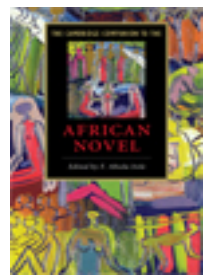

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3

DAN IZEVBAYE

Chinua Achebe and the African novel

People create stories create people; *or rather*, stories create people create stories.
Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe achieved canonization with his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and he has retained his top ranking in the African literary canon. Given the notoriously unstable character of literary reputations, his reputation has retained a remarkably steady place in the canon through a whole generation, covering the last half of the twentieth century. But while objective proofs of his reputation are easy to produce – witness Lindfors's quantitative audit[1] and the anniversary celebrations (conferences, colloquia, Festschrifts) – these cannot be true indicators of his real achievement which can only be indirectly gleaned in the transformation of the fictive tradition and in the confessional complexion of the reception history,[2] or signs of the changing attitudes to the colonial image in the restructuring of school curricula. His essays are major contributions to the growth of postcolonial theory and indigenous knowledge systems. But these essays are primarily by-products of his creative practice which expressed itself in the novel form.

It is a tribute to Achebe's art that the studies of his novels, as well as his own essays, are among the landmarks of the scholarship on African literature. It is not that Achebe's writing is completely free from critical controversy and disagreements although, given the very nature of his achievement, it is remarkable that it is relatively so. Although his essay on Joseph Conrad, "An Image of Africa" (in *Hopes and Impediments*),[3] has continued to generate critical arguments and various re-evaluations of Conrad – and incidentally of Joyce Cary – his position is in fact less controversial than reactions to it suggest. Achebe is concerned not so much with Conrad's place in the English tradition as with the effect of his romantic view of language and reality on his representation of Africa.

It is not too difficult to see the connection between the colonial theme and the question of language. Language has become one of the key sites of the postcolonial contest. The language of African literature has been the other area in which Achebe's views and choices have provoked controversy, and his view on the language of African literature still splits the ranks of even the novelists themselves, especially since language is tied up with the question of

identity and nationhood. But these are ultimately minor critical disagreements, given the broad consensus on his achievement, which may be attributed to his impact on three main areas of the literary culture.

First, he virtually invented the fictive language and form that has become normative for the literature. He has come as close to defining what many would consider "the archetypal African novel,"[4] partly by demonstrating that it is possible to shape literary English into the language of an ethnic experience far removed from the English homeland. This achievement is underscored by his stylistic antecedent: he made acceptable what began as a utopian dream for the African writer and an anathema for English scholars. Literary English began as a conservative medium – receptive to foreign lexical items but protective of its imperial prescription of the metropolitan standard for syntax and idiom. Early attempts to break through this bulwark were repelled as barbarisms, as when some early non-standard literary English usage from the British Commonwealth was described as "doing violence to the English language," surely a modernist subconscious evocation of a sixteenth-century ideal of English that is "written clean and pure, unmixed and unmangled with borrowing of other tongues." One has to concede though, that Achebe's stylistic breakthrough was made possible by the accommodative nature of English itself. Throughout its transformation into contemporary English, it continued to draw in influences from foreign lands as well as the margins of Empire, although it had no intention of giving up its territoriality despite this enrichment. There had been major stylistic experiments before and after Achebe, but these had not been successful for reasons of usage and acceptability. Amos Tutuola's unusual style in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is largely representative of the Onitsha tradition to which he is thought to belong, but unrepresentative of the mainstream canon to which he has been assigned. But the vexed question of the author's level of formal education is irrelevant to the effectiveness of Tutuola's style because of the near-perfect fit between the strange vision of the first-person narrator and his expressive if unfamiliar idiom. This formal decorum is also evident in *Sozaboy* where, like the author of *Huckleberry Finn*, Ken Saro-Wiwa taps into the narrative possibilities of the non-standard English of a particular social group. But those possibilities remain limited to certain situations and characters and have not yet had a major effect on the stylistic mainstream of African writing. Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* is poetic but mannered and not a practical option for other African users of the language. Wole Soyinka's language in *The Interpreters* is inimitable, and its imitators have remained merely experimental.

In the second place Achebe has had a strong and enduring influence on the production, publishing, and reception of African literature in English,

especially on the teaching of the literature. Quite a few indigenous imprints were inspired by the success of the African Writers Series. Achebe has also inspired a generation of African writers, not so much in the popularity of the theme of culture conflict but in his handling of the material. He did not invent the theme. A. C. Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* had anticipated the theme of *Things Fall Apart* by nearly two decades. It is mainly Achebe's attitude and stylistic innovation that made the difference. Achebe's strong influence on the increase in the production of a specific genre, the novel of Igbo traditional life and the adaptation of English for African experience, has led Charles Nnolim to describe the producers of this genre as the "sons of Achebe,"[5] although it is still too early to determine the scope of Achebe's influence on African literary history. The idea of "sons" would not always imply the kind of indebtedness to which Nnolim was referring. A strong, independent voice can make itself heard within such a tradition. Such a writer would be an inheritor rather than a disciple, like the refreshing new talent of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the author of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

The third, and perhaps Achebe's most important influence given his goal as a writer, is his contribution to the advancement of a new postcolonial consciousness, particularly as his fictions date from the eve of African independence, thus giving emphatic voice to the pan-African impulse that found political expression in African independence. It is in the novel form that Achebe has made his most enduring contribution as a postcolonial writer. The significance of his choice of this form has deep historical roots. For the novel form is both the product and medium of the historical process. It marks a historic stage in the evolution of human communication when the interaction of technology and social relations brought about a new consciousness and the need for a new form of literary expression, as has been argued in studies by historians of the effect of technology and changing social relations on human consciousness, literary production (such as Georg Lukács, Ian Watt, Arnold Kettle), and the communication media (Marshall McLuhan).[6]

Achebe himself acknowledges oral and written history as sources of *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*, just as his appropriation of Igbo proverbs for domesticating the English language recalls the practice of transcription and translation of the earlier period. But he transforms the archival character of the material by connecting the roots of wisdom that are reflected in the speech genres of African oral cultures with the age of literacy and the printing press. He thus gives voice to this age of transition. Such a mediator would have been educated in both worlds and would have assimilated the new communication culture without losing touch with the oral tradition. His biographers, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, emphasize Achebe's security in both

worlds. Ezenwa-Ohaeto quotes Achebe's conviction that "you can be a Christian and yet be able to worship your own ancestors."[7]

Towards the end of the colonial period when new African urban cultures were being transformed by colonial activity, it seemed logical for the Western-educated African writer to turn to the ready-made tradition of the European novel for a formal model and an ideological site to be contested. For it was in Europe that the novel first became decisive as a representative genre of the new age, driven by the new print technology and a new class consciousness. It is the English line of this novel tradition that directly influenced the form of the novel that Achebe developed, and there are obvious resemblances and affiliations, from Achebe's ideological engagement with Conrad and Cary to his less polemical, more formal relation to Thomas Hardy who, like him, also writes about a culture in decline, and also works within the tragic mode that is tributary to the comic mainstream of the novel tradition. But even before Achebe, African realist fiction seemed mimetic of the English tradition: Cyprian Ekwensi is often compared to Daniel Defoe because his concern with the urban phenomenon as a cultural transformation of the Nigerian landscape and the growth of new social forms has some formal similarity with the urban realism of *Moll Flanders*.

African writers consider the European novel of Africa to be propaganda for the imperial cause, including even Conrad's critique of the colonial enterprise. Thus, the form which developed from the ideology of the middle class whose story it tells was extended to portray life in the new colonies and became a mirror of the other. This monopoly of viewpoints limits the essentially dialogic form of the novel. It denies the various peoples who are its subjects the right to tell their own stories, as Achebe puts it. Unlike the single vision of the European fairy tale, the modern novel has an inbuilt resistance to a monopoly of viewpoints because its distinctive form is dialogic – a "living mix of varied and opposing voices," as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it.[8] The publishing process also guarantees the response of a variety of interests because of the large reading public required for an economically viable production.

In telling his African story Achebe takes account of the historical process that transformed the traditional medium of storytelling into the modern novel form that he now employs. Perhaps the most important feature of this change is the new relation between the verbal artist, the art product, and the community in which it is produced and received. It created a new system of communication and a new community that is linked by new modes of expression and reception. This development is reflected in the technology-mediated evolution (or extension) of the terms of reception from hearing to seeing, from listening to reading, from *audience* to *reading public*. The consequences of this development are both social and psychological: the transition from the immediacy

of the artistic experience and the solidarity and community that an audience implies, to the fact that the act of reading involves an absent author communicating with fragmented communities of isolated individuals.

A consciousness of the imminence of this change occurs towards the end of *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu is partly conscious of the socially transforming power of literacy when he tells Oduche of the wisdom of acquiring the literacy of the white man. Ironically, Oduche's alienation from his prescient father begins as he acquires literacy – that is, when he learns to communicate in silence with an absent interlocutor and can exclude his family from the "conversation" even when they are physically present, in contrast to Ugoye who is at the same time acquiring the traditional skill of communication by practising the art of storytelling before her family who can see and hear her.[9] It is true, as *No Longer at Ease* shows, that the scale of time and finance that a literate culture consumes implies the rise of a new elite class, at least in the short term. In the long run, however, the printed word, in contrast to the written, is destined to be democratic because it requires a relatively large reading public to sustain its production and give rise to new professions, like that of the newspaper men, Ekwensi's Amusa Sango in *People of the City*, and Achebe's Chris Oriko in *Anthills of the Savannah*, and because its distribution and readership cannot be effectively contained.

It is for this reason that the art of the novel is important for the Africa that Achebe inherited. That Africa was an Africa in transition and the inspiration for Achebe's first three novels. The fictions recreate two worlds in conflict: They present the twilight of an old world at the same time as they anticipate the new. In the old Age of Wisdom indigenous knowledge was rooted in experience and the transmission and continuity of ancestral knowledge, rather than the excitement at new discoveries. This literature of wisdom is found in the gnomic forms that succeeding generations learned, recycled, and transmitted, especially proverbs and related oral genres. In the Information Age, with which the dying Age of Wisdom interacts and competes, knowledge has come into its own and with it an emphasis on progress and development, the discovery of the new, and the superannuation of the old. The transition from Okonkwo's generation in *Things Fall Apart*, to that of Obi, his grandchild, in *No Longer at Ease*, marks the end of the Age of Wisdom and the early foundations of the Information Age. Fully aware of the ideological implications of this transition by writing their histories in his novels, Achebe tries to reunite the communication modes of both systems in *Anthills of the Savannah*, notably halfway through the novel in an inspired panegyric on the universality of "story" by a bearded old man, who is at once a type of the wise old man of traditional African narratives and an Ancient Mariner type.

The specific nature of Achebe's tragic fiction can be explained by his interpretation of Igbo cultural history at the turn of the twentieth century with its positive reception of the technological offerings of the new age in education, technology, and trade. The core of that interpretation is the continuity of that specific Igbo cultural trait that V. C. Uchendu described as a readiness to accommodate change without giving up the essence of Igbo character.[10] By this world view, change does not have to be tragic; proverb after Igbo proverb reiterates the need for people to adapt to change. The adaptive nature of Igbo history is an important factor in Achebe's conception of tragic experience. Thus although the postcolonial experience presupposes a tragic mode as one of the major choices for African writers, in Achebe's fiction the emphasis is on the community's expectation of the continuity of life and its social detachment from the tragic hero.

Achebe opts for one of two tragic possibilities. In *Things Fall Apart* the tragedy is personal rather than communal: The focus is on the psychology of the hero rather than any tragic fate that may befall the community materially or spiritually. The survival instinct is ingrained in Igbo communal psychology, as we find in the framing incidents of *Things Fall Apart*: from the success story of the young, irrepressible and widely celebrated Okonkwo, to the tale of Okonkwo the suicide who damages his status in his people's cultural memory by that one act of abomination. His individualist defence of his people's culture fails at the historic turning point when he tries to be his people's champion against the white man's Goliath: "In a flash Okonkwo drew his machet. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless.... Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war."[11] The pathetic tone on which the story of Okonkwo ends (which is picked up in the ruminations of the District Commissioner as future author of a new genre) stands in sharp contrast to the tone of elation in the hero-narrative that celebrates the rising fortune of young Okonkwo at the beginning of the novel.

On the face of it, *Arrow of God* seems to chart a different direction. Its hero, Ezeulu, is central to the life of Umuaro in a way that Okonkwo is not; Okonkwo often breaches Umuofia's social expectations and norms. The Umuaro chief priest, Ezeulu, cannot be ignored, because he embodies their most fundamental religious and political mores. He is essentially an incarnation of his function as scapegoat, and after his ordination as Ezeulu – "Priest [of] Ulu" – even his natal name is discarded or forgotten. By its social charter, the economic and religious fate of Umuaro is so closely tied to the religious and political choices of its leader that, in the normal order of things, the community depends on the priest for its activities. The role of the Chief Priest was to "go ahead and confront danger before it reached his people" (p. 189)

and thus act out his predestined role as scapegoat and save his community from catastrophe, as Achebe puts it in his Foreword to the revised edition of the novel. In the event of the failure of his functions, the consequences for the community might be tragic in the short term but would not be far-reaching or permanent. But the true test of the integrity of the charter and its resilience is not the brash, but ultimately inconsequential local challenge of the nature deity, Ezeidemili and his ally, Nwaka the politician, but the historically determined confrontation between the traditions of Umuaro and the new polity of the white man. The confrontation is the historic opportunity to test the strength of the interdependence of priest and community. This interdependence is the theme of the ritual drama of the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves. But when the priest's role failed, the effect was at first economically devastating because the priest would not adapt to this situation that was not anticipated at Ulu's inauguration. But the Igbo community soon adjusts in its characteristic manner to this challenge to their survival, and the effect of the conflict turns out to be ultimately transient.

Arrow of God is in many ways a different kind of work from *Things Fall Apart*, especially in the way it orders the relation between character and event in the confrontation of the two political cultures. But by ending with the alienation of the hero from his community and from authorial sympathy, it falls into the same kind of tragic mode as *Things Fall Apart*, where the tragedy lies in the personal fate of the hero rather than the enduring material damage to the community. Social survival is stronger than the tragedy that is tied to the fate of an individual and is largely of his own making. At the time of the composition of the novels of this period, Achebe's conception of tragic fiction is a reflection of the Igbo saying that no man, however great, is greater than his people. His tragic heroes are isolated figures at the point of tragedy, rising no higher in the tragic scale than the status of history's scapegoat so that the community may survive.

The scapegoat theme was widespread in West African writing during the period of the publication of *Arrow of God*. Its recurrence was probably due to its contemporary significance as a continuation of an indigenous concept that was reinforced by the ascendance of the two world religions whose creed centred on the sacrifice of a surrogate for the sins of individuals. If theologically the scapegoat ritual was represented as an advance – if not an evolution – on the practice of blood sacrifice, in literary terms it marked a cultural transition from earlier rites. In *Arrow of God*, as in Bolaji Idowu's theory of sacrifice,[12] such superseded, but not forgotten, rites are recalled at the moment of crisis when Ezeulu appears to resist the humane function for which he was initiated. That is the moment when Nnayelugo reaches for a last-resort solution to Ezeulu's intransigence: "Every offence has its sacrifice,

from a few cowries to a cow or a human being" (p. 209). This transition was reflected in the genres of drama and prose fiction. Generically, the rite of sacrifice is essentially drama – especially when it takes the form of the scapegoat ritual. Ritual is closely related to drama. It could quite conveniently be transformed from religious experience into theatre by being translated from the customary setting of its performance and re-enacted on stage. Its stage presence is mimetic of physical reality. The narrative or myth that accompanies it is merely a correlative that can be dispensed with in drama. On the other hand, the novel takes over the myth and discards or merely narrates the ritual, although ritual can feature as a semiotic device – as distinct from a conscious social action, in a work like Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Myth is the natural choice of the new prose medium. The physical or visual representation appropriate to ritual lies outside its verbal resources. Like the new genre in which it appears, the history of the scapegoat ritual performed in *Arrow of God* is relatively recent compared with its antecedents. Although there is an aura of antiquity in Ulu's shrine, with its "skulls of all past chief priests" (p. 209), there is still a communal consciousness of the newness of the new dispensation not only as the basis of Nwaka's challenge to the authority of Ulu, but also because the inauguration of the ritual with the investiture of Ezeulu as the first scapegoat priest is recalled as if it occurred within living memory in Umuaro.

There is a sense in which literary genres are symbolic representations of their age. The tragic defeat of the protagonist of ritual drama in texts like *Arrow of God* and Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* anticipates the emergence of the anti-hero of prose fiction. The transition from the culture of tragic ritual-actors in Soyinka's drama prepares us for the emergence of the contemporary African anti-hero of *The Interpreters*, just as *Arrow of God* maps the social and psychological conditions that would produce the anti-heroes of *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*.

That is an important situation for the emergence of the novel as a new form. Its roots are secular, in contrast to the sacred ritual forms on which the drama of this period bases its representations. Achebe's fiction records an old-world ideal that is now out of place in the new age. The erosion of the traditional values of community as a result of the economic and cultural colonization of Africa produced results in literature that were similar to those produced by the ascendance of a new age of prose realism that marked the end of the chivalric romance of the European Middle Ages. It can be argued from a purely formal point of view that while Miguel de Cervantes's invention of Don Quixote as an anachronism marks the beginning of prose realism and defines its character, the characterization of Okonkwo marks the end of heroic storytelling not only because Umuofia would not go to war against

the white man, but because the story of the reception of the new European dispensation would now take new forms that are rooted in the kind of stories-by-women that Okonkwo disliked. Okonkwo's excessive attachment to his own reconstruction of the Igbo patriarchal code may be compared to Don Quixote's re-enactment of the medieval code of chivalry that had become purely textual by the end of the Renaissance when he lived. There are of course important cultural and generic differences between the Europe of Cervantes and the Africa that Achebe recreates. The difference between European chivalry and realism is a chronological one, while Igbo patriarchy cohabits with the feminist principle that is its necessary opposite.[13]

As spokespersons for transition, Cervantes and Achebe both take a realistic look at the present without devaluing the past itself, although they produced different results – characterized by comedy in one, tragedy in the other. The difference could perhaps be accounted for by their different cultural contexts. In Cervantes the confidence of comedy drew inspiration from a Europe that was becoming colonizer rather than colonized, while tragedy was the appropriate form for the story of colonized Africa. It is revealing that neither Cervantes nor Achebe considered satire an option, as Henry Fielding did. This is because an important residual respect for the old values survives their partial discounting of these values. These three makers of the novel were not directly recreating reality, but responding to the textual representation of reality, thus highlighting the difference between the world of the text and the reality that it tries to represent. There is an additional dimension in Achebe's project. Both Cervantes and Fielding were producing cautionary accounts of the psychological effects and social implications of literature as escape, of the psychological dangers of a religious indulgence in reading. Achebe's project begins from a different and more far-reaching angle. He begins with the assumption that reality itself is textually constituted, as he makes clear in *Home and Exile*, his Harvard lectures on the literary battles that are being fought for the soul of Africa.[14] Stories are the major source of our knowledge of reality. The knowledge of cultural and historical spaces can only be recreated and known through the stories we tell. So texts are important and potentially dangerous sources of knowledge. This is Achebe's intellectual elaboration of traditional Igbo ideas (of texts as sources of knowledge) that are already implicit in *Things Fall Apart* as a story of the social organization of Umuofia. Joseph Slaughter's reading of the novel suggests that "individual development in Igbo society entails, or at least is emblematized by, a coming into, and a facility with, language and stories",[15] with the corollary that the failure of Okonkwo, the man of action to whom speech does not come easy, is his failure to come to terms with the creative functions of speech.

Achebe actually goes further in various essays in which he elaborates on this idea of the power and necessity of stories, summarized in "What Has Literature Got to Do with It?" in the principle, "*People create stories create people*; or rather, *stories create people create stories*."[16] He restates this principle in his statement that "Man is a Story-Making Animal."[17] For colonized Africans, the implication of this is that since the production of colonial literature "was largely an ancillary service to the slave trade"(p. 30), the major twentieth-century task for the so-called "Third World" is "the process of 're-storying' peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession" (p. 79).

The two so-called novels of the past, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, are classics in the fundamental sense, as high art as well as completed ideological tasks to which not much more can be added. They deal with cultural wars that have had to be fought. But they also uncovered for a whole new generation of novelists a new tradition and conventions for handling language and indigenous culture. There is a sense in which their relation to the traditional heroic forms is too close for modern prose fiction. They privilege the heroic and the tragic, although in Achebe's uncompromising fidelity to the realist tradition he approaches social experience according to empirical values, and distances his work from an important aspect of religious life, particularly the supernatural. He thus closes out an important possibility for African fiction, the so-called animistic realism implicit in the convention of fiction whose line of descent comes down from Daniel O. Fagunwa through Tutuola to the Ben Okri generation.

No Longer at Ease is the work that marks the end of the Okonkwo era and the emergence of the new age. It marks a break with *Things Fall Apart* and, by extension, *Arrow of God*. So, although it is conceived as a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, it is in fact generically closer to *A Man of the People* than to the two historical novels. The question for critical theory is why critics insist on reading it as if it is cast in the same mold as *Things Fall Apart*. Perhaps one should begin with a brief survey of the fictional situation. The city is the "natural" setting for the novel form, because it is the place where the main conditions of its production and consumption are completely met, including its primary subject, the new African middle class. To generalize about the average or mean conditions for the form is not to deny the responsibility of the African novel to speak for the rural population – *A Grain of Wheat* is an eloquent demonstration of that responsibility – or for the trauma of the colonial encounter, the central concern of *Things Fall Apart*. Again the nature of the age is presented in the relationship between the central character, who can no longer be called a hero in the old sense, and the community he represents, but to which he no longer truly belongs. Classic tragedy begins

to thin out of contemporary narratives when a community is no longer able to produce its representative individual and the community no longer feels that its fate is connected to, or reflected in, that of the hero. *No Longer at Ease* is a self-conscious admission that the contemporary African condition was not conducive to the production of truly tragic form. The conventions of the form were already disappearing from the modern world by mid-century. The social conditions for the production of the heroic and tragic forms of narrative were present in isolated places and times as recently as the railway strike in Senegal, in Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*, and in Mau-Mau Kenya and pre-1994 South Africa where the seeds of tragedy were sown by the heroic drive towards freedom and democracy. However, elsewhere where freedom fighters had disappeared into national history after independence, the new social conditions were encouraging new pathetic prose forms rather than heroic narratives, a situation that is implicit in novels like *No Longer at Ease* and Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*.

Thematically, *No Longer at Ease* represents a logical progression in Achebe's development as a historical novelist. But it is the ideological imperative of postcolonialism that has forced it into this structural position. In terms of its cultural origins, it is a novelist's necessary response to the new urban culture that was Africa's response to modernism. The town, as a modern alternative to the African countryside, is the cultural home of the African novel, whether this takes the form of migrations from village to city or from tradition to modernity in the novels of Achebe, but also in those of Ekwensi, Beti, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Sandwiched between Achebe's two major novels of the tragic hero in colonial times, *No Longer at Ease* takes a form that encourages us to read it differently from how we would read the other two novels. Achebe inscribes into the later novels a psychological, if not spiritual, continuity between the village and the city, between the agrarian and the industrial, without ignoring the different origins and material conditions of the two settings. His poem, "Lazarus," opens by teasing the reader with reference to a common primordial fear of the resurrection of the dead that prevails among city dwellers as well as in the countryside, although we soon find a tragic angel lurking behind the villagers' kinship bond and code of honor.[18] But because it is in the countryside away from the constraints of law and order that the fear is acted out, it seems clear enough that the difference between city and countryside is environmental, not genetic.

The villagers who welcome Obi Okonkwo back to his father's house in *No Longer at Ease* would not, of course, think so. To them, their townsman, Obiajulu, is the true son of his (grand)father: "[H]e is Ogbuefi Okonkwo come back. He is Okonkwo *kwom kwem*, exact, perfect."[19] The elders who are present refer to him as the embodiment of their valiant ancestors. "He is

the grandson of Ogbuefi Okonkwo who faced the white man single-handed and died in the fight"(p. 53). In the past Obi's performance at school had confirmed his pedigree. So, confident in the vigour and vitality of the genes of heroes, they had entrusted him with a specific modern task – to bring back knowledge in place of the human heads that the old Umuofia warriors used to bring back home (p. 10). Returning from his long stay in far-away England Obi becomes, like a famous folk tale character, "a little child returned from wrestling in the spirit world" (p. 51).

The intention of this welcoming party remains admirable and their perception logical, if one ignores the intertextual ironies: that Okonkwo did not die as a hero – he hanged himself and shamed his kinsmen; that Okonkwo's father had symbolically rejected his own father by running away to join the missionaries and was never a headhunter; that literacy and headhunting are two completely different kinds of social tasks, belong to different periods and produce different social and psychological results. In a similar manner, Obi had failed the hopes of his townsmen in Lagos, for the conditions in Lagos are quite different from those of Umuofia, requiring a high level of literacy and integrity, not valor and ethnic loyalty, as they will soon discover from Obi's rejection of their ideology. In other words, although the structure of Obi's career reflects that of his grandfather up to the detail of the racist sneer by the colonial officer at the end of his administrative tour, the modern conditions in the national capital are so different from those of a provincial village on the margins of an emergent postcolony that the literary forms that represent both experiences could not be identical.

The real conflict in *No Longer at Ease* is between the demands of clan loyalty in the fierce economic conditions of a modern capital city, and the making of an educated middle class entrusted with building a modern independent nation. The tragedy is that Obi fails both causes: He has not been able to remain loyal to the clan that trained him, or to the nation he was trained to serve. The tragedy is national, but that does not make Obi a tragic hero. It would not be appropriate to adopt a conventional tragic paradigm for measuring Obi's worth as a tragic hero since, given the level of his training and social responsibility, the failure of character weighs far more than the economic pressures often cited as the cause of his tragedy. Although the various literary allusions and definitions of tragedy in the novel may indicate the novelist's intention and the tragic standard by which to measure Obi, it seems more useful to consider Obi as the first in the literary lineage of anti-heroes who have to cope with the new conditions of an urban, industrial and national culture. *No Longer at Ease* anticipates *A Man of the People*, and belongs to the kind of fiction that is quite different from the tragic heroism depicted in the novels about the ruinous conflict that the colonial encounter

has provoked within indigenous civilizations. In the modern nation state that colonialism brought into being, no national leader can perform the old role of community leader without compromising his moral integrity and national stature for, in a multi-ethnic state, such a sectional role can only be achieved and sustained by corruption and nepotism. This theme, only implicit in *No Longer at Ease*, becomes quite apparent in *A Man of the People*. Obi's failure reveals an early fissure in the postcolonial state and the beginnings of a dangerous decay in its moral fabric. That decay is fully exposed in *A Man of the People*.

There are thus two phases in Achebe's career as a novelist. The historical novels mix the narrative elements of oral genres, specifically the heroic tradition and the myths associated with rites of passage and cleansing rituals, with the realist conventions of the novel form. This mixing of genres may be described as transitional, since the themes and setting of the urban novels do not require the appropriation of the older genres in any significant manner, although novelists of city life can return to these older elements for figurative or symbolic uses. The mixing of genres is Achebe's fidelity to both his contemporary point of view and his historical subject. The point of view reflects contemporary assumptions about the world, with its scepticism towards all knowledge that is not verifiable. We find it in *Things Fall Apart* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds*, and it occurs in a less sceptical form in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. This modern attitude is also evident in Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, where the materials of the marvelous and the fantastic are tamed and aligned with the conventions of realism: The seasonal living dead, Aboliga the Frog's picture of the man-child, the unnamed persona's wandering through the wasteland of Accra, Koomson's ritual cleansing, the cargo-cult rituals and the myths of Mammy Water are all represented as parables. This approach to the knowledge systems of the past stands in contrast to forms of knowledge derived through the intuitive and the visionary, as we find in much of animist cosmology and the alternative tradition of myth with its trappings of the magical and the extraordinary.

The categorization of Achebe's historical novels set out above is purely generic and historical, and has no implications for the quality of the works in question. The next stage confirms the tradition of realism already evident in the writing of the two historical novels in which the non-realist genres of the oral tradition are assimilated into the basically realistic conventions of the urban novel. A provisional outline of the evolution of African narrative traditions would distinguish between two major traditions, the oral tradition and the modern scribal tradition. The transitional stage of the scribal tradition branches into paths that lead to two different possibilities: a realist

tradition, to which Achebe has made significant contributions, and a so-called tradition of animist or magical realism that is exemplified in the line of writing that descends from the Yoruba language fiction of Fagunwa to Tutuola's English, and has left traces of its footprints in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*. The cosmopolitan potential of this particular line of descent has been proved by the writing of its chief contemporary exponent, Ben Okri, with his short stories and his Azaro novels. The non-realistic strain seems to be particularly strong in West Africa, with writers independently combining their own traditional forms with European conventions, like the symbolist in Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King*, the allegorical in Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, or the postmodernist in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* and Kojo Laing's *Major Gentil and the Achimota Wars*. Both of these branches spring from roots in the oral tradition, but differ in the extent to which they appropriate elements of the scribal culture of Europe.

Achebe's two historical novels bridge the gap between the oral and the scribal traditions, while his two urban novels develop what is arguably the realist mainstream of the African tradition of prose fiction. The dominant genres of each literary tradition are shaped by antecedent literary practices as well as the theories of personality and the psychological conceptions of character in their time. The characters of such genres are thus generated from contemporary situations. Traditional Igbo tales reflecting Igbo ideas of leadership, heroism, and social relations draw mainly on the wrestler, the warrior, the priest(ess), and the farmer as well as problems of kinship and gender. These are the basic types in Achebe's novels of the Igbo past. As one would expect, the new urban industrial conditions generate new professions and occupations from which a new psychology and new theories of personality and of character types develop, especially characters reflecting the emergent social structure. The journalist, the civil servant, and the teacher are prominent in the first set of Nigerian fiction from Ekwensi's *People of the City* to Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. Later the politician and the soldier (in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*) would reflect the class of professionals that have become important in the changing social setting. It is clear then, that the novel form, especially as conceived by Achebe, is profoundly implicated in contemporary social reality, particularly when one considers his assumption, quoted at the head of this paper, that *stories create people create stories*. Characterization is particularly important for a novelist like Achebe since, to paraphrase him, people and stories are the end products of the storyteller's storytelling. The old storytelling traditions that Achebe assimilated into his first novel tended to present their characters from the outside, not because the bulk of stories deal with action rather than reflection, and not only because storytelling is a communal performance that

did not linger on the thought processes of characters, but mainly because characters fitted into molds that were shaped by cultural expectations and assumptions. In contrast to the oral tradition, the conditions in which writing takes place in the scribal tradition encourage isolation and individualism as well as reflection and a dwelling on the thought processes of characters. It is under these conditions that the interior monologue is represented in writing – a visual medium, as the logical correlative of thought, just as the soliloquy is presented in the theatre in an oral medium as the equivalent of thought. Thus the new prose form encourages greater interiority in characterization, with the interior monologue as well as the omniscient narrator's dissection of thought processes and inner states of mind as its integral units.

No Longer at Ease and *Arrow of God* go beyond the characterization of Okonkwo from the outside to explore the hidden motives of their central characters. This is because these are isolated, even lonely characters that may not be satisfactorily characterized by their social relations alone. Part of the complexity of *Arrow of God* derives from the fact that the omniscient narrator reveals much to the reader about Ezeulu's thought processes although, quite tactfully, he only hints at the actual motives of the priest. Achebe faces a more complex narrative challenge in *A Man of the People*. Here the situation requires a narrative voice to speak on behalf of the people, like the communal voice in *Things Fall Apart*. This is in contrast to the narrator's vision of the growing individualism of a new middle class in *No Longer at Ease*, or the detached narrator that explores the psychology of an elected representative speaking on behalf of his community in *Arrow of God*.

In *A Man of the People* Achebe withdraws from omniscience and shifts much of the responsibility for character analysis and judgment to a first-person narrator, Odili. Because Odili is himself a character, the moral privilege of the narrator does not free him from the reader's scrutiny and critical judgment, nor does it imply the author's complete surrender of his responsibility as the reader's moral guide. The author has merely assumed the maker's privilege like the dramatist who, because he has structured the action and shaped the characters, is still responsible for the moral center of the work in spite of his verbal absence as author. The novel's title defines the readers' expectations. This is to be a story of leadership and responsibility, and the values are to be determined in terms of the degree of the fulfillment of the people's social expectations. For that reason, the reader is expected to judge Chief Nanga, the man of the people, in terms of his performance as a political leader and by his provision of service for his people. Odili the narrator is to be the reader's immediate guide and watchdog over Chief Nanga, who is expected to serve the interest of the people, not his own interest. Perhaps because of Odili's closeness to Chief Nanga, and also because Odili very

quickly becomes disillusioned with Nanga as a type of politician and is completely alienated from the politician and his politics when he loses Elsie to him, we never really get to see the implied charismatic side of Nanga, whose personality is filtered through Odili's eyes. Also perhaps because Odili is entrusted with the characterization of Max, the other important political figure in the story, Max never really emerges as a rounded, living character. He remains only a symbol of a political idea whose strivings evaporate in the final despairing words that close the novel. The despair is partly justified because of the futility of Max's ideology, since the "people" in Nanga's opportunistic politics and in Max's manifesto are revealed by the narrator to be different ethnic communities waiting for their political representative to bring back their share of the so-called national cake, in some respects reminiscent of the expectations that the Umuofia Progressive Union has of Obi Okonkwo as their representative in the nation's Civil Service. It is through the unfulfilled character of Max that the novel rises above Odili's sexual motives and private politics.

With the introduction of national issues other than Odili's bid for political power – issues like Max's socialist politics, political violence and a military coup – the narrative rises above the hitherto personalized politics of the first-person narrator and fits into the larger social concerns of the period that produced the new realism of the mid-1960s. The novelists of that period virtually instituted a literary movement whose weapon was satire and whose major themes fitted into a pattern of false leadership, political betrayal of the people through widespread corruption terminating in a military coup involving the sacrifice of politicians as scapegoats. After the experiment with the first-person point of view and the problems of political leadership explored in *A Man of the People*, unanswered questions remain, especially the question of truth and the proper direction of the nation. And these questions provide the starting point for the next novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, published after Achebe had had time to reflect on the questions.

Anthills of the Savannah is in many respects a gathering together of the social issues and formal devices of the earlier writing, including the status and contemporary relevance of indigenous knowledge, the state of the nation and the nature of leadership, the gender question, the need for different interest groups to tell their own stories (presented here as multiple points of view), and the irrepressible nature of information even under a dictatorship. It is obvious from this that here, as in the other novels, Achebe has mapped out for himself new formal frontiers that he needs to confront as a novelist, including that of representative characters in contemporary contexts. The changing historical periods in Achebe's writing have brought into focus those characters that are most representative of the condition of their culture. These periods throw up a

succession of characters, changing from wrestler, warrior, and priest(ess), to teacher and civil servant, to teacher and politician who, in turn, give way to a new generation of professionals – the writer-as-journalist and the writer-as-poet whose alternative voices and points of view challenge the soldier's will-to-power. In every case the author has placed one of such representative characters in the privileged position where he stands for the dominant viewpoint of the culture either as the novel's protagonist or its point of view, although the author usually remains as narrator or sometimes as moderator of the proceedings. But each of these central characters has appropriated the privilege of speaking or acting on behalf of their communities for his own individual ends. Since Achebe's method guarantees the complete volition and independence of his characters, it implies that history shows that the failure of Nigerian leadership is rooted mainly in private interests.

Achebe's technique in the last two novels is a clear departure from that of the first three where the narrator's omniscience and unqualified moral opinions about characters, communities, and events are evidence of the author's constant presence. He withdraws from the world of *A Man of the People*, trusting one of the characters to expose the absurdity of the characters and events in the novel, although this witness turns out not to be completely reliable. *Anthills of the Savannah* is a partial demonstration of the right of every group of people to have their story told and heard, including women, the underprivileged, and the ancestors. Many novelists use the technique of multiple narrators to empower an underprivileged class by allowing them to speak directly in their own voice, though they do not necessarily limit it to the disadvantaged class. Multiple points of view serve such a purpose in Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds* and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. It is evident from the power of empathy in the epistolary form of Mariama Bâ's warmly received *So Long a Letter*, how close readers can get to characters who are allowed to speak in their own voices by the novelist. Achebe's concern with the problem of leadership has influenced the particular form of multiple narrators adopted in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The novel is structured as a concert of educated voices – three first-person narrators, Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi, and Beatrice Okoh, with the author returning as omniscient narrator to reassert his privilege as moral guide and coordinator of a variety of stories and points of view, after his withdrawal from the world of the previous novel. As Jennifer Wenzel argues in "The Trouble with Narrators,"[20] this intervention of the omniscient narrator does not give the reader any assurance of the author's confidence in his first-person witnesses.

Achebe's stated aims, especially in recent essays, and his practice in recent novels, place considerable faith in the central role of texts in constructing our world. Part of the justification for this position rests on his view of the

two historical phases of imperialism, a colonial period of brute force and a postcolonial period of literacy with its electronic extension into the Information Age. The initial colonial encounter of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which took the form of physical confrontations symbolized by Okonkwo's machete against the guns of the colonial officers, has now entered its more subtle and deadly battle for the souls of Third World communities through the agency of texts. This case is slightly overstated in the sense that not only have the engines of the Information Age – the television, the computer, and the home video – overtaken literature as agents of cultural imperialism, there are other equally potent instruments of globalization – multinational finance and international fashion designed at the cultural capitals of the West, with the universality of jeans and chinos attesting to its most successful products. The reason for this is the glamour and convenience of industrial products and their ease of reception and assimilation: Jeans and television programmes and home videos require less training for their reception and appreciation than literature, which requires extended, often specialized training for its critical reception. Even the new generation of educated Africans now serve other gods before literature, the most popular of these being the less intellectually demanding, often narcissistic culture of reality television. Education in Achebe's sense of a literary education is a basic answer to this cultural problem. He tries to counter the global onslaught from foreign cultures by resorting to folkloric devices from the Age of Wisdom. The Idemili myth which he invokes in *Anthills of the Savannah* encapsulates his proposal for the reinvigoration of the African ancestral heritage, a distinct African consciousness and identity, a feminine renaissance, and the harnessing of political power to morality. It is an ambitious proposal with ambiguous implications. Like the English language at its most imperial, the insatiable Information Age is a voracious god that accepts and assimilates all offerings and sacrifices, but adapts or transforms them for consumption in the global marketplace of culture. Achebe the wise old man of African literature is an advocate of literature as a necessary medium for telling Africa's own stories and a vehicle for promoting its cultural products and ensuring that there is at least an African presence when, as Léopold Senghor prophesied,[21] the roll call of identities is made at the world's cultural center.

NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o exchange positions at the top of Lindfors's statistical research into the critical reception of anglophone African authors. As Lindfors himself implicitly acknowledges by the tongue-in-cheek acronym which named the survey – "Famous Authors Reputation Test" – a purely bibliographical deduction from quantitative records of "the frequency with

which an author and his works are discussed in detail in print by literary scholars and critics" must be as unreliable a test of literary achievement as any other. See Bernth Lindfors, "Big Shots and Little Shots of the Canon" in *Long Drums and Canons: Teaching and Researching African Literatures* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), pp. 61–75.

2. F. Abiola Irele has remarked, "*Things Fall Apart* provided [for us] the sign of that profound reordering of the imaginative consciousness … in an Africa that was delivering itself of the colonial yoke and entering upon a new mode of existence." See F. Abiola Irele, "Homage to Chinua Achebe," *Research in African Literatures*, 32.3 (Fall 2001), "Chinua Achebe at Seventy," 1–2. In the same number, Simon Gikandi testified as to the impact of Achebe's work: "I read *Things Fall Apart* over one whole afternoon and it is not an exaggeration to say that my life was never to be the same again" (p. 3). See Simon Gikandi, "Achebe and the Invention of African Culture," *Research in African Literatures*, 32.3 (Fall 2001), "Chinua Achebe at Seventy," 3–7.
3. Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1988), pp. 95–105.
4. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. ix.
5. Charles Nnolim, "*Things Fall Apart* as an Igbo National Epic" in S. Okechukwu Mezu (ed.), *Modern Black Literature* (New York: Black Academy Press, 1971), pp. 56–60.
6. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1975); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963); Arnold Kettle, *The English Novel*, I (London: Hutchinson, 1967).
7. Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), p. 46.
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
9. Achebe, *Arrow of God*, rev. edn. (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 189–91.
10. V. C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).
11. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p. 182.
12. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), pp. 118–25.
13. The gender issue is common to both *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart* – the reinforcing of the patriarchal image by the subordination of women in the first novel and their relative absence in the second, except in one major ritual scene which emphasizes their collective presence even as individual characters are distinguished. This representation of the past was not acceptable to feminist critics, who found comfort in Flora Nwapa's *Idu* as a reinscription of the role of women in Igbo patriarchal society. Achebe eventually balanced his account by re-establishing women at the centre of social activity in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The critical reception of the novel on these grounds has been consistently positive.
14. Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Canongate, 2006). The original edition was published in New York by Oxford University Press in 2000.

15. Joseph R. Slaughter, "A Mouth with Which to Tell the Story: Silence, Violence and Speech in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" in E. Emenyonu (ed.), *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, I, *Omenka: The Master Artist* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), pp. 121–49.
16. Achebe, "What Has Literature Got to Do with It?" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 162.
17. Achebe, "Man is a Story-Making Animal" in *Home and Exile* (New York: Canongate, 2006), p. 59.
18. Achebe, "Lazarus" in *Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems* (London: Heinemann,1972), pp. 37–8.
19. Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (London: Heinemann, 1960), p. 53.
20. Jennifer Wenzel, "The Trouble with Narrators" in E. Emenyonu (ed.), *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, I, *Omenka: The Master Artist* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), pp. 319–31.
21. Leopold Senghor, *Senghor: Prose and Poetry*, ed. and trans. by John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 98.