

ACHEBE'S NOVELS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS IN AFRICA

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No writer in twentieth century Africa has achieved wider fame than Chinua Achebe, the internationally acclaimed novelist of Nigeria. His meteoric rise on Africa's literary horizon began with the publication of his first (and best known) novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958, which was soon followed by *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966), and a variety of essays and poems. After an intervening period of over twenty years, Achebe's skills as a novelist have again resurfaced with his *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), a novel that displays a magnificent blend of satiric control and haunting pathos.

While Africa can be justifiably proud of having produced a writer of not only continental but also international stature (he has been recognized as "on of the master novelists of the twentieth century"),¹ our particular interest is to view some of Achebe's literary perspectives in the context of Christian concerns in contemporary Africa. Whether perceptive Christians agree or disagree with Achebe's insights is perhaps less important than making a sincere attempt to consider at least some of the implications suggested by his penetrating novels.

The first question that must be addressed is whether Achebe is sufficiently conversant with Christianity in Africa to offer credible opinions and assessments, particularly in the light of his unrelenting depictions of the intrusive and even disruptive impact of Christian beliefs and practices among ethnic groups throughout Nigeria. Fortunately, we have explicit autobiographical materials in Achebe's writings that indicate the extent of his early exposure to Christianity. He was born in eastern Nigeria of "devout Christian parents"; his father had even become an evangelist and church teacher.² He recalls that his family "sang hymns and read the Bible night and day," and that at the age of ten he considered himself a "thorough little Christian."³ His encounters with Christianity were reinforced by his formal education in a mission school, a government college, and University College, Ibadan, where he took a degree in English, History and Religious Studies.⁴

Even as a child, however, Achebe's close encounters with Christianity were modified by his fascination for the traditional beliefs and practices of his uncle and other relatives. He recalls, with a touch of irony, that these close family members, "blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols" and that he and his sister would partake of these "heathen festival meals" without any sense of distress or trauma.⁵ He also recollects his "fascination for the ritual and the life on the other arm of the crossroads."⁶ This seemingly incidental remark, upon further scrutiny, can be seen to harbour momentous significance in relation to Achebe's novels. His fascination for the *rituals* and the *life* (italics mine) of his traditional heritage becomes, in fact, his major literary preoccupation in his early novels, particularly in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The "crossroads" that image the convergence of the Christianity of his immediate family and the traditional practices of his close relatives also prefigure the personal divergence of Achebe from his early emotional attachment to Christianity. Having become firmly established as a novelist, he looked back on his writing of *Things Fall Apart* as "an act of atonement with [his] past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son" — a literary penance, as it were, for his "apostasy"⁷ from the vibrant life of his traditional heritage. He can hardly suppress his irritation with "all that rubbish we hear of the spiritual void and mental stresses that Africans are supposed to have, or the evil forces and irrational passions prowling through Africa's heart of darkness."⁸ This implicit attack on what he regards as prevalent attitudes among Christians toward traditional propensities is reinforced by his frontal diatribe on the "crazy theology"⁹ of the early missionaries who had come to his village. While Achebe does not deign to explain his reasons for this blanket assessment in his autobiographical essay, it is a likely sequel to his disparaging reference to the "mad logic of the Trinity" in *Things Fall Apart* (p. 104). Apparently, Achebe had decided that Christian theology was intellectually untenable.

Achebe does not, however, categorically castigate every aspect of Christian sensibility and practice. He acknowledges that "in some ways and in certain circumstances [Christianity] stood firmly on the side of humane behaviour."¹⁰ The Igbo traditional custom of abandoning twins to die in the forest in counteracted by Christians who persistently rescue them (*Things Fall Apart*, 110). The Christians are also noted for providing, in the haven of their churches, a refuge for outcasts such as the *osu*, whose socially-mandated dedication to the gods was not a mark of veneration but of execration in the eyes of the tribal community. Complexities surrounding this issue, as we will see later, are addressed more fully in *No Longer at Ease*.

Achebe's acknowledgement of some of the beneficial as well as the deleterious social manifestations of both Christianity and traditional perspectives has elicited a tribute from the widely-published critic of African literature, Professor David Cook, who feels that *Things Fall Apart* is not intended to

... pass judgements on social systems, nor to assert dogmatically that one is better or worse than another. . . . He [Achebe] does not romanticise Igbo society nor vilify Christian European behaviour as a whole.¹¹

Achebe would certainly have considered this to be a welcome assessment of his work, for he clearly admires literary objectivity and realism, as can be evidenced in his own tribute to the Canadian novelist, Margaret Laurence, who observed that perceptive African writers interpreted their own world as

... neither idyllic, as the views of some nationalists would have it, nor barbaric, as the missionaries and European administrators wished and needed to believe.¹²

A careful scrutiny of Achebe's novels indicates, however, that Achebe is not as objective or dispassionate as he would like us to think. His handling of incidental details and episodes demonstrates persistent, though not necessarily blatant, satiric thrusts against Christian theology and eschatology. Concerning the latter, for instance, a message of judgment is given by a white missionary who proclaims to the Igbo villagers that "evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone" would be "thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil" (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 102). This solemn message, however, is conveyed by an Igbo interpreter from another village who habitually mispronounces the word "myself," which sounds like "my buttocks" to the ears of the crowd. The missionary gets into even further difficulty when he lamely attempts to explain how "there was only one God" who, however, had a son but not a wife (p. 103).

While Achebe is not at all reticent about having traditional leaders regard Christianity as a "lunatic religion" (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 126), he is very careful to ensure that traditional beliefs are not misunderstood by the Christian. For example, when a highly intelligent village leader named Akunna approaches Mr. Brown, a white missionary, to indicate that they both, after all, believe in one supreme God called Chukwu, who made heaven and earth, Mr. Brown points to a carved piece of wood on the rafters that is also called a god by the villagers. Akunna then attempts to explain that all of these "little gods" are simply regarded as intermediaries, much like the recognized head of the church in England. From this encounter, Mr. Brown begins to appreciate the need for careful listening and the value of accommodation.

Achebe also takes advantage of his prerogatives as a novelist to shape his characters according to his predilections. It can hardly be coincidental that most, if not all, of his most impressive and resonant characters are traditional leaders, elders or priests who are committed to preserving their heritage. The protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* is Okonkwo, whose fame throughout "nine villages and even beyond . . . rested on solid personal achievements" (p. 3). Similarly, the unforgettable priest of Umuaro, Ezeulu, in *Arrow of God*, remains a man of purpose and resolve in spite of ever-expanding numbers of detractors and opposers who make his position increasingly precarious.

In obvious contrast to these protagonists are the flawed, ineffectual, and even contemptible characters who are identified as Christians. Examples readily come to mind, such as Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son, whose immaturity and personal traumas made him particularly susceptible to "the poetry of the new religion" (p. 104). As the renamed Isaac of *No Longer at Ease*, his story is continued as he attempts to raise his son, Obi, in the nurture of the Christian faith. His efforts are however aborted, as all of Obi's religious training and academic successes fail to provide any real stability in his life. Obi is not only lost to his tribe, but becomes a Christian casualty as well. The missionaries also fail to thrive under the acidic ink of Achebe's sharp pen. For all his visible success in consolidating his mission, Mr. Brown is regarded as "foolish" by the nationals who tolerate and even like him, and his deteriorating health forces him to "leave his flock, sad and broken" (p. 128). His successor, the Reverend James Smith, proves to be bigoted, strident, and even vengeful, and he undoes much of the work accomplished by Mr. Brown; the church is burned to the ground before his eyes. In spite of the predominating shift from the religious and cultural issues of his earlier novels to the political focus of the last two novels (*A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*), Achebe finds room in his last novel for a pathetic servant girl, Agatha, who freely distributes "leaflets dripping with the saving blood of Jesus and yet had no single drop of charity in her own anaemic blood" (p. 183).¹³ In the middle of a casual conversation between two of the main characters of the novel, a remark that is almost out of context emerges, "you know I detest all born-again people" (p. 96).

Without a personal commitment to Christianity, it is hardly surprising that Achebe tends to depict, in his novels, the interaction of traditional customs and beliefs with Christianity in predominantly sociological, economic, and political terms. The reception of Christianity in the Igbo village of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* was facilitated by the erection of a trading store; "palm-oil and kernel" became valuable commodities and "much money flowed into Umuofia" (p. 126). Along with the church, "the white men had also brought a government" and a court (p. 123). Schools were also established, and Mr. Brown eventually convinced the people that "the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learnt to read and write" (p. 128).

Although Achebe does not minimize the economic and educational benefits that seemed to accompany the spread of Christianity, there is an unmistakable sense of its disruptive influence in his early novels. Even the title, *Things Fall Apart*, clearly encapsulates what Achebe analyzes as the essence of the problem, which is primarily one of disunity, as a tribal elder, Obierika, recognizes:

... The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (pp. 124-5).

Similarly, Okonkwo, who returns to Umuofia after a seven year exile for an unpremeditated and inadvertent murder of a kinsman, is able to assess the great changes that have transpired in his absence; he “mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart” (p. 129). In both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe concedes, with a sense of sadness, that the traditional way of life could not, in the long run, withstand the unrelenting onslaughts of European intrusions in Africa. Okonkwo’s futile attempts to repel government representatives by force result in his abandonment by his own tribesmen and in his lapse into utter disillusionment and consequent suicide. Ezeulu’s attempt, in *Arrow of God*, to accommodate and thereby nullify the ways of the white man by sending his son, Oduche, to be instructed by them, is also doomed to failure, with Ezeulu finding himself increasingly isolated by his own people, whose attachment to their traditional customs is gradually eroded by external influences. Even the elements seem to favour the timing of the harvests of some of the Christian converts who have dared to ignore the siren warnings of their traditional priests.

Achebe’s reluctant acknowledgement of the impact of Christianity and its attendant political and economic alliances is, however, accompanied by some penetrating caveats. Though the Galilean has cut a wide swath in the cultural fabric of traditional domains in Nigeria (and, by implication, many other parts of Africa), His domain has by no means been fully established, particularly in the hearts of men and women in these representative regions. This is particularly evident in the novel written between *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, namely *No Longer at Ease*. In his masterful allusion to T.S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi,” Achebe implies that an abandonment of the old gods does not necessarily lead to an unqualified embracing of a new religion. The protagonist of *No Longer at Ease*, Obi, is a character that disturbs and even repels the reader. As the son of Isaac (formerly Nwoye of *Things Fall Apart*, who suffered total rejection by his tribe and who devoted his life to the church), young Obi has enjoyed many educational advantages, including a large scholarship to study in a university in England. Obi’s mother, Hannah, was even more zealous in her Christian faith than her husband, if that were possible, and taught her children to reject food in their neighbours’ houses in case the food had been offered to idols.

This sanitized Christian environment, it might be supposed, certainly should have immunized Obi from the contamination of the world. This, however, does not happen. His glorious prospects abroad quickly become sullied by sexual affairs “– a Nigerian, a West Indian, English girls, and so on” (p. 63).¹⁴ Nor does his thorough Christian training restrain him from accepting bribes – the issue that frames the novel as a whole. In all of this, however, there is nothing that startles the Christian reader, though it is always heart-rending to see the afflictions that prodigal sons (and daughters) bring upon themselves in spite of loving Christian nurture, in Africa or anywhere else.

There is, however, a sub-plot in *No Longer at Ease* that should profoundly disturb any Christian reader. Obi falls in love with a beautiful Nigerian nurse named Clara, from his own tribe, whom he first meets in London. Back in Nigeria, he affirms that he wants to marry her, but she states that this would be impossible, as she is an *osu*. Having been educated abroad, he has come to realize that it would be “scandalous” (p. 65) to permit a mere tribal taboo to interfere with their plans. She senses, however, that his powerful reassurances mask some weakness in his resolve. Even after sharing his determination to marry Clara with his parents, he fails to arrange the intended marriage, allows her to undergo a risky abortion, and finally abandons her.

Obi loses the sympathies of the reader by these actions, of course, but even more unsettling is the intractable disapproval of his parents when he tells them of his plan to marry Clara. Obi's father acknowledges that Clara's father is both “a good man and a great Christian,” but he nevertheless stubbornly refuses to listen to Obi's argument that the light of the Gospel should have dispelled such darkness and ignorance (pp. 120-21). His mother's reaction is even more vociferous. She warns him that “if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself” (p. 123). Achebe appears to give his approval, in *Things Fall Apart*, to the Christian church for welcoming the *osu* into their fellowship, but in *No Longer at Ease* he clearly implies that Christians set their limits far short of the New Testament declaration that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor two Greek . . . bond nor free . . . for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The implications for tribal exclusiveness are obvious, and it is apparent that in some parts of Africa Christians have been slower than the political authorities in addressing this lingering issue in a constructive and dynamic manner.

While Achebe's first three novels can all be regarded as nostalgic requiems for the demise of the “old” traditional Africa, his last two novels can hardly be viewed as celebrations of post-colonial freedom. Both *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* depict – with unmistakable candour – Achebe's harshly satiric portrayals of nationalistic leaders turning into “party bosses” who, in turn, are chased out by “the bright military boys, new idols of the people.”¹⁵ Had Achebe not already earned an international reputation as an African writer, these novels might have fallen by the wayside, or have been placed on some censor's index of prohibited readings. However, *A Man of the People*, an uninhibited fictionalized study of a suave but utterly unprincipled and ruthless M.P. whose vagaries precipitate a coup, elicited wide-spread interest when its “prophetic ending” coincided with an actual coup in Nigeria.¹⁶ Achebe's literary preoccupation with political issues persists unabated in *Anthills of the Savannah*, a brilliant satiric analysis of a military dictator's consolidation, abuse and final loss of power.

The implications of these two political novels, for Christian readers, are more oblique than those found in the earlier novels, which focus on the collision

between entrenched tribal traditions and the intrusions of westernized Christianity. Nevertheless, there are three issues in these latter novels that cannot be ignored by Christians who are concerned for the spiritual health of Africa: declining moral standards, opportunism, and (for want of a better phrase) unbridled intellectual broad-mindedness.

We have briefly noted Achebe's depiction of Obi's moral deterioration in *No Longer at Ease*, but this can be plausibly attributed to Obi's deliberate loosening of his ties with his closely-knit tribal community as well as with his Christian parents while he studies overseas. In *A Man of the People*, however, it is at a party organized by the students' Christian movement at a Nigerian university that the protagonist of the novel, Odili, first meets Elsie, a co-ed who is engaged to a medical student who is taking studies abroad; Odili, speaking in the first person, divulges to the reader that "Elsie was, and for that matter still is, the only girl I met and slept with in the same day—in fact within an hour" (p. 24). This episode becomes a harbinger of further complications when the "Chief Honourable M.A. Nanga, M.P." (p. 1), upon whom Odili has placed his aspirations for sponsorship to take graduate studies overseas, manages to seduce Elsie while she and Odili are being accommodated at his mansion.

Odili's revenge takes the form of an attempted political challenge at the polls, which initially only makes him a victim of severe intimidation, harassment, and even violent physical beatings from Nanga's hired thugs masquerading as police officers. The ensuing unrest and bloodshed eventually lead to a military coup in which the government is overthrown and all of the ministers are incarcerated. Odili experiences a personal triumph in this turbulent scenario by winning the affections of the attractive young Edna, whom Nanga had hoped to marry as his second wife. Whether Achebe is simply striving for realism in this somewhat crude novel (I have ignored many lewd details interspersed throughout the story), or whether he is deliberately highlighting the failure of Christianity to permeate the morals of post-colonial Africa is not at all clear; what is apparent, however, is that moral decline is an ominous challenge to those who name the Name of Christ in various African countries, as well as throughout the Western world. Moral indiscretions among Christians can have devastating and far-reaching effects that nullify the otherwise positive witness of individuals, churches, and even entire communities.

At the heart of both *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* (Achebe's recent and, in my opinion, most brilliant novel) is their common theme, "the corroding effect of privilege" (*A Man of the People*, p. 109). Nanga's ruthless suppression of opposition finds its counterpart in Achebe's satiric portrait of "His Excellency," Sam, a military buffoon who adds the name, "President," to all his titles as he treacherously turns against his closest friends who have assisted him in his struggle for absolute power in the fictionalized West African state of Kangan. The tactics of this megalomaniac eventually result in a backlash of violence in which he himself perishes in

another inevitable coup. Bordering on comedy throughout much of the novel, Achebe also cleverly exposes the obsequiousness and self-abasement of "His Excellency's" attendant ministers who vie for his favour like the palace "leapers" and "creepers" among Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians (little put-ons?) in *Gulliver's Travels*:

Worshipping a dictator is such a pain . . . It wouldn't be so bad if it was merely a matter of dancing upside down on your head. With practice anyone could learn to do that. The real problem is having no way of knowing from one day to another, from one minute to the next, just what is up and what is down (*Anthills*, p. 45).

The ruthless political opportunism portrayed by Achebe in this novel offers an extreme example of the abuse of authority that has often characterized men in positions of power. Christ Himself notes in Mark 10:42 that "they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship" over their subjects. He offers, however, a superior paradigm for the church: "whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all" (Mark 10.44). Christ's model of authority is, however, frequently jettisoned in favour of unsanctified personal ambition, even in ecclesiastical structures. The church, in fact, often provides opportunities for social and economic advancement that might otherwise never come to some of the eager and clever people living in struggling societies in various parts of Africa. Where does one draw the line between the divinely-mandated obligation to develop one's talents on the one hand, and yet fulfil Christ's requirement of humble servanthood on the other? Part of the answer, of course, lies in the motive. Everything done in the Name of God must be done for the glory of God, to whom alone belong the kingdom, the power, and the glory—as the far too easily recited Lord's prayer tells us.

Another part of the answer has to do with method. Preferment, position, and power for the Christian must be attained by legitimate and honourable means, as stipulated by Paul: "If a man . . . strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully" (II Tim. 2:5). This also includes the whole area of moral obligation. One of the more fascinating minor characters in *Anthills of the Savannah* is Professor Reginald Okong, a minister in President Sam's cabinet. His rise to power had come about by his "working secretly on schemes of his own" (p. 10) while being sponsored and groomed by American Baptist missionaries who were training him for ministry in their denomination. Variations on this scenario have been repeated many times by ambitious and bright young men who have been enticed away from their church sponsors for more lucrative and prestigious positions in para-church organizations or, as in Professor Okong's case, secular careers.

And what more needs to be said about the ubiquitous scourge of bribery, which is estimated as consuming 60% of the wealth of at least one West African nation?¹⁷ What are the real costs in terms of trust or integrity? Or, what are the costs in terms of the denial of real merit, which Achebe perceptively recognizes as "a form of social injustice which can hurt not only the individuals

concerned but ultimately the whole society"?¹⁸ The learned judge in *No Longer at Ease* who sentences Obi "could not comprehend how an educated young man" would jeopardize his entire future by accepting bribes (p. 54), and yet there are people who regard themselves as Christians who are placing their spiritual well-being as well as their testimony at risk by succumbing to bribery and other forms of monetary abuse, thereby allowing the salt of Christianity to lose its savour in their corrupt social environments.

The more than twenty years' gap between *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* appears to have crystallized some of Achebe's maturing insights. While Achebe would not likely agree with the unequivocal opinion of the graduate student from a small West African country who, though not himself a committed Christian, declared that missionary activity was the only bright spot in the entire sordid history of colonialism,¹⁹ Achebe seems to have come to terms with the historical fact of the legacy of colonialism, with its positive as well as negative reverberations. His real concern in his final novels is the political and economic climate of post-colonial Africa, but only in his last novel can we detect the strength of his distrust of political clichés and simplistic ideologies of any kind, which so easily provide demagogues with pretexts for overthrowing corrupt governments with others that are no better. The perspectives of Ikem, the editor of "The Gazette" in *Anthills of the Savannah*, seem to reflect those of Achebe. Ikem distrusts "orthodoxy whether of the right or left" (p. 100), and insists in his final message to the university community that only responsible performance can produce the "moral authority" required for credible leadership (p. 160).

Achebe's conviction that integrity is more basic than orthodoxy is both attractive and compelling, especially on a continent as politically and ideologically fragmented as Africa. His plea for religious toleration fits into this, and is imaged beautifully in the spontaneous "holy" dance of a Moslem girl, Aina, when she hears Agatha's song of praise to Jehovah (p. 224); for Achebe, true worship transcends religion or creed, dissolving in an awareness that "this world belongs to the people of the world, not to any little caucus, no matter how talented" (p. 232).

When the devastation caused by political and religious conflicts is thoughtfully considered, Achebe's prescriptions of integrity and tolerance would appear to be Africa's only viable option. With the paramount importance of integrity Christians should have no quarrel whatsoever; many of the world's great religions converge on this point. Achebe's lofty humanism, however, also demands tolerance – except for orthodoxy, which is castigated by Achebe as "the graveyard of creativity" (p. 100). This poses a dilemma as well as an ongoing challenge for Christians, whose Biblical mandate requires an obedient love for God as the basis for loving one's fellow men. For the committed Christian, toleration is a relative rather than an absolute value. Christian love embraces toleration but it also transcends it, simultaneously

revealing the necessary distinction between the love of the sinner and the hatred of his sin. From a Biblical perspective, the communication of the inescapable realities of time and eternity, or salvation and damnation, takes precedence over toleration, which in this context is an existential variant of criminal negligence. The highest form of creativity is not enhanced by indiscriminating broad-mindedness (the most common form of pride among intellectuals) but by a yearning for ways to express — ever more resonantly — the wonders of the highest truths to this needy world.

ENDNOTES

¹Introductory editorial comment to "African Literature as Restoration of Celebration," by Chunia Achebe, in *New African*, March 1990, p. 40.

²Chunia Achebe, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," in Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, pp. 20-1. This selection was first published in *New Letters*, Vol. 40, Kansas City, October 1973.

³*Ibid.*, p. 23

⁴Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1958), vii, Biographical Note. The 1988 reprint is referred to throughout my essay. *No Longer at Ease* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1988 [1960]) is the edition used in this paper. *Arrow of God*, second edition (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1988 [1964]) is the edition used here.

⁵*Hopes and Impediments* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1988), p. 23.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 20, 25.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹David Cook, "The Centre Holds" in Cook, *African Literature* (London: Longman Group, 1977), pp. 67-8.

¹²Margaret Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 9, cited in Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, p. 55.

¹³All references to *Anthills of the Savannah* are to the Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1988 edition.

¹⁴Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1988 [1960]), p. 63.

¹⁵*Hopes and Impediments*, p. 25.

¹⁶Achebe, *A Man of the People* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1988 [1966]), note on back cover. This edition will be referred to throughout my essay.

¹⁷Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1983), p. 40.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹This assessment by a West African fellow doctoral student at a large Canadian university emerged in a casual conversation we had a number of years ago.