**Chinua Achebe funeral celebrates revered Nigerian author**

Pomp-filled ceremony betrays Things Fall Apart author's dislike of grandeur, but fails to override national outpouring of love

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The red carpet was rolled out, the dignitaries arrived in a whirlwind of helicopters and armed guards, and the obituaries poured in as Nigeria buried the revered writer [Chinua Achebe](http://www.theguardian.com/books/chinuaachebe) on Thursday.

There were dancing troupes, a choir, red-bow-tied trumpeters, keyboard players and people darting around filming on their tablets. At one point, keen not to miss any opportunity, the grieving audience was counselled to buy a documentary on the celebrated author, whose terse prose did perhaps more than any other writer's to project African realities into the minds of westerners.

It was exactly the sort of pomp the literary titan hated, and often ripped apart with the witty, acerbic tip of his pen.

Achebe died on 21 March, aged 82. If he avoided a state funeral, it wasn't for lack of trying from the government. Despite rebuffing national honours twice over his distrust at an oil-fed elite who left the country a "bankrupt and lawless fiefdom", the administration of Goodluck Jonathan tried to hold a state funeral, before capitulating to the three hour-long service in the white-washed St Philips Anglican church in Achebe's hometown of Ogidi.

The writer was no stranger to such irony. His first manuscript was nearly lost to history when publishers in London thought the handwritten pages from Africa were a joke. Fifty years later, Things Fall Apart, an anti-colonialist anthem with a title borrowed from a Yeats poem, is still the biggest-selling novel from [Africa](http://www.theguardian.com/world/africa) of all time. It tells the story of his Igbo tribe's disastrous first experience of European colonialism.

Despite his success, Achebe turned down all offers to teach creative writing courses, saying: "I don't know how it's done."

In 2004, he declined a national award. He refused again a second time, in 2011, saying: "The reasons for rejecting the offer when it was first made have not been addressed, let alone solved."

But this time the author was in no position to resist the state honours being conferred on him. President Jonathan reminded funeral attendees of the author's criticisms of politicians and corruption. After the singing, the long speeches and prayers, this was a moment about which many had been holding their breath.

"For those of you that read The Trouble with Nigeria, Achebe told us that there is nothing wrong with [Nigeria](http://www.theguardian.com/world/nigeria). The problem is the political leadership," he said, waving a copy of the novel.

A toe-curling pause followed and Achebe's family looked on with unreadable expressions.

Jonathan went on to read a passage that highlighted the political corruption and manipulation that had afflicted the African oil giant since independence. "That was in Chinua's last book," the former professor said. "All of us must work hard to change this country."

The audience applauded cautiously.

Ghana's president, John Mahama, seated beside Jonathan, waved as his own name was read out among a long list of political dignitaries.

"During a recent discussion about Achebe, a political contemporary asked me if I felt as though I had somehow become part of the system that we so bitterly decried in our youth," Mahama wrote in a recent tribute. "'No,' I replied without hesitation. 'I entered politics because I wanted to be a part of changing that system.'"

Whether people across Africa agree or whether, once again, Achebe may have slyly exposed a ruling elite is a question for history.

Still, only the most hardened cynic could fail to have been moved by some of the celebrations of Achebe's life. For days, young people have marched in the sweltering heat with banners commemorating the author. As they sang lilting hymns at the funeral, some of the red-gowned choir members put their arms around each other.

Three women held photos of a smiling Achebe as they sang an operatic re-enactment of traditional theatre. At one point, one knelt in front of the gleaming coffin topped with white roses.

Behind all the gloss, what was left for many was a simple celebration of a deeply admired man.

"I have never seen so many people, even white people, dancing to our [Igbo] music. I cannot tell the number of people, but they are more than 10 villages put together," said 52-year-old farmer Ike Dimelu. "The world is in our village today because of Chinua Achebe.

"I may never see a lot of people like this in one place again. I've danced and I still want to dance," he said over the noise of drumming and honking cars.

Like hundreds of others, he wore one of the blue prints emblazoned with a serene-looking Achebe, red cap atop his head, bearing the message: "The literary icon lives on."