
The Diane Rehm Show: May 21, 1999, 11 A.M. - 12 Noon: A Discussion of Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"

Author(s): R. Victoria Arana

Source: *Callaloo*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Spring, 2002), pp. 597-611

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300589>

Accessed: 25/03/2011 12:26

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=jhup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Callaloo*.

THE DIANE REHM SHOW
May 21, 1999, 11 A.M. – 12 Noon
A Discussion of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Editor's note: We are grateful to Diane Rehm and WAMU 88.5 FM for permission to publish this illuminating transcript of the May 1999 Readers' Review. The Diane Rehm Show is a nationally syndicated radio program with an enormous listenership produced by public radio station WAMU at American University in Washington D.C. and distributed by National Public Radio. Listeners from around the country responded on this day to the guests' discussion of reasons for the novel's durability with generation after generation of readers and to their examination of this novel's function during the past forty years as a vade mecum, or manual of sorts, for living gracefully and meaningfully in a post-colonial, multi-cultural world.

The guests are:

Roger Wilkins, Professor of History at George Mason University

E. Ethelbert Miller, Poet and Director of the African American Resource Center at Howard University

Patti Griffith, Playwright and Novelist and Associate Professorial Lecturer at the George Washington University, Department of English

Valerie Babb, Associate Professor of English at Georgetown University

Several callers who identify themselves variously.

From WAMU in Washington, I am Diane Rehm. *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe, is one of the best-known works by an African author. It's the story of one man, one village, and one culture, and how they changed when Europeans arrived to teach their own forms of religion and government. Joining me on the May Reader's Review panel: Roger Wilkins, professor of history at George Mason University; Patti Griffith, who is on leave from George Washington University to write a screenplay; Ethelbert Miller is a poet and also director of the African American Resource Center at Howard University; and Valerie Babb, professor of English at Georgetown University. We will take your calls throughout the hour, 1-800-433-8850, and good morning to all of you. It's good to see you all on this gorgeous May morning.

DIANE REHM: Patti Griffith, the title of this book comes from a line of a Yeats poem. Why is the title so appropriate?

PATTI GRIFFITH: Because *what happens* basically in this story (and the title describes the story completely) is that, when the white man comes in the form of a missionary into this Igbo village, *things fall apart*. Achebe has a wonderful line in the book. One

of the characters describes the white man as “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” (Chapter Twenty).

DIANE REHM: Ethelbert?

ETHELBERT MILLER: What we see here in Achebe’s book is what happens when *cultures collide*; also, what has been the impact of colonization on African society. We can raise questions in terms of *what is traditional society*, *what is traditional man*, and *what is modern man*; and, finally, I think we can also look at the impact of religion on all of our lives in terms of what happens to a society in which ancestral worship is key, and now all of a sudden another group comes in with a new way of worshiping and looking at things. How does it change our values and our way of existing?

DIANE REHM: Valerie Babb?

VALERIE BABB: Yes, I think “falling apart” refers to an implosion as well—because the old traditions don’t seem to meet needs as well anymore. We also have a younger generation questioning the older generation; so things are also falling apart from within as well as from without.

DIANE REHM: Roger Wilkins?

ROGER WILKINS: Well, let me just read you the lines from the Yeats poem, “The Second Coming.”

Turning and turning in a widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

And that is about what happens near the end of this book.

DIANE REHM: It’s an extraordinary book that was written 40 years ago, so the question becomes *Why* has it maintained its universal popularity? Why is this such a *powerful* book, Roger?

ROGER WILKINS: I think that it speaks very profoundly to the spiritual needs of human beings. And if you read this, as I once did just by chance, right after you have read *The Great Gatsby*, you get a *wonderful kind of a juxtaposition*: modern American life,

in which there is no spirituality (at least in the *Gatsby* book), where people are worshipping money and power . . .

DIANE REHM: . . . and falling apart . . .

ROGER WILKINS: . . . and falling apart . . . and *this book*, where, until there is a clash of cultures (even though I agree that the old culture didn't meet everybody's needs), the fact is they really *had* a culture that worked for most of them, and it worked in a very loving, giving, communal way that is about as far away from the story that is told in *Gatsby* as you can get.

DIANE REHM: Well, Valerie, talk about this Igbo culture, about what it was and how it functioned.

VALERIE BABB: Well, I think what is interesting is the notion of ritual and oral tradition that holds this culture together, and I think that those are two of the things that go by the wayside once this *other* culture imposes its values and its visions here. And, so, that sense of nurturing, that sense of connectivity is lost because it is just rent asunder.

DIANE REHM: What fascinates me is the manner in which Chinua Achebe has presented this culture to us. It's primarily without explanation, but even in the opening scenes, the sharing of the little bit of food that is in the household and the ritual (who cracks the nut, who presents it, the kinds of words that are said before it's consumed).

ETHELBERT MILLER: When we look at this novel, we have to be aware of the structure. It is put together in three parts. So, Part I is where we see Okonkwo in his village, and we get a sense (through Achebe's wonderful writing) of just being immersed in the culture. We take it for what it presents to us. He tells us the rituals, he gives us the proverbs, he gives us the folk tales, and all of that is just given to us; and you can say, okay, I agree with this. I may have some concerns about how women are treated, but this is the culture. In the second part, after Okonkwo has to leave his clan and go where his mother's family lives, you get a sense of what happens when a person has been removed from his village, removed from his values and culture. And then, in the third section, that's when the missionaries are actually there, that's when things are *really* falling apart, but that first section is very important because it's *then* that you see the way life *was*.

PATTI GRIFFITH: He establishes the community, and that is so important, unlike the typical kind of novel that starts out with the conflict. He establishes this community and you get so immersed in it, and you learn to appreciate the richness of it.

VALERIE BABB: . . . and that can only be achieved because he *doesn't* explain it. He just places you in it, and you become a part of it.

DIANE REHM: Roger, talk about the writing of this book, because it is so extraordinary to me, in its simplicity that says so much.

ROGER WILKINS: Well, I think that Ethelbert had it just right. You see, Achebe writes it in a way that really does just place you there. You are not aware that this is . . . being guided. It's presented to you. The writing doesn't intrude *at all* on your consciousness. What you are conscious of is how these people *lived*. I want to go back for a second to your original question about why this book has retained such popularity. (I think it's very important for African Americans when we read it.) It is a very powerful refutation of the idea that there was no civilization in Africa until the white man came to help the people out. In that sense, this book *could have been* a polemic, and it is all *the more powerful* because Achebe just *shows* it [pre-colonial Africa] to you.

DIANE REHM: Has the white culture in this country and indeed around the world read this book with the same fascination and the same interest as the African American culture, Patti?

PATTI GRIFFITH: This book *knocked me out*. When I read this (and I had been intending to read it for a long time—as I was saying earlier, I bought two copies of it), I kept thinking, *This is so important for white people*, for all of us, *to understand*. This is what I have been trying to understand for so long. This book is so important! And it is not just about Nigeria that it talks about, but it's *colonialism* that it talks about, colonialism *everywhere*—and the destruction and the changes of the culture that *that* created.

ETHELBERT MILLER: I think I could probably take this book out to . . . (well, I could name some states). I could probably take this book out to Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, states where there are strong conservative movements, and go into small towns and present this like the book of the week, and I am certain that many people would identify with what it's saying in terms of conservative values: how we have been raising our kids, things of that sort, and also how these "missionaries"—the politicians from Washington, D.C.—are coming in here and telling you, "This is what you should do: A, B and C." And *there* is the problem, because what happens is that people *have* their values, their *culture*, their way of *doing* things, and now all of a sudden someone in the basement of their house is listening to RAP music, or something like that. What is that about? they wonder. And all of a sudden they see things falling apart. Yes, it is very interesting. It's also about the millennium, about what is happening *now*, the *second coming*. And there are many people around the world like that (we might think of them as loonies or the fringe groups) who see their society as falling apart. Okay. Who is threatening them? "Pat Buchanan" or "the Barbarians" or

“Harold Bloom,” or somebody like that, people who have different values, different cultures. This is the fear. For Africans a long time ago, it was the missionaries.

DIANE REHM: Valerie, explain the role of women in this culture?

VALERIE BABB: Well, I don’t know if I can explain the role of women within the novel, because I think it changes. There are passages where we clearly do see women in a subjugated position. There are passages where we clearly do see the *power* of women, the way they are able to navigate through a situation, the way they are able to protect one another from, in some cases, male violence; so, I think, just as he does with every other theme within the novel, Chinua Achebe complicates this notion. I also want to add, too, that one of the reasons that this novel does appeal to a wide readership is because the whole history of imperialism and colonialism is complicated. Not only do we see the English coming in and bringing a kind of destruction of a people, but we also see them coming and bringing things that a newer generation *might* find somewhat attractive, so I don’t think this novel alienates anybody’s simplistically.

DIANE REHM: But, I mean, be specific: one of the characters, the main character, has three wives.

VALERIE BABB: This is interesting! Clearly, from my point of view, that is unacceptable, but one of the things that this novel *forces* us to do, as we were saying earlier, is to have us look at the experiences from *within* the culture, and *that* is very important. I don’t think Achebe allows us to bring our *own judgments*, our *own cultural values* into this novel without questioning *what* we are bringing and *why* we are bringing them.

ETHELBERT MILLER: The *woman* aspect comes out when we have the juxtaposition of Part II against Part I, because Part II is where Okonkwo has to go live with his mother’s side of the family, and there is a wise man who talks about the whole *difference* between *mothers* and *fathers*, *women* and *men*. And that’s *key* because, throughout this whole book, you see male and female *principles*. And we probably question today (because of questions and issues in our own society) whether these are really “male and female principles” or just issues of power.

PATTI GRIFFITH: Unlike a lot of books, this is a book that was written with the relationship of men and women very strongly in mind. You don’t take any of this as being gratuitous in any way at all. Achebe is dealing with the issue all the way through the book.

VALERIE BABB: When I teach courses, such as Women’s Studies, there really is, I think, a tendency among young women to say, “Let’s go into these cultures that are not western European, that are not American, and just eradicate everything that is there and change their values to ours”—and I think we have to be careful of not doing that.

DIANE REHM: Valerie Babb of Georgetown University. She is a professor of English and when we come back after a short break, we'll take your calls. I'm Diane Rehm. Stay with us.

[Break]

PATTI GRIFFITH: It just knocked me out!

DIANE REHM: Well, give me an example.

VALERIE BABB: For me, I think one of the most powerful examples was this question of a father wanting to protect the boy who had become his son, but feeling the [social] pressure to kill him; a son walking through the woods, hearing the cries of the [abandoned] twins, wanting to save them, but feeling the pressure of tradition of *not* to. It's the conflict with tradition that makes the story problematic.

DIANE REHM: But you've got to talk about this "twin" thing and about why the culture moves in that direction, saying: "You've got to kill somebody here."

VALERIE BABB: Well, what holds a culture together, except for meaningless traditions? you might say. But traditions are very, very important, to hold people together, and the tradition here, in this culture, was that twins were bad luck, a bad omen, not just for their family, but for an entire clan, an entire people. So, to protect the people, to protect the clan, you take away this threat to them. It is very difficult for us *to understand* that, given our notions. But what Achebe does so beautifully is to render that culture in a way that *does show* us exactly *why* it is so important that this thing *has* to be done.

DIANE REHM: So, Roger Wilkins, how do the Christian missionaries see the Igbo culture? What do they see?

ROGER WILKINS: Oh, they see just the primitivism. They see people who don't know anything. They come with this just *terrible* combination of (it's lethal anywhere you meet it) ignorance and power, and they bring *total* ignorance. I love to try to think about, or imagine, the Christians saying to these people, "Well, your gods, your ancestors, and your traditions don't work. Now, let me explain *my* religion to you. See, there is this person who lived 2000 years ago, and his mother and father really didn't have sex. His mother was a virgin, and he was a minister or preacher for 33 years. Then they put him up on a cross, and he died, and then he came alive again. You see? Do you understand that?" Well, I think *that* would have been a very *hard* conversation.

DIANE REHM: You bet.

VALERIE BABB: Do you understand it and do you *accept* it?!

DIANE REHM: Yes, exactly. Roger, I know that your 92-year-old mother is listening—in Grand Rapids, Michigan—so what I want to know is how your *own* cultural background fits into your reading of this book and the teachings you had from her.

ROGER WILKINS: It is funny that you should mention Mama at this moment because I think that ancestors and having a sense of them are crucial to the identity and the psychic health of African Americans—a sense of *who* they were, how *strong* they were, what their contributions to the *country* have been. But in many African-American families, there was an enormous amount of shame about slavery, and so a lot of the oral tradition is lost because people . . . Well, I asked my mother once about something that had happened in our family before I was born, and she told me, and I said, “Gosh, why didn’t you tell me that a long time ago?” and she looked at me and she said, “Well, Roger, I guess we didn’t like to clank our chains.” That’s a saying in the Black community: “don’t like to clank our chains”; so, what happens is that, because the individual stories are lost, you study the *history*, you have to take on this *collective ancestry*; and since we can’t, most of us can’t, pinpoint exactly where our ancestors came from in Africa, this book—because a lot of us came from west Africa—really helps enormously in reconstructing that kind of collective history.

ETHELBERT MILLER: I want to add to something Roger is saying. When we look at this novel, we see that the white people come in two groups. They come in the church, and then the church is backed up with the power of the state. Once Okonkwo and his people destroy one of the churches, the state has to back that up. I think *that* is important. The other thing that is important is to look at a community and look at the group that becomes attracted to the new religion that is brought in: what we see are individuals who have been outcast in their own community, physically, or—as in the case of Okonkwo’s son Nwoye—individuals who have been a little more sensitive. What pulls Nwoye into the new religion is the poetry and music of things, which is very interesting.

DIANE REHM: It is fascinating that there is a language barrier between the Christian missionaries and the Igbo people, but it’s the Igbo people who think, who feel, who *know* that the missionaries have it all wrong. And the missionaries, of course, think that the Igbo people are just totally ignorant.

ETHELBERT MILLER: It is good that you mention *the language* because what we see as soon as Okonkwo is introduced, as soon as Achebe mentions his main character . . . we see that the emphasis is upon his *physical* being. Also that he *stutters*. Language is not very important [to him]. He is a person whose life is based on power, strength, and the physical act. Okay, that’s how he gets ideas across within his family, and that is how he wants to be seen in his own clan. This whole ability to talk and stuff is given to some of the other people, but he is not a person where language is going to be a key thing.

VALERIE BABB: And I think that another way that language works interestingly here is that there is a difference between how language exists in the missionary

culture, where it is something that is *one way* only, and how language exists in the Igbo culture, where there is the same importance given to both speaking *and* to listening. So, the missionaries *do* go in with a certain arrogance, they do impose their language, and they cannot conceive of a vision outside of their own. So, *no*, they can *never* get it right, to a certain degree.

DIANE REHM: But is this sort of cross-cultural clash *racial*, Patti?

PATTI GRIFFITH: Achebe doesn't seem to see it that way. He doesn't present it that way, it seems to me. Let me just say that when I was in college, there was a professor who used to say that *missionaries* caused all the wars. I've been thinking about *that* all my life. [*Laughter.*] Here it is, right *here*. Also a book that I just read and that is the other side of this—or not the other side of it, but that fits in with this one very well—is Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. And the language is so important there, too, because there, too, but in the 1950s, an arrogant white minister comes in and thinks that he has an interpreter and thinks he is communicating, and they are all laughing [at him], just exactly what happens in *Things Fall Apart*.

ROGER WILKINS: I am not sure that it *isn't* race. I think Achebe doesn't raise flags and beat drums. He is a very subtle writer; but, in the end, the Commissioner, who is the real bearer of colonialism, after observing this very complicated culture as it falls apart, thinks about the book he is writing and thinks about this experience and thinks that maybe he wouldn't write a whole chapter, but at least a paragraph, about this particular man [Okonkwo]; and he had already chosen the title for the book, "after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*." Those are the last words in Achebe's novel, and it seems to me that the Commissioner's attitude has a lot to do with race [his racism], both the idea that they are primitive and the idea that you can encapsulate something as complex as this culture and its disintegration in one paragraph.

VALERIE BABB: And it makes you wonder how many books like that were written and then called truth, then called history, then placed in libraries in schools and universities, and that skewed vision is perpetuated generation after generation after generation.

DIANE REHM: All right, we've got lots of callers. Go to the phones now, 1-800-433-8850. First to Miami, Florida. Good morning, Olive.

OLIVE: Good morning, Diane. You've done it again. You have the most brilliant people on your show, and I just want to say to all of them that I appreciate them, being there. And to the young person, the young male person, the young man, I wanted to say that I would like to take this book and compare it to the young people's culture. I'd like to take this book into the high school and talk about some of the problems there that are very related to what is going on in the book.

DIANE REHM: Exactly. Going on today throughout this culture.

OLIVE: Yes, but mostly with the young people, and nobody is listening to them. We are very arrogant. Young people have their own language; and right now, I think the one thing that might be disturbing to a lot of people is that young people, young Caucasian males, young white men and women, call themselves with the *n-word* at times when they *really* feel oppressed. The other thing is that their language also is very different from adult language—like, they are always concerned about hypocrisy, so they are talking to each other, saying, Are you perpetrating fraud? Are you fladging? Now, I am sure that the young person knows exactly what I am talking about, and I would really like to say to high school teachers and other people that are dealing with young people that this would be a really great book to bring to them and let them discuss and work it out.

VALERIE BABB: Absolutely. Absolutely.

ROGER WILKINS: All of you are brilliant, but Ethelbert isn't that young. [*All laugh.*]

DIANE REHM: Ethelbert, what do you think of her idea?

ETHELBERT MILLER: Well, you know there is another line from this book that has become very popular, and it has become very popular because the novelist John Wideman begins to mention it quite a bit (quoting Achebe, whom he gives credit to), and that is "all the stories are true." When we look at this book, in terms of how white people are introduced, there are characters who say something like: "We heard these stories about white people." (First, they think they are Albino.) "We heard these stories about white people, and we didn't believe the stories." And then there's a character who says, "Yes, all the stories are true." I think, when we look at the things that are happening in our culture, we don't want to believe certain things. We ask questions like How could this happen at such-and-such school? How could . . . ? Well, *all* those stories are true. If you had been paying attention, if you had been listening, okay, you would have known what was happening right in front of you, and if things were falling apart, there were little hints. But you didn't listen, you didn't listen to the story. You thought they were just rumors and things of that sort, but *all the stories are true*.

PATTI GRIFFITH: That line is one of the stunning moments in this book, but what you are saying also, just let me say, is that this presents, in the early part of this book, this community, and that's one of the things, I think, that is the subject matter that people are talking about now.

DIANE REHM: At 25 before the hour, you are listening to the Diane Rehm Show, and caller Steven, in Alexandria, thanks for joining us. Steven, are you there?

STEVEN: Yes, I was delighted to turn on the radio and find this book as a topic. I wanted to bring up a couple of points that you might address. One is talking about language and the language of the English. In fact, the novel was written in English, and I think that is an interesting irony that depends partly on seeking an audience for publication, but also [Achebe's] using English—which is, in fact, the language that the oppressor was using—is of interest. I also think it's a powerful cultural novel, but I would like you to talk about, if you can, the psychology of the individual in the context of culture. Okonkwo's confidant and friend . . . I guess, I can't remember his name [Obierika]; he advises Okonkwo in ways that suggest compromise sometimes, and there is a whole range of reactions within his culture.

DIANE REHM: Yes. Roger?

ROGER WILKINS: I've wanted to get back to that. We haven't talked about Okonkwo. He is the most . . . , when we are introduced to him, the most powerful man in his tribe, in his clan. He has been a great warrior, he has been a great athlete, he is a very affluent farmer, he is a highly respected man, but he is rigid. He only has one gear, and that is strength—and anger if you cross him. The reason is (you can just see it in our lives) that he hates what his father was. His father was a failure. His father was a wonderful musician, and his father didn't like to be a farmer. He just wanted to be a musician, but he didn't fit in, in that culture. He was a failure, and Okonkwo was afraid that he would be like his father. And all of his problems, really, stem from the rigidity of that fear. And Okonkwo's son is more like his grandfather than he is like Okonkwo, which drives Okonkwo nuts—and drives the kid into Christianity.

VALERIE BABB: And I think this is also where this novel speaks to teen culture. I was just reading the description here. "Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad faced youth" (Chapter 2). That seems to articulate, I think, the values of so much of a young generation . . . at the time.

ROGER WILKINS: That was what Olive was talking about.

ETHELBERT MILLER: The issue of language is very important for many African writers. You know, which language do you write in? One person who has spent a lot of time examining this issue is the famous writer Ngugi [wa Thiong'o] from Kenya, who decided that he would write in Gikuyo (as opposed to English, which might reach more people)—I guess to be true to his culture. But [which language to write in] is the dilemma of many rising writers, in terms of audience, where the publishing outlets are, and how truthful you can be to the experience that you are trying to describe.

DIANE REHM: You know, I interviewed Chinua Achebe (oh, it must have been 15 years ago). It was the first live radio interview he had ever done. What a charmer! What a charmer! But what do we know about him? Tell us about him, Roger.

ROGER WILKINS: I don't know much about him.

PATTI GRIFFITH: Well, he was born in 1930 in Nigeria, and he went to school in Nigeria. (He actually was from the eastern Igbo tribes.) He became an educated man; and, after the colonial period (I know I am skipping a period which some people can fill in), he became very active during the Biafran war for secession (which was fought in Biafra, a district in eastern Nigeria). After that war was over and Biafra was "destroyed," Achebe came to the United States and has been in the United States ever since.

DIANE REHM: All right, short break. More of your calls. We'll be back.

[*Break*]

DIANE REHM: We were talking about the name of Chinua Achebe.

VALERIE BABB: Yes, he was actually baptized as Albert. His parents were Christians, and what is interesting is that he was baptized Albert, named after Queen Victoria's Albert, and has a wonderful line later on in his life where he says if people ever want to know what Queen Victoria and I have anything in common, tell them we have both lost *Albert*, because at that point he had changed his name from Albert to Chinua.

DIANE REHM: And he is, or was, teaching at the University of Iowa. [He teaches at Bard College in New York State.]

ETHELBERT MILLER: Achebe is one of our great writers. Several years ago, his name was up to be president of International PEN. If you talk about a person who should be in line for a Nobel Prize, Achebe's name was mentioned—along with Wole Soyinka, who did receive the award, but Achebe, I think, for some people within the academy, is a little too popular, so if you had a choice between Wole Soyinka as a point guard or Achebe, it goes to Wole Soyinka, but what happens in terms of who is taught, okay, in terms of black studies classes and things of that sort, Chinua Achebe is there.

DIANE REHM: In high school or in college?

ETHELBERT MILLER: In college.

ROGER WILKINS: My daughter read this book in the 9th grade.

PATTI GRIFFITH: Let me say that a later book, *Anthills of the Savannah*, [Diane breaks in here and says that's the one she talked with him about], that was nominated for the Booker [Award] in 1987, must not have been any lazy, popular-book novel.

ROGER WILKINS: And the judges were not lazy that year. [*Laughter*]

DIANE REHM: All right, let's go to Norman, Oklahoma. Hi, Jeremy.

JEREMY: Good morning. I wanted to make a comment about yams. First, I wanted to ask one little question. How accurate, as far as the customs go, would you think this book is, particularly about taking newborn twins into the evil forest?

ETHELBERT MILLER: I think *that* is accurate. When you get into how certain children, for example, in cultures . . . where it's a daughter as opposed to a son [one of the women mentions India, another mentions China], yes, China, this is *real*. When you look at certain rituals that accompany birth and death, what people do, sometimes for people outside, this [form of sacrifice] seems very, very strange, but these are things that are part of the culture.

DIANE REHM: The second question?

JEREMY: You mentioned earlier that some of the customs, some of the bits of the culture weren't good for everybody. I would have to say that the oncoming of Christianity perhaps made things much worse than they were when they were at least stable with the original customs, but one of the things that struck me as a bit of a tragedy was that of the twins . . . because the staple of the Nigerian diet was yams, wasn't it? If you have ever had *fu fu*, you will know that *that* is largely a yam dish; and yams, it turns out, I have learned *greatly* increase your chance of giving birth to twins.

DIANE REHM: I have never heard that one before.

VALERIE BABB: That is beyond *my* field of expertise.

ETHELBERT MILLER: I would have to change my diet.

DIANE REHM: All right. Roger, you've got a paragraph.

ROGER WILKINS: Well, I want to say in response to Jeremy, that surely things were worse after the whites came, but it wasn't Christianity by itself that made things worse. The missionaries were just the first wave of colonial oppression, so what came after the missionaries was oppression and exploitation. Of course, they were worse off.

DIANE REHM: And of course, you can look at it the same way as in this country, with the arrival of Europeans, and the Native American population . . .

ROGER WILKINS: This paragraph just warms my heart. Okonkwo at some point is exiled from his own village because he accidentally killed somebody, he didn't do it on purpose, his gun goes off, so he goes to his mother's village, where he is guided by an old uncle Uchendu, and finally, after he serves his term, Okonkwo is going home, and he has a huge feast for all of his relatives, and the oldest member of this extensive family was Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu. "The kola nut was given to him to break, and he prayed to the ancestors. He asked them for health and children. 'We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.' He prayed especially for Okonkwo and his family. He then broke the kola nut and threw one of the lobes on the ground for the ancestors" (Chapter 19). I just loved that.

DIANE REHM: I love that, too, Roger.

PATTI GRIFFITH: It's worth reading the whole book just to read those kinds of sayings in the oral folk tradition.

VALERIE BABB: I think that is precisely how a lot of marginalized writers satisfy this tension between oral culture and written culture: by finding ways of bringing the oral into the written and making the written sound more oral.

ETHELBERT MILLER: And I think your listeners might want to know why mosquitoes buzz in your ear.

ONE OF THE WOMEN: Yes, right, read the book and you will find out.

DIANE REHM: Let's go to Indianapolis. Good morning, Toyan.

TOYAN: Yes, good morning, Diane. I am from Nigeria, and I know Chinua Achebe in person, and I also know Wole Soyinka, and, having lived in Nigeria . . . and now in the United States, I want to lend my expertise from actually having lived there, because some of the discussion is (not all of it, but some of it is) academic, not the real life in Nigeria.

DIANE REHM: Well, let me hear what you have to say.

TOYAN: Okay. If you take 40 years out of his life now, you will notice that he would be about 20-something around the time he was writing that book. He was a smart man, knowing that his target audience would have to be outside Nigeria because we don't

have that kind of money to buy any novels. When we go to classes, we have to get one book, and we have to make it into millions of photocopies. That's how we learn. About Okonkwo looking at his father as a failure. There is no such thing in Africa. Even if your father has not a dime, the most precious thing to us is our parents. And that's how we succeed: because your mother would sell the last underwear that she has to make sure you go to school.

DIANE REHM: What do you think, Ethelbert?

ETHELBERT MILLER: Well, my mother . . . [*laughs*]. I think his view is interesting: What is the age of the writer when he is writing. Also, it is one person's interpretation of how he views mother-father relationships, or father-son relationships—that's always interesting, but I think, if you look at the passage that Roger recently read, you see the whole thing of respect for the elders, for the ones who are older, so I think the book contains both views.

DIANE REHM: But I think his point is that at the time, you know, books were not as readily available as they are now.

ETHELBERT MILLER: And I think that is a problem that many African writers face in terms of an audience.

DIANE REHM: Of course. Now to Mary in Madison, Wisconsin. Good morning.

MARY: Hi Diane. This is Mary. I called because this book has been very special to me. I lived in Nigeria in 1960 and 1961, where my husband was a teacher in what was called a Federal Emergency Science School that had been put together to prepare Nigerians to take over jobs the British would leave at the end of the year, and we had lots of materials about living in Africa, specifically in Nigeria, prepared in England and also in the United States. And it was all very bewildering until I found this book, *Things Fall Apart*, and that book took me—although I lived in Yoruba territory, in Lagos—so completely *into* the world that I had entered without preparation, that I discovered (and I have used it for the rest of my life) that if you *really* want to know something about the people you are confronting for the first time, *read their fiction*.

DIANE REHM: That's beautiful. Valerie?

VALERIE BABB: Yes, I completely agree, and I also don't know of any writer who *does* write to his or her *most immediate* audience. I think part of the notion of writing is going *outside* of that, somewhat, to reach people beyond who *you* are.

DIANE REHM: But it seems to me that Mary is making a broader point: which is that, you know, if you're entering in any kind of situation that you haven't understood, you really don't get [someone saying to you] "This is a wonderful book!"

ETHELBERT MILLER: This goes back to what we are saying. It's not, do you read the fiction? *All the stories are true*, and so you have to contrast it with things you see in real life.

DIANE REHM: Thanks for calling, Mary. At 7 minutes before the hour, you are listening to the Diane Rehm Show. And to Baltimore, Maryland. Marie Claude, you are on the air.

MARIE: Good morning, Diane. And good morning to everyone. And, Diane, thank you for enriching my life on a daily basis. I wanted to call you because I have lived (and still do) in Africa (on and off) for 22 years, in South Africa; and when you live there, it becomes very obvious, very evident, . . . the destruction by colonialism of a continent, which I think was extremely well balanced, had a social ecology which worked for them. So to me, it's very, very sad to call 'primitive' that which was actually very sophisticated, in terms of human relationships, in terms of tribal governing bodies, and in terms of religion.

DIANE REHM: Now, those are terms that it seems to me the white culture has applied to other cultures because we haven't understood them, so we use the word *primitive*.

ONE OF THE MEN: Because they are primitive, we can do whatever. In the name of civilizing them.

PATTI GRIFFITH: It should also be said that it is not that Achebe believes that that kind of culture could have been maintained. In his later writing, he goes into the great complexities of post-colonialism and how the society has to restore itself—but in a different way. I mean, he is not saying that the old way was the way that it should stay.

VALERIE BABB: One of the things that I would add to what the caller, I think from Baltimore, said about how Africa was despoiled is that, when we think about Africa, we forget that (over a period of two-and-a-half or three centuries) millions of the strongest, fittest, bravest, and smartest people were exported! And talk about ethnic cleansing! It just saps the strength out of all those societies, and it is invisible when you go there now, but *they are gone*, and *all* of their descendants are gone, gone away, not there to be strong for Africa.

DIANE REHM: Roger Wilkins. He is professor of history at George Mason University. Also here in the studio are Patti Griffith, Ethelbert Miller, and Valerie Babb. The book we have been talking about is called *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. I know you will enjoy it. Next month, our reader's review panel is going to discuss "One True Thing," and that's the novel by Anna Quinlan, former *New York Times* columnist. Have a great weekend everybody. Thanks for being here.

Transcribed and edited by R. Victoria Arana