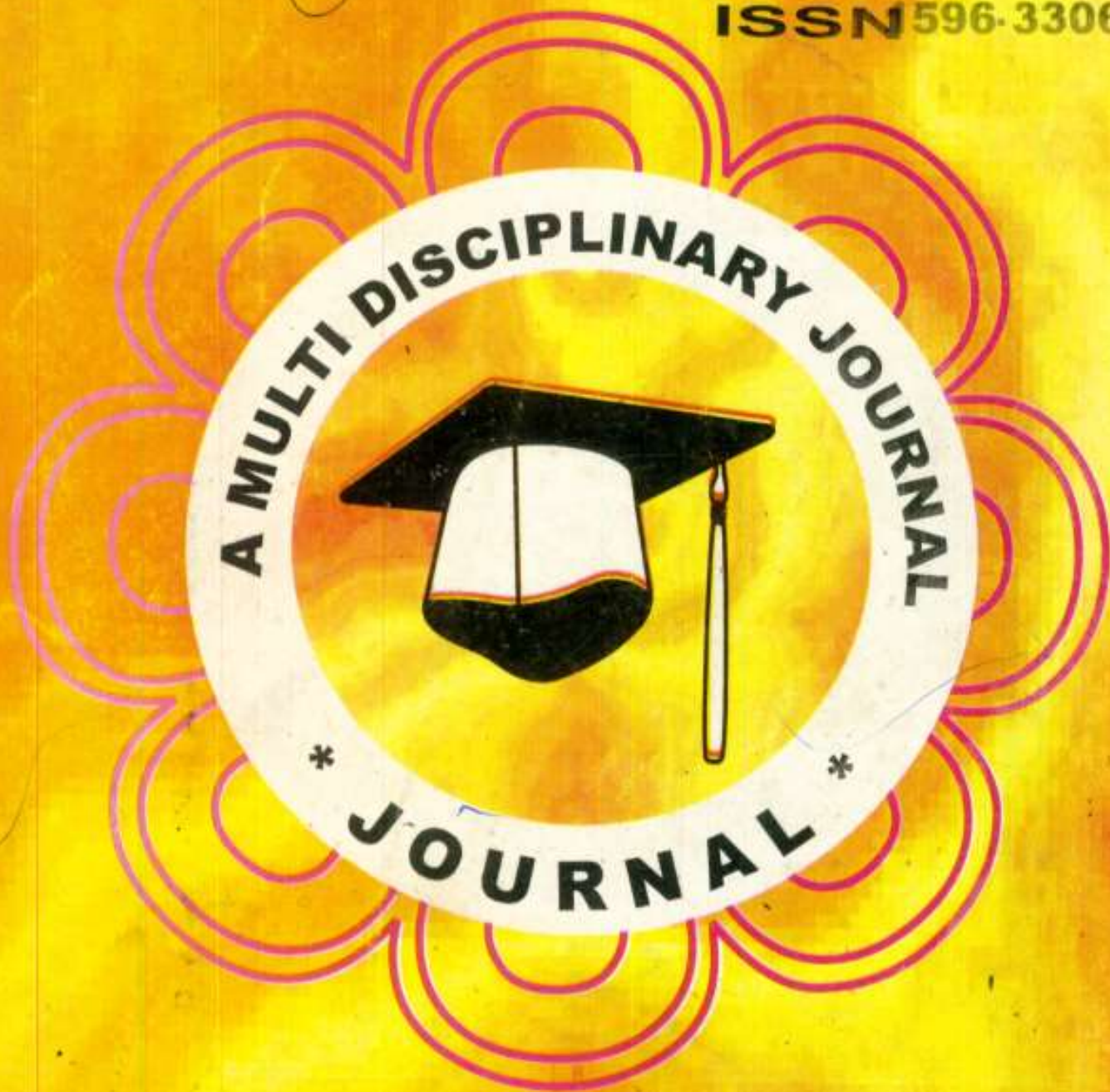


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## Contents

Strategies for Improving and Sustaining the Standard of Education in the Faculty of Education, Ebonyi State University – <b>Pastor Dr. Paul Nwakpa</b>	1 – 7
Biokinetic Model for Production of Ammonia From Urea in a Batch Reactor – <b>C.P. Ukpaka, H.A. Ogoni, R.H. Gumus and T.S. Farrow</b>	8 - 24
Computer Crime, Detection and Prevention- <b>N. D. Oye</b>	25 – 30
Improving Quality in Teaching Education Using Information and Communication Technology (ICT)- <b>Dr. Mrs. Sabina Nwana</b>	31 – 37
Higher Education and Poverty Reduction Among Youth – <b>Aniekam Isaac Ekpo and Harry Otuo Ofunime</b>	88 – 43
An Exploration of Aesthetism, Wisdom and Morality in Igbo Traditional Proverbs – <b>Dr George N. Anaso</b>	44 – 51
Perception of Environmental Hazard by Residents Adjoining Gasoline Service Stations in Jimeta, Adamawa State, Nigeria – <b>Felix Aromo Ilesanmi and Michael Kigsley Balasom</b>	52 – 62
Graphic Design Literacy and Democracy: A Theoretical Approach in Contemporary Nigeria For Nation Development- <b>Bankole E. Oladumiye and Adene O. Fatuyi</b>	63 – 68
Micro Finance Bank and Rural Development in Nigeria- <b>Dr. Chika Ile and C. M. Okpala</b>	69 – 72
Application of Classroom Knowledge of Chemistry to National Phenomena/Concept by Students as a Way of Revamping and Sustaining Nigeria's Economy- <b>Dr. Mrs. J. N. Anaso</b>	73 – 78
Parturition in Dairy Cattle: A Management Requirement for Profitable Livestock Production- <b>Omuya A. Okomanyi</b>	79 - 84
Extent of the Achievement of the Goals and Philosophy of the Nigerian Education System- <b>Josephine O. Okafor</b>	85 - 89
Relationship Marketing in Banking Industry- <b>Abata Matthew Adeolu</b>	90 – 97
Morality and National Development: The Role of Physical Education - <b>E. C. Nwachukwu</b>	98 – 102

	Influence of Various Inhibitors on the General Corrosion Behaviour of Un-Deformed and Cold – Worked Mild Steel in Chloride Solution – <b>P.O. Okonji; R.E. Okonji and I.I Awili</b>	103-109
	Crude Oil Pollution and the Implication for Agriculture in Egbema Clan - <b>Ray N. Otunne</b>	110-114
<b>E</b>	Community Based Education as a Basis for Universal Basic Education in Nigeria – Abayomi Olatoke Adejobi	115-119
<b>E</b>	The Grammatical Description and Usage of Pidgin and Creole in Nigeria - <b>Florence Etuwe Oghiator and Augusta Uche Ofili</b>	120-124
	Refocusing Vocational Education for Relevance and Sustainable National Development in the New Millennium – <b>Jerome O. OKafor</b>	125-129
	Unoka, an Ideal African Life Bastardized and Destroyed by Western Capitalism: A Study of Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> - <b>Clement Chukwuka Idegwu</b>	130-135
	Effect of Different Types of Live Mulching Materials on Growth Parameters, Yield and Yield Component of Maize ( <i>Zea Mays</i> ) – <b>Okonmah, Lawrence Uche</b>	136-144
<b>C</b>	Screening for Low Temperature Stress-Tolerant Cassava Varieties using Member Thermomstability - <b>Akparobi, S.O</b>	145-150



# UNOKA, AN IDEAL AFRICAN LIFE BASTARDIZED AND DESTROYED BY WESTERN CAPITALISM: A STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

Clement Chukwuka Idegwu

## Abstract

This proposal provides and offers for the study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, positing Unoka, Okonkwo's father, life and world view as an ideal African mind-set where every individual specializes on his arts contributing to the central pool, the joy that stimulates and sustains the oneness for which Africans are well known. Unoka's life is devoid of western capitalism which had destroyed the African essence, promoting undue quest for money and western ideals thereby, destroying the communal life style for which African had been the envy of many. It is this note that I will analyze Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

## Introduction

The principal feeling in these works had been that of compassion for unhappy mankind condemned to utter futility of life in this world. These deep sense of life's 'absurdity' is found in many other writers of our time but Camus presented a specially appealing view of humanity; though he considered that the indifference with the main feature of the world around him, he recognized that himself was part of that world and he was determined to feel in his own world 'solidere' with it. He concluded that he must make the most of the forbidding but unavoidable experience of living a life of absurdity (pp 10 - 11).

The above is Edward O. March's (1967), posit in his introduction to *Les Justes* by Albert Camus. Edward O. Marsh (1967), here, could serve as a beautiful note on which I intend to discuss UNoka's life as an ideal state of life which Chinua Achebe either intentionally or otherwise, seems to portray in his *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe seems to be saying that the ideal African state of life in which man is and remains at peace with his soul.

The Africa world view is as represented by Unoka is a peaceful co-existence, living in harmony with one's neighbours, doing that in which one has relative advantage over others, being happy and serving as a source of happiness.

Henry David Thoreau (1963: 182 - 183), in his piece, *Where I lived and what I lived for* stated that Time is but the stream I go a fishing in. I drink it, but while I drink, I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slide away but eternity remains. Thoreau (1963), explained the temporariness of things. Fishing in time, doing what one has to do, living and making others live, and not making any hue and cry about life, help in making a meaning out of the absurdity of life.

Thoreau did quickly add "that we should spend one day as deliberately as nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails (p 182).

This is why Unoka remained an apostle of the ideal life devoid of the unnecessary quest of this world. It is my humble submission that Chinua Achebe, one of the foremost African novelist in *Things Fall Apart* and his subsequent works show how those who refuse to see the nothingness of life, walk or thread softly, end up destroying themselves, and the dreams of those who would have leant on them.

This paper, therefore, aims at discussing Unoka's life devoid of materialism as an ideal African life and world view, the beauty of communal life style which allows every member of the society to engage in that which he is a best suited for, creating the desired joy and inspiration that ensure the maximization of time and talent.

## Unoka: The Ideal

Though many people may have read Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* chattering the story of Okonkwo, ignoring the beauty of the African world view as personified by Unoka, Okonkwo's father, a critical view of Unoka's short life as Achebe craftly presents him; the life of Obierika and others



who ignore the craze for individualism and materialistic tendencies will show very vividly that Africans are existentialists to a very great extent. The awareness of the nothingness in life at will makes the likes of Unoka to hate wars, avoiding taking human life, making merriments and peacefully co-existing with others, the haves and have-nots alike.

On the first page of *Things Fall Apart* Achebe, displays Unoka and his son Okonkwo. Like wares for sale, showcasing them for the buyers to make a choice. This exposition tells the readers how the entire book would be, could be judged.

Unoka for that was his fathers name, had died ten years ago. In his days, he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth, he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts (pp 3 – 4).

The above is the first glimpse we have of Unoka. Achebe talks about Okonkwo thus:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Unuofia to Mbaino (p3).

The above quotations are Chinua Achebe's way of presenting characters whose life and death will help in appreciating Unoka and its enduring beauty.

In a typical African society, every member of the society contributes to the general pool, giving that which the individual is well gifted or has a natural advantage over others, being blessed and being a source of blessing to others. Either deliberately or otherwise, Achebe presents Unoka in a way that gives credence to this postulation. According to Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart*, Unoka

Was a tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplaces. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes, another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing "egwugwu" to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such host for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. Unoka loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty (p.4).

Achebe talked about Unoka's moments of fulfillment. Macmillan English Dictionary for advanced Learners International Student Edition (2002), sees fulfillment as a feeling of happiness and satisfaction, especially because you are doing something important or using your abilities. Unoka understood this very well and acted accordingly.

Okonkwo, in all his splendour as the best wrestler, the only one who could make Amalinze's back to touch the ground, the indomitable warrior who was the first to come back with a human head in a war, and could go as an emissary of war when duty called, was not arrayed with such "blessedness and peace" as Unoka.

Unoka's expertise in music endeared him to people from all shades of life hence, the invitation from neighbouring villages. The fact that the act of music, or musician of the period before the white man came into Africa were not appreciated financially was not enough for him to be damned or be regarded as a failure. Today, there are people whose main preoccupation is music: the Sunny Ade's, the late Sunny OKosun, the Felas and the Victor Uwafo's and the late Lucky Dube of



blessed memory. One can imagine late Lucky Dube, Peter Torsh and Marley of blessed memories play on television. The excitement, the joy, such a journey on memory lane will vividly explain Unoka's position in pre-colonial Africa.

Taiwo (1982: 122), gave credence to the above view by saying that

Unoka is not the worthless man that his son makes him out to be. He is an accomplished artist whose expertise is much sought after by other villages. The picture of him which comes through from the pages of the other novel is one of the almost unqualified approval. Given this situation, the critic is entitled to wonder why the only use made of Unoka is the negative motivation he provides for Okonkwo.

There seems to be a playing down of Unoka's outstanding qualities. Even when Unoka consulted Agbala whose 'priestess in those days was a woman called Chika', we find him being humiliated instead of being encouraged.

Hold your peace! Screamed the priestess, her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void. You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is set at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your matchet and your hoe (p.13).

That Unoka is known for the weakness of his matchet and hoe, is and would not be a problem anywhere, anytime, especially when the person in question has an area where he has a natural advantage over others. This is why Taiwo (1982), could say that Achebe provides too little an information about Unoka. According him.

The reader would require much more information about Unoka to be convinced that his memory can influence Okonkwo to the extent the novel claims. The little information we have shows Unoka as a lover of music and the arts and as one endowed with those human qualities which Okonkwo would have been the better for possessing (Taiwo, 1982).

Unoka was highly endowed. He was at peace with his gods hence his face beamed with blessedness and peace. The inability of the people to have a valid assessment of Unoka or their deliberate attempt to ignore his sterling qualities made them regard him as a failure for he didn't fail in life, he only failed in the use of his matchet and hoe. He was a master of the flutes hence, even neighbouring villages could invite him, and his band to play for them for days. He was a teacher of music. One could see a great prophet (the god of music) being honoured except in his village (Umuofia).

Unoka has the charisma which Okonkwo lacks greatly. Though Achebe could say that:

Unoka, the grown up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laugh at him because he was a loafer and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. But Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in borrowing more and piling up his debts (p.4).

Unoka never forced any of his creditors to lend him more money. His ingenuity, the craftsmanship, and the implicit confidence that the people had in him made them lend him even after swearing not to do so again. He was credit worthy.

Unoka an ideal African is always hopeful. He believes that tomorrow will certainly be better than today. He is wise. Even when the whole world seemed to mock him, calling him names, he still believed that life must continue.

That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotten yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself. Okonkwo remembered that tragic year with a cold shiver throughout the rest of his life. It always surprised him when he thought of it late that he did not sink under the load of despair. He knew he



was a fierce fighter, but that year had been enough to break the heart of a lion ... His father, Unoka who was then an ailing man, had said to him during that terrible harvest month: "Do not despair, I know you will not despair. You have a manly and proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone! (pp. 17 – 18).

Even as an ailing man, we find Unoka tell Okonkwo his son, in "that terrible harvest month," not to despair. "Do not despair. I know you will not despair. "Such words could make a hopeless and dying man not only to hope for a better tomorrow, but to become 'hale and hearty' with ease.

Ojinmah (1991) gives credence to the above by saying that:

Unoka's fault, Achebe writes, was that he was improvident and a wafer and not that he was a bad father perse. Achebe mentioned that when Okonkwo's crop failed in that year of bad harvest, Unoka. Like any father consolved has son, Okonkwo... (p.23).

That is wisdom. Unoka is wise. Wisdom is highly cherished in African world view. The Holy Bible New King James Version (1994: 620) in Proverb 4:7 says "Wisdom is the principal thing. Therefore get wise. And in all your getting, get understanding." Unoka knew that "Happiness is a momentary episode in a general drama of pain," (Hardy, 1982). And that happiness is not dependent on a man's acquisition of materials things.

Obierika, another apostle of beauty in the African world view demonstrates how much Africans value wisdom.

I cannot understand why you refuse to come with us to kill that boy; he asked Obierika "Because I did not want to, Obierika replied sharply. I had something better to do.' You should as if you question the authority and the decision of the oracle, who said he should die. I do not. Why should I? But the oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision. But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the oracle would do then? You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend, if I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families. If the oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it (pp 46 – 47).

The dialogue between Okonkwo and Obierika above shows how precious wisdom is. Okonkwo lack wisdom. One could see Obierika trying to school him on the topic. Samson, a major character in the Old Testament bible wasted the great anointing he had because he lacked wisdom. Okonkwo lacked wisdom. Hence:

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead. Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him, said Obierika 'We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming. Obierika who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: 'That man was one of the greatest men of Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog... He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words (pp 146 – 147).

Okonkwo's death by hanging would have been avoided if he was as wise as his father Unoka, his friend Obierika and his mother's kinsman Uchendu. Uchendu spoke to Okonkwo thus:

You think you are the greatest sufferer in this world. Do you know that men are sometimes banished for life? Do you know that men sometimes lose all their yams and even their children? I had six wives once. I have none now except that young girl who knows not her right from her left. Do you know how many children I have buried – children I begot in my youth and strength? Twenty-two. I did not hang myself and I am still alive. If you



think you are the greatest sufferer in this world ask my daughter, Akueni, how many twins she had borne and thrown away (p.95).

Taiwo (1982), re-echoes the maturity of Uchendu by saying "again, Uchendu in seeking to win Okonkwo from despair in his exile said he himself has suffered much and adds... 'I did into hang myself and I am still alive'...

Achebe as a novelist, frown at brazen materialism. He abhors the great premium attached to undue material acquisition. This is why Idegwu (2005:87), commented on Achebe position thus: Though many may not have looked at Chinua Achebe as a devoted existentialist, a textual analysis of his texts, will show how he has craftly expounded this theory. In his characteristic manner, Achebe gives it a meaning by showing how every being is an evitable victim of the futility of creation. I do not feel there is a better way of showing Achebe's unrepentant commitment to this school of thought than a proper textual analysis of his literary works. This is why Achebe himself opines that "... the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how well gifted or intentioned".

It is the story, which no one else can tell, Achebe perfectly tells us in *Things Fall Apart*. Ojinmah (1991:20) quoted Achebe thus:

Anyone who has given any thought to our society must be concerned by the brazen materialism one sees around. I have heard people blame it on Europe. That is utter rubbish. In fact, the Nigerian society I know best – the Ibo society – has always been materialistic.

What Achebe did here is to condemn the manner with which human beings pursue fame and wealth. This is because the African world view, which Unoka epitomize, condemns it in its entirety. Okonkwo, who represents this brazen materialism and fame was brought to naught at the end. According to Higo (1981), in his introduction to *Things Fall Apart*.

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household and beyond it. What nobody knew was that this famous man was leading a life dominated and motivated by fear. Fear of failure and weakness... fear that the reputation and wealth he had built up would pass on to a worthless son, Nwoye... (p.vi).

That has been the lot of all who are shamelessly materialistic. This is why Achebe could say that the "Ibo life had a strong spiritual controlled by gods, ancestors, personnel spirit or chi and magic. The success of the culture was the balance between the two, the material and the spirit (p11).

Rudhyar (1979:147), in *Astrological insights into the spiritual life* posits that

The issue is one of quality rather than quantity. A poor peasant in Asia may have the richest kind of life. A tensely working American businessman who, driven by the worship of material success characteristic of his society, has sacrificed everything to the achievement of wealth and power may find in abundance only emptiness and boredom.

## Conclusion

Rudhyar (1979), the great philosopher and astrologist did opine that "only the empty cup can be filled" (p.148). It is indeed true. This is why Achebe consciously or otherwise, uses *Things Fall Apart* as a means of condemning the materialistic tendency noticeable in his society. Okonkwo and his likes are empty and need to be filled. They need to know that happiness in life is not dependent on the degree if a man's material acquisition. Okonkwo took his life by hanging. His wealth did not give him the desired fulfillment. Unoka, though not wealthy by capitalist rating had the desired peace that he could beam with "blessedness and peace."

The call for this article to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* seems most appropriate. As Buscalia (1982), would say "I am excited... I think you feel with me", for it is an opportunity for us to appreciate the beauty of the African world view as represented by Unoka in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Ogunbumi (2004), in his Guardian article titled *Achebe Rejects Honour* did say:

In a two-page letter to President OLusegun on Friday, Achebe said "Nigeria's condition today under

your watch is however, too dangerous for silence. I must register my disappointment and protest by declining to accept the honour awarded me in the 2004 Honours list.

That's Achebe for you. He rejected an honour done him to protest the crazy nature of the government of his time. He abhors 'he brazen materialism that has eaten deep into the fabric of the society.

In conclusion, therefore, Unoka's rejection of the brazen materialism of his time was in order for he truly represents the African world view. The Igbos and indeed, Africans see and accept the fact that there is great emptiness in abundance for death levels all men.

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