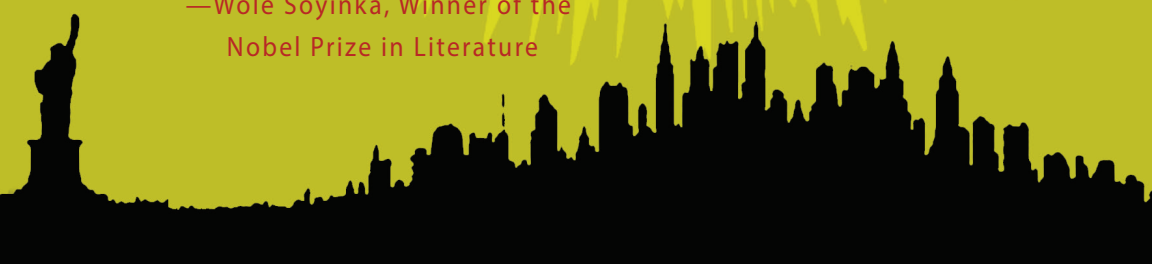
FOREIGN GODS, INC.

"We clearly have a fresh talent at work here. It is quite a while since I sensed creative promise on this level."

—Wole Soyinka, Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature



EARLY PRAISE FOR **FOREIGN GODS, INC.**

"Razor-sharp... Mr. Ndibe invests his story with enough dark comedy to make Ngene an odoriferous presence in his own right, and certainly not the kind of polite exotic rarity that art collectors are used to... In Mr. Ndibe's agile hands, he's both a source of satire and an embodiment of pure terror."

—Janet Maslin, *New York Times*

"This gritty, poetic, at times hallucinatory novel, humorous and then heart-rending and tense, narrates a journey that feels true and lived in the soul. Okey Ndibe takes his readers on a transfixing and revelatory journey from bitter bad faith to hard won, deeply moving and adult redemption. I feel grateful to have read this remarkable novel."

—Francisco Goldman, author of *Say Her Name*

"Like the love child of Chinua Achebe and Victor LaValle."

—Tayari Jones, author of *Silver Sparrow*

"A blistering exploration of the contemporary African immigrant experience in America. Ndibe tackles tough questions: from the shifting notions of home and identity to the nature of greed. In prose which is fresh and often funny, Ndibe draws the reader into the heartbreaking story of Ike Uzondu's attempt to survive in a world which seems determined to crush him."

—Chika Unigwe, author of *On Black Sisters Street*

"*Foreign Gods, Inc.* reads like the narrative of a taxi-driving Faust in modern Nigeria and America. With Moliere-like humorous debunking of religious hypocrisy and rancid materialism, it teems with characters and situations that make you laugh in order not to cry."

—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, author of *Wizard of the Crow*

"A challenging romp of gods and styles."

—John Edgar Wideman, author of *Philidelphia Fire*

"Neither fable nor melodrama, nor what's crudely niched as "world literature," the novel traces the story of a painstakingly-crafted protagonist and his community caught up in the inescapable allure of success defined in Western terms."

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

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FOREIGN GODS, INC.

by Okey Ndibe

At the opening of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* **(Soho Press | January, 2014)** Ikechukwu Uzondu thinks he has hit bottom. It's been over a decade since Ike (pronounced Ee-kay) graduated *magna cum laude* from Amherst College and yet because of his thick Nigerian accent the best job he can manage is driving a yellow cab in New York City.

This longstanding frustration gives way to depression after an emotionally crippling divorce from an American woman. It doesn't take Ike long before he begins losing more and more ground to his dual addictions to alcohol and gambling.

The drinking, the ruinous gambling, and the failure of his career can be boiled down, according to Ike, to the discriminations against his accent and a manipulative ex-wife.

But then again, according to Ike, nothing is his fault.

Fate smiles a toothy grin however, when a friend shows him an article in *New York Magazine* that details an art dealer in New York City that specializes in selling foreign deities—the titular Foreign Gods, Incorporated. It does not take long for Ike to think of the effigy of Ngene, the powerful war god that resides in his home village in Nigeria. Such a powerful god of war would be worth a lot of money to one of Foreign Gods, Inc.'s wealthy clients. After a few desperate and booze-addled nights of plotting Ike resolves to journey back to Nigeria in order to steal Ngene.

This plan, of course, will not be easily achieved and Ike will soon realize that there is always a little farther to fall before you hit bottom.

The result is nothing short of a masterful novel that is at once a taut, literary thriller and an indictment of greed's power to subsume all things, including the sacred. Ikechukwu is a refreshingly rakish protagonist who owes as much to Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov as he does to Achebe's Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart* or Rushdie's Saladin Chamcha from *The Satanic Verses*.

Okey Ndibe has written a novel that wrestles with bad faith and the post-colonial condition in equal measure. Foreign Gods, Inc. is a more than worthy follow-up to *Arrows of Rain*, Ndibe's first novel, which Ernest Emenyonu called, "A blueprint for the second generation of African novelists."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Okey Ndibe was born in Yola, northeastern Nigeria, on May 15, 1960, five months before his original country achieved Independence from British rule on October 1, 1960. He remembers his first few years as a period of enchantment, a time when his mother, a schoolteacher, and his father, a postal clerk, introduced him both to books and the magical world of folktales.

He was seven when Nigeria descended into a horrific civil war, called the Biafran War (after the name chosen by the southeast region that sought to secede). An estimated two million people perished in the 30-month conflict, most of them from starvation.

The war was a defining moment for Mr. Ndibe. Forced to flee Yola with his parents, he relocated to the Igbo-speaking southeast. At the end of the war, he had not only lost the Hausa language that was the predominant language in the town of his birth, but had also come away with a sense of a violent, fractured world.

It was in high school that he developed a strong interest in writing. He served on an editorial team that produced a newsletter, rising to be the editor. By the last year of high school, several major Nigerian newspapers were publishing his editorial pieces.

After high school, he had hoped to travel to the US for further studies. When that plan fell through, he studied business management at Nigerian colleges.

Upon graduation, he worked as a senior editor at two Nigerian weekly magazines.

He relocated to the US in 1988 when the inimitable Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, invited him to be the founding editor of *African Commentary*, a bi-monthly publication that focused on Africa and its Diaspora. The magazine received critical acclaim in the US and elsewhere, named by such publications as *Library Journal*, *USA Today*, *Utne Reader*, and *Detroit Free Press* as one of the best magazines that appear in the US in 1989.

Ndibe was then admitted to the University of Massachusetts where he earned an MFA in fiction—and, later, a PhD as well.

His first novel, *Arrows of Rain*, was published by Heinemann (UK) in their esteemed African Writers Series. *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, which will be published on January 14, 2014, is his second novel. Ndibe also co-edited (with Zimbabwean author Chenjerai Hove) a book titled *Writers, Writing on Conflicts and Wars in Africa*.

A visiting professor of African and African Diaspora literatures at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, Ndibe has also taught at Trinity College, Hartford, CT; Connecticut College in New London, CT, and Simon's Rock College of Bard in Great Barrington, MA. During the 2001-2002 year, he was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Lagos in Nigeria.

From 2000 to 2001, he was a member of the editorial board of the *Hartford Courant* where his essay, "Eyes to the Ground: The Perils of the Black Student," was named the best opinion piece by the Association of Opinion Page Editors. He writes a widely popular, hard-hitting column that focuses on Nigerian politics, syndicated by several Nigerian newspapers and websites. Stung by his unsparing stance against official corruption in the country of his birth, the Nigerian government put his name on a list of "enemies of the state." In January 2011, Nigeria's security agents arrested him and detained him when he arrived from the US, and confiscated his Nigerian and American passports. The episode was covered by media around the world, and triggered protests from Nigerian and foreign writers as well as organizations, among them Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka and the New York-based Committee for the Protection of Journalists.

In 2010, the Nigerian Peoples Parliament (a political pressure group of Nigerians resident abroad) elected him their speaker.

GUERNICA / a magazine of art & politics

My Biafran Eyes

by Okey Ndibe

August 12, 2007

The author, on the ground, at older brother John's 2nd birthday party in Yola (1960). John is in jacket right of the cake.

My first glimpse into the horror and beauty that lurk uneasily in the human heart came in the late 1960s courtesy of the Biafran War. Biafra was the name assumed by the seceding southern section of Nigeria. The war was preceded—in some ways precipitated—by the massacre of southeastern (mostly Christian) Igbo living in the predominantly northern parts of Nigeria.

Thinking back, I am amazed that war's terrifying images have since taken on a somewhat muted quality. It requires sustained effort to recall the dread, the pangs of hunger, the crackle of gunfire that once made my heart pound. It all now seems an unthreatening fog.

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As Nigeria hurtled towards war, my parents faced a difficult decision: to flee, or stay put. We lived in Yola, a sleepy, dusty town whose streets teemed with Muslims in flowing white babariga gowns. My father was then a postal clerk; my mother a teacher. In the end, my father insisted that Mother take us, their four children, and escape to safety in Amawbia, my father's natal town. Mother pleaded with him to come away as well, but he would not budge. He was a federal civil servant, and the federal government had ordered all its employees to remain at their posts.

My mother didn't cope well in Amawbia. In the absence of my father, she was a wispy and wilted figure. She despaired of ever seeing her husband alive again. Our relatives made gallant efforts to shield her, but news about the indiscriminate killings in the north still filtered to her. She lost her appetite. Day and night, she lay in bed in a kind of listless, paralyzing grief. She was given to bouts of impulsive, silent weeping.

Then one blazing afternoon, unheralded, my father materialized in Amawbia, stole back into our lives as if from the land of death itself.

"Eliza o! Eliza o!" a relative sang. "Get up! Your husband is back!"

At first, my mother feared that the returnee was some ghost come to mock her anguish. But, raising her head, she glimpsed a man who—for all the unaccustomed gauntness of his physique—was unquestionably the man she'd married. With a swiftness and energy that belied her enervation, she bolted up and dashed for him.

We would learn that my father's decision to stay in Yola nearly cost him his life. He was at work when one day a mob arrived. Armed with cudgels, machetes and guns, they sang songs that curdled the blood. My father and his colleagues—many of them Igbo Christians—shut themselves inside the office. Huddled in a corner, they shook uncontrollably, reduced to frenzied prayers. One determined push and their assailants would have breached the barricades, poached and minced them, and made a bonfire of their bodies.

The Lamido of Adamawa, the area's Muslim leader, arrived at the spot just in the nick. A man uninfected by the malignant thirst for blood, he vowed that no innocent person would be dealt death on his watch. He scolded the mob and shooed them away. Then he guided my father and his cowering colleagues into waiting vehicles and spirited them to the safety of his palace. In a couple of weeks, the wave of killings cooled off and the Lamido secured my father and the other quarry on the last ship to leave for the southeast.

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Air raids became a terrifying staple of our lives. Nigerian military jets stole into our air space, then strafed with abandon. They flew low and at a furious speed. The ramp of their engines shook buildings and made the very earth quake.

"Cover! Everybody take cover!" the adults shouted and we'd scurry towards a huddle of banana trees or the nearest brush and lay face down.

Sometimes the jets dumped their deadly explosives on markets as surprised buyers and sellers dashed higgledy-piggledy. Sometimes the bombs detonated in houses. Sometimes it was cars trapped in traffic that were sprayed. In the aftermath, the cars became mangled metal, singed beyond recognition, the people in them charred to a horrid blackness. From our hiding spots, frozen with fright, we watched as the bombs tumbled from the sky, hideous metallic eggs shat by
mammoth mindless birds.

One day, my siblings and I were out fetching firewood when an air strike began. We threw down our bundles of wood and cowered on the ground, gaping up. The jets tipped in the direction of our home and released a load. The awful boom of explosives deafened us. My stomach heaved; I was certain that our home had been hit. I pictured my parents in the rumble of smashed concrete and steel. We lay still until the staccato gunfire of Biafran soldiers startled the air, a futile gesture to repel the jets. Then we walked home in a daze, my legs rubbery, and found that the bombs had missed our home, but only narrowly. They had detonated at a nearby school.

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At each temporary place of refuge, my parents tried to secure a small farmland. They sowed yam and cocoyam and also grew a variety of vegetables. We, the children, scrounged around for anything that was edible, relishing foods that in less stressful times would have made us retch.

One of my older cousins was good at making catapults, which we used to hunt lizards. We roasted them over fires of wood and dried brush and savored their soft meat. My cousin also set traps for rats. When his traps caught a squirrel or a rabbit, we felt providentially favored. Occasionally he would kill a tiny bird or two, and we would all stake out a claim on a piece of its meat.

While my family was constantly beset by hunger, we knew many others who had it worse. Biafra teemed with malnourished kids afflicted with kwashiorkor that gave them the forlorn air of the walking dead. Their hair was thin and discolored, heads
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big, eyes sunken, necks thin and scrawny, their skin wrinkly and sallow, stomachs distended, legs spindly. Like other Biafrans, we depended on food and medicines donated by such international agencies as Catholic Relief and the Red Cross. Sometimes I accompanied my parents on trips to relief centers. The food queues, which snaked for what seemed like miles—a crush of men, women, children—offered less food than frustration as there was never enough to go round. One day, I saw a man crumble to the ground. Other men surrounded his limp body. As they removed him, my parents blocked my sight, an effete attempt to shield me from a tragedy I had already fully witnessed.

Some unscrupulous officers of the beleaguered Biafra diverted food to their homes. Bags of rice, beans and other foods, marked with a donor agency's insignia, were not uncommon in markets. The betrayal pained my father. He railed by signing and distributing a petition against the Biafran officials who hoarded relief food or sold it for profit.

With my elder brother, John Idibe (left) circa 1962.

The petition drew the ire of the censured officials; the signatories were categorized as saboteurs. To be tagged a saboteur in Biafra was to be branded with a capital crime. A roundup was ordered. One afternoon, some grave-looking men arrived at our home. They snooped all over the house. They turned things over. They pulled

out papers and pored over them, brows crinkled half in consternation, half in concentration. As they ransacked the house, they kept my father closely in view. Then they took him away.

Father was detained for several weeks. I don't remember that our mother ever explained his absence. It was as if my father had died. And yet, since his disappearance was unspoken, it was as if he hadn't. Then one day, as quietly as he had exited, my father returned. For the first—and I believe last—time, I saw my father with a hirsute face. A man of steady habits, he shaved everyday of his adult life. His beard both fascinated and frightened me. It was as if my real father had been taken away and a different man had returned to us.

This image of my father so haunted me that, for many years afterwards, I flirted with the idea that I had dreamed it. It was only ten years ago, shortly after my father's death, that I broached the subject with my mother. Yes, she confirmed, my father had been arrested during the war. And, yes, he'd come back wearing an unaccustomed beard.

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Father owned a small transistor radio. It became the link between our war-torn space and the rest of the world. Every morning, as he shaved, my father tuned the radio to the British Broadcasting Corporation, which gave a more or less objective account of Biafra's dwindling fortunes. It reported Biafra's reverses, lost strongholds and captured soldiers as well as interviews with gloating Nigerian officials. Sometimes a Biafran official came on to refute accounts of lost ground and vow the Biafrans' resolve to fight to the finish.

Feigning obliviousness, I always planted myself within earshot, then monitored my father's face, hungry to gauge his response, the key to decoding the news. But his countenance remained inscrutable. Because he monitored the BBC while shaving, it was impossible to tell whether winces or tightening were from the scrape of a blade or the turn of the war.

At the end of the BBC broadcasts, my father twisted the knob to Radio Biafra, and then his emotions came on full display. Between interludes of martial music and heady war songs, the official mouthpiece gave exaggerated reports of the exploits of Biafran forces. They spoke about enemy soldiers "flushed out" or "wiped out" by gallant Biafran troops, of Nigerian soldiers surrendering. When an African country granted diplomatic recognition to Biafra, the development was described in superlative terms, sold as the beginning of a welter of such recognitions from powerful
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nations around the globe. “Yes! Yes!” my father would exclaim, buoyed by the diet of propaganda. How he must have detested it when the BBC disabused him, painted a patina of grey over Radio Biafra’s glossy canvas.

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In January 1970, after enduring the 30-month siege, which claimed close to two million lives on both sides, Biafra buckled. We had emerged as part of the lucky, the undead. But though the war was over, I could intuit from my parents’ mien that the future was forbidden. It looked every bit as uncertain and ghastly as the past.

Our last refugee camp abutted a makeshift barrack for the victorious Nigerian army. Once each day, Nigerian soldiers distributed relief material—used clothes and blankets, tinned food, powdery milk, flour, oats, beans, rice, such like. There was never enough food or clothing to go around, which meant that brawn and grit decided who got food and who starved. Knuckles and elbows were thrown. Children, the elderly, the feeble did not fare well in the food scuffles. My father was the sole member of our family who stood a chance. On good days, he squeaked out a few supplies; on bad days, he returned empty handed. On foodless nights, we found it impossible to work up enthusiasm about the cessation of war. Then, the cry of “Happy survival!” with which refugees greeted one another sounded hollow, a cruel joke.

My father, Christopher Chidebe Ndibe, sitting 2nd from right, and my mother, Elizabeth Ndibe, 5th from right with ohter Igbo civil servants in Yola—circa 1960

Despite the hazards, we, the children, daily thronged the food lines. We operated
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around the edges hoping that our doleful expressions would invite pity. Too young to grasp the bleakness, we did not know that pity, like sympathy, was a scarce commodity when people were famished.

One day I ventured to the food queue and stood a safe distance away watching the mayhem, silently praying that somebody might stir with pity and invite me to sneak into the front. As I daydreamed, a woman beckoned to me. I shyly went to her. She was beautiful and her face held a wide, warm smile.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Okey," I volunteered, averting my eyes.

"Look at me," she said gently. I looked up, shivering. "I like your eyes." She paused, and I looked away again. "Will you be my husband?"

Almost ten at the time, I was aware of the woman's beauty, and also of a vague stirring inside me. Seized by a mixture of flattery, shame and shyness, I used bare toes to scratch patterns on the ground.

"Do you want some food?" she asked.

I answered with the sheerest of nods.

"Wait here."

She went off. My heart pounded as I awaited her return, at once expectant and afraid. Back in a few minutes, she handed me a plastic bag filled with beans and a few canned tomatoes. I wanted to say my thanks, but my voice was choked. "Here," she said. "Open your hand." She dropped ten shillings onto my palm.

I ran to our tent, flush with exhilaration. As I handed the food and coin to my astonished parents, I breathlessly told them about my strange benefactor, though I never said a word about her comments on my eyes or her playful marriage proposal. The woman had given us enough food to last for two or three days. The ten shillings was the first post-war Nigerian coin my family owned. In a way, we'd taken a step towards becoming once again "Nigerian." She'd also made me aware that my eyes were beautiful, despite their having seen so much ugliness.

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Each day, streams of men set out and trekked many miles to their hometowns. They were reconnoiterers, eager to assess the state of life to which they and their families would eventually return. They returned with blistered feet and harrowing stories.

Amawbia was less than 40 miles away. By bus, the trip was easy, but there were few buses and my parents couldn't afford the fare anyway. One day a man who'd traveled there came to our tent to share what he'd seen. His was a narrative of woes, except in one detail: My parents' home, the man reported, was intact. He believed that an officer of the Nigerian army had used my parents' home as his private lodgings. My parents' joy was checked only by their informer's account of his own misfortunes. He'd found his own home destroyed. Eavesdropping on his report, I imagined our home as a mythical island of order and wholesomeness ringed by overgrown copse and shattered houses.

The next day my father trekked home. He wanted to confirm what he'd heard and to arrange for our return. But when he got back, my mother let out a shriek then shook her head in quiet sobs. My father arrived in Amawbia to a shocking sight. Our house had been razed; the fire still smoldered, a testament to its recentness. As my father stood and gazed in stupefaction, the truth dawned on him: Some envious returnee, no doubt intent on equalizing misery, had torched it. War had brought out the worst in someone.

My parents had absorbed the shock of other losses. There was the death of a beloved grandaunt to sickness and of a distant cousin to gunshot in the battlefield. There was the impairment of another cousin who lost a hand. There was the loss of irreplaceable photographs, among them the images of my grandparents and of my father as a soldier in Burma during WWII. There was the loss of documents, including copies of my father's letters (a man of compulsive fastidiousness, my father had a life-long habit of keeping copies of every letter he wrote). But this loss of our home cut to the quick because it was inflicted not by the detested Nigerian soldier but by one of our own. By somebody who would remain anonymous but who might come around later to exchange pleasantries with us, even to bemoan with us the scars left by war.

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At war's end, the Nigerian government offered 20 pounds to each Biafran adult. We used part of the sum to pay the fare for our trip home. I was shaken at the sight of our house: The concrete walls stood sturdily, covered with soot, but the collapsed roof left a gaping hole. Blackened zinc lay all about the floor. We squatted for a few
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days at the makeshift abode of my father's cousins. Helped by several relatives, my father nailed back some of the zinc over half of the roof. Then we moved in. The roof leaked whenever it rained. At night, rain fell on our mats, compelling us to move from one spot to another. In the day, shafts of sunlight pierced through the holes. But it was in that disheveled home that we began to piece our lives together again. We began to put behind us the terrors we had just emerged from. We started learning what it means to repair an inhuman wound, what it takes to go from here to there.

In time, my father was absorbed back into the postal service. My mother returned to teaching. We went back to school. The school building had taken a direct hit, so classes were kept in the open air. Even so, our desire to learn remained strong. At the teacher's prompting, we rent the air, shouted the alphabet and yelled multiplication tables.

Interview with *Foreign Gods, Inc.* author Okey Ndibe

by Paul Oliver

Paul Oliver: When we meet Ike Uzondu (the protagonist of *Foreign Gods, Inc.*) he has seemingly hit rock bottom. He's lost any semblance of control over his addiction to alcohol and gambling. He is mired in a dangerous combination of shame and indignation. It's enough to bring to mind the famous opening lines of Dostoevksy's *Notes from Underground*: "I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." What made you want to write such a morally reparable character?

Okey Ndibe: The United States is a truly extraordinary address, a place where—pardon the cliché—dreams are constantly inspired, born and nurtured. But it can also be an unforgiving place, a location where dreams die, where forces, physical as well as ineffable, sometimes appear to be arrayed against the striving, but luckless, guy. Despite the cosmopolitan accent of life in the US, many immigrants also know that the phrase "You have an accent" can suddenly, lastingly take on a certain defining gravity. In many American cities—and this is true, by the way, of the UK as well as much of Europe—you're bound to run into many immigrant graduates, even PhDs, who are cab drivers, and not always by choice. A sizeable number of these are from Africa, but there are others from Asia, Eastern Europe, South America, etc. In some ways, some of them inhabit the Underground; they have that lacerating sense of being cast, if not quite in a dungeon, then aside. The psychological freight of being caught in that predicament struck me with its rich, complex dramatic potential. My novel attempts to look unflinchingly at some of the monsters that can be birthed when one such "ground-down" man dares—through contemplation of an act of treachery—to become a master of his own fate. At the end of the day, my protagonist, Ike Uzondu, is engaged in a drama of self-reclamation.

PO: At Book Expo last summer you gave me a lesson on how to pronounce Ike's name—citing how tricky it can be. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it goes something like this: Ike (Eekeh) is short for Ikechukwu, which in Igbo means "The Power of God." Though if you were to make the mistake of referring to him as EE-kay you'd be saying an entirely different word, *ike* which is the Igbo word for buttocks. I probably have that wrong. But it is kind of fitting for this particular character to be stuck somewhat between those two things. Was that name choice intentional?

ON: You're exactly right. Unless you've spent time getting their pronunciation right, Igbo names as well as words can play tricks on you. For example: the letters a-k-w-a form at least four meanings, each meaning determined by a slight inflection in pronouncement. The same spelling, but the word can mean an egg, a bed, clothing, or tears. So, yes, part of Ike's sense of depersonalization comes from having his passengers frequently, insouciantly mangle his name. They either call him "Buttocks" or impose the Americanized Ike—as in Eisenhower. I wanted Ikechukwu—Ike, for short—to have that particular frustration and unease.

PO: There are a few strikingly different concepts of personal wealth in this book. Ike's character alone seems to straddle several views. On one hand he feels guilty for never having sent money back to his family in Nigeria and on the other he is willing to sacrifice his relationship with them for a western concept of wealth. Can you speak to the various ways greed and objectification play out in *Foreign Gods, Inc.*?

ON: This question strikes at the heart of Ike's psychological dilemma. It ought to be noted, first, that the tools of social media have homogenized—or, at any rate, rendered globally familiar—certain aspects and trends of contemporary experience. Twenty-five years ago, most Nigerians had little use for the game of basketball; today, many have become hooked, in part because of the sheer scandal—in their eyes—of paying millions of dollars to tall men just for throwing a ball through a basket. As it were, the logic of cash—as much as the dazzle of the dunk and the wizardry of the cross-over dribble—has made basketball compelling. As a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Lagos, I noticed that my students, who had never even visited a neighboring African country, much less New York City, Nashville, or Atlanta, could do unheard of things with American slang. But Ike is not searching to be an over-"social mediated" man. In fact, even though the novel is set about 2005, he's far from taken with cell phones, which he sees, dimly and primarily, in terms of their intrusive capacity. Yet, like many an immigrant, he's compelled to simultaneously play by the rules of two cultural games. He's buffeted by personal crises, some of them of his own making, but he can't help responding to his mother's claims on his financial support. He's fond of his uncle, the chief priest of Ngene, his community's war deity. Even so, he somehow subordinates a great love for his uncle to an all-consuming craving for riches. Ultimately, it's this desire to rig himself into "American-made" material success that both propels and blinds him.

PO: Racism and the difficulties that immigrants face in the US are major themes in your novel. Race in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is particularly multifaceted. Beyond black and white, questions of race also manifest amidst the peoples of the African diaspora that populate this story, whether African, African American, or Caribbean. Ike's

African American wife is just as condescending about his Nigerian accent as the white characters he encounters. Do you think Ike has a unique vantage on race in the US?

ON: It can be awfully difficult to talk about race and racism in the US. The terms are often slippery, even though they are also America's inescapable, default subjects, rooted in the peculiar history of this republic. Yet there's so much that the words obscure, render oblique. The ubiquity of the two words paradoxically enforces certain taboos, closes off exploration of some of the unexpected ways in which racial conflict plays out. For example, there are situations where your "strange" or "foreign" accent can get you quick passage into bedrooms, whilst blocking your access to the boardroom. James Baldwin knew, as do John Edgar Wideman and many others, that race is often deftly manipulated, used to keep Africans and African Americans apart, separately garrisoned, trapped in a state of mutual distrust. Ike is enmeshed in all this. He's intellectually sophisticated enough to grasp the ironies of his plight, even to understand the nature of the foes he's up against, and yet he remains mostly powerless to do much about his dire condition. His experience runs the gamut; he's possessed of a wide-angled perspective, and that, I hope, deepens the emotional gravity of the choices he makes, the impact of what happens to him. Through him, the attentive reader will be able to glimpse the varied ways in which the currencies of race and racism are furnished, deployed, deflected, cashed in or cashed out. *Foreign Gods, Inc.* seeks to bring some of the sly "race" moments out into the open of the fictive canvas. It tries to speak some of the taboos of race and racism.

PO: "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" is Salman Rushdie's now famous essay (and pun) describing the entry of post-colonial writers into the Western Canon. There seems to be a trend lately among writers from post-colonial states to turn an eye inward to their own political cultures, writing less out of external critique. Is the "empire" still writing back? Or have the politics of the novel left the paternalism of the post-colonial orbit?

ON: Rushdie's essay is a provocative description. Achebe called it "four memorable words: The Empire Writes Back." Rushdie's formulation sought to ground that phenomenon—which has since accumulated a rather long history—of the presumably "mute" (or muted) postcolonial subjects insisting on having their say, talking back, talking back, bringing their voices into the equation of narratives. In his slim but richly rewarding book of essays, *Home and Exile*, Chinua Achebe used two fascinating metaphors to zero in on this Rushdian idea. One metaphor is adopted from fable of the natural world, and involves the Lion's guaranteed disadvantage in a world where the Hunter monopolizes the narrative of the hunt. As long as the Lion doesn't

take a turn at telling the story, as long as the Lion's account is expunged, the Hunter will always emerge, inevitably and predictably, as the sole hero. Achebe's other metaphor is taken from the modern world, specifically the British post office. It is the location where accounts are mailed and received, what I'd call a veritable Narrative Exchange. A man of great wisdom and prudence, Achebe prescribed "the balance of stories among the world's peoples." We're far from achieving that balance, but we must admit that each day brings its small harvest of progress. I see glimpses of hope—even instances of wonderful signs. Writers, storytellers from all over the world are writing, "speaking," in a wide variety of accents. Thanks to the Internet and literary festivals, they're communing in great fiestas to tell their stories, to listen to others' stories. I'm willing to hazard that readers, these days, are on the whole more adventurous, more curious about the imaginative harvests of other cultures, more keen to tune in to stories forged in areas that were once deemed "mute" or unintelligible. And that rising quotient of curiosity is a magnificent development.

PO: I think that in the United States we tend to think of religious conflict as exclusively the realm of the world's major religions, which is exactly why the conflict in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is interesting. This battle between Christianity and the followers of Ngene drives an important storyline in your novel. How much do deities like Ngene play a role in modern Nigerian life? And are they in conflict with religions like Christianity and Islam?

ON: The grand narrative of the (often) bloody feud between Islam and Christianity often obscures the deeper embattlement of those who, despite all odds, still stick to traditional religious practices. In Nigeria, Christian pastors sometimes lead crusades to destroy or desecrate animist shrines. There was a former military governor, a self-professed born-again Christian, who came by the revelation that all the problems in the state he administered were caused by satanic forces. He declared war on places of traditional worship, led mini-crusades of fervent Christian warriors to lay waste to many a shrine. Traditional religious practices are not always so singularly besieged, but the antipathy toward them runs deep. Yet vestiges of traditional religion remain, stubborn and resilient. Their staying power lies, I suspect, in the fact that many a Christian or Muslim has a syncretist outlook, not beyond consulting a traditional diviner when life turns suddenly, mysteriously miserable.

PO: "A heist story like no other" is how *Booklist* described the core plot of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* This novel really does succeed in creating tension of the kind usually found in genre fiction. Weighty themes concerning race, identity, greed, and religion are apparent from the outset and clearly the reason you wrote the novel. But how much did you worry about writing a page-turner as well?

ON: Did I set out to write a page-turner? To keep the reader invested, captivated, viscerally moved by the turns and twists of the story—those goals shape my narrative choices. Inevitably, I hope, it all boils down to something like a page-turner. You can't interest someone in polemics if they have little care about what happens next.

PO: On January 9, 2011, Nigerian security agents arrested you on your arrival at the international airport in Lagos. You were subsequently detained, and had your Nigerian and US passports confiscated. Did you see the arrest coming? How did you react to what followed?

ON: Did I see the arrest coming? Yes and no. In late 2009, I had received two anonymous calls warning me not to show up in Nigeria. The callers disclosed that the Nigerian government, then under Umaru Yar'Adua, had put my name on a list of "enemies of the state" and ordered my arrest if I showed up at any Nigerian port of entry. It was all so bizarre, so sordidly Orwellian. My weekly column for a Nigerian newspaper had apparently riled the Yar'Adua regime. However, Mr. Yar'Adua died in May 2010, and Goodluck Jonathan took over Nigeria's presidency. On Mr. Jonathan's first official visit to the US, two of his aides rang to invite me to meet with him in Washington, DC. I declined the invitation, but raised the issue of my status as "an enemy of the state." The two officials assured me that Mr. Jonathan had ordered that the "enemy list" be erased. So, yes, I knew that I had been branded an enemy, but I was under the impression that the whole list had been tossed. So I was somewhat surprised when an immigration officer at Murtala Muhammed Airport told me he was going to hold on to my passport, and that I should grab my luggage and return to him because the Nigerian security agency at the airport wanted me. I used the occasion of picking up luggage to call friends and colleagues in the US. Within a few minutes, news of my detention was on the Internet. Wole Soyinka (winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize for literature) issued a statement condemning my arrest. From there, it became a whirlwind. The news was widely reported by newspapers around the world. Writers, writers' groups, newspaper editorials, columnists, academics, and numerous Nigerian organizations voiced their outrage. Three days later, a top security official returned my passports, assured me that my name had been erased from any list of "enemies," and blamed it all on the deceased Yar'Adua. Later, Nigeria's top security official told the editor of the newspaper that carries my column to ask me to write a petition him officially emanding the removal of my name from the list. I refused; since I had not, after all, asked anybody to put my name in the roster of enemies of the state, it was not my place to urge deletion. I have since been stopped and briefly detained five times, most recently in January 2012 when I was held overnight—for more than ten hours—at the same Lagos airport. My reaction is a cross between amazement and indignation. Some of Nigeria's worst criminal

elements, including governors and ministers who looted millions of dollars of public funds, go in and out of Nigeria with no impediment whatsoever. My only crime is that, week after week, I call out the corrupt in my column, and expose the scam that passes itself off as governance in Nigeria—and occasionally elsewhere. I can't see much of a future for a country that makes a point of shielding, even glorifying, scoundrels, but hounding innocents.

PO: It seems to me that African literature is enjoying a bit of a renaissance at the moment. Writers like NoViolet Bulawayo, Teju Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Mukoma Ngugi have all enjoyed success with their recent books. Not to mention the likes of Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o . . . Do you have any theories about why African literature is popular at the moment?

ON: I suspect that several factors built up, slowly, inexorably into this current renaissance in African writing. But I'd argue that the wide interest in works by African authors isn't altogether a new phenomenon. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has sold more than 10 million copies in English, and been translated into some 60 languages. We're all indebted to him in a significant way, because his commanding presence in the canon of world literature went a long way in making what we call African literature visible, familiar, and desirable. Then we must not forget Wole Soyinka's Nobel in 1986, with the traction and gravitas that come with the prize. Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood* was a *New York Times* bestseller. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose roundedness and eminence as a literary artist make him one of my favorite writers of all time, has apparently—deservedly—emerged as a serious candidate for the Nobel. Then there's the Caine Prize for African writing, which awards some $15,000 to a short story. The prize has its annual buzz index. It's created a certain ferment. So there's all of that. But there's also the factor of serendipity, the fact that a few US and British publishers gambled on works by younger African writers—and discovered that there was a huge, excited and attentive audience out there. Ben Okri's Booker for *The Famished Road* provided a huge tonic for African writers. Chimamanda Adichie's radiance and stupendous talent command attention. Teju Cole's *Open City* dazzles with the sheer luminousness of its style, its effortless intelligence. There are many others–Zakes Mda, Nuruddin Farah, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chika Unigwe, Emmanuel Dongala, and Helon Habila among them–whose extraordinary writings continue to stamp our literature lon the world's consciousness. One can't minimize, much less discount, the Internet's role: how it has unbound once-repressed voices, how it's catalyzing the bursting forth of some magnificent writing, a variety of styles and accents of storytelling. For all the wonderful things happening around African writing, I'm often deeply sad that the "metropolitan" publishers in New York, London,

Brussels, and Paris are mostly responsible for husbanding much of African writing, introducing it to the world—and, in many cases, to Africa. I'd like to see a robust publishing industry take root throughout Africa to match the continent's energetic creative talent.

PO: The late Chinua Achebe played a significant role in your life and career. From giving you your first big interview for the *Nigerian Sun* to co-founding *Africa Commentary* with you, Achebe was a huge influence for you. It almost didn't happen, though, thanks to a tape recorder malfunction, and you very easily could have got off to a bad start with the great writer. How did that go down?

ON: My first interview with Achebe, in 1983, was also my very first significant assignment as a rookie correspondent for the now long defunct *African Concord*, a weekly magazine. That first interview set a mood for my relationship with the author—he saved my career.

I met Achebe quite by accident. I was visiting a girl from Ogidi, Achebe's hometown. I raved on and on about Achebe and his best known work, *Things Fall Apart*. The girl listened for a while, a bemused smile creasing her cheeks. Then she said: "Achebe is my uncle. His house is a short walk away. He happens to be home this weekend. Do you want to visit him?"

Did I ever!

The Achebe I met in his country home personified grace. I still remember that he served us cookies and chilled Coke. He regarded me with penetrating eyes as I gushed about his novels, his short stories, his essays, even reciting favorite lines. I told him I had just got a job with the *Concord* magazine and would be honored to interview him. To my surprise, he gave me his telephone number at Nsukka, the university town where he lived and ran the Institute of African Studies.

A week later I flew to Lagos, reported for work, and told the magazine's editor that I had Achebe's telephone number—and a standing commitment that he would give me an interview. Elated, the editor dispatched me on the assignment. It was my first real task as a correspondent. Achebe and I retreated to his book-lined office at the institute, its air flavored with the scent of books stretching and heaving. Five minutes into the interview I paused and rewound the tape. The recording sounded fine and our interview continued for another two hours. Afterwards Achebe told me it was one of the most exhaustive interviews he'd ever done. I took leave of him and,

heady with excitement, took a cab to the local bus stop where I paid the fare for abus headed for Enugu, the state capital, where I had booked a hotel.

That evening several of my friends gathered in my hotel room. They asked questions about Achebe, and then said they wanted to hear his voice. I fetched the tape recorder, happy to oblige them. Then I pressed the play button. My friends and I waited—not a word! I put in two other tapes, the same futility. How was I going to explain this mishap to my editor who had scheduled the interview as a forthcoming cover?

I phoned Achebe's home in panic. I begged that he let me return the next day for a short retake. "Thirty minutes—even twenty —would do," I pleaded. I half-expected him to scold me for lack of professional diligence and then hang up, leaving me to my distress. Instead he calmly explained that he had commitments the next day. If I could return the day after, he'd be delighted to grant me another interview. And he gave me permission to make the next session as elaborate as the first.

Two days later we were back in his office for my second chance. This time I paused every few minutes to check on the equipment. I stretched the interview to an hour and a half before guilt—mixed with gratitude—compelled me to stop. It was not as exhaustive as the first outing, nor did it have the spontaneity of our first interview. But it gave me—and the readers of the magazine—a prized harvest. My friends got a chance to savor Achebe's voice, with its mix of faint lisps and accentuated locutions.

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"Foreign Gods, Inc. reads like the narrative of a taxi-driving Faust in modern Nigeria and America. With Moliere-like humorous debunking of religious hypocrisy and rancid materialism, it teems with characters and situations that make you laugh in order not to cry."
—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o,
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"Foreign Gods, Inc. is a blistering exploration of the contemporary African immigrant experience in America. Ndibe tackles tough questions: from the shifting notions of home and identity to the nature of greed. In prose which is fresh and often funny, Ndibe draws the reader into the heartbreaking story of Ike Uzondu's attempt to survive in a world which seems determined to crush him."
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