayist, Cultural Philosopher, Social Activist, and Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, in the Science Auditorium, University of Massachusetts at Boston, at a University Forum Marking the Inauguration of JoAnn Gora as the 6<sup>th</sup> Chancellor, on September 26, 2002<sup>1</sup>*

By

**Chukwuma Azuonye**

Professor of African Literature and Chair,  
Chinua Achebe Symposium Committee

Chancellor Gora  
Vice-Chancellors and Deans  
Faculty, Staff and Students of the University of Massachusetts at Boston  
Members of the Chinua Achebe Symposium Committee  
Members of the Inauguration Committee  
Distinguished Guests  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this event, a rare face-to-face encounter with Africa's most outstanding verbal artist and cultural philosopher, Chinualumogu Achebe—a formidable champion of diversity in the ever-shrinking global community, a tireless critic of the abuse of power at all levels of human relations, Africa's voice in a world divided by Eurocentric bigotry, Stevenson Distinguished Professor of Literature at Bard College at Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, widely recognized as one of the first 100 men who shaped the tone and spirit of the twentieth-century and who stand to chart the movement of ideas in the twenty-first century and the third millennium.

Chancellor Gora, you must be congratulated for this magic moment. Celebrations such as your inauguration are occasions for the appearance of masks—those denizens from the spirit world representing all aspects of the facts of experience. But it is not all celebrations that are graced by the appearance of the king of masks—*Ijelè*—that magnificent embodiment of the history, culture, environment, and social life of a people over a whole generation. In the realm of modern African literature and culture, Achebe is *Ijelè*. And here we are, Madam Chancellor, at your inauguration beholden to the most magnificent of *Ijelè*, whose two traditional titles—*Ûgònaàbò* (he-that-is-crowned-with-a-double-accolade-of-eagle-plumes) and *Ikejimbà* (power-that-holds-the-community-together)—sum up the artistic excellence and social commitments for which the

---

<sup>1</sup>Originally published under the heading “Chukwuma Azuonye Introduces Chinua Achebe...” in *Sentinel Poetry Online: The International Journal of Poetry and Graphics* (ISSN 1479-425X), December 2002 [[http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/magazine1202/Ijele\\_Achebe\\_in\\_machusetts\\_2.html](http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/magazine1202/Ijele_Achebe_in_machusetts_2.html)]

enlightened global community is beholden to him, from New Zealand to Alaska, In Igbo culture, to wear an eagle plume is a mark of extraordinary achievement; a double accolade of eagle plumes is a mark of genius.



*Professor Chukwuma Azuonye standing beside Professor Achebe whilst he blesses the kolanut.*

Since the publication of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which has sold over 8 million copies in English and has been translated into well over 50 languages across the world, Achebe has embodied in his writings and social activism the main stream of Afrocentric discourse in its many battles against Eurocentric absolutism and hegemony. Eurocentricism claims that Europe is the center of the world and the paragon of civilization while the rest of us inhabit the shadows of the periphery. Steeled with social Darwinist ideas of humankind arbitrarily categorized into a civilized world and the worlds of savagery and primitivism, Eurocentricism presents Europe and its Diaspora as the first world while the rest of us, in terms of this absolutism, constitute the second, third and even fourth worlds. Achebe's Afrocentric challenge is not the romantic wishful thinking of those who would move the center, replacing one absolutism with another. Interrogating Eurocentric writings like the novels of Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary, Rider Haggard, and the like, he casts the light of reason on the fallacy that Africa, before the coming of Europeans in the form of explorers, adventurers, missionaries, traders, slavers, and colonizers, was a terrain of absences—the absence of language, absence of philosophy, absence of religion, absence of the rule of law, absence of social organization, and absence of even the human mind or soul itself. In *Things Fall Apart* through *No Longer At Ease*, through *Arrow of God*, through *A Man of the People*, through *Girls at War*, through *Beware Soul Brother*, through *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, through *Hopes and Impediments*, through *Anthills of the Savannah*, and through *Home and Exile*, Achebe has battled indefatigably to restore the presences denied in malignant Eurocentric fiction. This is what he calls "celebration"—representing people in themselves as they really are, not as the flat, detractive stereotypes embodying the prejudices of the outsider.



*Professor Chioma Azuonye with  
Professor Achebe at the post-forum  
African feast she hosted*

Because of his overwhelming commitment to realism, Achebe's celebration of the human presence in Africa never lapses into self-pity or the idealization of the African world. "Our past," he says in one of his early essays, "is not one technicolor idyll." Thus, in his pursuit of realism, Achebe is as much an avid re-creator of the values of indigenous African culture as an unapologetic critic of the weaknesses of that same culture and the failure of African leadership in the postcolonial order.

By and large, he combines an artistic virtuosity, uniquely his own, with commitments which have come to define the writer's role in the postcolonial world. This felicitous fusion of artistry and social responsibility is embodied in what Achebe has frequently described as "the story." Achebe insists that "the story" of Africa must be told by Africans themselves and not by anyone else. As that symbol of indigenous African folk wisdom, the Old Man of Abazon, on page 114 of *Anthills of the Savannah*, says:

...it is only the story (that) can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spokes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbors...the story is everlasting.

It is the story that makes Achebe what he is to us, teachers and students, who read his works in a wide diversity of academic departments and programs: Africana studies, anthropology, art, poetry, comparative literature, English, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, women's studies, and even geography and earth sciences. In telling the story of Africa, Achebe has not only distinguished himself as a teacher, cultural nationalist, social activist, and re-writer of history, but as a healer, whose words and images have contributed immensely to the healing of the social wounds of racism and colonialism. As the progenitor of a whole generation of writers

and intellectuals in Africa, and as a giant whose words and images have revolutionized our thinking and engendered true diversity in the global intelligentsia, there can be no doubt that when the history of world literature, devoid of Eurocentric biases will come to be written, the second half of the twentieth century in Africa and the beginning of the third millennium will be remembered as the Age of Chinua Achebe.



*Professor Achebe talking to a guest at the feast. Miss Ijeoma Azuonye (Extreme Left) looks on.*

Here is Achebe in person, to engage you in a dialogue which we hope will be as inspiring as it promises to be enlightening. This session will be moderated by my colleague from the English Department, Professor Judy Goleman. But the *Ijelè* cannot make its appearance without flourishes. Before I hand over the microphone to Achebe, I must give way to the flutist. Note that the flute (*òjà*) with which he will announce the presence of Achebe is the same wind instrument for which Unoka in *Things Fall Apart* is well-known.