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Interviews

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*Interviewed by Jerome Brooks*

INTERVIEWER

Has your work been translated into Igbo? Is it important for it to be translated into Igbo?

ACHEBE

No, my work has not been translated. There is a problem with the Igbo language. It suffers from a very serious inheritance, which it received at the beginning of this century from the Anglican mission. They sent out a missionary by the name of Dennis. Archdeacon Dennis. He was a scholar. He had this notion that the Igbo language—which had very many different dialects—should somehow manufacture a uniform dialect that would be used in writing to avoid all these different dialects. Because the missionaries were powerful, what they wanted to do they did. This became the law. An earlier translation of the Bible into one of the dialects—an excellent translation, by the way—was pushed aside and a new dialect was invented by Dennis. The way he did it was to invite six people from six different dialectal areas. They sat round a table and they took a sentence from the Bible: In the beginning, God created . . . or whatever. In. What is it in your dialect? And they would take that. The. Yours? Beginning. Yours? And in this way, around the table, they created what is called Standard Igbo, with which the Bible was translated. The result is incredible. I can speak about it because in my family we read the Bible day and night. I know the Bible very well. But the standard version cannot sing. There’s nothing you can do with it to make it sing. It’s heavy. It’s wooden. It doesn’t go anywhere. We’ve had it now for almost a hundred years so it has established a kind of presence; it has created its own momentum among our own scholars. There are grammarians who now sit over the Igbo language in the way that Dennis did in 1906 and dictate it into Standard Igbo. I think this is a terrible tragedy. I think dialects should be left alone. People should write in whatever dialect they feel they want to write. In the fullness of time, these dialects will sort themselves out. They actually were beginning to do so, because Igbo people have always traveled and met among themselves; they have a way of communicating. But this has not been allowed to happen. Instead the scholars are all over the place. I don’t really have any interest in these translations. If someone said, I want to translate your novel into Igbo, I would say, Go ahead. But when I write in the Igbo language, I write my own dialect. I write some poetry in that dialect. Maybe someday I will, myself, translate Things Fall Apart into the Igbo language. Just to show what I mean, though for me, being bilingual, the novel form seems to go with the English language. Poetry and drama seem to go with the Igbo language.