

AFRICAN HISTORIES AND MODERNITIES

CHINUA ACHEBE AND THE POLITICS OF NARRATION

Envisioning Language

Thomas Jay Lynn



African Histories and Modernities

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Thomas Jay Lynn

Chinua Achebe and the Politics of Narration

Envisioning Language

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Thomas Jay Lynn
Penn State Berks
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For Jessica, Our Children, Our Families

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I. ENVISIONING LANGUAGE AND THE POLITICS OF NARRATION

This volume examines vital intersections of narration, linguistic innovation, and political insight that distinguish Chinua Achebe's fiction as well as his non-fiction commentaries. Each chapter emphasizes a different aspect of these intersections, but a more general understanding informs this exploration. Achebe's literary and cultural impact arises from his manner of interlacing African cultural and linguistic traditions, often those of his own Igbo people, with Western-influenced fictional discourses. Drawing on these diverse resources he offers searching historical, psychological, and political insights in his fiction and non-fiction alike. In the realm of fiction these insights contribute to the modern novel not only a decidedly African political viewpoint, but also a more inclusive narrative consciousness. Achebe's own consciousness as a writer was shaped by his immersion in both African and Western discourses and by his moral urgency. His work is widely admired for its dignified narrative voice, probing storytelling, and pioneering role in bringing African language and culture into a new relationship with English and the West. Berndt Lindfors remarks that Achebe "literally created a technique that had never been seen before: to simulate an African language in English" (Keynote). This technique and Achebe's prose adaptations of Igbo oral art are intrinsic to his writing's political engagement because they assert the integrity and authority of the African voice in a global order defined by colonialism.

In giving literary expression to the African perspective on Africa and the world, Achebe could not avoid writing politically engaged books.¹ As he noted in a 1988 presentation at the University of Texas, “things are generally all right from the [Western] view. That’s because the West runs the world. But from the view of Africa and Third World countries, the world is upside down and needs to be totally reordered. When people say my books are too political, this is the reason” (Obregon D4). Achebe narrates in a realistic vein, and he asks us to see his writing not as political expression alone, but rather as an authentic articulation of the cultural environment he inhabits, an environment permeated by political awareness. Extricating political pressures from representations of that environment would be as unsound and fruitless as extricating, say, religion from representations of the traditional Igbo culture. Of necessity, in other words, does political awareness permeate Achebe’s narration because the story he tells challenges both long-standing Western structures of knowing Africa and the premises of colonialism itself. As Simon Gikandi recognizes, “it is through words that colonial culture inscribes its presumed superiority over the African culture” (*Reading the African Novel* 162), so in their inception words such as Achebe’s that destabilize this presumption are politically resonant.

In reshaping the English-language discourse on Africa that was enshrined in books by European authors, Achebe interrupts the encoding of power that supported colonialism and other forms of Western cultural domination in Africa. Yet Achebe proves adept as well at narrating against the grain of certain powerful African discourses, recognizing that counter-narratives bearing on established societal attitudes are always politically significant, since they potentially modify the acceptance and application of power in social and political spheres. If we expand our understanding of Achebe’s politically resonant blending of discourses, of his vision of constructive relationships between language, storytelling, culture, and politics, then we will better grasp one of the enduring contributions to African and world literature, and to a global understanding of Africa, of the last 100 years.² That contribution’s transformative value may be gleaned from a comment by Nelson Mandela: “There was a writer named Chinua Achebe . . . in whose company the prison walls fell down” (qtd. in Innes, “Chinua Achebe Obituary”). Gikandi recalls, moreover, that reading Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), while in school in Kenya “change[d] the lives of many of us” (Foreword vii). Writing of such consequence possesses, needless to say, exceptional qualities, and those

qualities in Achebe's case include range of viewpoint, narrative innovation, blending of discourses, and compelling content.

What also distinguishes Achebe's fiction, as Elleke Boehmer notes, is the resistance of its African content to subversion by its Western-influenced format: "His reputation as a great world writer rests centrally on his staggering success in wresting Africa into non-African frameworks of cognition through the medium of the novel form, yet, importantly, without ever compromising or substantially changing his novels' structures of religious and cultural reference" ("Achebe" 239). Achebe's compelling embrace of these African and Western storytelling dimensions is one reflection of his literary vision, and the phrase *Envisioning Language* in the present title gestures to the visionary elements of his written expression. Another such element is revealed in his fashioning of a productive literary interaction between an African language and a colonial one. Achebe implements a constructive dialogue between Igbo language traditions and literary English in varied ways, and his imaginative writings attest to the possibility that legacies of violence may be shaped to the constructive ends of mutual understanding and respect.

The author's imaginative response to colonial violence in West Africa is found in, among other works, *Things Fall Apart*, his first and most widely read book, which portrays the collective trauma, cultural alteration, and individual alienation that British colonial and missionary work foisted on the cultivated and elaborate Igbo society. As with *Things Fall Apart*'s "great medicine man," who is able to put back together what had fallen apart (specifically Tortoise's shell [99]), that first novel as well as Achebe's later fiction, written in English though interlaced with Igbo linguistic elements and Nigerian Pidgin, aided in reconfiguring the fragmentation of language and cultural identity consequent to colonialism. His work contributed to new currents of communication between his own society in Nigeria, a larger African society, and a global society, and it disclosed new interconnections between traditions of Igbo orature and Europhone literature. In fiction, poetry, memoir, essays, interviews, and lectures, Achebe helped devise the means for and implemented a fresh dialogue between these groups, yet did so without exculpating the perpetrators of physical violence, demeaning discourse, and governmental misconduct against Africans. In the first place the instigators of these abuses in Achebe's works are European colonialists and their descendants, but numerous African actors also are held to account by the author. Further, he draws our attention to the interdependence of political abuses practiced by the colonialists and those practiced by Nigerians. In his final volume,

the 2012 memoir *There Was a Country*—whose first paragraph invokes aptly enough an Igbo proverb, and whose second briefly sketches European “violence to Africa’s ancient societies” (1)—he reflects:

In a sense Nigerian independence came with a British governor general [Sir James Robertson] in command, and, one might say, popular faith in genuine democracy was compromised from its birth.

Within six years of this tragic colonial manipulation Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation’s wealth. Elections were blatantly rigged. The subsequent national census was outrageously stage-managed; judges and magistrates were manipulated by the politicians in power. The politicians themselves were pawns of foreign business interests.

The social malaise in Nigerian society was political corruption. (51; see also 50, 52)

The misuse of governmental power, colonial and postcolonial, attested here is a central concern of all three Achebe novels set after 1950: *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). For example, the neocolonial corruption to which Achebe alludes in this passage (“pawns of foreign business”) is vividly depicted in the relationship between British Amalgamated and Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People*. The connection that the author traces here, moreover, between colonialist political maneuvering and Nigeria’s widespread postcolonial corruption is also discernible in the arc of his novels: the abuses practiced by British officials in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (1964) shift into the corrupt tactics of Nigerian-born officials in the three novels set in the post-1950 period.

At the same time, varied elements in Achebe’s fiction and other writings invoke the potential for constructive interchange between African and non-African cultures and languages, reflecting the humane morality that helps shape his narrative and political vision: “Chinua Achebe did much more than to get us to listen. He got us to pay attention in profound and lasting ways, and, even more, to care—and this involves more than teaching, it involves moral instruction” (Palumbo-Liu). The moral element is a vital one, for, apart from his belief in democratic principles, including Igbo democratic values, and “the best” of African traditions,³ Achebe’s political vision is rooted not in a fixed

doctrine, but rather in the constructive potential of cultural dialogue and in the illumination of, and refusal to countenance, political oppression:

I do think that decency and civilization would insist that the writer take sides with the powerless. Clearly there is no moral obligation to write in any particular way. But there is a moral obligation, I think, not to ally oneself with power against the powerless. An artist, in my definition of the word, would not be someone who takes sides with the emperor against his powerless subjects. (*There Was a Country* 58–59)

This concept of a writer's moral imperative pivots at the meeting point of political power and the elemental demand for justice. Achebe's fascination with this dynamic zone is manifest in the very structure of each of his last three novels, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*, all of which hinge on how far their protagonists will bend under pressure from powerful government officials: Captain Winterbottom's pressure on Ezeulu, Chief Nanga's on Odili Samalu, and His Excellency, Sam's, on Ikem Osodi, Chris Oriko, and Beatrice Okoh. Achebe's literary ethos, which he discloses in his non-fiction and fiction alike, is thus politically predicated yet avoids fashionable phrases and formulas. He contends in his essay, "Africa and Her Writers" (1973), that "art is, and was always, in the service of man," and he speaks approvingly of "the human purpose" according to which "our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories" and of "creat[ion] . . . for the good of . . . society" (29). The primacy of the human purpose rather than the political formula is likewise articulated by Achebe's fictional editorialist Ikem Osodi in *Anthills of the Savannah*: "As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination. I don't want to foreclose it with a catchy, half-baked orthodoxy" (146). Achebe himself abjures doctrinal prescriptions, all the more political fanaticism, in his approach to the writer's political burden.⁴ The creative conscience that shapes his negotiations of injustice and collective violence is the generative ground of his probing and consequential narratives.

Harry Garuba reminds us that "the struggle between the colonized and the colonizer for the power to narrate [is], as Edward Said tells us, . . . the major connection between imperialism and culture" (247). The probing examination of colonial and postcolonial justice that shapes Achebe's fiction arises from and mediates that struggle. What confers on Achebe, and by extension Igbo and African cultures, the "power to narrate" to a

wide African and international audience in this realm are Achebe's principled voice and his mastery of both Igbo and English language and storytelling traditions.⁵ His first novels clearly reveal his intention to draw on Western influences in order to narrate the lives of Africans. That intention is evident not only in the novels' grounding in modernist realism, a style that resembles the works of European authors he had read and studied, but also from the allusions in them to such prominent English-language writers as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh. Yet significantly these allusions, including the epigraphs drawn from Yeats and Eliot for, respectively, *Things Fall Apart* and Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, are meant to facilitate Achebe's articulation of an African worldview rather than merely to enlarge the scope of Western literary discourse. What Achebe's book-length fiction consistently reveals is an Igbo perspective on the events that unfold, so that to a Western audience an unfamiliar way of seeing is integral to the storytelling environment despite the manifestly novelistic format. In general Achebe's writing is vitally shaped by both African and Western thought, perceptual organization, and narrative tradition.

One of the Igbo existential concepts that helps reveal Achebe's value base and his penchant for combining influences is found in his remark in the second to last of his published volumes, *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2009), and his supporting allusion to an Igbo proverb (one that he includes in multiple contexts: see Chapter 8): "The preference of the Igbo is thus not singularity but duality. Wherever Something Stands, Something Else Will Stand Beside It" (5–6). This proverb not only bespeaks the value placed on the qualities of balance and complementarity in the Igbo philosophical vision, qualities associated with Achebe's use of the term "duality," but also signifies an alternative to a binary duality that divides subjects into discrete, opposing pairs, an organization of experience that in Western thought may be traced back at least as far as Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction (see Gottlieb). Commentators have noted that this conceptual arrangement entails preference for one side of every binary pairing and subordination of the other. M. Keith Booker encapsulates this binary mode and its association with Western culture:

From Nietzsche's transvaluation of values to the dialogics of Bakhtin to the deconstructive project of Jacques Derrida, a number of modern thinkers have argued that the dualistic thinking so central to the history of Western

civilization has tended inevitably toward the establishment of hierarchies—one term in a pair is privileged over the other so that what is “good” becomes defined from its difference from what is “bad.” (“Beauty” 991–92)⁶

Arguably, one manifestation of the binary mode may be recognized in Western chauvinism toward non-Western peoples. The profound political significance of this attitude is articulated by Said:

Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying “us” Europeans as against all “those” non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. (*Orientalism* 7)

For his part Achebe interweaves into his fictional narratives a contrapuntal approach that, even when distinctions such as “us versus them” are made, legitimizes multiple concepts and subjects rather than one over the other. In *Things Fall Apart* Uchendu, the uncle of protagonist Okonkwo, gestures to the “us versus them” way of viewing others. But Uchendu’s very manner of articulating such an outlook suggests that human communities tend to see other communities unfavorably—so that their judgment in these matters is hardly absolute: “‘The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others’” (141).

Uchendu affirms the multiple voices and viewpoints to which Achebe elsewhere draws explicit attention: “The Igbo people don’t like one-way traffic . . . don’t want anything absolute” (*Chinua Achebe: Africa’s Voice* ch. 19). This discomfort with one-way traffic is reflected in the resistance of Achebe’s fiction to ideological definition. Certainly British and missionary assumptions are challenged in, for example, *Things Fall Apart*, but the novel does not uniformly condemn them any more than it avoids descriptions of Igbo customs that would disturb many readers. The missionaries, after all, offer a needed refuge to Okonkwo’s son Nwoye, who has been wounded not only by his father’s brutality but also by indigenous customs—including the abandonment of infant twins. Here and elsewhere Achebe’s fiction offers, rather than polemical assertions, imaginative negotiations of complex experience, negotiations perfectly consistent with the Igbo manner of organizing experience: “There is nothing that is beyond discussion, beyond negotiation . . . [in] the Igbo culture” (*Chinua Achebe:*

Africa's Voice ch. 19; *Chinua Achebe* 2). As these comments suggest, the negotiations that Achebe delineates, whether over Umuofia's core values or the real worth of missionary endeavors in Umuofia, are rarely given closure. So while Achebe celebrates Igbo duality, he does not write what in *A Theory of Narrative* Rick Altman designates as "dual-focus narratives." These narratives

begin by division into two antithetical groups and principles, both striving to govern the same space. The text serves to resolve the conflict and reduce duality to unity, subordinating all aspects of the narrative universe to a single, well-established system protected by rules assuring its continued existence. (119)

Such unity or "one-way traffic" along with the tidy resolution of conflict is precisely what Achebe's novels withhold, even though they reach decisive closing points. Indeed, *No Longer at Ease*'s protagonist Obi Okonkwo might well be expressing Achebe's own view as he propounds his theory of tragedy during an interview: "'Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever'" (45–46). The *particular* unresolved tensions of Achebe's fiction (out of countless such tensions in the storytelling realm) serve as an emblem of the Igbo embrace of multiple viewpoints that guides Achebe's narrative vision. This vision brings to the English novel not only an alternative view of Africa, but also, in some degree, an African consciousness.

Achebe's choices concerning narrative perspective and linguistic foundation, choices that would carry deeply political implications, were not, of course, the only rational ones for a twentieth-century African writer to make. Achebe as well as other African authors devised a number of valuable means to traverse boundaries between African and colonial languages, between diverse African societies, and between African writers and global audiences. The border crossings implemented by these writers have included rendering in English the characteristic syntax of an African language (Peters 22; see Okara); using other verbal cues to make English stand for an African language or narrative style; and embedding translated or transliterated African expressions in dialogue and narrative (see Achebe, "African Writer" 100–103; Lindfors, *Folklore* 168–70). What may be argued here is that Achebe made an essential contribution to the development of techniques that give African dimensions to Europhone imaginative writing and that these techniques express more than linguistic

and cultural cross-fertilization: they carry linguistic challenges to the hegemony of the colonizing language. Still another path that these challenges have taken is to reject the former colonizer's language for the writing of African creative literature, a path ultimately pursued by renowned Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. To be sure, many African authors have written throughout their careers in African languages, but after writing and publishing numerous important novels in English, Ngũgĩ eventually decided to employ his native Gĩkũyũ in the composition of the original fictional work while using translation, including his own, to reach a wider audience. (Aspects of Ngũgĩ's decision are addressed in [Chapter 4](#).) Our understanding of Ngũgĩ's change of direction in this matter may be further illuminated by another Mandela remark: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart" ("Mandela"). One readily infers from these words the communicative and emotional power of the mother tongue as a literary vehicle.

At the same time, Achebe's Igbo-inflected literary English appears to bridge his head and his heart and allows him to appeal to these faculties in his audience, large segments of which may not have heard him speak in the first place without English's mediatory potential. In part Achebe's fiction finds its purchase in the folding of Igbo diction, oral art, song, and narrative method into a lucid English foundation (see Gikandi, Foreword xiii). In this vein, Angela F. Miri focuses on Achebe's "rooting [of] the modern in the tradition" through such "oral speech patterns" as "repetitions," "etiological formula[s]," "digression[s]," and "the use of annexions and conjunctions" (101–108). Concerning the last of these phrases, Miri draws attention to the "double connective 'and so'": "Achebe finds in this combination an ideal way of summarizing the context of an elaborate argument or for underlining the effect of a certain action: 'And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka [had] loved.... And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth'" (Miri 101–108; *Things Fall Apart* 13–14). These important narrative observations in Achebe's first novel derive vitality from the oral manner the narrator employs.

Thus Achebe's fiction, while written in English, has exposed many readers to features of discourse and narrative in an indigenous West African language and (as explored in [Chapter 5](#)) to Nigerian Pidgin. Yet Achebe's purpose is not simply to use English to convey the resources of an African language, but also to Africanize English. In his 1964 essay "The

African Writer and the English Language” (considered further in [Chapter 4](#)), Achebe suggests that the integration of African-language features by African authors cultivates a “new English,” one that submits to a “different kind[] of use,” that “is able to carry [the African writer’s] peculiar experience,” that is “still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (100, 103). These points are echoed in a 1982 article, “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance,” by Salman Rushdie, who, concerned mainly with “the new literatures of Africa, the Caribbean and India,” identifies Achebe, Ngũgĩ (whose Gĩkũyũ writing is not mentioned), and several other distinguished writers as contributors to the development of a “decolonized” English, one being “remade in other images” (8). Rushdie takes note of the “mythology, parable, song, oral traditions and other roots” drawn on by “many . . . contemporary African and Caribbean writers” as part of the process that is “forging English into new shapes” (8). Certainly in Achebe’s writing these traditions help galvanize and contextualize the portrayals of African life during both historical and contemporary eras. Yet also, as Rushdie’s remarks make clear (and as [Chapter 4](#) elaborates), they contribute to a political counter-discourse conducted within the boundaries of English literature while altering those boundaries.

In his essay “The Truth of Fiction” (1989), Achebe declares, “actually, art is man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence *through his imagination*” (139, Achebe’s emphasis). This no doubt describes Achebe’s fundamental orientation as a writer, one that imparts a visionary dimension to his writing, but in no way did such an orientation render him a naïve idealist. As Nadine Gordimer observed in 1988, Achebe is “a writer who has no illusions but is not disillusioned” (qtd. in Kandell). What he understood as both a visionary and a realist is that “language is always interested” (Booker, “*Finnegans Wake*” 202–203), that his language as an African author of Anglophone fiction was politically resonant. In keeping, moreover, with Emmanuel Obiechina’s assertion, Achebe recognized from an early point that “the African writer has to correct the false impressions of African life contained in foreign writing on Africa” (*Culture* 24–25). In brief, Achebe understood that his literary contribution necessarily would create volatile political currents, including ones that would run counter to the “false impressions” Obiechina mentions. Although the elements of orature that infuse Achebe’s writing help express Igbo verbal style and finesse, these

elements provide more than ornamental flair; they play an integral role in the expression of communal views and reveal colonialism's impact on Igbo identity. Traditional cultures and colonialism's impact on them have a bearing on the identity and value structure of contemporary society: [Chapter 8](#), which further develops this volume's meditation on language and the politics of narration, seeks to convey useful classroom approaches to Achebe's dramatization of cultural tradition, and to the related literary, ethical, and historical insights that he addresses.

II. CHINUA ACHEBE

Achebe's own life merits examination as part of an analysis of language and politics in his narratives because he personally navigated competing, politically volatile structures of power. He demonstrated along the way a combination of respect and defiance toward tradition and authority that his fiction dramatizes. Achebe's role as a late colonial and postcolonial African artist and spokesman, his perspectives on Metropolitan culture and Nigerian politics to a vast African and international audience, and his creation of a narrative counterpoint comprising African and Western traditions, paralleled the negotiations, and bridging, of contested spheres of discourse and influence in his fictional narratives. Furthermore, Achebe's extensive exposure as a youth to Anglophone literature provided him with the tools he needed to translate Igbo perspectives and cultural traditions to a wide range of readers in Africa and beyond.

The author's international stature arose initially from recognition of *Things Fall Apart*'s portrayal of an authentic African view of African culture and of colonialism on the continent. Read around the world either in the original English or in one of many translations, the 1958 novel dramatizes in an accessible and incisive manner the integrity of a traditional African society and the divisive, destabilizing impact of Christian missionary work and colonial domination. Achebe's reputation as a writer and as a commentator on an array of cultural and political questions continued to grow with the publication of not only his four other novels, but also his short fiction, children's books, poetry, memoir, essays; with the many interviews he granted; and with his work as a broadcaster, speaker, editor, and teacher. Although he spent many years in the United States, Achebe is widely regarded as one of the most important voices of modern Africa. Individuals who spent time with him, moreover, speak warmly and admiringly of him as a person. Lindfors, for example,

recalls him as a “wonderful person” (Keynote), while Michael Thelwell observes that Achebe’s greatness as a man made his writing consequential (Roundtable). And Ngũgĩ states, “He was the single most important figure in the development of modern African literature as writer, editor and, quite simply, a human being. . . . As a human being, he embodied wisdom that comes from a commitment to the middle way between extremes. And, of course, courage in the face of personal tragedy!” (“Encounters” 761).

Achebe was christened Albert Chinualumogu Achebe on November 16, 1930 in Nnobi, in the southeastern part of colonial Nigeria, and when he was 5 his family moved to Ikenga village in Ogidi, another Igbo community in the region. Achebe’s great-uncle, Udo Osinyi, had been a leader in Ogidi and possessed a reputation for tolerance. As a young man Achebe’s orphaned father, the nephew of Udo Osinyi, abandoned traditional Igbo religious practices, becoming an early Ogidi convert to Christianity. He was baptized around 1904 as Isaiah Okafor Achebe, and in that year he was sent by the Church Mission Society (CMS) from Ikenga village in Ogidi to St. Paul’s Teachers College in Awka, becoming one of its first students. While enrolled there he met Janet Anaenechi Iloegbunam, the daughter of a blacksmith, and although the preliminary protocols of their marriage observed Igbo tradition, their wedding ceremony was conducted in an Ogidi church in 1909. The couple raised their family, moreover, according to their firm Christian faith, and Isaiah was employed by CMS as a catechist and missionary, while Janet worked as a leader among church women and as a vegetable farmer. Chinua, their fifth surviving child and fourth son, was highly attentive to the vestiges of traditional Igbo culture around him and showed exceptional academic talent from an early age. He read avidly, and his formal education followed the British colonial and church curricula available to promising students. It included study as well of African cultures and languages. Achebe attended St. Philip’s Central School, Ogidi, and Nekede Central School, where his brother John taught, and later won prestigious scholarships to the Government College, Umuahia, and University College, Ibadan, from which he graduated in 1953 with specialties in English, theology, and history (having followed a medical curriculum during his first year).⁷ When he was still young, Achebe’s vocation as an author asserted itself. He saw a bookshelf filled with classical literature and the names of eminent authors, such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Dickens. He noticed, though, an empty space amid the volumes and thought, “that space is for my

book,” already aware that his story and that of his people had not been told to a broad international audience (Chidi Achebe).

Although Achebe was chiefly recognized as an author, he made contributions in other areas as well. In 1954 he undertook one of his many teaching positions, instructing students in English and history at a recently established rural secondary school in Oba, not distant from his hometown. Over several decades Achebe taught literature at both African and American schools, including the University of Massachusetts, the University of Nigeria, the City University of New York, Bard College, and, at the time of his death on March 21, 2013, at Brown University. Achebe’s work at Oba as a teacher was brief, however, as he was hired later in 1954 to be a producer for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, which became the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in 1961 (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 55–56, 84). In that year—shortly after Nigerian independence—NBC appointed him director of external broadcasting, and the same year saw his marriage to Christiana Chinwe Okoli (Christie), with whom he raised two daughters (Chinelo and Nwando) and two sons (Chidi and Ikechukwu). Christie, who worked at NBS and met her husband there, earned a Ph.D. in Education Counseling at the University of Massachusetts and has taught at University of Nigeria, Nsukka and at Bard College (Egejuru 4). Achebe also served without pay from 1962 to 1972 as the first general editor and adviser to the African Writers Series, published by Heinemann. During his tenure in this position 100 titles were published in the series, and he encouraged many authors of novels, poetry, plays, and political memoirs, helping to introduce them to an international audience. These writers included Cyprian Ekwensi, Kenneth Kaunda, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Nkem Nwankwo, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Okot p’Bitek (Buxó 11).

Achebe’s work at NBC came to end in 1966 when the persecution of the Igbo that led to the Nigeria–Biafra War (also called the Nigerian Civil War; 1967–70) forced him to leave Lagos. He then returned to southeastern Nigeria, the homeland of, among others, the Igbo people, and in 1967 this part of the nation declared itself the independent Republic of Biafra, which is the focus of Achebe’s memoir, *There Was a Country*. The author supported, and served as an international spokesman for, Biafra during the Civil War. He was appointed by the Biafran leader, General Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, to chair the National Guidance Committee, which drafted the Ahia Declaration, a proclamation of Biafra’s foundational principles (*There Was a Country* 144–49). Yet the Biafran cause was doomed, and the new nation suffered catastrophic losses to the federal government with its vastly superior

resources, partly as a result of the latter's blockade on Biafra. According to various estimates between two and three million Biafrans perished (and the number may have been higher), with a large proportion dying from malnutrition and disease. (See, for example, Achebe, *There Was a Country* 226–27, 312n.3–4, 6.) Although the Achebe family survived the anti-Igbo violence that led to war and the war itself, just managing to avoid harm (see, for example, Achebe, *There Was a Country* 70, 182), they endured losses of various kinds. Aspects of the war and its consequences in relation to Biafra, Achebe, and his family are sketched in the present volume's [Chapter 7](#), which more broadly addresses the closing trilogy of *Girls at War and Other Stories* and Achebe's portrayal there of the Nigeria–Biafra War's effects on Biafran communities.

The war proved a defining moment for Achebe's life and career. In the early 1980s he attempted to play a direct constructive role in Nigerian politics as a member of the left-of-center People's Redemption Party and served briefly as its appointed Deputy National President. He reflected, however, that his "sojourn in politics was marked by disappointment, frustration, and the realization that . . . that the vast majority of the characters I encountered in the political circles were there for their own selfish advancement" (*There Was a Country* 244). As for his literary career, Achebe himself observed that "probably . . . the very traumatic history that we have had in Nigeria . . . of the Biafran war as well as before and after" played a role in the twenty-one-year hiatus between his 1966 novel, *A Man of the People*, and his fifth and final novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*; but this "was not a period of silence . . . I was expressing myself in other ways, in other activities, in those years" (Interview with Jussawala 64–65). The war itself became a focus of his creative attention in both poetry and short stories. One volume of poetry, *Beware, Soul-Brother and Other Poems*, appeared in 1971 (and was later published in the United States, in a revised and expanded edition, as *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*), while Achebe's previously mentioned volume of short fiction, *Girls at War and Other Stories*, was published in 1972 and includes not only three outstanding stories directly related to the war, but also stories that he had written well before it.

Still, out of his numerous and diverse written works, Achebe's novels have attracted the most attention, and their inclusion in the curricula of social science as well as literature classes is attributable in part to his talent for locating, particularizing, and narrating themes that have conditioned a century of life in his native Nigeria, in Africa in general, and in the post-colonial world. *Things Fall Apart* portrays the British and Christian

missionary forces arrayed against coherent cultural survival in Igboland. Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, published two years after *Things Fall Apart*, takes up the story of the Okonkwo family two generations after the demise of Okonkwo. Set in the late 1950s, it depicts Obi Okonkwo's embrace of British education, Western modernity, and a concept of Nigeria that in essential ways was already defined by the soon-to-depart colonizer. Here it may be noted that, like Obi and prior to the civil war, Achebe had been, by his own wartime account, "a Nigerian and a great believer in Nigerian unity.... I knew and loved Nigeria. Now I do no longer" ("In Reply to Margery Perham" [1968], qtd. in Ezenwa-Ohaeto 139). Even in the absence of war Obi Okonkwo, despite his privileged position as a senior civil servant, is unable to negotiate the lingering claims of cultural tradition and the endemic corruption of the late colonial state. His ultimate disgrace prophesies the danger that lay ahead for the postcolonial African nation. *Arrow of God*, Achebe's third novel, treats the attempts by a traditional head priest, Ezeulu, and other members of a recently colonized Nigerian village to accommodate the new colonial regime and religion while maintaining elements of their own cultural heritage.

An almost prescient discernment proved to be one of Achebe's skills, and the political causes and effects that the author fictionally delineated not only in *No Longer at Ease* but also the more satiric *A Man of the People* transformed uncannily, if harshly, into political reality. The latter novel's evocation of a military takeover of a newly independent, democratic, but corrupt African government so closely anticipated events that unfolded in Nigeria immediately after the novel's publication that Achebe was actually sought by soldiers during the mass slaughter of Igbos that led to civil war. The soldiers were apparently intent on killing him and believed somehow that the accuracy of events in the novel meant that the writer had information known only to the highest-ranking Igbo military leaders, who were decimated during the slaughter (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 115). Achebe observed in relation to the varied catastrophes that have faced Nigeria and many other nations subsequent to their independence that "the colonial situation does not prepare people for independence." Rather,

[the British] practiced a colonial system, a totalitarian system, whether in Africa or India or wherever. So, to expect the colonial subject to have imbibed the Westminster model during the colonial period is farcical. Because there was no Westminster model practiced in the colonies; there was no training. No matter how long the system continued, you would not

get that training. The Portuguese were in Angola for five hundred years. They did not train the Angolans, because it's a colonial system, a system of servitude. (Interview with Jussawalla 66)

Achebe connects this postcolonial political bind to the rise of greedy and corrupt leaders in various African nations and portrays such a leader in *A Man of the People*. This is Chief the Honourable Micah A. Nanga, of whom Achebe remarks: “a leader like [Nanga] is utterly alienated from his community—is perhaps the greatest evil, the worst consequence of colonization.... The colonialists wanted somebody who can run this foreign, alien institution for the advantage of the colonial power” (Interview with Jussawalla 69).

Although twenty-one years separate *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, and although the tone and structuring of the two novels differ, Achebe elaborates in *Anthills* on some of the same dilemmas he raised in the earlier novel: the ruthless drive for political power in an African nation, the processes that corrupt that power, and the heavy impact of Western influences on those processes. One source of hope that may be discerned in the volatile context that Achebe portrays in both novels is the goodness and decency of some exceptional and ordinary people. His heroes in *Anthills* are those who have the courage to resist co-optation and alienation, who have the potential to become leaders of both small and large national communities, and who draw for inspiration on African traditions that are adapted to the contemporary environment. Yet individual good will is clearly insufficient, and while Achebe offers in this novel no elaborate model for African political success, he does make clear that the bane of so many struggling African nations is the recurring consolidation of power by autocratic rulers or ruling elites.

As may be evident, Achebe could be a stern critic of colonial and post-colonial Western domination and exploitation of Africa and the cultural, racial, and economic arrogance on which such domination rests. Periodically, nevertheless, he was criticized for being too mild in his strictures against the West and for writing mainly in English. Certainly Achebe’s varied oeuvre attests to a humane vision that honors the arts and progressive contributions of many cultures—including those of the West—and that resists narrow political categorization. While he presented a clear-eyed view of the cultural, political, and economic ravages imposed on the non-Western world by Western systems of power and influence since the colonial era, he also cast a withering eye on the injustices and failures of leadership in Africa,

particularly those in his native Nigeria. This is reflected not only in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *There Was a Country*, but also in his brief 1983 volume *The Trouble with Nigeria*, which consists of analyses of Nigeria's ills as well as proposals for their remediation. Booker observes that "*The Trouble with Nigeria* indicates a turn back toward an engagement with problems of the Nigerian nation . . . [and] offer[s] definitive evidence that [Achebe] had once more embraced the concept of united Nigeria after the debacle of Biafra" ("Chinua Achebe" 3).

The volume's blunt first sentence reads: "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (1). Achebe also indicates that one of Nigeria's strengths lies in its diverse population and that the nation's long-standing interethnic rivalry obstructs the realization of this strength. In *The Trouble with Nigeria*, moreover, Achebe praises Mallam Aminu Kano, an important Muslim Nigerian politician and reformer who was an advocate for democracy and women's rights, and the movement that he led in the 1940s that opposed British rule. Achebe hoped that Kano, who was a Member of Parliament and Minister for Health in Nigeria, would be a model for future Nigerian politicians. Noteworthy, too, in *The Trouble with Nigeria* is Achebe's suggestion that the dangers associated with Nigerian roadways are emblematic of the failures of discipline and leadership in Nigeria in general (Booker, "Trouble" 265–67). This was not the only time that the author invoked these dangers in support of a point, for in his essay "The Truth of Fiction," first delivered as the Convocation Lecture at the University of Ife in 1978, he observes that "our imagination can . . . giv[e] us in a wide range of human situations the closest approximation to experience that we are ever likely to get, and sometimes the safest too, as anyone who has travelled on Nigerian roads can tell you! For it is hardly desirable to be run over by a car in order to *know* that automobiles are dangerous" (145). These allusions to driving problems in Nigeria would come to seem grimly clairvoyant when Achebe was badly injured in a 1990 car crash outside Lagos, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down for the remainder of his life (see Booker, "Trouble" 266; Kandell).

Arguably individual integrity and the democratic principle inform Achebe's very conception of the relationship between the ruler and the writer: "Our future depends on this constant putting together of the past and the present through the story.... The struggle and the conflict between [storyteller] and the ruler, the emperor, is also something we mustn't take lightly. It is important that the storyteller tells the story the

way he sees it, not the way the emperor wants it to be told” (Interview with Jussawalla 81). Achebe’s direct yet dignified efforts to speak truth to power, to bring the past and future into a working relationship, and to convey vital elements of African traditions and modern political reality to Africans and non-Africans alike, earned him lasting international acclaim. Among the many honors bestowed on the author were the 1972 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, the 1979 Nigerian National Order of Merit and Order of the Federal Republic, and the 2007 Man Booker International Prize. Achebe twice declined, however, Nigeria’s high national honor of being named a Commander of the Federal Republic. In both cases he did so as a protest at government malfeasance, writing in 2004 directly to the sitting President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, and releasing a statement to Nigerian media in 2011, during Goodluck Jonathan’s Presidency, in which he wrote: “the reasons for rejecting the offer when it was first made have not been addressed let alone solved. It is inappropriate to offer it again to me” (qtd. in Flood). Such a rejection reminds us that, while Achebe sought “middle ground” as a writer and public figure, his commitment was not to the social mainstream. Rather, the defining tension of his career proved to be between, on the one hand, his abiding hopes for his homeland, along with his admiration of its people and cultures, and, on the other, his frustration with official corruption and its detrimental political effects. Neither his fiction nor non-fiction provides facile solutions to the latter scourges, but they make clear, nevertheless, that moral courage of the kind he demonstrated both as an artist and a person would be essential.

NOTES

1. Concerning the articulation of the African viewpoint, as well as other elements of the present discussion, see Achebe’s comment in *There Was a Country: A Memoir*:

Writing has always been a serious business for me. I felt it was a moral obligation. A major concern of the time [the independence era] was the absence of the African voice. Being part of that dialogue meant not only sitting at the table but effectively telling the African story from an African perspective—in full earshot of the world. . . . It was important to us [writers] that a body of work be developed of the highest possible quality that would oppose the negative discourse in some of the novels we encountered. By “writing back” to the West we were attempting to

reshape the dialogue between the colonized and the colonizer. Our efforts, we hoped, would broaden the world's understanding, appreciation, and conceptualization of what literature meant when including the African voice and perspective. (53, 55)

2. See Elleke Boehmer: "The death of the African literary giant Chinua Achebe, at the age of eighty-two, on 21 March 2013, will do nothing to dim his assured status as one of the most important writers of the twentieth century.... Here was a writer whose vision had shaped not only [Nigeria's] understanding of itself but also, and as profoundly, Anglophone world letters" ("Achebe" 237).
3. In *There Was a Country* Achebe states that "the Igbo are a very democratic people" (246) and recalls that, as a member of Biafra's National Guidance Committee,

[he] preferred democratic institutions not in the purely Western sense but in a fusion of the good ideas of the West with the best that we had produced in our ancient African civilizations. It was not enough in my view to state that we wanted to be radical and create a left-wing manifesto, but we also certainly did not want to be right wing. It was that ancient traditional virtue I wanted to channel into the Ahia Declaration. (*There Was a Country* 146–47)

He also asserts in that volume that "it is [now] a time to work at developing, nurturing, sustaining, and protecting democracy and democratic institutions" (247).

4. In *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, for example, Achebe characterizes "Fanaticism" as "The One Way, One Truth, One Life menace" (5). For other comments by Achebe that challenge unreflective adherence to a single point of view, see in Chapter 8 the quotation from his interview with Robert Serumaga and the related endnote.
5. Achebe himself makes a related point: "So we were very much a people of the Church.... But you see I took it [Igbo cultural traditions such as dancing, singing, and masquerades] all in. And in retrospect that was really what created the tension in me that a story needs to come about" (*Chinua Achebe: Africa's Voice* ch. 6).
6. Booker would also include Michel Foucault's critique of such thinking as one of the most important. Also, Booker rightly stipulates that dualistic thinking is not embraced in the West alone ("Beauty" 992). With regard to the subordinating effects of colonial dualistic concepts, an essential contribution is that by Frantz Fanon, who, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "was able to characterize the colonial dichotomy (colonizer–

colonized) as the product of a ‘manichaeism delerium’ [a term used in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*], the result of which condition is a radical division into paired oppositions such as good–evil; true–false; white–black, in which the primary sign is axiomatically privileged in the discourse of the colonial relationship” (*Empire* 124–25).

7. Sources consulted for this overview of Chinua Achebe’s life and education include his memoir, *There Was a Country*; Egejuru; Ezenwa-Ohaeto.

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CHAPTER 2

An Adequate Revolution: Achebe Writes Africa Anew

“Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement.... For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul.... I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.”

—Chinua Achebe, “The Novelist as Teacher” (71–72)

“Does the white man understand our custom about land?”

“How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?”

— Things Fall Apart (176)

Achebe’s seminal contribution not only to African, English, and world literatures, but also to a generational shift in African and international perceptions of Africa, is tied to his multifaceted use and representation of language (see Gikandi, Foreword; “Invention”). At either end of *Things Fall Apart*, for example, is a passage that foregrounds the role of language and that resonates within and beyond the confines of the book. A scene near the beginning illustrates that “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly” (7), while at the novel’s conclusion, a British officer contemplates writing a book about “the pacification” of various West African peoples (209). That concluding scene represents Western

modes of thinking and writing about Africa, while the earlier scene introduces the linguistic methods by which Achebe will challenge these modes. What Achebe's treatment of language in these and other passages affirms is the profound integrity of an African society; what it supports is the ongoing restructuring of a global vision of Africa.

In *Things Fall Apart*'s coda, as soon as he has discovered and given orders for the handling of the lifeless body of the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, the unnamed British District Commissioner reflects on his book and the title that he already has in mind: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. While of course Okonkwo's suicide generates many questions in the minds of readers, this scene also raises important concerns about the District Commissioner, who is partly responsible for precipitating Okonkwo's death, as well as the Commissioner's prospective book. Having followed the arc of Okonkwo's life over the course of an entire novel, a reader may be struck by the limited scope the Officer proposes to give Okonkwo. He tells himself:

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. (208–209)

Although the District Commissioner's book would be non-fiction, the way in which he proposes to treat his subject is suggestive of the features of European fiction about Africa that prompted Achebe to write *Things Fall Apart* in the first place.

A comment about this literary background is in order before returning to the Commissioner. In British literature of the colonial period, individual Africans—their inner lives and psychic complexities—were rarely explored. Rather, when they did appear in fiction set in Africa, they were routinely employed as secondary or background figures, adding piquancy to the adventures of Europeans in Africa. “European[] notions about a mysterious Africa,” writes Jonathan Peters, “had held on for centuries and had been made popular in the colonial period through novelists like [Sir Henry Rider] Haggard, [Joseph] Conrad, and [Joyce] Cary” (15). The connection between adventurous travel and a fanciful notion of Africa is reflected in the dissemination through European “travel books” of “prejudices and myths about Africa” (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 44). As for novelists, focusing sustained psychological attention on individual Africans would spoil the mystery, and, in any case, one can scarcely escape the conclusion that these and other European writers considered Africans to be not interesting enough for

focused interrogation. Haggard's enormously popular novel, *King's Solomon's Mines* (1885), includes dramatic scenes that hinge on African mysteries that fatefully draw European characters, and although it does attempt to give certain Africans occasional prominence and dignity, it invariably falls back on denigrating stereotypes of their simple mental qualities. In addition, the language barrier discouraged Europeans from creating penetrating dramatizations of the lives of Africans.

In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1975), which has had the greatest impact of any Achebe essay (see Wise 115–16), the author shows the connection between, on the one hand, the habitual European view of Africans as lacking a human status equal to their own, and, on the other, the ways in which the language barrier prevented Europeans from making more truthful representations of Africans and justified their demeaning attitudes toward them. To be sure, Achebe recognizes that the dehumanization of Africans by Westerners had material benefits for the latter: "[Some of] the first Europeans [who] came to Africa . . . persuaded themselves that Africa had no culture, no religion, and no history. It was a convenient conclusion, because it opened the door for all sorts of rationalizations for the exploitation that followed" (*There Was a Country* 54). But Conrad's presentation of Africans in his widely read novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) demands particular attention because it sympathizes with the plight of Africans under Belgium's cruel colonial yoke and because of its high literary status.¹ Yet, as Achebe indicates, the story depicts Africans partly through animalistic and savage imagery and deprives them of anything approaching a profound or subtle language: "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth" (19). The elements in the novella that demean Africans and their speech help deprive them of a humanity equivalent to that of Europeans. Though Conrad was exceptionally proficient in European languages, he likely would not have had the training to render African dialogue credibly.

Nevertheless, *Heart of Darkness*'s central narrator, Marlow, whose journey up the Congo river traces the one that Conrad himself had made in 1890, does not concede that his lack of knowledge of an African language is a significant hindrance to his communication with Africans or is the reason that what Africans say to each other goes unreported. Rather, Africans appear to be the ones who are linguistically deficient, which suggests that their thought patterns are shallow. Conrad's readers, and possibly Conrad himself, would not have been troubled by such distortions, since these would have been camouflaged

by the already prevalent belief that African languages and views were rudimentary. In his essay on *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe elucidates Conrad's slanted treatment of African language and his resulting degradation of Africans:

It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. In place of speech they made "a violent babble of uncouth sounds." They "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy.... Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind [the mind of the story's Mr. Kurtz]? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. (8, 12; Conrad 51, 22, 42)

Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness* can help inform our understanding of *Things Fall Apart*'s final passage, in which the District Commissioner anticipates his paragraph about Okonkwo and reveals attitudes about Africans that will underlie the book he plans to write.

One may ask why "one of the greatest men of Umuofia" (208) is worth only a paragraph in the book. From the District Commissioner's perspective, a more probing treatment of a "primitive" mind would require unnecessary "details." Another question concerns the quality of insight that the book might be expected to demonstrate given, among other factors, the language barrier. Undoubtedly the officer will rely on an interpreter, as he does in his dealings with the people of Umuofia (193), despite the evident limitation of this method: "The Commissioner did not understand what Obierika [Okonkwo's best friend] meant when he said, 'Perhaps your men will help us'" (207). But since a man in his position might think of African languages as rudimentary, an interpreter would appear sufficient. Indeed, the narrative reveals a dismissive quality in the officer's attitude toward African speech: his initial reaction to that consequential remark by Obierika is to think, "One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words" (206). Especially since his lack of understanding has helped bring about Okonkwo's death, we may ask, finally, why the District Commissioner

feels qualified to write about Okonkwo at all. The officer sees African societies as inferior and sees himself as an emissary of an enlightened nation: “We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy” (194). He could well believe, therefore, that he has the capacity to understand “these people.” As Achebe writes in the essay “Colonialist Criticism,” “To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: ‘I know my natives,’ a claim which implied . . . that the native was really quite simple” (71).

Haggard and Conrad, of course, were not the only prominent Western novelists to translate their experiences of colonial Africa into fiction. The Anglo-Irish writer Joyce Cary, for example, published *Mister Johnson* in (1939). This novel is an exception to numerous other British colonial novels in that it revolves around an African, specifically the Nigerian title character. For Achebe, however, it only contributed to his awareness of the inadequacy of European representations of Africa (see “Named” 38; Ezenwa-Ohaeto 44, 100; Interview with Bill Moyers, qtd. in Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* 6). He has said that his reading of *Mister Johnson* was a factor that played an influential role in the eventual composition of *Things Fall Apart*:

I was quite certain that I was going to try my hand at writing, and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary’s novel set in Nigeria, *Mister Johnson*, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that this was a most superficial picture . . . and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside. (Interview with Nkosi 4; see also “Named” 38)

Cary’s protagonist, Johnson, a local agent for British colonial concerns, is juvenile and unscrupulous, and simply on the basis of his characterization one understands why Achebe would think a different story was needed. But also Achebe’s remark that “perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside” indicates that a crucial ingredient for a different story would be a teller who knew intimately an African society and its language.

Yet to discover an even fuller picture of the social and political currents related to language that motivated Achebe to embark on his first novel, one may turn to its sequel, *No Longer at Ease*, which is set in the 1950s and which Achebe originally meant to be part of the same volume as *Things Fall Apart*. Overlapping themes bind the two novels, and *No Longer at Ease*, in addition to its own considerable merits, also rewards

readers of *Things Fall Apart* by illuminating the author's concepts for the original project. Its protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, is Okonkwo's grandson and Nwoye's (that is, Isaac Okonkwo's) son. He earns a university degree in English in England and returns to modern Lagos, assuming a post in the British civil service of the late colonial period. Yet Obi still remembers a particularly painful experience he had in England involving African language: "when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own" (57). Of course Obi knows that the linguistic reality is altogether different, that the Igbo language and conversation of his birthplace, Umuofia, are rich and exquisitely nuanced, and this awareness touches him with particular force when he returns to Umuofia for the first time after his university studies: "He wished they [the proud owners of English] were here today to see. Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live" (57).

Obi's reflections are replicated in a sense by Achebe himself at the conclusion of his *Heart of Darkness* essay. In the novel, Obi feels the sting of having his language judged by a proud people who are ignorant of it, but he finds at least a partial remedy in affirming to himself the value of his language and the people who speak it. In the essay, Achebe writes of an American newspaper article that, while using the word "language" to refer to Western languages like Spanish and Italian, uses the word "dialects" to refer to the languages of India and Nigeria. He contends that "this is quite comparable to Conrad withholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let's give them dialects!" Achebe continues, "In all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done not only to the image of despised peoples but even to words, the very tools of possible redress" (19). Obi Okonkwo recalls the humiliation that English ignorance of African language causes him, but he also finds a remedy in language, and a parallel notion is suggested at this point in the *Heart of Darkness* essay: "violence is done...words...the very tools of possible redress." Furthermore, in light of Achebe's own experience with Conrad, Cary, and those European authors who, when he was younger, had made it impossible for him to identify with African

characters (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 44, 100), who took him over to “the side of the white man” in opposition to “the savages [who] were after him” (Interview with Bill Moyers, qtd. in Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* 6), *Things Fall Apart*, too, may be regarded as a means of using language to heal damage caused by the West’s ignorance of African language and society. Indeed, that damage may be said to accrue from Westerners’ arrogant obliviousness to their own ignorance and, in the event, their willingness to impose, through force and other measures, their concepts and priorities on colonized peoples.

Not only does Achebe’s narrator invoke much the same phrase early in *Things Fall Apart*—“Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly” (7)—that is placed in Obi’s thoughts in its sequel, but also the entire *Things Fall Apart* passage that includes the phrase, like most of the book, shares the spirit of Obi’s celebratory response to hearing the language of his hometown. It treats the encounter between a prosperous man named Okoye and Okonwo’s father, Unoka, who is a financial “failure” (6). Okoye seeks repayment of a loan he made to Unoka, who has no intention of repaying it. The verbal parrying between the two is both rich and subtle, employing a range of rhetorical flourishes and maneuvers:

“Thank you for the kola. You may have heard of the title I intend to take shortly.”

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally. In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two hundred cowries he had borrowed from him more than two years before. As soon as Unoka understood what his friend was driving at, he burst out laughing. He laughed loud and long and his voice rang out clear as the *ogene*, and tears stood in his eyes. His visitor was amazed, and sat speechless.

Pointing to groups of markings on the wall of his hut, Unoka tells Okoye:

“Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it

shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first." And he took another pinch of snuff, as if that was paying the big debts first. Okoye rolled his goatskin and departed. (7–8)

Part of what a reader notices in this exchange is its varied texture, which, even more than fifty years after *Things Fall Apart*'s first publication, exudes a vibrant and authentic tone. In the course of the novel Achebe introduces a range of devices associated with Igbo oral art, including, as in the present passages, traditional proverbs, and these devices have helped shape the form of Anglophone African literature (Gikandi, "Invention" xvii). Here and elsewhere in the novel (as well as in *Arrow of God* and other Achebe works), the Igbo-language dialogue, including the proverbial element, is rendered in a dignified, measured manner (Riddy 151).² Oyekan Owomoyela confirms that "traditional African discourse tends to rely to a considerable degree on proverbs" and also suggests that the stately cadence of Igbo speech in Achebe's early novels is achieved through his use of relatively simple words derived from Anglo-Saxon ("Question" 358-59). This method, too, is evident in Okoye and Unoka's previously quoted exchange.

All of Achebe's novels, including those set in a modern milieu, make clear that the author saw in traditional Igbo proverbs a powerful mode of discourse that contributed to the narrative a distinctly African voice and manner of organizing experience. As suggested in the previous chapter, the Igbo perspective in which Achebe partly grounds his fiction is oriented to the principle of negotiation and the validity of multiple points of view. While Unoka's failure to repay his loan is not justified by his appeal to the proverb about whom the sun shines on first, that proverb does lend firmness to his response to Okoye and some dignity to his defense, and Okoye implicitly registers these when he "roll[s] his goatskin and depart[s]."³ Unoka is not absolved from the irresponsibility that marks his life and that apparently takes it away through malnutrition, but his give-and-take with Okoye and other aspects of his portrayal encompass positive aspects of his humanity, including musical skill and gentleness (4–5, 6–8, 13). Through this nuanced characterization we are reminded that Unoka is a person, not a mere buffoon, villain, or dismissible term in a binary structure.³ From this perspective the portrayal of Unoka reflects the previously discussed Igbo principle of balance or, following Achebe's usage, "duality" encapsulated in the proverb "Wherever Something Stands, Something Else Will Stand Beside It" (*Education* 6).

Two different types of Igbo proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* that illuminate the Igbo concept of the *chi*—a concept comprising in itself the doubleness of

the human being as both an earthly and spiritual entity⁴—disclose how fundamental such qualities as complementarity and paradox are to the Igbo sense of dualism that Achebe attests. These qualities contrast with the hierarchical binary dualism associated in the novel with the missionary and colonialist outlook. (This hierarchical orientation and its relation to colonialism are evident in the quotation from Said's *Orientalism* in Chapter 1—"what made that culture hegemonic . . . the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (7)—as well as in a quotation from Achebe's *Heart of Darkness* essay in the present chapter—"the racism on which (the evil of imperial exploitation) sharpened its iron tooth"). The first of the two different kinds of Igbo proverbs that help express the concept of the *chi* declares that "when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also" (*Things Fall Apart* 27); a variant of this same proverb is mentioned later in *Things Fall Apart* (131). This precept underscores the importance of dialogue and negotiation in Igbo relationships—even in one's relationship with the divine component of identity that the *chi* embodies. Further, as indicated in the second proverb type concerning the *chi*, a strong intent does not always alter the divine purpose: "the little bird *nza* . . . so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi* (*Things Fall Apart* 31). A more direct version of this proverb arises in *No Longer at Ease* when Obi's friend Joseph declares to Obi, "I can tell you that a man does not challenge his *chi* to a wrestling match" (47; see also *Arrow of God* 14). Taken together, these two proverb sets involving the *chi* suggest that human experience may be understood through contending traits, events, and relationships that seek balance. Focusing on *Things Fall Apart*, it is the balance between strength and gentleness that Okonkwo violates in his rage to reject Unoka's example and establish "masculine" success, and the resulting imbalance that he creates in his life dooms him. According to Achebe himself, Okonkwo's own culture sees Okonkwo's imbalance in this respect as "weakness" (*Chinua Achebe: Africa's Voice* ch. 2–3; see also Irele et al. 2858).

As suggested above, balance is precisely what European colonialism, built as it was on concepts of cultural chauvinism and hegemony, did not pursue. This is why Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, in the prefatory note to his play *Death and the King's Horseman*, objects to commentators' routine description of the colonial encounter, when portrayed in literature, as the "clash of cultures." Soyinka asserts that "the bane" of portrayals of this encounter "is that they are no sooner [presented] than they acquire the facile tag of 'clash of cultures', a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent

misapplication, presupposes a potential equality *in every given situation* of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter" (*Horseman* 5; Soyinka's emphasis). The characterization of that meeting as a clash or collision is rendered dubious by the strategic disproportion between the groups and by the colonial power's forcing the convergence in the first place—and doing so, as Soyinka remarks, on the land of the people who never left it. The implied equality of power between the groups is a distortion Soyinka suggests, and one may add that it is an ironic distortion given the colonizer's presumption of superiority, one grounded in its militaristic power. The colonial presumption of superiority, moreover, proves decisive in Soyinka's just-mentioned play as it does Achebe's first three novels, in which missionaries and colonizers alike assume that the religion and culture they bring are of a categorically higher order than those of the Igbo. Yet the complex duality woven into Soyinka's play and into each of these novels is consistent with the traditional sense of duality in a West African context that Achebe attests. This duality is revealed in an equitable vision that perceives intelligence and courage in both African and European characters, and recognizes not only the irreparable cultural loss that accompanied Christianity's arrival in West Africa but also the benefits that the religion brought to some of the people there. Clearly, Achebe did not simply aim in his fiction to reverse the prejudices of European writers who helped motivate his narrative project. What did interest him was storytelling informed by an Igbo point of view, including its affinity for negotiation and resistance to "one-way traffic."

So even while Achebe acknowledges the attractions associated with the arrival of Europeans in the Igboland, he discloses quite clearly in *Things Fall Apart* and elsewhere the binary essence of the colonial sensibility. In the *Heart of Darkness* essay, after giving specific examples of Western views of Africa, including one about African history not existing that he attributes to Oxford professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, Achebe maintains that Africa is viewed "as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (3). The inequitableness and intractable bigotry of such a mode of perception are made the starker against the backdrop of European attempts to see Africans as fellow human beings. Along with *Things Fall Apart*, the *Heart of Darkness* essay is one of the works in which Achebe highlights this contrast, noting that even as Conrad takes the side of oppressed Africans victimized by colonial brutality and asserts a certain equality between Europeans and Africans, he reveals his belief in fundamental African inferiority:

When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look: "And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like the claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment."

It is important that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is concerned not so much about "distant kinship" as about someone *laying a claim* on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. ("Image" 11, Achebe's emphasis; Conrad 51)

Another of Achebe's points of reference in this essay with respect to "the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people" is Albert Schweitzer, who like Conrad strove to recognize Africans as truly human, and who likewise struggled with a binary perception of them. Achebe clearly praises Schweitzer's altruistic sacrifice, but also cites his observation that "The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother," about which Achebe comments, "And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being" (10–11).

It is the binary perspective that *Things Fall Apart* tends to avoid, and in its spirit of negotiation and "two-way traffic," among other features, its discourse and perspective exhibit dimensions of African narrative, even while the story's form may be identified as that of a modern, realistic novel. As with other of Achebe's "early novels," according to Gikandi, it was created

in response to a set of modern texts, most notably Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which African "barbarism" was represented as the opposite of the logic of modern civilization. Since he was educated within the tradition of European modernism, Achebe's goal was to use realism to make African cultures visible while using the ideology and techniques of modernism to counter the colonial novel [on] its own terrain. (Foreword xiv)

If Conrad's portrayal of African "barbarism" partly relied on distortions of African language, it also gained traction because of the common Western stereotypes of Africans as savage and violent. Marlow's narration supports these stereotypes by indicating that some of the Africans of his novel are cannibals, having others shoot arrows from a jungle bank (from which a

deadly spear is also used), and implicating some in “unspeakable rites” (50); albeit the European Mr. Kurtz plays an authorizing role in the attack from the bank and in the “rites.” To be sure, Achebe counters these stereotypes in the form of the novel, but the most effective particular tool that he employs is dialogue. This is glimpsed in the exchange between Okoye and Unoka. Although the former wants the loan repaid so that he might take the prestigious and expensive Idemili title, he does not verbally, much less physically, assault or coerce Unoka. He deploys mostly indirect verbal gestures, and, in response, so does Unoka. The loan is not repaid, but no threats are offered; the exchange itself seems to disperse potentially destructive forces, and Okoye leaves.

In fact, a thorough consideration of *Things Fall Apart* leads to the conclusion that far more time and effort are expended by Igbo society on peacekeeping than on violence, and the level of violence that is committed by the Umuofians and their neighbors proves modest compared to the peace that they maintain. Certainly violence occurs—it is part of the success of the novel that Achebe does not overlook it or disguise its nature (though some may feel that he leans rather too far in the direction of candor in the matter). The story alludes to various acts of violence that occur over numerous years in the Igbo region in which the story is set: people there murder a woman, ritually kill a young man in compensation for that murder, abandon infant twins, murder a missionary, unmask an *egwugwu*, burn down a church, and (in the case of two different men) beat wives; Okonkwo himself beats two wives and a child, murders a colonial messenger, and commits suicide. There is also reference to “two inter-tribal wars” of an earlier period, in which “incredible prowess” was displayed by Okonkwo, who has killed a total of five men as a warrior (8, 10). Yet a variety of restrictions are imposed on the use of violence, and arguably one of the foremost of these, ironically, is the killing of Ikemefuna, the teenager who is given to Umuofia by Mbaino in the aftermath of the murder of the Umuofian woman. The sacrifice of Ikemefuna three years later appears to be part of compensation for the spilling of innocent blood (12, 57–61). This compensation, which is the outcome of a verbal exchange between the two towns, circumvents a war that would have occasioned a far higher level of bloodshed. In fact, though Umuofia is skilled in warfare and feared by all the surrounding towns, it observes a strict code designed to avoid war: “it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its oracle. . . . Their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call *a fight of blame*”

(12; Achebe's emphasis). Okonkwo's impulsive violence, the cause of his demise, is repeatedly condemned, moreover, by leaders of Umuofia. The penultimate case of that violence, his sudden beheading of the District Commissioner's messenger, is partly a call to revolt against British-led abuses against Umuofia, but no Umuofian supports that call after this action.

It is rather the words of the Igbo characters through which rebellion is implemented. By means of those words Achebe answers two slanders by European writers against Africans: that they are physically savage and verbally undeveloped. The words that encourage peace, that stem violence, are realized in dialogue. Although from the beginning of the novel Achebe's narrator connects Okonkwo's violent temper to a failure of language—"And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists" (4)—even Okonkwo finds that when no work is at hand, "talking was the next best" (69). Two other instances of dialogue cultivating peace are significant. One occurs at the *egwugwu* ceremony in which village leaders wearing ancestral masks adjudicate disputes. The one to which the novel gives full attention is that between Mgbafo and her husband, Uzowulu, who beats her. Mgbafo has run away from her marriage to live with her brothers, and Uzowulu wants the brothers to return either his wife or the bride-price he gave to their family. A remark that underscores both the value placed on dialogue and the connection between dialogue and peacekeeping is made by the *egwugwu* leader when Uzowulu concludes his testimony: "'Your words are good.... Let us hear Odukwe [Mgbafo's brother]. His words may also be good'" (90). Yet while Achebe's Umuofians cultivate dialogue and peace, they are not continually peaceful in word or deed; analogous to the demands that Umuofia makes of Mbaino to avoid war, Odukwe proposes that Uzowulu resolve the standoff verbally, but also threatens violence if Uzowulu resumes his beating of Mgbafo (which is called "madness"): "'If... Uzowulu should recover from his madness and... beg his wife to return she will do so on the understanding that if he ever beats her again we shall cut off his genitals for him'" (92). In this moment, though, peace prevails and words facilitate it: the *egwugwu* decree that Uzowulu, in addition to bringing his brothers-in-law wine, must speak to Mgbafo, must "'beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman'" (93).

The arrival of Christian missionaries and British colonial administrators to the region shakes Umuofia to its foundation, but the first British

missionary to live among Umuofians, Mr. Brown, is explicitly a conversationalist and tolerant toward non-Christians. Through an interpreter, he holds long talks about religion with Akunna, one of the “great men” and a non-convert (179). In the view of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, true dialogue allows for the productive interactions of different cultures. Although it must be conceded that Bakhtin is probably not considering so great a difference in power orders as that between colonizer and colonized, he finds that in “a dialogic encounter of two cultures . . . [the two] are mutually enriched” (qtd. in Morson and Emerson 56). In this vein, Achebe’s narrator indicates that, while neither Akunna nor Mr. Brown “succeeded in converting the other . . . they learned more about their different beliefs” (179). More to the point, during Mr. Brown’s tenure Umuofia enjoys peace between members of the traditional religion and Christian converts. Brown’s successor, on the other hand, Mr. Smith, far from engaging in dialogue, takes a Manichean approach to the encounter between the traditional and newly arrived religions of Umuofia: “He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness” (184). It is precisely this approach that discourages conversation and accommodation and that leads to religious outrages against both groups: the unmasking of an *egwugwu* and the burning of the local church. The latter incurs the violent intervention of the District Commissioner.

Yet greater violence occurs earlier in the novel, with the arrival of the first missionary in the region, and in this case, too, the outburst is associated with an absence of a common language. A lost missionary encounters some people of Abame who have never seen a European, who do not understand him, and who come to fear the European onslaught that he portends. They murder him, and, some weeks later, the town of Abame is virtually wiped out by a savage British reprisal. The incident is based on a similar one that occurred in 1905 when British forces massacred the people of Ahiara as retribution for the killing of an English missionary, J. F. Stewart (Wren, “*Things*” 40; Irele et al. 2920n.5; Booker, “Stewart” 245). What may be noted here is that the missionary does try to communicate with the people he encounters in Abame, but he is not understood; rather, they take him to represent a serious threat: “Their Oracle . . . told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them” (138). Not all speech succeeds in bridging the gap between cultures or holding off an overwhelming force. In this case, the failure of

communication is shared, and the death of the missionary is the responsibility of the people of Abame, while the massacre that follows represents a level of violence not seen elsewhere in the novel.

One form of speech in *Things Fall Apart* actually encourages violence, a form that parodies dialogue: the language of deceit. It appears in a cautionary and etiological folk tale (narrated by Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, to her daughter Ezinma) about the "eloquent" Tortoise, who beguiles the initially suspicious birds into helping him appropriate most of a feast that was meant for them. Finding that they have been deceived by Tortoise's "sweet tongue," the birds reclaim the feathers they had given him, and Tortoise falls to the earth, cracking his shell when he crashes against the hard things that cover his compound (96–99). With false words Tortoise disarms the birds, then betrays them, and this pattern arises again toward the end of the novel when the District Commissioner sends "his sweet-tongued messenger" to invite Okonkwo and the other leaders of Umuofia to a peaceful dialogue (a "palaver"; 193). When he "receive[s] them politely" they literally disarm (193). But all the fair words have been part of the trap he sets for the men, and, shortly after they are handcuffed, the proposed dialogue turns into the Commissioner's monologue of condescension and coercion: "We shall not do you any harm... if only you agree to cooperate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy" (194). The irony that the Umuofian leaders and community are harmed by the District Commissioner's force—to say nothing of the massacre at Abame or of other Igbo who "were beaten in the prison" to which the District Commissioner has sent them (175)—is not lost on readers, and through the District Commissioner we perceive that monologue is the speech of violence; this is further confirmed when the Commissioner's aides treat the leaders brutally after he leaves (194–95). This is the treachery that is a catalyst for Okonkwo's murder of one of the Commissioner's officers—perhaps, indeed, the one possessing the "sweet tongue" (204).

In an article commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Hillel Italie refers to it as "a triumph of contradictions." Though Italie does not mention it, one of the contradictions, or at any rate one of the paradoxes of the novel, is that, while it deploys an array of devices and creative brilliance to validate African language and culture, it is nevertheless a novel written in English. Not long after *Things Fall Apart* was originally published, an important and extensive debate commenced over whether a literary work may be recognized as legitimately African if it is

written in a colonial language. Though [Chapter 4](#) of the present volume more fully considers that debate—a debate in which Achebe himself repeatedly participated—it may be mentioned here that what that author asserted long ago about the usefulness of writing in such a language in the post-colonial context still merits consideration. In “The African Writer and the English Language” (1964), he affirmed the value that English has in reaching a wide audience in Nigeria, in which a large number of African languages are spoken yet in which none has as widespread currency as English. He observes that for the same reason, a colonial language is useful for communicating beyond a nation’s boundaries: “The only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in—English, French, Arabic” (95). What is fair to say is that *Things Fall Apart* is an African author’s masterful narration of an African culture and tragedy that has reached a very large audience in Nigeria, Africa, and the world and that has influenced many other African writers. While from the perspective of some observers *Things Fall Apart* and other fictional works by Achebe fall short because they do not sufficiently nurture an African language, Achebe’s intention was to mount an “adequate” response to distorted portrayals of African language and society, to devise a literary method for conveying that response, and to celebrate the dignity of African people and their cultures. In these endeavors he was more than successful.

NOTES

1. In 1998 the Modern Library’s board of judges designated *Heart of Darkness* as the sixty-seventh best novel published in English since 1900 (Modern Library).
2. See the two items by Eldred Jones, listed in the works cited section, on which Felicity Riddy draws for this observation.
3. Achebe remarks in the video *Chinua Achebe: Africa’s Voice* (1999) that Unoka “was not a wicked man, not a cruel man, he committed no offenses, he was just a jolly good old man, that was all. There’s nothing wrong with that . . . The world is full of types. I mean [we] don’t want everybody to be like Okonkwo . . . People like [Unoka] we sometimes laugh at them, but the world would be very, very poor if you didn’t have that kind of person. Because [he] had a certain integrity. He was an artist. Once he got on his flute, he came alive. There’s room for that kind of person” (ch. 3).
4. “A person’s *chi*, says Achebe, may be visualized ‘as his other identity in spirit-land—his *spirit being* complementing his terrestrial *human being*.’”

For this quotation and for ideas involved in the present discussion of the *chi*, see Irele et al. 2858.

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Of Flight, Fraud, and Freedom: Achebe's Political Tricksters

Ever the opportunist, the trickster figure of West African oral tradition has been adapted repeatedly by modern authors whose communities and themes have confronted the colonial past as well as present-day inequities and corruption. The trickster's role in West African and other postcolonial literatures, moreover, exemplifies the integration of traditional storytelling elements to affirm a culture's values without severing those values from European influences (Boehmer, *Colonial* 187, 202–203; Obiechina, *Culture* 107). Three Nigerian critics argue that “African orature . . . is the incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, esthetics, and achievements for traditional African thought and imagination outside the plastic arts. Thus it must serve as the ultimate foundation . . . for a . . . liberated African literature. It is the root from which modern African literature must draw sustenance” (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 2).¹ Despite this crucial relationship between oral tradition and modern literature, Jonathan Peters observes in an overview of Anglophone West African literature that “scholars tend to consider the oral tradition separately from the written body of creative literature, even though the latter has been informed to a great degree by the traditional cultures of which the writers are inheritors” (9). Fictional trickster characters, however, which are transferred from folklore or which share traits with folkloric tricksters, have helped to bridge this very divide. These modern tricksters, including Achebe’s, play a role in recovering dimensions of culture that were nearly extinguished by colonization or reshaped by colonial priorities. And in

shedding light on dilemmas posed by colonial and postcolonial societies, tricksters demonstrate the relevance to modern literature of traditional narrative motifs.

The significant place of trickster storytelling in West African culture is suggested by Achebe's repeated allusions to a trickster tortoise and, not least, by his integration of an extended Tortoise folktale into *Things Fall Apart*. This story, which depicts Tortoise's encounter with the birds during a famine, is one of the most extensive invocations of Igbo oral tradition in his novels.² More broadly the major trickster element in three Achebe novels corresponds to three interrelated African political challenges: first, the Tortoise and birds folktale in *Things Fall Apart* views colonialism in Africa from an African perspective; second, the career of Chief Nanga, the trickster (and title) character of Achebe's fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, delineates the sources of African post-independence disillusionment; and third, the contrasting tale of a trickster tortoise in Achebe's final novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, contends with the crisis and confrontation of authoritarian rule on the continent. The tricksters' maneuvers in these novels bring to each a distinctive narrative plotline and tone. In varied ways they also help to dramatize Achebe's long-standing view that corrupt practices by those in power and the societal toleration of such practices are major obstacles to full African independence.

Multiple factors may account for the trickster's recurring appearance in Achebe's novels. The author's attraction to this character is traceable to a childhood preference:

My initiation into the complicated world of Ndi Igbo [“the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria”] was at the hands of my mother and my older sister, Zinobia, who furnished me with a number of wonderful stories from our ancient Igbo tradition. The tales were steeped in intrigue, spiced with oral acrobatics and song, but always resolute in their moral message. My favorite stories starred the tortoise *mbe*, and celebrated his mischievous escapades. (*There Was a Country* 8–9 [267n.1])

A related source of Achebe's attraction to the tortoise may be the character's artistic flair. The artistry of the tortoise and other tricksters is revealed partly in their verbal agility: as with Achebe himself, tricksters can be “magical word-weavers” (Smith 115). But their creativity takes multiple forms, including painting, as in a Ga folktale from Ghana, “Spider the Artist,” in which the trickster’s creativity and the community’s

attraction to the artist's work coalesce (albeit inauspiciously). The tale reveals how the trickster spider, Anaanu, subdues other animals during a time of famine by "paint[ing] a beautiful design" on their tongues, not unlike the web patterns spun by actual spiders (Berry 77).³ Now in this and many tales the trickster's creativity has a destructive function, but, as Richard Priebe contends, "the trickster is often a positive force, however demonic his actions may sometimes seem" (Rev. 402). Two of the tricksters that Achebe foregrounds, in *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, respectively, betray their friends, but they are associated in part with favorable future possibilities. The trickster tortoise in *Anthills of the Savannah*, on the other hand, enacts an admirable deception that models meaningful and potent opposition to unjust political domination. Lewis Hyde helps illuminate each of these tricksters in observing that "trickster tales...are not, as is sometimes asserted simply prophylactic narratives meant to show transgression so that people will avoid it"; rather, trickster transgression "disturbs the established categories...and, by so doing, opens the road to possible new worlds" (268, 13). The "magical words" of each of the tricksters examined here disturb established categories in tragic circumstances and, in the process, gesture toward a path of redemption.

The tricksters featured in Achebe's fiction, including the tortoise characters, do not merely stand as relics of the past, but rather play a part in reclaiming and validating cultural tradition while mediating a self-defined, more hopeful future for the African communities they represent. As scholars have recognized, in fact, folkloric tricksters by their very nature function as mediating agents. Encapsulating an analysis by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Hyde states that "trickster narratives appear where mythic thought seeks to mediate oppositions" (268).⁴ On a more basic level, mythic tricksters are popularly associated with their relentless appetites and the outrageous maneuvers meant to gratify them—associations made the more fitting, and perhaps the more palatable to audiences, by the frequent appearance of tricksters as animals, albeit human-like animals. Oyekan Owomoyela notes that "like the tricksters of other cultures, Ajàpá [a Yoruba tortoise trickster] is a human surrogate, as his anthropomorphic character is meant to attest" (*Yoruba* xiv).⁵ Seeking to gratify bodily urges or to acquire desired items precipitates the audacious ploys and, consequently, much of the humor associated with trickster characters. They may act as guileful rogues whose self-serving tendencies prove detrimental to friends and even to their closest family members and can backfire on

themselves. Numerous tricksters function as neither heroes nor villains, exactly, but as beloved rascals, useful for teaching moral lessons, whose irrepressible and irreverent qualities reveal tensions in societal norms and perspectives. Examination, though, of their broader narrative and cultural functions reveals that tricksters' selfish traits are also integral to their quest for liberation. They are driven to free themselves of the normative constraints that, for better or worse, bind the inhabitants of the world around them. Trickster characters display, moreover, gifts of creative expression that enable them to respond more freely than others to restrictive societal codes. Thus, in pursuing their objectives, tricksters employ language, musical expression, and other forms of creativity in versatile and innovative ways.

Besides striving for their own freedom, trickster characters also periodically support the liberation of other characters, and in such cases they may be recognized not merely as iconoclasts, but also as altruists or culture heroes. Yet in keeping with the equivocal nature of the trickster figure, who "is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" (Hyde 7), the roles of the modern literary trickster defy neat classification. In many cases literary tricksters represent an amalgam of both objectionable and admirable qualities, as Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People* demonstrates, and tend to confirm Hyde's point that the trickster "embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly intertwined" (10). Adapting the trickster figure to his fictional designs helps Achebe reveal the intellectual power that accrues from non-binary narration, from a way of thinking reflected in the Igbo proverb "Wherever Something Stands, Something Else Will Stand Beside It" (*Education* 6), which permits the audience to transcend "heroes and villains" paradigms as well as conventional Western attitudes toward "primitive" storytelling and thought. This too may account for Achebe's recurring inclusion of the trickster in his fiction: the character offers another means to question not only Western assumptions about African culture but, in the process, the very modes of Western thought. What also needs attention in this context is that the already paradoxical trickster profile of folklore is further complicated by the fact that many literary tricksters are fundamentally three-dimensional human characters with complex personal traits and competing motives, as again may be seen in Chief Nanga. When the trickster's pursuit is largely selfish in nature, as it often is in folklore, this character may represent the domination or corruption associated with social and

political injustice. On the other hand, the trickster's endeavors in the folk realm sometimes may also represent resistance to unjust uses of power, and trickster resistance to such injustice plays a role in a range of modern West African written narratives, as will be seen regarding *Anthills of the Savannah*.

The magic of trickster play partly lies in its very defiance. The resistance of tricksters to arbitrary or unjust rules and customs offers, if only temporarily (as in folk traditions), a sense of liberation to their audiences.⁶ In their drive for freedom, then, tricksters routinely resist domination and adopt an adversarial posture toward totalizing power. These are a few of the traits of tricksters in West African oral tradition—including Ananse the Spider, Tortoise, Leuk the Hare, the wonder child Kwaku Babone, and the deity Eshu—and the emergence of these traits in modern West African literary characters has helped to affirm the oral tradition's enduring influence. In addition to Achebe, Ousmane Sembène (Senegal), Mongo Beti (Cameroon), Nkem Nwankwo and Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), and B. Kojo Laing (Ghana) are among the West African authors who have deployed trickster characters to explore, question, or undermine dubious structures of power, ones associated with unjust leadership, colonial domination, or neocolonial corruption.⁷ In short, trickster characters participate in the political dimension of modern world literature. Regarding international Anglophone literature in particular, Salman Rushdie emphasizes this dimension in his article “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance” (which refers twice to Achebe): “of course a good deal more than formal, stylistic alteration is going on in this new fiction. And perhaps above all, what is going on is politics. . . . There are very few major writers in the new English literatures who do not place politics at the very centre of their art” (“Empire” 8). Further, the politically inflected gestures of modern tricksters resonate the more deeply precisely through the traits they have in common with tricksters of oral tradition: “the commitment to oral forms is frequently a political act offering resistance to hegemonic language norms . . .” (Thieme 198).

Achebe includes the tortoise trickster of West African orature in specific political contexts, and more broadly his writing demonstrates the literary power and political resonance of combining oral and written forms. He acknowledges that partly what motivated him to write *Things Fall Apart*, his first novel, was the “distortion” and “denigration” in European writers’ portraits of Africa and Africans; what was needed was “someone [to] look at this from the inside,” a writer “to

show what was false" (*Conversations* 3–4, 7–8, 112, 183). Linguistic gestures and observations on language may be counted among the prime tools Achebe uses to contest Eurocentric perceptions of Africa and the cultural authority associated with them. This is in keeping with Emmanuel Obiechina's observation in his study of the West African novel that "the African writer has to correct the false impressions of African life contained in foreign writing on Africa" (*Culture* 24–25). Furthermore, in his influential essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Achebe himself maintains that distorted Western representations of language use by Africans dehumanizes them. Achebe's fiction counteracts this distortion in a range of ways, including the use of Igbo words and phrases. These and other features of West African orature help convey some of the beauty and distinctive qualities of an African verbal manner and consciousness. While elements of oral tradition do serve to vary Achebe's discourse, they also contribute integrally to the expression of personal and communal identity in the traditional, colonial, and post-independence societies that Achebe portrays.

In chapter 11 of *Things Fall Apart*, a few years before the arrival of Europeans in the fictional Igbo village of Umuofia, Ekwefi, second wife of the protagonist Okonkwo, narrates to their daughter Ezinma the story of a famine-stricken but smooth-talking Tortoise, his treachery toward the birds who help him, and the stern consequence of his duplicity. Tortoise is a cunning, self-centered, and sometimes comically self-defeating trickster found in multiple West African traditions as well as in Latin American and (as Terrapin) African American folklore.⁸ In Ekwefi's tale he learns that the birds have been invited to a feast in the sky and, driven by such privation that "his body rattled like a piece of dry stick in his empty shell," seeks to partake of this feast, but his reputation for cunning and ingratitude arouses the birds' mistrust. Yet Tortoise has "a sweet tongue," and with it he convinces the birds of his humility and that "he was a changed man." Each bird "gave him a feather, with which he made two wings." On the feast day Tortoise is "the first to arrive" at the place the birds gather prior to their journey, and then, in his "many-colored plumage," he flies with them to join "the people of the sky," who are the hosts. Tortoise, who "was very happy and voluble as he flew among the birds," is soon selected by them "as the man to speak for the party because he was a great orator." While still in flight, Tortoise persuades the birds to "take new names for the occasion," telling them that this is an "'age-old custom'" for

a feast like this. Tortoise adopts for himself the name “*All of you*” (*Things Fall Apart* 96–97).⁹

After Tortoise and the birds join their hosts, “the people of the sky,” Tortoise gives an “eloquent” speech, and due to his role as speaker and to his anomalous appearance the hosts assume that he is “the king of the birds.” When Tortoise asks one of the hosts whom the feast is for, the host replies “For all of you.” Inventing another tradition to explain this response to the birds—“the custom here is to serve the spokesman first”—Tortoise is able to enjoy “the best part of the food.” The hosts do not intervene, thinking that it is the birds’ “custom to leave all the food for their king.” Later some of the birds share the leftovers, while others are “too angry to eat.” Before returning home, the birds take back their feathers from Tortoise, and in addition Parrot practices on him the counter-ploy that a trickster’s wiles sometimes incite. Parrot deceives Tortoise and his wife by directing her, in direct opposition to Tortoise’s wishes, to spread around Tortoise’s compound the hard items in his house. Falling the immense distance back to earth, Tortoise lands on the compound with a resounding crash, and his shell breaks into pieces. He does not perish, but while “a great medicine man” puts his shell back together, it is no longer in a smooth condition, and this provides an etiological account of the fragmented appearance of tortoise shells (*Things Fall Apart* 97–99).

Richard Priebe, commenting on Achebe’s use of “Igbo oral art” in *Things Fall Apart*, observes that “versions of . . . the tale about the greedy tortoise named ‘All of you’ are common throughout West Africa” (“Teaching” 126); Barbara Harlow suggests an even wider distribution of this oral narrative: “The tale of the tortoise and the birds is told in many versions in many regions among the many peoples of Africa” (78). Thus, we may compare the ending of Achebe’s version, which explains the cause of tortoise shell seams (99), to the ending of the Yoruba tale “Ajapa [the tortoise], Dog, and the Princess,” which likewise narrates the origin of the same phenomenon (Owomoyela, *Trickster* 199–202). In both cases, the tortoise drops to an especially harsh portion of earth from a great height as a result of the ire that his treachery has aroused in others. Achebe himself, moreover, provides another apparently traditional manifestation of the fall and fragmentation of Tortoise, which is a brief proverbial remark in *A Man of the People*: Hezekiah Samalu remonstrates with his son, Odili Samalu, the novel’s narrator and protagonist, “So you really want to fight [the powerful title character] Chief Nanga! My son, why don’t you fall where your pieces could be gathered?” (121).¹⁰ But while the Tortoise

story in *Things Fall Apart* has extensive roots in West African oral tradition, Achebe's incorporation of such a long tale about treachery and domination into a novel about the incursion of British colonial authority into a traditional West African society suggests that "Tortoise and the birds" is meant to play a polemical role.

As multiple observers have remarked, this Tortoise folktale allegorizes a central tension in *Things Fall Apart*, that between the traditional Igbo community of Umuofia and the penetration there of British missionaries and colonizers.¹¹ From one perspective Tortoise is an image of the deceit, treachery, and excess of the white intruders. Thus, like the novel itself, Tortoise's actions in the tale re-envision the nature of the European incursion from an Igbo perspective. Tortoise's spurious claims to know "the expect[ation]" and two 'custom[s]'" of "the people of the sky" (97–98), with their divine associations, in order to gain the cooperation of the birds in Ekwefi's tale are analogous to the British missionaries' assertive claims about the divine nature as part of the colonial pacification of Igbo communities in the novel (179–81). In the Tortoise tale, moreover, the people of the sky notice that Tortoise looks different from the others (92), while in the novel, the strange appearance of the first European to be seen by people in Okonkwo's area, a white missionary on a bicycle (see Wren, "*Things*" 40; Irele et al., 2920n.5), is a source of fascination (138–41). Harlow regards the Tortoise and birds tale as an "allegory of resistance" in which "Tortoise represents colonial power" and "the birds...signify the colonized population" (75). In addition, as Harlow perceives, "the final incidents of Okonkwo's life and the resistant history of the other villagers reenact the fable of the tortoise and the birds" (78).

The correspondence in *Things Fall Apart* between Tortoise and British colonial authority involves the District Commissioner's previously discussed tactic of sending "his sweet-tongued messenger to the leaders of Umuofia" late in the novel in order to draw them into a meeting with him. At the meeting the leaders, including Okonkwo, lay down their weapons, but the District Commissioner tricks them by bringing in his henchmen on the pretext that they need to be informed of Umuofia's grievances. The henchmen then jail and abuse the leaders (193–95). In Ekwefi's tale of Tortoise and the birds, by comparison, Tortoise uses his "sweet tongue" to gain the acceptance of the birds (97). One result is that, once Tortoise consumes most of the feast, "some of [the birds] were too angry to eat. They chose to fly home on an empty stomach" (98–99). In the later scene, while being handcuffed, jailed, and verbally and physically abused, "the six

[leaders] ate nothing throughout that day and the next. They were not even given any water to drink, and they could not go out to urinate or go into the bush when they were pressed . . . Okonkwo was choked with hate" (195). Incarceration of the leaders signifies the illegitimate and brutal reduction of a dignified people to the status of subjects and criminals. More broadly, the Tortoise's treachery toward the cooperative birds prefigures the District Commissioner's treachery toward the cooperative Umuofian leaders, a pivotal moment in Okonkwo's will to violence against the British.

If Tortoise's deception of the birds and the privation they suffer as a result anticipate the District Commissioner's treatment of the Umuofian leaders, the circumstance of the greedy outsider who—at the expense of the many—enjoys most of a feast to which he has not been invited seems to fit a more general notion about the Europeans in Africa. Obviously this notion is not possessed by Africans alone: through Marlow, his English narrator, Conrad expresses this sentiment in *Heart of Darkness*, notwithstanding the elements in the novel that dehumanize Africans. But a particularly apt correspondence, one that mirrors what occurs between the Tortoise and the birds, is found in *Xala*, by the late Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène. *Xala* (of which Sembène made his own film version) is set in post-independence Senegal, where the protagonist, El Hadji, tries to salvage his precarious post-independence business situation by censuring deceitful neocolonial Western domination in Africa: "The colonialist is stronger, more powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place. *He promises us the left-overs of the feast if we behave ourselves*" (84; emphasis added). Coming from El Hadji this statement has an ironic twist, since he has been an eager participant in the neocolonial swindle he describes and since he makes the statement only as a last-ditch effort to save his own skin. Nevertheless, from the narrative perspective the statement is true and politically significant, as is Tortoise's leaving only the feast's leftovers for the birds in *Things Fall Apart* in the context of the interpretation offered here.

Obiechina contends that Ekwefi's Tortoise and birds tale and other oral narratives, what he calls "narrative proverbs," embedded in *Things Fall Apart* function, as such narratives do in an array of subsequent African novels, the way that short proverbs do ("Proverbs" 199–200), and carry a corresponding moral weight. "Like the use of proverbs proper," Obiechina observes, "the embedding of stories in the novels is based upon two main principles of the African oral tradition—authority and

association—through which an idea is given validity by being placed side by side with another idea that bears the stamp of communal approval and by its being linked to the storehouse of collective wisdom” (“Proverbs” 201). Yet at the same time that Ekwefi’s narration of “Tortoise and birds” affirms the wisdom and integrity of Igbo tradition in this twofold manner, it also brings into focus the invocation of spurious traditions, ones that played a role in British colonial expansion in Africa.

Tortoise makes two dubious appeals to tradition by inventing customs. First he uses this method to persuade the birds to change their names:

“There is one important thing which we must not forget,” he said as they flew on their way. “When people are invited to a great feast like this, they take new names for the occasion. Our hosts in the sky will expect us to honor this age-old custom.”

None of the birds had heard of this custom but they knew that Tortoise, in spite of his failings in other directions, was a widely-traveled man who knew the customs of different peoples. And so they each took a new name. When they had all taken, Tortoise also took one. He was to be called *All of you*. (97)

Of course, changing one’s name is emblematic of transforming one’s very identity, and *Things Fall Apart* vividly portrays the process by which colonialism entails the overhaul of Igbo identity —ranging from the missionaries’ efforts to install Christianity to the District Commissioner’s sweet-sounding boast (belied shortly after he makes it) of bringing “‘a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy” (194).

The second tradition that Tortoise invents enables his purchase on the first. In order to reinforce the legitimacy of appropriating the entire feast by virtue of his changed name, he goes on to claim that the people of the sky are observing the custom of first serving the leader (which the birds have designated Tortoise to be):

But Tortoise jumped to his feet and asked: “For whom have you prepared this feast?”

“For all of you,” replied the man.

Tortoise turned to the birds and said: “You remember that my name is *All of you*. The custom here is to serve the spokesman first and the others later. They will serve you when I have eaten.” (98)

In part, Tortoise's introduction of the name-changing custom proves effective because it suits the grandeur of the event. The birds are hosted by the people of the sky, beings with a quasi-divine status that is emphasized by their production of a feast during famine as well as by their gracious invitation of the birds. Such exalted hosts merit transformed, hence newly named, guests. Although the birds are prevailed upon by Tortoise to modify their identities, it is Tortoise's identity that is most transformed, for, in addition to assuming a new name, he takes on feathers and he flies. These changes give impetus to others: whereas Tortoise's body had become like a stick from famine, he now eats voraciously, which leads, in turn, to the great fall that forever alters the appearance of the tortoise shell. Concerning Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*, Neil ten Kortenaar remarks that the author "explores how people use appeals to tradition or to change to invent themselves" (40). In *Things Fall Apart* Tortoise does both: before he can introduce the tradition that allows him to appropriate the birds' feast, he must reinvent himself; he must, in the manner of all confidence men, persuade them with his mellifluous words that he is to be trusted, and to achieve this he declares to the initially skeptical birds, "I am a changed man. I have learned that a man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself" (97). Having asserted the transformation in his character, Tortoise appeals to customs with which the birds are unfamiliar, and thus, creating a paradox befitting the trickster figure, Tortoise invokes change *and* tradition in order to deceive the birds and secure their cooperation.

Tortoise's deft invention of customs to gain control over the birds and the feast corresponds to devices employed by British colonialists in Africa. Terence Ranger argues that "British administrators set about inventing African traditions for Africans . . . They set about to codify and promulgate these traditions, thereby transforming flexible custom into hard prescription" (211–12). The invention of tradition by colonial authority, moreover, took on, according to ten Kortenaar, special urgency among the Igbo people: "Indirect rule was intended to preserve indigenous frameworks of control, but the model developed in northern Nigeria was inappropriate in Igboland, where the British had to invent 'traditional' rulers because there were no absolute chiefs to assume local authority" (33). Such inventions, though, often possess only temporary value, as Tortoise's encounter with the birds illustrates. The birds recognize that Tortoise's success at their expense is based on a power that he does not independently possess, and they leave him vulnerable once he enjoys their

feast. Tortoise's circumstance here thus parallels that of the British colonialists, who according to ten Kortenaar "never had as much power in West Africa as they thought they had" (36). According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, moreover, "the experience of the vast majority of these citizens of Europe's African colonies was one of essentially shallow penetration by the colonizer" (7). The relatively swift collapse of British authority in the area of Nigeria associated with Achebe's Umuofia (authority that lasted less than seventy-five years; see Wren, "*Things*" 39–40) may well have been a function in part of this superficial authority.

So while Achebe's novel does not provide many hopeful signs for the future of Umuofia, the collapse of Tortoise's sway over the birds and the consequent shattering of his shell remind us through the analogy between Tortoise and colonial authority traced here that the rule of the few over the many in West Africa under the British will disintegrate in relatively short order. Perceptible in this light, moreover, is that Achebe's title, *Things Fall Apart*, ultimately bears on the colonizer as well the colonized. Destruction, however, is not the final stage of Tortoise's progression in Ekwefi's tale since, with the resilience of so many folk tricksters, he survives the fall and his shell is reconstructed. Thus Tortoise enacts a process that illustrates Robert Pelton's comment in his study of West African mythical tricksters: "The trickster reveals that just such a work of shattering and rebuilding is the achievement of the West African imagination" (274).

While the shell of Tortoise is permanently altered in Ekwefi's imaginative tale, historically the exercise of British influence in West Africa was altered with the transformation of colonies into independent nations. That influence has been multidimensional, affecting language, religion, education, economics, and politics. Achebe does not uniformly decry the European role in Africa, as indicated, for example, in his post-independence interview with Donatus Nwoga (1964): "To oppose colonialism does not mean that one does not appreciate the values of Western technological civilization" (8; see also [Chapter 7](#)). He does, however, dramatize in *A Man of the People* neocolonial ties between, on the one hand, an enterprise of the former colonizing nation and, on the other, a powerful post-independence African politician. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, a seminal study of the "neocolonial" phenomenon, explains that a venal entrepreneurial and political elite in a colonized or formerly colonized nation selfishly will protect and promote the economic interests of a European power. Consequently, "the national middle class disappears

with its soul set at peace into the shocking ways—shocking because anti-national—of a traditional bourgeoisie” (150, 152–53). The politician in *A Man of the People* whose shocking self-promotion hinges partly on his cozy relationship with a British corporation, and to whom the book’s ironic title refers, is Chief the Honorable Micah A. Nanga. Once a village schoolteacher, Chief Nanga is now a Member of Parliament as well as the Minister of Culture in an unnamed, fictional African nation (whose capital is “Bori”—“I rob” backwards) that undergoes political turmoil resembling Nigeria’s around the time of the novel’s publication. Nanga’s current affluence and the activities that have produced it reflect Fanon’s statement. He uses his authority in this newly independent nation not primarily to build a strong society, but rather as a middleman for European economic interests that, in turn, gratify his personal appetite for material gain and a hold on power.¹²

The novel provides substantial evidence of this. Not long before the story’s time frame, Nanga helped secure authorization for the paving of a highway that runs through his district, and in anticipation of the road’s completion he ordered ten luxury buses from the fictional corporation British Amalgamated. He refers to this transaction as a “never-never arrangement,” which helps suggest that the corporation will absorb the charges for the buses while the road and the buses will support Nanga’s re-election and finances (42–43). In addition, Nanga previously had been the government’s Minister of Foreign Trade and in that capacity had used a policy subterfuge to build numerous luxury apartments in his wife’s name that were immediately leased for £1400 a month to British Amalgamated (100–101). Furthermore, *A Man of the People*’s narrator, Odili Samalu, discovers late in the story “that British Amalgamated has paid out four hundred thousand pounds to the People’s Organization Party [the P.O.P.—Nanga’s political party] to fight this election” (127–28). Doubtless the British company offers this support to Nanga’s ruling party because the P.O.P. accommodates its interests: “The Prime Minister assured foreign investors that their money was safe in the country, that his government stood ‘as firm as the Rock of Gibraltar’ by its open-door economic policy” (144). On top of this a new four-story home is being built for Nanga next to the one he already has in his home village. The “European firm of Antonio and Sons” is constructing this new home as a kickback to Nanga for awarding it the “contract to build the National Academy of Arts and Sciences” (36–37, 97). A cloud of corruption hovers above Chief Nanga, whom Samalu comes to see as “a minister bloated by

the flatulence of ill-gotten wealth" (76). Furthermore, Nanga's political chicanery and the perception by three different characters that this Minister of Culture is culturally shallow contribute to his profile as a trickster character (see 23, 67, 74–75).

Chief Nanga may be viewed indeed as a reimagining of Ekwefi's Tortoise, sharing several of the same trickster traits but as a realistic character in a modern milieu. Both Tortoise and Nanga sweet-talk their way into leadership positions and bountiful spoils, but through greed and effrontery overreach themselves and alienate their friends. The latter fight back with their own duplicity and thwart the respective tricksters—with the unwitting assistance of their wives—without destroying them (as elaborated below). Another feature that the folktale and the novel share is the complicity of Tortoise's and Nanga's victims in their own duping. In Ekwefi's tale the birds fully comprehend Tortoise's cunning and ingratITUDE, but allow his smooth talk to work its magic, and they pay the price. This is consistent with Warwick Wadlington's view that the "trickster... requires the consent of his victims" (21). While practically speaking not all such victims are willing accomplices, *A Man of the People's* narrator, Samalu, makes clear at the outset that a corrupt politician like Nanga thrives in part through the apathy and indulgence of his constituents: "They were not only ignorant but cynical. Tell them that [Nanga] had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you—as my father did—if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth" (2–3; see also 145). So it is not the "Man" of the title alone who is responsible for the nation's political mire, but also the "People" who make him their man. In fact the voters do not remove Nanga from power; that removal is accomplished at the novel's conclusion only through the arrest of every member of the national government in a coup d'état ordered by young army officers who "seize[] the opportunity to take over" (148). In his futile attempt to evade capture, Nanga poses as rather the opposite of the wealthy urban official he has been: "Nanga was arrested trying to escape dressed like a fisherman" (148). At the novel's close he remains a man whose external expressions thoroughly falsify his identity and intentions.

What makes Tortoise's and Nanga's guile so effectual prior to their respective downfalls, what permits them to *beguile* their listeners, is their verbal facility. Ewefki first gestures to the enchantment that Tortoise weaves with his words by mentioning his "sweet tongue," which transforms the birds' skepticism toward him into such approval that they select

him to speak for them at the feast: "Tortoise was very happy and voluble as he flew among the birds, and he was soon chosen as the man to speak for the party because he was a great orator" (97). Once the group joins the people in the sky, Tortoise consummates this oratory role: "Tortoise's speech was so eloquent that all the birds were glad they had brought him, and nodded their heads in approval of all he said. Their hosts took him as the king of the birds . . ." (98). In *A Man of the People* Samalu repeatedly alludes to Nanga's verbal charm in accounting for the hold he has on his various listeners who, as the birds do with Tortoise, select him to speak for them. When Nanga tells Samalu, who is a teacher, that he has not yet looked over a prepared speech that he is shortly to give as Minister of Culture, he mentions the effortlessness of his utterances. His verbal proficiency derives from his own previous career as a teacher as well his work as a politician, and, cynically, he acknowledges the lack of seriousness he invests in his words (using Pidgin phrasing at the end as an intensifier): "'I shall finish [the speech] in ten minutes; it is not important . . . Talking is now in my blood—from teaching into politics—all na so so talk talk'" (61). Despite Nanga's jaded attitude, the uncanny pull of his facile expressions and charismatic manner support his reputation as "a man of the people" (1).

Uncanny talent, the kind that inspires awe and defies discursive explanation, prompts witnesses to reach for mystical phrases or simply to acknowledge that rational understanding of it is elusive. Nanga's expressive charm leaves Samalu both trying to explain it and acknowledging that Nanga's talent strains belief: "At this point everybody just collapsed with laughter not least of all the Honourable Minister himself, nor me, for that matter. The man's assurance was simply unbelievable . . . The man's charisma had to be felt to be believed. If I were superstitious I would say he had made a really potent charm . . ." (9–10). Nanga's fraudulence is matched by this charisma, which leads others to believe in his benevolence. Making people laugh, as in the previous quotation, is another aspect of Nanga's ability to enchant, but he does not rely on laughter alone:

Chief Nanga was a born politician; he could get away with almost anything he said or did. And as long as men are swayed by their hearts and stomachs and not their heads the Chief Nangas of this world will continue to get away with anything. He had that rare gift of making people feel—even while he was saying harsh things to them—that there was not a drop of ill will in his entire frame. (66)

Here too, a link between Chief Nanga and Ekwefi's Tortoise is discernible, for Tortoise likewise exhibits unremitting good will in his relations with the birds, until he appropriates their food.

In addition, “politician” in the quoted passage’s first line resonates with the term “trickster,” which could easily replace it in this context. Politicians are regularly construed in public and private discourse as tricksters and “two-faced,” and Nanga is portrayed in just this way (as Tortoise is in the folktale): his duplicity facilitates his corruption and tricks. As Hyde observes, the idea of politicians as tricksters is not uncommon but (for reasons different from the ones delineated here) problematic (13). The negative features of tricksters are the ones often associated with politicians, even though many politicians work for the public good. Some of them even rise to the status of culture hero, a label that (as discussed below) also is legitimately applied to certain tricksters. A functioning democracy, moreover, demands leaders capable of seeing and expressing matters from multiple perspectives, but politicians who possess this ability are not all two-faced tricksters or crooks. Achebe uses *A Man of the People* to convey the skill and destructiveness, including toward democracy itself, of the politicians who are duplicitous, as well as the temptations that they are offered and offer in turn.

It may be added that not all politicians, even devious ones, are mellifluous enchanters, but Nanga exhibits talents that, in his case, make the classification apt. In fact these talents—beguiling tongue, charm, inventive responses to vexed circumstances—with their relationship to singing and creativity are integral to the trickster’s very nature. Richard Spears remarks that the West African “Tortoise . . . is . . . often associated with magical music, either hypnotic or diverting” (203), and Owomoyela’s related point seems particularly germane to Ekwefi’s Tortoise’s enchanting tongue: “In many tales [the Yoruba Tortoise Àjàpá’s] scheme is carried by his singing, which casts a powerful spell on individuals and whole communities, even on other-worldly beings, so that they forget themselves and their present purpose . . .” (*Trickster* xiii). Although this comment refers to Àjàpá’s singing, it reminds us that in *Things Fall Apart* Tortoise’s eloquent deceit operates successfully even on the people of the sky. Another telling analogue, including the joining of the trickster with supernal beings, is found in the Homeric Hymn to the Greek trickster-god Hermes, who, in order to be granted what he considers his rightful place among the Olympian gods, becomes a “smooth-tongued enchanter.” His

“silver tongue” and his song with lyre accompaniment succeed in beguiling Apollo and achieving Olympian acceptance (Hyde 217–19; 317–31; Hyde’s translation of the Hymn).

The verbal enchantment woven by Tortoise and Nanga represents, then, a variation of an essential trickster quality and plays a decisive role in their maneuvers. Tortoise gains with this talent access to flight, the heavens, and food, while Nanga gains with it access to the heights of power and financial success in a fledgling African democracy. His rise to success is tied to the image he projects as “a man of the people,” but since he does not truly serve the people first, his fall is also embedded in that phrase. This is especially evident in light of the disgrace of Umuaro’s Chief Priest in Achebe’s previous novel, *Arrow of God*. Specifically, Ezeulu’s fall—and so Nanga’s—reflects traditional Igbo thought on the relationship between leaders and the people: “To [the people of Umuaro] the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors—that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgement against his clan” (230). Chief Nanga of course is a different type of leader than Ezeulu, but they do share a degree of arrogance that severs them from their people.

Attention to the trickster qualities of Chief Nanga as well as Tortoise brings awareness of another paradox, namely, the distinctive appeal of these and other tricksters in spite of their objectionable behaviors. To be sure, the trickster figure is selfishly individualistic in many tales and in general would not be seen as a role model by traditional communities. Barre Toelken, referring to traditional Native American communities, notes that self-centered behavior transgresses the primacy of the group in relation to the individual in the value structures of such traditional societies (Letter). At the same time, tricksters’ expressive talents, the humor they generate, their zest for life, even their audacity, draw the audience’s interest and on occasion even admiration. Hyde, in discussing Coyote, a trickster of Navajo oral tradition, captures certain aspects of the attraction exerted by many trickster characters on their audiences: “Part of the entertainment derives from his self-indulgent refusal [to observe] such [norms of proper behavior], of course, for there is vicarious pleasure in watching him break the rules, and a potentially fruitful fantasizing, too, for listeners are invited, if only in imagination, to scout the territory that lies beyond the local constraints . . . ” (12). The trickster iconoclasm on which Hyde comments reflects a consciousness more intent on placating physical

appetite than on obeying the rules. Yet self-gratification may also disclose the drive for liberation that tricksters and their audiences share.

The liberatory dimension of folkloric tricksters is evident when they take on the culture hero role, but is arguably also at play when trickster ingenuity and daring elicit the audience's admiration and identification. Just such identification with the tortoise in his encounter with the leopard is what inspires *Anthills of the Savannah*'s editorialist, Ikem Osodi (117–18), who wishes in turn to inspire his university audience to see the "political" application of this tale and to identify with this trickster and his "struggle" (141). (That episode and the trickster as culture hero are examined below.) And while Tortoise in *Things Fall Apart* hoards the feast meant for the birds, he also embodies a primal determination to find a way to survive and then to transcend mere survival. What does a torpid land and water animal who attains flight and a heavenly feast in kaleidoscopic plumage model for his audience if not the quest for liberation? Chief Nanga, for his part, no doubt embodies the politician as con artist and womanizer, but as he breaks the rules he brings a substantial share of humor and vitality to *A Man of the People*. Moreover, as the paved road and the buses that will ply it attest, he also helps bring some share of a better life to the constituents who keep electing him—his unscrupulous methods notwithstanding. So readers may find themselves attracted to Nanga as well as repelled. "All trickster tales . . . are invigorating experiences of transgression," declares Hyde (268); boundary breaking is after all part of what entertains the trickster's audience. But whether or not audience members countenance Tortoise's and Nanga's treachery, they still may be drawn in, as the birds and Samalu are, by their enthusiasm, their charm, their "ravenous and extravagant appetite for life" (Ballinger 34).

All the same, Tortoise's and Nanga's willingness to indulge their biological appetites at the expense of their allies represents their point of weakness and precipitates sharp reversals for them. In Tortoise's case, of course, the indulgence involves food and drink. Hypothetically speaking, Tortoise would have fared tolerably well if he were to have shared the feast with the birds it was meant for rather than take nearly all of it, but his greed ensures his shattering fall. Chief Nanga on the other hand indulges his appetite for sex, and, like Tortoise, he suffers for his greed. Nanga would have avoided Samalu's acrimonious political challenge and pursuit of his prospective second wife, Edna Odo, who is little older than a girl when she first appears (92), had he let suffice his sexual access to numerous

women or simply to his first wife, “Mrs. Nanga,” who understands that Edna is to join her in a bigamous arrangement. But instead Nanga, who is at least 50 years old (76), contrives to seduce Elsie, the companion of the unmarried Samalu—a man with whom Nanga is on friendly terms at the time and who is a guest in his house. Samalu, moreover, has a long-standing connection with Elsie that includes sexual intimacy, and during the scenes leading up to the seduction she is responsive to Samalu, who has been planning on the very intimacy with her that Nanga artfully seizes (see 24–26, 60–71). This is the trick by Nanga that backfires on him, and it helps underscore the correspondence in the novel between political and sexual corruption. Evidence of this correspondence also lies in the fact that Samalu, under Nanga’s influence, made arrangements several days earlier for Elsie and himself to spend an evening together in the capital city Bori with another couple—Elsie’s female friend and Nanga (57, 61).

Those plans fall through, however, and Nanga, in company with the much younger Elsie and Samalu on the designated evening, takes advantage of the opportunity (76). He employs his verbal gifts to ensure that the couple relax, laugh, and trust him as a friend while impressing Elsie with his importance and success (62). In a chauffeur-driven Cadillac, Nanga summons a favorite trope, the aggravation besetting a government minister, to amuse his listeners:

“If somebody wan make you minister,” said Chief Nanga . . . make you no gree. No be good life. . . .

“Wetin be Minister No be public football? So instead for me to sidon rest for house like other people I de go knack grammar for this hot afternoon. You done see this kind trouble before?”

We all laughed, including the driver whose face I could see in the mirror. We joked and laughed all the way back. In Chief Nanga’s company it was impossible not to be merry. (62; see also 14–15, 67)

The pleasure Nanga’s remarks impart is heightened by his use of West African Pidgin, a language that, as Samalu subsequently notes, can be accompanied by a certain “levity” (89; see Chapter 5 of the present book). Not long after this merriment, though, and despite the close proximity of the two men, Samalu discovers that Nanga has maneuvered himself into the intimate relations with Elsie that the younger man anticipated for himself. Specifically, while Samalu waits for Nanga to “turn[]

in . . . and settle down in his bed,” a sensitivity to decorum that Nanga counts on, the older man goes to his absent wife’s bedroom—the one he assigned Elsie earlier in the day. When Samalu himself goes to join Elsie, he “hear[s] voices . . . then . . . laughter” in the room, and soon understands what is happening between the other two (70–71). Nanga’s betrayal brings to an end Samalu’s recent suspension of ethical judgment toward his would-be mentor and benefactor. Determined to avenge himself, Samalu plans to pursue relations with Edna and contest Nanga’s parliamentary seat (77–78, 102).

Both Tortoise and Nanga demonstrate the tendency of tricksters to take not only more than their share, but also more than the given situation reasonably affords. The Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland, whose drama *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) reinscribes in a modern setting the tales and performance traditions associated with Ananse, the spider-trickster of West African origin, notes that in grasping for too much, “most of Ananse’s successes are doubtful and temporary.” Sutherland finds that “by constantly over-reaching himself [Ananse] ruins his schemes and ends up impoverished” (3). The first phase of the reversal that Tortoise’s and Nanga’s overreaching entails is the sabotage of their plans by their victims, who, parroting their deceivers, now play the trickster part. “Parrot promised to deliver the message” from Tortoise to his wife to place outside their home its soft objects, but instead Parrot directs her to place the hard objects there, a reason for Tortoise’s shell shattering (99). Similarly, after his rupture with Chief Nanga, Samalu retaliates partly through deception of his wife. In Chapter 9 he returns to Nanga’s village and ingratiates himself with Mrs. Nanga in order to meet with Edna and, according to his original vengeful design, to have sex with her, thereby mirroring Nanga’s insinuation of himself between Elsie and Samalu. Samalu conceals from Mrs. Nanga the state of his relations with her husband and disguises his true intentions toward Edna, measures that enable him to locate her (77, 88–90).

Also in Chapter 9, Samalu pretends during his conversation with Edna’s father that he brings a message from Nanga for Edna. Then, upon learning that Mr. Odo’s wife is in the hospital, Samalu improvises that supposed message: “Chief Nanga said that I should come and greet you and find out about your mother” (91–92). He then brings Edna on his bicycle to the hospital to see her mother—in telling contrast to Nanga and his chauffeur-driven Cadillac. Later in the story, Samalu finds himself “loving Edna” and realizes that he “want[s] Edna now (if not all along)

for her own sake first and foremost and only very remotely as a general scheme of revenge" (109–10). Nevertheless, his trickery in [Chapter 9](#) is instrumental in his eventually gaining her affection. Near the novel's close Edna quietly expresses that affection, and Mr. Odo negotiates her marriage to Samalu (feasible now that Nanga is in jail in the aftermath of the coup launched by the military officers; 145–48). Thus Tortoise and Nanga are subject to the turnabout familiar in trickster stories: "Trickster...is he who dupes others and who is always duped himself" (Radin xxiii). Meanwhile, the social ground on which the duping and counter-duping play out in these stories is tossed about and produces significant changes in the environment.

Whereas the transformation that ensues from Tortoise's encounter with the birds, the splintering of his shell, is physical, Samalu's encounter with Chief Nanga occasions modest but still notable changes in the social and political spheres they inhabit. Edna goes from viewing the married Nanga as her future husband to viewing the single Samalu that way, a shift commensurate with Samalu's firmly stated opposition to the polygamy practiced by his father Hezekiah and anticipated by Chief Nanga (23, 30–31, 99). Nanga gives impetus, moreover, to new political possibilities because he initiates the process of mentoring Samalu. This circumstance illustrates Dee Horne's assertion that "tricksters are often catalysts for others' empowerment" (128), a role that also has a liberatory aspect. Nanga's self-gratifying excess sets a negative example for the younger man, who exhibits an idealistic streak from the beginning of the novel: Samalu turns against his patron, pursuing a political path opposed to Nanga's corruption and that of his governing party, the P.O.P. (2–7, 110–11). The fact that the new party that Samalu joins, the Common People's Convention (C.P.C.), exhibits a degree of ethical compromise itself does not entirely nullify its introduction of a strong voice in support of greater political integrity. Nor does it negate Samalu's potential to play a constructive future role in national politics, for, despite his drive for revenge, coarseness of thought regarding women, and dubious plan to borrow from C.P.C. funds to pay Edna's bride-price, Samalu reveals a distinct ethical inclination. One may note, too, that his justification for borrowing party funds—the military leadership's indefinite abolition of all political parties—is not without some validity: to whom would Samalu return the funds at this point (148)?

Toward the end of the novel, Samalu has the moral and physical courage to stand up at a Nanga political rally, whose attendees include Nanga's henchmen, and denounce the older man: ““I came to tell your

people that you are a liar . . . ” (141). He suffers a nearly fatal beating for his trouble. And when Samalu loses hope of gaining Edna’s love, his renewed political idealism is manifest: “What I had to accomplish [in running for Nanga’s seat] became more than another squabble for political office; it rose suddenly to the heights of symbolic action, a shining, monumental gesture untainted by hopes of success or reward” (131). Samalu’s ethical impulse in the sphere of politics is evident, too, when he learns that his long-time friend and C.P.C. leader, Max Kulamo, in consultation with other party members, has accepted “soiled” money from Chief Nanga’s fellow P.O.P. minister, Chief Simon Koko, who offered it in order to run for his seat unopposed by Max. Samalu reminds Max that their ““fight [was] to be clean”” (127), and in response to Max’s urging him to accept the same kind of bribe from Nanga—Samalu already has rejected the first such offer—Samalu exclaims ““Never!”” (128). The day after his exchange with Max (who does not end his campaign against Koko, but uses the money for a C.P.C. campaign minibus), Samalu further contemplates the high stakes of succumbing to the lure of corruption:

Max disgrace[ed] our party and yet ha[d] the face to charge me with idealism and naivety.... I would still have refused [the tainted money] if it had been ten thousand. The real point surely was that Max’s action had jeopardized our moral position, our ability to inspire that kind of terror which I had seen so clearly in Nanga’s eyes despite all his grandiloquent bluff, and which in the end was our society’s only hope of salvation. (129)¹³

The final clause here reflects the moral and political core not only of *A Man of the People*, but also of the other two Achebe novels set in the post-1950 milieu, *No Longer at Ease* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. At the core of all three is the tension between, on the one hand, the yearning for a functioning and thriving African democracy and, on the other, the discouragement and cynicism that habitual official corruption breeds. Even in his 2012 memoir *There Was a Country*, Achebe’s distress over the internal forces that degraded his nation is palpable: “Nigeria had people of great quality, and what befell us—the corruption, the political ineptitude, the war—was a great disappointment and truly devastating to those of us who witnessed it” (158).

A Man of the People’s satiric edge reflects indignation over the political disarray and bad faith that unfolded in Nigeria and numerous other African nations after independence. Achebe acknowledges in an interview in

February 1967 (before the Nigeria–Biafra War) that he meant for the novel to challenge the people and attitudes that produced these setbacks. But he also asserts in the interview that he sustains a hopeful outlook: “I don’t despair. *A Man of the People* is a rather serious indictment—if you like—of post-independence Africa. But I don’t give up because I think this is a necessary stage in our growth” (Interview with Serumaga 13). Perhaps because of the sharpness of the “indictment” that Achebe mentions and because the closing pages of *A Man of the People*, published in January 1966, famously appear to foretell the political upheaval, coup, and counter-coup in Nigeria that occurred around the time of publication (see Achebe, “Truth” 152–53), it is easy to overlook the novel’s hopeful note. If Samalu’s personal struggle with Nanga metaphorically represents the national struggle with political corruption, and if Edna herself, in addition to her realistic role, represents the young nation and its destiny, then the growth of Samalu’s relationship with her raises the possibility of a more hopeful path for their nation. In fact, Samalu himself makes a connection between his relationship with Edna and the politics of the nation, referring to “my twin hopes of a beautiful life with Edna and of a new era of cleanliness in the politics of our country” (131). He does perceive that violent political upheaval is around the corner: “We were exhilarated like everyone else by the heady atmosphere of impending violence. For we all knew that the coming election was going to be a life and death fight” (101). But not long after this observation, having encountered setbacks in his pursuit of Edna, he also reflects, “As a rule I don’t like suffering to no purpose. Suffering should be creative, should give birth to something good and lovely” (105). Given the political tensions in which Samalu is embroiled at this point (having recently announced that he will contest Nanga’s parliamentary seat), this remark may be understood to encompass the nation’s looming political chaos. It may also gesture forward to the “new era” of greater political uprightness for which Samalu yearns and to the role he could play in bringing that about.

As it happened, though, the political upheaval in Nigeria that *A Man of the People* appears to forecast led not to rebirth (at least not in any short-term sense), but to an overwhelming catastrophe, the Nigeria–Biafra War (also known as the Nigerian Civil War), which lasted from July 1967 to January 1970. While Achebe could not have known the scale of that war’s devastation when he wrote *A Man of the People*, the novel does mention the possibility of a worst-case outcome for its fictional nation when Samalu observes that “our society’s only hope of salvation” depends on the integrity of its leaders. After *A Man of the*

People Achebe did not publish another novel for twenty-one years, but *Anthills of the Savannah* makes clear that he abandoned in the interim neither his hope for a better political future, despite the grim brutality of the regime in the latter novel, nor his belief in the oral tradition's ongoing relevance and power. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, according to C.L. Innes, Achebe "comment[s] on the forms and themes of his own works . . . [and] weave[s] continuities between past and present, Igbo and English cultural forms and traditions" ("Chinua Achebe Obituary"). A resource of Igbo tradition on which Achebe once again draws in the novel is the trickster tortoise. Here too, the trickster is employed to illuminate the political moment—both in the novel's fictional West African nation of Kangan (133) and more generally in modern Africa. As with the nation in which *A Man of the People* is set, Kangan bears a distinct resemblance to modern Nigeria. In addition, its province of Abazon, which had previously seceded from Kangan, may be associated with Achebe's native Igboland and the short-lived secessionist nation of Biafra, of which Igboland was part (Booker, "Abazon" 1; "Anthills" 23). Perhaps what the fictional Kangan shares most strikingly with Nigeria and numerous other postcolonial African nations are the stages by which tyranny takes root in them, brutalizes the actions of government, and distorts relations within the society.

In part it is the response to dominance and brutality that "The Tortoise and the Leopard" addresses. The tale is narrated on two separate occasions, each time by a different character, although the story is fully rendered for the reader only with the first telling. The first of the narrators is the wise though unnamed elderly leader of the delegation from the province of Abazon. He tells the story in Kangan's capital, Bassa, to help make an appeal for his desperate cause after the suffering in his drought- and famine-stricken province is made worse through human design. The digging of boreholes to extract water in Abazon has been terminated at the behest of the president, Sam (Achebe gives him no last name), who retaliates against Abazon for not approving his designation as "president-for-life" in a recent referendum (116). The second of the narrators of "The Tortoise and the Leopard" is Ikem Osodi, the prominent editor, who presents it to a large audience at the University of Bassa to galvanize resistance to Sam's regime. Osodi only recently encountered the tale when he heard the older man's narration of it, a narration that landed the elderly speaker "in solitary confinement at the Bassa Maximum Security Prison" (141). The younger man's enthusiastic reaction to the story and that of his

audience at the university are suggestive of the oral tradition's enduring power in a modern milieu.

The tale describes how the leopard, having pursued the tortoise for a long period, finally encounters him on a desolate road. With the tortoise in his power at last and intending to kill him, the leopard grants his prey's final wish to have "*a few minutes to prepare [his] mind.*" The tortoise then goes into a furious tumult "on the road, scratching with hands and feet and throwing sand furiously in all directions," that is, literally tossing about some earth. The leopard asks the tortoise why he does this, to which the tortoise replies, "*Because even after I am dead I would want anyone passing by this spot to say, yes, a fellow and his match struggled here*" (117; Achebe's emphasis). Both the telling and the retelling of this tale are delivered as a protest against Sam's increasingly autocratic and oppressive regime, a metaphor for the many African governments that have slid into tyranny after periods of popular and transparent rule. The version of the tale told by the old man from Abazon implicitly acknowledges that even if ultimate victory against Sam's persecution of Abazon cannot be gained, honorable resistance to it is imperative. And this is the message that Osodi is intent on conveying at the university when he tells, "to remarkable dramatic and emotional effect, the story of the Tortoise who was about to die." He calls his speech, which spurs the student opposition to Kangan's regime, "*The Tortoise and the Leopard—a political meditation on the imperative of struggle*" (141).

In *Anthills of the Savannah* the tortoise shakes up accustomed patterns of thought in his narrators' audiences, but in this case the tortoise fulfills more distinctly the culture hero role. At the leopard's mercy, the tortoise acts in a way that is expressly meant to demonstrate to others courage and resistance to oppression—even though it is just a sign of these in the sand that he will leave. That sign, in other words, constitutes the tortoise's trick: nothing is said about the tortoise mounting an actual physical struggle against the leopard. But signs carry power, of course, and the courage and resistance that the tortoise inscribes are invoked by two narrators, the old man and Osodi, to elicit these very qualities in their audiences. The old man's narration of "*The Tortoise and the Leopard*" does stir Osodi to foreground the tale in his address at the university, where he associates the tortoise's actions with political struggle—which in the context of his narration is associated with resistance to "champions of control... usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit" (141). These usurpers encompass no doubt the Kangan regime that prior to

Osodi's university presentation has suspended him from his editorship and has taken the old man from Abazon and his fellow leaders into custody (138–39); after the presentation it murders Osodi, but later is violently overthrown (156, 202–203). In this context, the tortoise drawn from folklore takes on the identity of culture hero and so plays a trickster role that recurs in both folklore and modern literature.

How is it that the identity of tricksters such as the tortoise may alter from rogue to culture hero? Do disloyalty and selfishness not help define their very nature? In fact Achebe highlights the tortoise's selfish traits. Tortoise's reputation for disloyalty is pronounced by the birds in *Things Fall Apart* when they first respond to his request to attend the feast: “‘We know you too well,’ said the birds. . . . ‘You are full of cunning and you are ungrateful’” (97). And Tortoise soon shows how richly deserved this reputation is. This same reputation sharpens a climactic moment in *Arrow of God* when the Chief Priest Ezeulu tries to make sense of the incomprehensible: that he has been abandoned by Ulu, the Umwaro god he has served. As Ezeulu grapples with the shock, his mind adverts to several Igbo proverbs, and finally to a proverbial (or proverb-like) flourish, rendered as a couplet: “What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things? Then a god, finding himself powerless, might take flight and in one final, backward glance at his abandoned worshippers cry:

If the rat cannot flee fast enough
Let him make way for the tortoise!” (229)

That is to say, even the tortoise can move swiftly when his self-interest is sufficiently threatened. The anomaly of a swift-moving tortoise, signifying a world turned upside down, helps prepare us for the next narrative moment in *Arrow of God*, which is Ezeulu's loss of sanity. These passages in the two novels underscore deeply rooted negative views of the tortoise—so where does the culture hero come from?

Partly what accounts for the capacity of tricksters to transition from selfishness and treachery to heroism is their diminutive size and modest defenses compared to the predators they encounter. Harry Garuba observes in connection with *Things Fall Apart* that the tortoise's slightness relative to his mythic adversaries affords him the triumph of wisdom: “The tortoise, it is important to recall, is the creature of folklore that is often celebrated for its cunning and trickery and usually figures as the embodiment of the wisdom of the small over the strength and power of

the big" (330). Against the larger, deadlier leopard in *Anthills of the Savannah*, though, the tortoise is vulnerable, which confers on him an underdog status. (The same applies to the African American trickster Brer Rabbit in his encounters with adversaries Bear, Fox, and Wolf. This trickster Rabbit, who has roots partly in African folkloric trickster storytelling, is also something of a culture hero in his resistance to superior force.¹⁴) The tortoise's vulnerability, his wish to impart meaning and dignity to his demise, and his belief, at least in principle, in fighting the good fight all enable his transition from rogue in *Things Fall Apart* to hero in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The existence of such polarities in the same character, according to Teresa Njoku, does not prevent the transmission of tortoise tales to Igbo youth: "The resourcefulness of the tortoise is pointed out in the education of the young so that while his greed and unscrupulousness are criticised, his ingenuity and wisdom which enable him to exploit every situation to his advantage are often encouraged" (304). Without resourcefulness the potential creation of something better is lost, so this trait is critical to the trickster's success as a culture hero.

The trickster's resourcefulness is succinctly delineated in *Anthills of the Savannah*'s tortoise tale. On the evidence of the story the tortoise has no options left to save his life, but he finds a way to live beyond his encounter with the leopard by leaving a sign of his courage. He perceives that the means at his disposal to leave this sign is simply the sand at his feet. The trickster-artist finds, in short, his medium, one that will allow him to create signs that will speak for him, salvage his dignity, and inspire whoever will discover them. To shape under pressure his limited resources into the tools of communication and redemption, the tortoise improvises, and improvisation is a skill that tricksters (including, as previously noted, Samalu in trickster mode) and artists share. Stephen Greenblatt characterizes "improvisation [as] the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (227), which is exactly the ability that the tortoise exercises when faced with the leopard.

What may be added here is that, from the perspective of the elder from Abazon who initially narrates "Tortoise and the Leopard," it does not really matter that the tortoise's improvisation only signals physical struggle with the leopard rather than actually carrying out that struggle:

"The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards—each is important in its own way . . . But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather

I will say boldly: the story.... Only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of the brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering...." (113-14)

The tortoise's improvisatory story in the sand resonates richly with Hyde's analysis of why the self-serving trickster is also the character that oral traditions sometimes designate as culture hero: "the character who can freely play with dirt... is also the culture hero who brings fundamental change" (189). Playing with dirt, engaging in all manner of socially proscribed activities, shows the trickster indulging his infantile, instinctual impulses, but it also discloses the character's longing for physical and psychological freedom. That freedom permits not only transgressions of established boundaries, but also innovative approaches to the conditions that stifle human fulfillment.

Achebe examines those conditions in *Anthills of the Savannah* and, through President Sam and his apparatus of control and intimidation (which includes the head of the secret police, Johnson Ossai, also referred to as "Samsonite"), gives special attention to the brutal and corrupt regimes that have deformed African governance since the independence era. Not that Achebe lets the West off the hook for its instigation and support in these matters. With respect to these different forces Osodi reflects: "The real danger today is from that fat, adolescent and delinquent millionaire, America, and from all those virulent, misshapen freaks like Amin and Bokassa [like Sam a 'President for Life'] sired on Africa by Europe. Particularly those ones" (47). Symbolically, the leopard that appears to control the tortoise's fate with his deadly weaponry corresponds to "those ones" as well as to Sam. As the leopard's intended victim, the tortoise represents those oppressed individuals and groups, including the people of Abazon, subject to the intimidation and violence of authoritarian rulers. The tortoise symbolically challenges these rulers not only by virtue of his dignified response to the leopard's naked aggression, but also by virtue of "the most important function of the Trickster," as Arlene Elder sees it: "performing as the culture's memory and conscience, reminding others of their traditional values" (67).

The tortoise thus plays the mythic culture hero in a modern political drama, and in so doing he performs his perennial role as mediator. Henry Louis Gates, referring to a trickster deity of West African origin, argues: "These trickster figures [including Esu-Elegbara and Legba] are fundamental, divine terms of mediation: as tricksters they are mediators, and their

mediations are tricks” (6). The old man’s tortoise mediates not only between the devastated province of Abazon and President Sam, but also between the values intrinsic to oral tradition and those of the tyrants that have beset modern Africa. By invoking “The Tortoise and the Leopard” and other traditional motifs, the old man, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, “signif[ies] from the periphery of authorized power and privilege [through] the power of tradition to be reinscribed” (2). In fact, one may discern something of Achebe himself in the old man, for, as Brenda Cooper sees it, *Anthills of the Savannah* reflects the author’s “new-found ability to . . . construct a bridge across the gulf that has often been observed existing between his novels set in the past and those played out in modern Nigeria” (59). Achebe builds numerous bridges between the past and the present in works prior to *Anthills*, but if his final novel creates continuity between his traditional and modern cultures, as Cooper suggests, then the emblem of that continuity may be the old man’s appeal to the tradition of trickster narrative. He deploys the tortoise with clear allegorical intent and, in so doing, directs tradition toward the contemporary political reality. The tortoise deprives the leopard of unqualified victory by creating a struggle with his foe for others to see, a gesture that defines the sort of ingenuity and tenacity needed to counteract the destructive exercise of power that Achebe contemplates.

In markedly different ways, then, Achebe’s tricksters impart to readers some of the vitality and insight of the cultural past while mediating a vision of the future. In his fall from the sky, Ekwefi’s Tortoise anticipates the demise of colonialism’s rule of the many by the few. Chief Nanga’s wiles occasion the entrance into politics of Odili Samalu, who, for all his own shortcomings, is determined to change the politics of corruption that Nanga practices. Finally, the old man’s tortoise, though overmatched by the leopard, insists on expressing his existence’s meaningfulness and consequently is invoked by his narrators (not excluding Achebe himself) to encourage resistance to unjust authority. These trickster narratives are meant to heighten awareness of historical and political transgression, but they also join traditional wisdom with modern experience on a path directed toward a more just and dignified political reality.

NOTES

1. See also Sarah Lawall, who speaks of “the productive relationship between orality and literacy that has largely conditioned the modern African imagination” (2172). In “The Novel in Africa,” the second chapter of

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, a dialogue unfolds between two imaginary writers, Nigerian Emmanuel Egudu and Australian Elizabeth Costello, on orality's role in the African novel. Egudu asserts that "the true African novel[] is an oral novel. On the page it is inert . . . it wakes up when the voice speaks [the words] aloud." In contrast, Costello finds Egudu's oral novel's "idea muddled at its very core" and claims that it relies, counter-productively, on "exoticism." She believes that "Emmanuel's talk of an oral novel . . . is just another way of propping up the mystique of the African as the last repository of primal human energies" (45, 50, 53). Of course, this exchange does not negate the influence of African oral tradition on modern African written literature.

2. In rendering Achebe's tortoises with an upper-case "T" at times, lower case at others, I am following as far as possible Achebe's own orthography. For the more general references to this character I have selected the lower-case letter.
3. In modern West African literature Kola, a trickster in Nigerian Wole Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters*, is also a painter, though not at all the lethal one Anaanu is in "Spider the Artist."
4. Lévi-Strauss perceives in the trickster figure a "form of mediation" (Lévi-Strauss 441), a view related to his notion that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution" (qtd. in Hyde 267). While Lévi-Strauss comments on Native North American tricksters, Hyde's elaboration ultimately extends to "all trickster tales" (268). As will be seen, Henry Louis Gates, too, recognizes the trickster as a mediatory agent, focusing specifically on a trickster deity of West African origin. It should be mentioned here that the world's various trickster traditions possess unique qualities, but striking points of contact between traditions also emerge. So although the present discussion focuses on West African tricksters and related commentary, it does not exclude references to other trickster traditions and analyses.
5. Similarly, an old wise man in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* declares, "stories are not about ogres or about animals or about men. All stories are about human beings" (61–62).
6. See Christopher Vecsey: "Through Ananse's tales, the Akan individual experiences vicarious freedom from the societal boundaries that bind so tightly. (The boundaries are so tight because they are so necessary.) Ananse . . . gives the individual the opportunity to mock society's authority. . . . That is not to say that the trickster destroys the fabric of Akan society. The Akan individual may applaud his successes, but he does not attempt to emulate his antisocial techniques; he enjoys Ananse's illicit schemes but does not approve of them. . . . The important point is that Ananse, through his actions, subverts and revalidates the ultimate bases of

- Akan life” (118, 108). This point—that tricksters can offer just enough liberation to reinforce convention—represents a paradox worthy of the trickster figure.
7. Numerous authors from diverse backgrounds have incorporated notable trickster characters into their works. These include Toni Morrison, Derek Walcott, Andrew Salkey, Maxine Hong Kingston, Charles Johnson, N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, and Thomas King.
 8. Certain traits of Achebe’s Tortoise in *Things Fall Apart*, including his self-sabotage, are shared by Àjápá, the Yoruba tortoise, whose “tricks often recoil on him, and he learns to his shame or cost that the creatures of whose intelligence he is so contemptuous are not as stupid and gullible as he imagined” (Owomoyela, *Trickster* xii).
 9. This trick hinges on a verbal ploy similar to the assumption of the name “Nohbody” by Odysseus—a trickster of Greek oral tradition—to thwart the Kyklops, Polyphemos, whose complaint in the ninth book of the *Odyssey* that “Nohbody” has hurt him is met with indifference by his fellow Kyklops (Fitzgerald translation).
 10. In addition to the tortoise motifs examined in the body of this chapter, Achebe alludes to and adapts the tortoise of oral tradition in numerous other contexts. Nathaniel, a character in *No Longer at Ease*, narrates a brief, perhaps improvised, tortoise tale late in the novel as an unflattering comment on Obi Okonkwo’s decision not to travel from Lagos to his family’s town of Umuofia to attend his mother Hannah’s funeral (186). *Arrow of God* alludes to the tortoise multiple times to comment on the story’s development and ideas. This is illustrated by an example in the body of this chapter. In *A Man of the People*, Edna Odo’s father slights the new Volkswagen that his political party has given him by calling it “a tortoise” (103, 147). On the other hand, “tortoise” refers flatteringly in *Anthills of the Savannah* to a fictional African autocrat, President Ngongo, whom Sam, the increasingly dictatorial President of Kangan, considers “the wise old tortoise” (22). In addition, the central character in Achebe’s children’s book *The Drum* is Tortoise, who tries to become king of the animals by sharing the food he can produce with a drum he has gained from the land of spirits. The book series, published in Nigeria, to which this and another Achebe children’s book, *The Flute*, belong is Tortoise Books. Further, in his poem “Mango Seedling,” composed in 1968 during the Nigeria–Biafra War and dedicated to the memory of his friend killed in the fighting, Christopher Okigbo, Achebe writes, “Or else it hoped for Old Tortoise’s miraculous feast . . . / These days beyond fable, beyond faith?” (“Mango”).
 11. Richard Priebe, Emmanuel Obiechina, and Charles Nnolim also find the Tortoise and birds tale functioning allegorically in *Things Fall Apart*, although their interpretations, similar to one another—both view Tortoise

as standing for Okonkwo (Priebe, *Myth* 55; Obiechina, "Narrative" 213–14; Nnolim 37–38)—are different from the one elaborated in the body of this discussion. Just the same, one distinct similarity between Tortoise and Okonkwo is their apparent rashness as they overreach, seeming to hope for better results than what may have been expected. They lack exit strategies (or possess sketchy ones) and suffer the harsh consequences. Tortoise, dependent on the birds' feathers, does not anticipate the disastrous fall that follows his treachery toward the birds, while Okonkwo, after beheading the District Commissioner's messenger and recognizing that the Umuofian community will not support him, seems at a loss for an alternative plan, save suicide (204–205).

12. Achebe comments in a 1969 interview on this aspect of Nanga's role:

Well, the colonial departure from the scene was not really a departure. I mean independence was unreal, and people like Nanga were actually used as front men, as puppets, by the former colonial power. As long as they could go about saying they were ministers, as long as they enriched themselves, they were happy, and they would leave the real exploiter at this work. So I think in a very basic sense, characters like Nanga flourished because the colonial situation leading to the independence period in Africa made it possible. And it still happens; it's not a thing of the past. (Interview with Lindfors, Munro, Priebe, and Sander 10–11)

13. Achebe himself regarded Samalu favorably. In the 1969 interview he remarks:

I like that young man.... He was... basically honest, which makes a difference.... He knew his own shortcomings; he even knew when his motives were not very pure, and he admitted that.... This puts him in a class worthy of attention, as far as I'm concerned. He suffered in this kind of society because it was very cruel, very ruthless. But he was learning very fast, and at the end I think he had improved his chances of being of service, of doing the things he thought should be done.... It's not necessary to judge a man's action simply in terms of "well, he's only seeking revenge." [Samalu] himself was honest enough to know that there was that element in his motivation, but soon there were other more worthwhile reasons. And I think I wouldn't quarrel with him at all for that. (Interview with Lindfors, Munro, Priebe, and Sander 9–10)

14. In the nineteenth century Joel Chandler Harris suggested that Brer Rabbit embodies the vulnerability of "Southern" African Americans (which means in many cases, of course, people who were enslaved or who had been):

"It needs no scientific investigation to show why [the African American] selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness . . ." (*Songs* 44). See also Robert Hemenway's comment:

Naturally enough, the African tales were adapted to the Afro-American experience. Slaves [Hemenway refers to them also as "black artists"] told tales or the parts of tales that seemed most suited to the slave environment. Trickster tales, universal in all folklore, were especially popular because they often emphasized the triumph of the weak over the strong; they seemed ready made for a slave situation in which foot speed—escape—was a persistent hope and tricks rather than physical force were the primary recourse for survival. (24–25)

For Brer Rabbit's kinship with African tricksters, see Florence Baer's *Sources and Analogues of the Uncle Remus Tales*. As Hemenway notes, Baer "concludes that well over half of [Harris's Uncle Remus tales] originally were African tales in some form" (24).

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Language and Ambivalence in Achebe's Writing

Any probing discussion of modern African literature arrives unavoidably at the question of language legitimacy. Are the languages brought to Africa by its European colonizers valid media for modern African literary expression? A related fundamental question asks whether African interests are best served by the academic and commercial privileging of Europhone African literature rather than literature in indigenous African languages. The debate over these questions was fully engaged by the early 1960s. In April 1964, for example, Achebe presented at the University of Ghana his paper "The English Language and the African Writer," subsequently published in the journal *Transition* (1965), and then published as "The African Writer and the English Language" in Achebe's collection of essays, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975). Achebe defends in this essay the use of English by African writers, affirming the value of a language that reaches such a wide audience and alluding to a number of authors who have shaped English to remarkable aesthetic effect though it was not their first language. To illustrate his argument Achebe provides excerpts of verse by Joseph Kariuki, Christopher Okigbo, and John Pepper Clark, as well as an excerpt of prose from his own novel *Arrow of God*. Yet Achebe acknowledges qualms as well over the propriety of employing the colonizer's language. Understanding his perceptions and misgivings regarding linguistic practices in the late colonial and early independence eras demands careful attention not only to the details of this essay, but

also to *No Longer at Ease*. Achebe's second novel richly depicts the cultural tensions surrounding language use well before an important 1962 literary conference in Uganda and a forceful critique that ensued.

The historic "Conference of African Writers of English Expression" held in June that year at Makerere University College in Kampala was attended by Langston Hughes and a host of young African literary figures, including Clark, Es'kia Mphahlele, Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, Wole Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the last of these hoping above all to meet another participant, that is, Achebe (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 89–90; Ngũgĩ, "Language" 5). In the following year Nigerian critic Obiajunwa Wali published "The Dead End of African Literature?" in *Transition*, in which he gives special attention to the proceedings of the Uganda conference. Wali assesses the status of and prospects for African literature in this trenchant and partisan essay, to which Achebe partly was responding in "The African Writer and the English Language." Notwithstanding the important literary contributions already being made by African authors who attended this conference, Wali declares in his critique that "perhaps [the conference's] most important achievement" was to show "that African literature as now defined and understood leads nowhere." With African writing in English and French as his particular target, Wali maintains that "African literature as now understood and practiced, is merely a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature." This appendage "has no means of self-enrichment," while "the ordinary local audience, with little or no education in the conventional European manner, and who constitute an overwhelming majority, has no chance of participating in this kind of literature" (13–14). He states that his intention is

not to discredit...writers who have achieved much in their individual rights within an extremely difficult and illogical situation. It is to point out that the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing, is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration. (14)

Numerous writers and critics took exception to this argument (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 101), but it was Wali's view that Ngũgĩ embraced years later.

In his chapter “The Language of African Literature,” Ngũgĩ explains that, after a period in which many talented African writers embraced colonial languages for their work,

some are coming round to the inescapable conclusion articulated by Obi Wali with such polemical vigour twenty years ago: African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism. (27)

Ngũgĩ himself came to the decision to write his fiction in his mother tongue after having composed several important works in English. In an interview published in 1986 he declared, “farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on, it is Gĩkũyũ and KiSwahili all the way” (qtd. in Owusu 1734). This and the other previous statements help explain why Achebe and Ngũgĩ came to be widely regarded as the dueling poles in the debate over language authenticity in African literature.¹

Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and others have contributed compelling arguments to this debate, but the present chapter, while mindful of these arguments, does not primarily seek to adjudicate between them. Rather, it considers how this debate was, in effect, conducted by Achebe himself in his novel *No Longer at Ease*. He dramatized these issues, in other words, as early as (or even perhaps before) 1960, the year the novel was published and the year of Nigerian independence. *No Longer at Ease* offers not a partisan but rather an equivocal perspective on the appropriate languages of Africa, giving expression to the varied factors that have led to dissension on the topic. Indeed, one might criticize the book’s irresolution on the issue, but that would miss the mark, for the novel offers an honest portrayal of those forces that shape an ambivalent linguistic sensibility in late colonial African speech and literature. In short, instead of depicting or prescribing a linguistic situation that might be, in *No Longer at Ease* Achebe vividly dramatizes the complexity of the situation that existed at the time of the novel’s composition and that continues in many parts of Africa. And while Achebe’s language portrait is accomplished in English, it is an English inflected with African linguistic elements, specifically ones that derive from Igbo and Nigerian Pidgin (the latter cited by Ngũgĩ as a “new African language[]”; “Language” 23). One result of this blending is that value is

placed unmistakably on Igbo and Pidgin and not on English alone (see Ngũgĩ, “Language” 8).

Although Achebe could be a formidable critic of Western and African abuses alike, he navigated a course that drew on and affirmed both African and European linguistic traditions.² His approach was supple enough to acknowledge and critique both the internal and external sources of modern African societal ills and successes. This multidimensional approach is particularly evident in *No Longer at Ease*, in which the social advantages and compromises associated with the use of three languages, English, Igbo, and Nigerian Pidgin,³ are projected in a manner that is artistic, conscientious, and politically savvy. One result of this approach is that the novel and its treatment of language elude simple ideological classification. Another result is that the previously mentioned languages are shown to be highly productive when positioned in a working relationship with each other rather than vying for primacy in a hostile spirit.

Before further exploring the debate over language and literature as expressed in *No Longer at Ease*, it will be useful to briefly examine the version of the debate that, with a somewhat different emphasis, Achebe delineated several years after the publication of the novel. This version is given in “The African Writer and the English Language,” referred to above, in which the author observes that in Nigeria, as in numerous African countries, English is the one language with “nationwide currency.” Achebe contends that the literature produced in English is consequently “the national literature,” while the literatures produced in languages—including Hausa Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo, and Ijaw—of the nation’s various ethnic groups are “ethnic literatures” (92–93). The reader may feel that with this point Achebe goes beyond defending the literary use of English by African writers and confers on it a degree of preferential treatment. The terms “national literature” and “ethnic literature,” while reasonably descriptive, establish a binary frame that seems to elevate English. Such a gesture is particularly disconcerting if we reflect that any literature in a language indigenous to an African nation has as great or greater claim to the title of national literature than one in English (notwithstanding that many of contemporary Africa’s national boundaries were designated by Africa’s colonizers).

In short, Achebe’s view in “The African Writer and the English Language” that African ethnic literatures are not national literatures is based on the extensiveness of the use of the languages in which they are written, though he might have proposed multiple national literatures—those

written in the “mother tongue[s]” (102) of the people of the nation. On the other hand, since Nigeria’s existence as a political entity is a product of colonial occupation, the language of the colonizer, English, is understood in the nation’s various regions, as Achebe notes. Thus, the English language and “nation” are unavoidably intertwined, and the national/ethnic dyad that Achebe proposes appears to create a hierarchy favoring English. The author states that the ethnic languages of Nigeria in particular “will just have to develop as tributaries to feed the one central language [English] enjoying nationwide currency.... Tomorrow the language [with nationwide currency] may be something else, although I very much doubt it” (96). And he does argue cogently for the value of a language that reaches an array of linguistic groups, not only in a single nation but also across African national boundaries: “The only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in—English, French, Arabic” (95).⁴

Yet, for all of Achebe’s attention in “The African Writer and the English Language” to the reach and therefore importance of English as a medium of communication, his personal and philosophical misgivings over his use of the former colonizer’s language do emerge. They may be discerned in the trace of defensiveness that accompanies two assertions that he makes. The first is that “those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecks with an eye on the main chance—outside their own countries” (95); the second, found near the essay’s close, is that “I have been given this language and I intend to use it” (102). Further, in two other passages in the essay, Achebe expresses more plainly the internal discomfort, the pang of conscience, associated with the use of English:

We may go on resenting [English] because it came as part of a package deal which included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it. (96)

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. (102)

And even when Achebe attests unequivocally in “The African Writer and the English Language” to the benefit of writing in a colonial language, he follows that declaration immediately with an expression of regret over colonial conquest and the cultural domination that attended it: “There

is certainly a great advantage to writing in world language. I think I have said enough to give an indication of my thinking on the importance of the world language which history has forced down our throats" (97). Concerning the second to last quoted passage above, Ngũgĩ discerns "a tone of levity" (7) in the phrases "dreadful betrayal" and "guilty feeling." But if any levity is present in the use of these phrases, it surely does not carry their essential message. The phrases contribute to Achebe's frank acknowledgment in the essay of his own misgivings over the use of English, and are echoes of the sense of guilt and betrayal that some years earlier, in *No Longer at Ease*, he evokes in relation to English.⁵

The character in *No Longer at Ease* who feels that he has betrayed others through his embrace of English is protagonist Obi Okonkwo, grandson of *Things Fall Apart*'s protagonist Okonkwo, and son of Nwoye, who late in that novel joins the Christians and becomes Isaac. As with grandfather and father, Obi is born in the fictional Umuofia, but after completing a university degree in England, he settles in Lagos, which city the novel realistically names and portrays. Umuofia and Lagos are the two spheres that exert an irresistible pull on Obi and ultimately pull him apart. He values the traditional Igbo values and close-knit rural community of his native Umuofia, but he is drawn by the economic and cultural opportunities and sensual excitement of Lagos. One aspect of Obi's dilemma is that he cannot escape Umuofia and the region of which it is part even in Lagos, since the influence of his rural family home reaches him in the city. This is reflected in the intrusions into his personal life of the Umuofia Progressive Union, in his Igbo office exchanges, and in his fraught relations with his parents.

Obi takes his university degree in English contrary to the wishes of the Union's members; they looked for him to study law in order that he might represent Umuofia in land disputes. Obi forms as it were an educational alliance with the colonial rulers instead of his Igbo supporters, and the symbolism of this alliance, his concentration in English, contributes to his own pangs of conscience. His sense of guilt over his affiliation with the colonial language is aroused by homesickness when he resides in England and is related, moreover, to his humiliation there when forced to speak English with other Nigerians:

Obi's longing to be back in Umuofia was sometimes so strong that he found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree. He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London

bus. But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's country man in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. (57)

Ironically, the characteristic of English that especially vexes Obi in this context is precisely the one that Achebe praises in "The African Writer": it permits communication between Africans who otherwise have no common language. When he is on English soil, Obi fears linguistic condescension from the so-called "proud owners" of the language. Yet, his affinity for English is such that he not only takes a degree in it, he also draws on English literature, as will be seen, for personal and professional purposes after he returns to Nigeria. Obi wants, in short, to own English himself, but not be owned by it—or, indeed, by the people who "conferred" it on his people.

Thus, Achebe's association in "The African Writer and the English Language" of betrayal and guilt with the use of English—"Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling"—is an association that in *No Longer at Ease* his protagonist, Obi, understands only too well: "[H]e found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree." The feelings of betrayal and guilt Obi experiences in relation to language are echoed each time he must choose between competing factions that claim him, including his parents, his fiancée Clara, the Umuofia Progressive Union, and even Nigeria itself.⁶ The force of the conflicting claims is such that Obi's identity as a new kind of educated and conscientious Nigerian official eventually unravels, and he succumbs to the bribe-taking he previously had deplored. In the process he does betray every faction—and himself.

The pattern of betrayal and guilt that Obi enacts arises from his attempt to embrace cultural codes that are fundamentally at cross-purposes. Simon Gikandi observes three such codes, that is, "three spaces with contradictory claims and cultural contours":

An Umuofia [Obi's rural home] that is displaced from its traditions and is in a perpetual state of cultural crisis; a Nigeria that he had earlier hoped would be an erotic space of fulfillment but has become corrupted in its genesis; and an England whose cultural transcripts have shaped his character but whose

function as a colonial power is a negation of the most important ingredients in his Africanity—history, home, language. (“Poetics” 10)

To some extent Gikandi’s analysis applies to Achebe the writer, but as this book argues, Achebe tried and largely succeeded in fashioning from these disparate forces a constructive discourse. Yet it seems that the conflict that revolves around the language of African literature presented a circle that perhaps neither Achebe nor others can satisfactorily square.

Roderick Wilson sums up the effect on Obi of these divergent codes that define him: “Obi is fragmented, and is so in a peculiarly modern way, attributable in its historical sense to the irreversible meeting of incompatible forces” (165). *No Longer at Ease* traces a series of reactions between these opposing forces so that Obi’s embrace of English represents one kind of response to his late colonial environment, while his experience of that embrace as a betrayal of Africa is the seemingly unavoidable consequence. The sense of betrayal associated with English is revealed not only in Obi’s thoughts about his life in England, but also in his interpretation of an Igbo folk song that he hears during his first return visit to Umuofia. Traders on the bus that Obi takes to Umuofia sing the song, and Obi, who knows the refrain, translates it into English:

An in-law went to see his in-law
 Oyiemu—o
 His in-law seized him and killed him
 Oyiemu—o
 Bring a canoe, bring a paddle
 Oyiemu—o
 The paddle speaks English
 Oyiemu—o. (52)

Upon translating the refrain, “its real meaning dawned on” Obi “for the first time.” He finds that it signifies “the world turned upside down” (akin to the phrase “things fall apart”) and that the transforming agency is betrayal. Just as “to the Ibo mind” the aggressor’s action is “the height of treachery,” since it is performed against his in-law, so, too, the fact that “a paddle . . . begins suddenly to talk in a language which its master, the fisherman, does not understand” represents “another great betrayal” (52). Obi is “pleased with his exegesis” (52), which indeed is illuminating, and certain of *No Longer at Ease*’s commentators have found no fault with that

interpretation as far as it goes.⁷ Wilson and Rosemary Colmer both have commented, nevertheless, that Obi apparently fails to recognize that “The paddle [that] speaks English” is an unflattering image of Obi himself: the underling who overturns his proper relation to his superiors through his acquisition of English (Wilson 165; Colmer 128). Here too, *No Longer at Ease* forms an association between an African’s use of English and the betrayal of Igbo tradition.

Wilson faults Obi’s self-regarding pleasure at his learned analysis of the traders’ song: “Obi is very proud of being able to translate and analyse [the song] with his tools of a western literary education. . . . Obi with some self-congratulations recognizes” the central idea of the song (165). At the same time, a different slant on Obi’s interpretive effort is available: his English education has augmented his capacity to interpret and appreciate an expression of Igbo folk art. After translating the song into English, Obi “turned it round and round in his mind [and] was struck by the wealth of association” (53). This is not to say, of course, that folk art can only be understood by people with advanced Western-constructed educations, but the meeting of different traditions of analysis and discourse can generate new insights and new paths of intercultural understanding (as is further considered in Chapter 8). One may draw, indeed, the same conclusion from *No Longer at Ease* itself, which comprises elements of storytelling, dialogue, song, verse, and proverbial wisdom from Igbo, English, and Nigerian Pidgin.

In a similar vein, we should notice that while *No Longer at Ease* is written in English, the Igbo language plays an important role. As Felicity Riddy points out, Igbo

is represented by a cadenced, proverb-laden style similar to that in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, to which Professor Eldred Jones has drawn attention, rich in images drawn from traditional rural life.⁸ It is the rhetorical manner of “men who made a great art of conversation.” . . . English conversation [in *No Longer at Ease*], in contrast to Ibo, has no distinctive rhetoric. It is laconic, almost abrupt. (151, 155)

The multiple discourses that *No Longer at Ease* interweaves and the ambivalence over language that the novel dramatizes are not, of course, arbitrary or purely polemical narrative features. Rather, they realistically reflect the multilingual reality of many parts of Africa—a reality that in diverse ways is regarded favorably in the novel. In addition to detailing Obi’s productive application of his proficiency in English to the Igbo song

about the paddle, the novel observes the appreciation by the Umuofia Progressive Union's members, all of whom are Igbo. They welcome the recently graduated Obi back to Nigeria at a Lagos reception that features a speech by the Union's Secretary. This speech is rendered in a florid "English they admired . . . the kind that filled the mouth, like the proverbial dry meat"—undoubtedly alluding to an Igbo proverb (37). And commenting on Obi's well-received speech at a later meeting of the Union, the narrator explicitly declares that the members "liked good Ibo, but they also admired English" (93). In addition, the narrator approvingly mentions the multilingualism that encompasses the Nigerian Pidgin of Obi's friend Christopher: "Whether Christopher spoke good or 'broken' English [that is, Pidgin] depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, to whom and how he wanted to say it. Of course that was to some extent true of most educated people, especially on Saturday nights. But Christopher was rather outstanding in coming to terms with a double heritage" (125–26). A component of that double heritage for most of *No Longer at Ease*'s characters of course is Igbo tradition, and while the dual influence of Igbo and British cultures seems to impel Obi to ruin, the novel does not in general reject a person's aptitude in multiple languages and traditions.

At several points, nevertheless, fluency in multiple languages does suggest or anticipate conflict. Still recently arrived from England and newly appointed as Secretary to the Scholarship Board, a senior civil service post, Obi speaks a second time to the Umuofia Progressive Union and attempts to appeal to the members' appreciation of both Igbo and English styles of discourse. At the outset, when his address is purely in the Igbo language, he blends ideas associated with both Igbo and Western culture—that is, he evokes a psalm and an Igbo proverb (92)—but he falls flat when he tries "to improvise a joke about beer and palm-wine" (93). Ultimately Obi's speech, which "had started off one hundred percent in Ibo[,] was now fifty-fifty" in Igbo and English (93). And although the speech is a success overall—his audience enjoys discourse in both Igbo and English—Obi's shift from Igbo into a hodgepodge of the two languages may signify a certain irresolution concerning his linguistic home and cultural identity—an irresolution that will help overwhelm him. This theme is discussed by Emmanuel Obiechina:

The point is not whether his audience likes a "mixture" of Igbo and English or not, it is that such a mixture is itself symptomatic of something deep and dangerous, some malaise. . . . [Obi's] ultimate defeat comes from the fact

that after taking intellectual positions, he constantly lacked the will to sustain those positions, and was carried, almost without a struggle, by the pattern of events to disaster. ("Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*" 143)

His indecision notwithstanding, Obi does earnestly struggle to maintain equilibrium in the face of conflicting cultural forces. Achebe's point is that even an intelligent, well-meaning man's struggle in such a fraught colonial environment is highly vulnerable to the competing claims on him. Pressures arising from Obi's "double heritage" await him at many turns.

The recurring demand placed on Obi to shift from English to Igbo and thereby affirm his Igbo solidarity reflects these cultural pressures. His romance with Clara, with whom he initially speaks in English, does not commence until, on their voyage back to Nigeria, she addresses him in their shared African language: "she had spoken in Ibo, for the first time, as if to say, 'We belong together: we speak the same language'" (29). This use of the mother tongue to affirm a cultural bond is clearly constructive, as is the messenger Charles Ibe's practice of stopping in Obi's office to exchange Ibo greetings (110 and see below). On several occasions, however, a shift from English to Igbo represents a more dubious invocation of cultural solidarity. Mr. Mark and his sister, Elsie Mark, make such a shift in their separate conversations with Obi. They hope that he will be more favorably disposed to monetary and sexual bribes because of the shared ethnic background, and in turn give preferential treatment to Elsie's application for a university scholarship (98–99, 103–104). In another of Obi's Lagos encounters, a policeman suspends his confrontation of Obi and Clara when he realizes from Clara's speech to Obi that they are, like him, Igbo (85). Regarding the scenes in which Igbo is associated with official corruption, Riddy aptly observes that "kinship may be abused in a larger society not based on kin" (153). No certain refuge from the corruption to which Obi ultimately succumbs may be found for him in the deployment of Igbo or in expressions of ethnic solidarity.

Nor does he find lasting refuge in English either. Obi reads his "favorite poem," A.E. Housman's "Easter Hymn," for comfort at the end of a day in which he has been troubled by a fight with Clara and financial stress. Obi himself has written poems in English, and it is indicative of his divided linguistic and cultural affinities that one of these English poems is "Nigeria," a tribute to and benediction for his homeland. This poem slips out of his volume of Housman, so he reads it before reading "Easter Hymn." Late in the novel, though, when Obi is still more deeply

distressed over Clara and his financial situation and again takes out Housman for comfort and sees his own poem, "Nigeria," he "quietly and calmly crumpled the paper in his left palm until it was a tiny ball, threw it on the floor, and began to turn the pages of the book forwards and backwards. In the end he did not read any poem. He put the book down on the little table by his bed" (172). Obi writes poetry in English rather than Igbo, studies English rather than law in England, advances to a senior post in the civil service through his learned disquisition on modern English literature (44–46), and uses English as well as Igbo in his speeches to the Umuofia Progressive Union. Yet his destruction of his own English poem on Nigeria and his turning away from the Housman volume in the late scene signify that neither English nor England can solve his or society's problems; they constitute a source of those problems, despite the benefits that have accrued to Obi through English.

And whatever the rewards that English confers on Obi, he is devoted to Igbo as well. His mind adverts to Igbo proverbs on numerous occasions, he establishes bonds with others through Igbo verbal exchanges, and he acknowledges while traveling by bus to Umuofia a primal bond with Igbo that he does not have with English: "He said words in his mind that he could not say out loud even when he was alone. Strangely enough, all the words were in his mother tongue. He could say any English word, no matter how dirty, but some Ibo words simply would not proceed from his mouth" (52). It may be true, as Riddy notes, that Obi's extended period away from Nigeria has left him rusty in Igbo—at least the reading of scripture in Igbo (Riddy 155; *No Longer* 65)—but there can be little doubt that he is deeply attached to his native language and the people who use it:

He wished they [the proud owners of English] were here today to see. Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live. (57)

The last sentence reminds us why the question of African literary language is so highly charged. African literature represents a mode of opposition to British domination and arrogance, yet what can be the efficacy of literary utterances that are composed in the colonizer's language? Achebe's response is to use an array of linguistic devices to resist the totalizing effect

of Standard English. He is among those writers whose work, as he argues in “The African Writer and the English Language,” forges “new English,” one that submits to a “different kind[] of use,” one that “is able to carry [the African writer’s] peculiar experience,” and one that is “still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (100, 103).

One of Achebe’s methods of forging a new English in *No Longer at Ease* is simply to represent faithfully the language fluidity of modern Lagos. He does so in numerous scenes, such as that in which Obi confronts Charles Ibe about a loan. Their exchange is conducted in Igbo, English, and Pidgin:

[Obi] sent for Charles and asked him in Ibo (so that Miss Tomlinson would not understand) why he had not fulfilled his promise. Charles scratched his head and renewed his promise, this time for the end of December.

“I shall find it difficult to trust you in future,” Obi said in English.

“Ah, no *Oga*, Master. E no be like dat I beg. I go Pay end of mont prompt.” He then reverted to Ibo. “Our people have a saying that a debt may become moldy but it never rots.” . . .

“O.K., Charles. End of December. If you fail I shall report the matter to Mr. Green.”

“Ah! I no go fail at all. If I fail my Oga [master], who I go go meet next time?” (110–11)

This and other passages in *No Longer at Ease* have a vibrantly innovative quality, since they represent forms of African expression unfamiliar to readers of English fiction. The varieties of discourse in such passages exhibit what Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin designates as “heteroglossia”—that is, “a multiplicity of social voices”—and heteroglossia tends to disrupt the authority of a single dominant voice or cultural point of view (*Dialogic* 262). Obi’s use of Igbo in the passage above to circumvent Miss Tomlinson’s comprehension may be motivated, at least partly, by his wish not to make a fellow Igbo and African man look bad in front of an English woman. But if that is the case then, as with so much that concerns Obi, his commitment wanes, since he soon shifts to English.

Also notable in the exchange between Obi and Charles are the resonant tones of Nigerian Pidgin, which in *No Longer at Ease* Achebe uses extensively for the first time. To be sure Pidgin, whose part in Achebe's fiction is more fully explored in the next chapter, has a tendency to make class distinctions transparent (see Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 75–77; Obiechina, *Culture* 190), as reflected in Obi's haughty exchange with the Pidgin-speaking Charles Ibe, a dialogue that also will be further examined in the next chapter. In Achebe's fiction, though, Pidgin discourse can also sharpen expressions of irreverence by lower-status individuals toward "superiors." Pidgin represents, moreover, one kind of productive adaptation to the multiple languages that influence African oral and written expression. As different in style and story as *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer Ease* are, notwithstanding many thematic points of contact, Achebe's extensive integration of Pidgin into his portrait of Nigeria on the eve of independence is only one of the ways in which he carries over to his second novel the fresh vision that distinguishes the first.

No Longer at Ease features numerous politically informed gestures, including the content of Pidgin dialogue and such observations as the following:

They were eating pounded yams and *egusi* soup with their fingers. The second generation of educated Nigerians had gone back to eating pounded yams or *garri* with their fingers for the good reason that it tasted better that way. Also for the even better reason that they were not as scared as the first generation of being called uncivilized. (23)

The closing comment, encompassing domestic etiquette and changing African consciousness of Westerners' perceptions, is not of the type found in *Things Fall Apart*, whose characters do not have the decades-long view available to those in *No Longer at Ease*. Achebe moreover is so much closer in outlook to African characters in *No Longer at Ease* than to ones in the preceding novel that this comment resonates with personal experience. Yet despite differences in manner between the author's first two novels, *No Longer at Ease* carries on the spirit of *Things Fall Apart* in expressing previously neglected African experiences and perspectives, including ones with evident political connotations. In particular the acknowledgement of the outsider's perception of African eating custom sounds one of the salient themes of Achebe's first three novels, that is, repugnant Western chauvinism toward Africa. And this brings back the question of literary language, for *No Longer at Ease* emphasizes a linguistic underpinning of this chauvinism. As Obi considers his father Isaac's affinity for "the things of the white man," he reflects that "the symbol of the white man's power was the written word, or

better still the printed word” (144). The power associated with writing and printing, accentuated in *Things Fall Apart*’s final lines, which feature the District Commissioner musing over how he will write Obi’s grandfather (208–209), produces an understandable ambivalence in Obi and in Achebe himself. Both the character and the author draw on written English to achieve their goals, and in Achebe’s case the partial goal is to correct distorted concepts about Africans, such as their language use, propagated by various Western observers embodied in the District Commissioner. Yet, as that character reminds us, English has been a weapon to degrade and subjugate Africans, and the fact remains that the Igbo language celebrated in *No Longer at Ease* does not serve as the novel’s outward vehicle of expression. This tension between indigenous African and colonial languages with which Achebe grapples embodies, no doubt, the proverb examined in previous chapters: “Wherever Something Stands....” Yet this same perplexing tension is the source of the innovation and vitality that distinguish his work, and in this irony the proverb resonates as well. Indeed, the virtue of that proverb in the colonial and postcolonial literary context is that it guides storyteller and audience in taking a judicious response to the ironies and incommensurabilities that colonialism generates.

Clearly, the multiple languages and cultures navigated by both “The African Writer and the English Language” and *No Longer at Ease* carry the burden of a complex and, in varied respects, unjust social and political history. Yet if “The African Writer” and other pronouncements by Achebe on English as a medium for African literature do not locate an ideal resolution to the quandary over what the appropriate medium is, *No Longer at Ease*’s adept treatment of varied linguistic gestures illuminates cultural and political realities that have shaped modern Africa. So, while Obi Okonkwo’s linguistic orientation is deeply divided, the novel should not be faulted for equivocation in the matter of language, but rather admired for the vibrant, multidimensional language portrait it offers. That the portrait is composed fundamentally in English, moreover, does not nullify what it teaches us about the use of multilingual codes in a political entity nearing the end of colonial occupation.

NOTES

- Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike argue that English may function as a language for African literary production, while acknowledging that “the language in which the work is done” is “a most important consideration”

in determining which works “should be included in this evolving canon” of African literature:

In this view of things, the instrumental medium, that is, the language employed to carry out larger and more important cultural functions is hardly by itself to be considered sufficient, let alone exclusive grounds for assigning a work to one tradition or one body of literature rather than another. That [numerous prominent African writers including “Ngugi, Achebe”] speak or write in English, however perfectly or imperfectly, does not make them Englanders, and their works belong to them and, through them, to African literature—certainly not to England’s literature. (14)

2. Achebe censured Europe in its relationship with colonial and postcolonial Africa. (See, for example, “An Image of Africa” 11–12, 15, 17–18, and *Anthills of the Savannah* 47, 146.) Yet he also acknowledged that some benefits have accrued during the colonial era. (See the passage, quoted in Chapter 8, from his 1967 interview with Robert Serumaga 13.) He also reproached Africans in various ways. (See, for example, *Anthills of the Savannah* 144–47.)
3. In observing that *No Longer at Ease*’s complex language picture reflects cultural division, Roderick Wilson plausibly distinguishes between four language registers in the novel: “a particular formal device which Achebe uses . . . enforce[s] the sense of a divided society . . . and that is the varieties of language: characters of different kinds or in different contexts speak in ‘normal’ English, stilted ‘impressive’ English, Ibo or pidgin” (165). The impressive English is rendered in the “Welcome Address” of the Secretary of the Umuofia Progressive Union when Obi Okonkwo returns to Nigeria. With characteristic irony, Achebe notes that the members of the Union admire the Secretary’s bloated English diction more than the subsequent clear and simple speech, also in English, by the English-language scholar Obi (36–37).
4. Even in his final book, *There Was a Country*, Achebe, in recalling his secondary education, invokes the reach of English across ethnic boundaries:

English was the language of instruction at Government College, Umuahia [where] I first truly understood the power and importance of that unifying language. The schoolmasters, well aware that Nigeria had over 250 ethnic groups, had very carefully enrolled students from every nook and cranny of that nation, where possible. While African languages and writing should be developed, nurtured, and preserved, how else, I would wonder later, would I have been able to communicate with so

many boys from different parts of the country and ethnic groups, speaking different languages, had we not been taught one language? (25)

5. Judging, moreover, from the various remarks that Achebe made after “The African Writer and the English Language,” the influential role of English in African writing remained a concern of his and seems to have been a weight on his conscience. In 1966 he wrote in volume one of the *Nigeria English Studies Association Bulletin* that he was aware of “no serious weight of opinion today against the continued presence of English on the Nigerian scene. This is fortunate for our peace of mind for it means we can believe in the value of English to the very survival of the Nigerian nation without feeling like deserters” (9; qtd. in, and see, Riddy 150). Apparently there was some “weight of opinion,” given the strongly worded exchange Achebe had that year with Tai Solarin, a Nigerian editorialist. Despite the fact that his columns were written in English and appeared in an English-language Nigerian newspaper, Solarin attacked Achebe’s affirmation of the use of English in Africa and suggested that Achebe’s own use of it was financially motivated. (See Achebe, “Dear Tai Solarin” 149–52.)

Further indications of the mental burden that Achebe carried regarding English in African literature are discernible in his preface to his volume *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975). “The African Writer and the English Language” is the only one of the numerous essays on literary themes in the volume that Achebe considers in that preface, and he acknowledges there the greater doubt over the role of English in this context. Not only is he “more cold” toward the position of English, the arguments for English, though still compelling, contribute to the bind he feels:

The fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature leaves me more cold now than it did when I first spoke about it [in 1964]. And yet I am unable to see a significantly different or a more emotionally comfortable resolution of that problem. (xiii)

Ngũgĩ notes that Achebe’s phrase “the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature” reflects “a slightly more critical stance from his 1964 position” (“Language” 31). And yet, as the second sentence above shows, Achebe arrives at the same practical conclusion as in 1964. In a still later discussion, published in 1990, Achebe again reveals his uneasiness over the African literary use of English in African without rejecting that use: “writing in the language of my coloniser [can be viewed as] acquiescing in the ultimate dispossession.... My position is that anyone who feels unable to write in English should of course follow his desires” (“African Literature” 7–8). Achebe’s recurring reflections on the question

of African literary language suggest that the issue produced an uneasy counterpoint between his intellect and his conscience.

6. For the influence of betrayal and guilt on Obi's actions, see analyses by Rosemary Colmer and Andrew Peek.
7. Andrew Peek adds to Obi's exegesis by suggesting that the disintegration of traditional kinship codes signified in the song by the murder occurs partly as a result of English colonial rule, with its "suppression of traditional religious beliefs" (113).
8. Riddy cites Jones's pieces "Language and Theme in *Things Fall Apart*" and "Achebe's Third Novel."

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Language and the Power of Subordination: Achebe's Integration of Nigerian Pidgin

Nigerian Pidgin English is the hybrid language with which Achebe creates some of the dialogue in all of his novels as well as in certain shorter fiction.¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, the author states in “The African Writer and the English Language” that English itself must adjust to the Anglophone African writers who are forging a “new English,” one that submits to a “different kind[] of use,” that “is able to carry [the African writer’s] peculiar experience,” and that is “still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (100, 103). For Achebe and several other African writers, that linguistic “peculiar experience” encompasses not only indigenous languages and oral traditions, but also Pidgin English. Achebe deploys Nigerian Pidgin, as he does other African linguistic elements, with partly polemical intent: to express the drive for cultural liberation by validating African realities. What Simon Gikandi says in another postcolonial literary context is also true of the Nigerian Pidgin that informs an array of verbal gestures in Achebe’s fiction: Pidgin is “the previously disdained vernacular” that “challenges the norms of the ‘Queen’s’ English” (*Writing* 234).

To be sure, Achebe uses Nigerian Pidgin English to vary the textures and rhythms of his fictional palette. Yet Pidgin does not merely embellish his work, but contributes to its very substance.² Nigerian Pidgin helps focus the identity of a range of characters and gives their discourse a down-to-earth dimension, carrying as it does the cadences of everyday life and a frankness that formal English can lack. As a non-elite discourse, moreover,

Pidgin underscores cultural and class tensions. In particular, it draws attention to the inequities that mark relations between several power orders in Africa—inequities that lie at the heart of Achebe's themes. Pidgin infuses with carnivalesque potency and irreverence the expressions of non-privileged characters, especially in relation to members of the educated elite.³ With its blend of elements from different languages, its vernacular frankness, and its rhythmic vitality, Pidgin not only reflects hierarchical structures in Achebe's literary dramas, but also serves to challenge them.

Like all pidgin languages, Nigerian Pidgin comprises linguistic elements derived from multiple sources, including African languages and English. Numerous pidgins exist in the world, and all of them consist of lexical and syntactical elements from more than one language (or “speech community”), with a modified form of one of the source languages providing the greater part of the pidgin’s basis (Hall xii). A pidgin is spoken for trade and other purposes associated with a lingua franca, that is, to facilitate communication between people belonging to different ethnic and linguistic groups who do not otherwise share a language; in other words, one of a pidgin’s functions is to facilitate “interethnic communication” (Zabus 73; Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin et al., *Key* 176). Strictly speaking a pidgin is not the first language of any of the speech communities that use it, and when a pidgin does become a group’s native language it is viewed not as a pidgin but rather as a creole, such as Caribbean patois or Gullah (Hall xii). Creolized languages are more developed than pidgins, and Nigerian Pidgin, which originally arose as an adaptation to the British presence in pre-independent Nigeria, has further evolved during the postcolonial era (Booker and Reynolds 220); increasingly it has become a creole (see Zabus 69). Achebe draws on a pidgin language that combines West African syntactical elements and vocabulary with English vocabulary; this language thus enables communication between Africans of divergent ethnic backgrounds who might not otherwise be able to communicate (Obiechina, *Culture* 189; Wren, *World* 71; Zabus 51).

Achebe’s recurring use of Nigerian Pidgin is just one of the ways in which his fiction resists the discursive and formal assumptions embodied in literary portrayals of Africa by European authors (see, for example, Gikandi, “Poetics” 3). Achebe acknowledged that partly what motivated him to write *Things Fall Apart* was the “distortion” and “denigration” in European writers’ portraits of Africa and Africans; what was needed, he felt, was “someone [to] look at this from the inside,” a writer “to show

what was false" (*Conversations* 3–4, 7–8, 112, 183). Linguistic gestures and observations on language may be counted among the prime tools by which Achebe contests Eurocentric perceptions of Africa and the cultural authority associated with them. Furthermore, in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Achebe contends that distorted Western representations of language use by Africans dehumanize them. The language of Achebe's own fiction serves to counteract this distortion, as is discernible in the author's versatile use of Igbo, English, and Nigerian Pidgin, of untranslated Igbo words and phrases, translated Igbo speech, and traditional Igbo oral art—proverbs, folktales, songs—all of which have helped reconfigure the novel in English (see Gikandi, "Invention" xvii).

Achebe was not the first to employ Nigerian Pidgin in an English novel, but the literary quality, variety, and substantive implications of his use of Pidgin constitute one of the pioneering contributions in this area.⁴ *No Longer at Ease* exemplifies the range of effects the writer creates with Pidgin while embodying the complex linguistic environment of the colonial capital, Lagos, on the eve of Nigerian independence.⁵ Achebe not only represents various languages in *No Longer at Ease*—English and Nigerian Pidgin, as well as varied aspects of Igbo—he also employs multiple languages during the same dialogue, a situation designated by linguists as "code-switching" (Scotton and Ury 5; Zabus 55–56). Such multilingualism, and the specific role that Nigerian Pidgin plays in it, is remarked on in the novel regarding protagonist Obi Okonkwo's friend Christopher: "Whether Christopher spoke good or 'broken' English [Pidgin] depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, to whom and how he wanted to say it. Of course that was to some extent true of most educated people, especially on Saturday nights. But Christopher was rather outstanding in coming to terms with a double heritage" (125–26). The array of language registers in *No Longer at Ease* attests not only to the intricate social and linguistic reality of the modern African city, but also to the checks on the totalizing tendencies of Standard English: English has had to adjust to the reality of the African city just as it has had to adjust to the designs of African writers who have been imparting new dimensions to English, forging, as Achebe puts it, a "new English."

One of the scenes in *No Longer at Ease* that dramatizes the modern city's linguistic complexity and related class tensions is quoted in the previous chapter. Obi Okonkwo confronts Charles Ibe, who along with Obi is Igbo. Charles is the older of the two, but he is a messenger in the same department in which Obi, who has earned a university degree in

England, holds a prestigious post in the colonial civil service. Charles has been nervous about a thirty-shilling loan that he has failed to repay Obi and consequently no longer stops by Obi's office to share Igbo greetings with him. Charles requested the loan because his wife had just had their fifth child, but now the growing financial pressure on Obi prompts his confrontation of Charles. Here is their final exchange in the passage:

"O.K., Charles. End of December. If you fail I shall report the matter to Mr. Green."

"Ah! I no go fail at all. If I fail my Oga [master], who I go go meet next time?" (111)

This and other similar passages in *No Longer at Ease* that foreground the characters' code-switching express a vibrant and rather non-conformist quality, since the language usage deviates from norms of Standard English as well as certain conventions of dialogue in English fiction.

So, beyond what is observed in the previous chapter, what is the actual meaning of Charles and Obi's linguistic maneuvering, with Obi speaking in Igbo (rendered in English) then English and Charles in Pidgin and Igbo? The narrator indicates parenthetically the reason that the conversation begins in Igbo: Obi does not want the English secretary, Miss Tomlinson, to perceive or judge their exchange. It is likely that Charles at first responds in kind—that is, in Igbo—especially given the Igbo greetings they had once customarily exchanged with each other; he then shifts to Pidgin, probably in order to lend a more submissive lilt to his speech: that is, he employs “the hypocoristic function of Pidgin as ‘baby talk’” (Zabus 73). Obi, however, moves to the formality of Standard English—and he may well stay with that. (The narrator does not indicate any later linguistic shifts by Obi.) Thus, Charles adjusts in order to save face and to extend the period of the loan, while Obi does so in order to press his advantage over Charles in terms of position, education, and wealth—and because he too is growing desperate for cash. Just as in Achebe's fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, Odili Samalu will not be thrown off his purpose by the easy humor of Pidgin (discussed below), so Obi will not be lulled by the familiar rhythms of Igbo or by the casual and unctuous strains of Charles's Pidgin. The submissiveness linked with Charles's use of Pidgin helps illustrate an observation by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin: “Pidgin was inevitably used in the context of master-servant relationships during the

period of European colonization. So the social and economic hierarchies produced by colonialism have been retained in post-colonial society through the medium of language" (*Empire* 76; see also Zabus 73–74). Obi and Charles's fictional exchange occurs at the end of the colonial era (*No Longer at Ease* is set during the mid to late 1950s) but, in keeping with the previous observation, their different registers signal hierarchical positioning established by colonialism.

Such positioning in the earlier colonial period in which Achebe's *Arrow of God* is set (the 1920s) likewise reflects "the hierarchies produced by colonialism." Captain Tony Clarke, attempting through an interpreter to negotiate with the proud Igbo Chief Priest Ezeulu, who rebuffs what he considers a gracious offer, uses Standard English with the interpreter, but the interpreter replies to him in Pidgin:

"What!" shouted Clarke. "Is the fellow mad?"
"I tink so sah," said the interpreter. (174)

Obiechina makes a comment germane to the kind of hierarchical signaling reflected in this exchange as well as the one between Obi Okonkwo and Charles Ibe: "In bureaucratic and domestic settings [involving African characters], low-income characters demonstrate their status of inferiority by speaking pidgin, while the middle-class characters generally emphasize their superior social position by speaking in standard English" (*Culture* 190) (Graham Greene's 1948 novel *The Heart of the Matter* illustrates this kind of hierarchical signaling involving West African Pidgin and Standard English as conveyed by an English author).

In *No Longer at Ease*, then, Achebe focuses attention on the propensity of Pidgin speech to reflect subordinate rank. Obi muses in the novel about his and Charles's bigoted English boss, Mr. Green, who prefers an African to exhibit the submissiveness that Charles does—a quality that Charles no doubt exhibits to Mr. Green through the very Pidgin we see him use with Obi (121). And yet Obi, in holding over Charles his elite discourse and his superior position in the British civil service while Charles takes refuge in Pidgin, actually comes to resemble the haughty Mr. Green, whom Obi resents (75, 120, 174). Kofi Yankson notes this same principle at work, as well as Pidgin's use in facilitating interethnic conversation, in one of Chief Nanga's telephone exchanges in *A Man of the People*: "Since [Chief Nanga] does not know the tribe to which the telephonist belongs, and especially as a Minister speaking to a subordinate, it is natural for him to use English instead

of pidgin" (75). Here again, the African man who has attained a high rank intimidates through English in much the manner formerly associated with English colonialists, while the subordinate relies, as before, on Pidgin.

Yet while Nigerian Pidgin can denote subservient social rank in Achebe's fiction, it is also capable of enhancing the potency of irreverent expressions by non-privileged characters toward the educated elite. In two scenes in *No Longer at Ease*, Pidgin English sharpens the rebukes leveled at Obi by different characters—each apparently of lower social station than he—in response to his self-important conduct. Fairly early in the novel Obi, motivated by an idealism that he eventually overrides, interferes with a routine bribe sought by two police officers from a bus driver and the driver's assistant. Afterwards the driver, who takes Obi to his rural home of Umuofia, reproaches Obi: "'Na him make I no de want carry you book people,' he complained. 'Too too know na him de worry una. Why you put your nose for matter way no concern you? Now that policeman go charge me like ten shillings'" (50). The quality of contempt that the driver's Pidgin helps impart recurs later in the novel when an individual waiting in a Lagos physician's office berates Obi after Obi jumps the line. In the process, the man suggests that Obi's elite status is the source of his selfish behavior, that such behavior is alien to the interests of the soon-to-be-independent nation: "'You tink because Government give you car you fit do what you like? You see all of we de wait here and you just go in. . . . Foolish man. He tink say because him get car so derefore he can do as he like. Beast of no nation!'" (173). The unintentionally ironic weight of this rebuke stems from Obi's previous devotion to Nigeria and to his belief in the positive role that he and others with sufficient formal education could play in it (22–23, 37, 171–72). In these two scenes, Nigerian Pidgin is expressive of "the Third Space of enunciations" postulated by Homi Bhabha, a space that enables new understanding of culture "based . . . on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (38). In *No Longer at Ease* the hybrid language, Pidgin, represents a more integrated view of Nigeria's reality and future than a potential national identity associated with Obi, who symbolically is torn by the competing claims of Igbo tradition and English modernity. "This Third Space" of Pidgin offers an alternative to what Bhabha calls "the politics of polarity" (39) through its inclusiveness, a quality that derives from the languages Pidgin comprises and the range of people who speak it: not only the non-elite but, as indicated above, "most educated people."

In certain other scenes that Achebe sets in an urban milieu, Nigerian Pidgin disrupts the Standard English employed by the narrator, sometimes

infusing dialogue with a carnivalesque quality. Robert Wren observes that “in spite of the respectability that scholars have begun to give pidgin languages, in print when introduced amidst any non-pidgin environment, pidgin tends to have comic effect. Achebe used pidgin both for verisimilitude and for comedy” (71). Achebe himself alludes to the humorous mood that can arise when Pidgin English is spoken. In *A Man of the People*, set in a nation that resembles Nigeria, protagonist and narrator Samalu deliberately avoids using Pidgin in an implicitly Igbo conversation with Mrs. Nanga, wife of the novel’s title character, because he fears that his effort to obtain information about Edna, her prospective co-wife, may be diverted by “the levity of pidgin” (89).⁶ Pidgin dialogue resonates in ways that are so distinct from the mother tongue he shares with Mrs. Nanga that the effect of her shift to Pidgin in the conversation carries a humorous touch and potentially threatens disruption of his veiled but urgent purpose.

Achebe further highlights in *A Man of the People* the kind of comic effect that arises from the blending of Pidgin English into an otherwise serious conversation. At a political meeting attended by “only professional [s]” (79), Joe, a trade unionist, slips into Nigerian Pidgin as he questions a general societal skittishness toward communism:

“I think our trouble in this country is that we are too nervous. We say we are neutral but as soon as we hear communist *we begin de shake and piss for trouser*. Excuse me,” he said to the lady and dropped the pidgin as suddenly as he had slid into it. (81; emphasis added)

Here the comic effect arises in part, as Wren suggests, from the insertion of Pidgin into a non-Pidgin verbal context. This effect is heightened further by the ironic vulgarity of Joe’s allusion, and by the contrast of that allusion with the earnest political nature of the discussion. Much the same kind of dynamic is at work in *No Longer at Ease* when the glamorous young politician, the Honorable Sam Okoli, hosts the novel’s protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, and Obi’s girlfriend Clara. In showing off the luxury of his home and commenting on the social climate in Nigeria as it nears independence, Okoli modulates into Nigerian Pidgin:⁷

He stopped the tape recorder, wound back, and then pressed the playback knob. “You will hear all our conversation, everything.” He smiled with

satisfaction as he listened to his own voice, adding an occasional commentary in pidgin.

“White man don go far. We just de shout for nothing,” he said. Then he seemed to realize his position. *“All the same they must go. This no be them country.”* He helped himself to another whisky, switched on the radio, and sat down. (78; emphasis added)

Once he realizes that he is playing with political fire, Okoli, the smooth politician, returns to his previous register to deliver a more acceptable political bromide, which he then finishes in Pidgin, as if to reinforce its status as the authentic sentiment of the people. In each of the foregoing quoted scenes, the speaker emphasizes his point by shifting at a key moment into the fresh voicing of Pidgin English, an emphasis imparted by the startling quality of the shift itself as well as its comic overtones. In each case, too, the speaker slides into Pidgin to utter what he sees as an uncomfortable political truth.

Thus, in the two scenes quoted above, a down-to-earth frankness enters the dialogue when the speaker adverts to Nigerian Pidgin, bringing humor and candor to the polite exchange. This earthy frankness—especially in regard to the trade unionist Joe and his political observation—reflects Pidgin’s association with the “common” people. The interrelation of irreverent humor with “low” cultural expressions reminds us that for Bakhtin, carnivalesque laughter stands in opposition to “established order” and “official ideology” (81, 84). Such laughter helps “express[] the people’s hopes of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order, of a new truth” (81). Analogously, Pidgin’s comic potential and hierarchical connotations allow Achebe to question received social norms. Such a process is made the more potent insofar as Pidgin comprises a loosening of linguistic conventions that sustain established power. Further, Pidgin dialogue helps validate the diverse voices in Achebe’s work, reflecting the deeply democratic principles of the author and of his Igbo heritage: “Igbo communities were known as extremely democratic” (Ohadike xxiii). In Achebe’s very concept of his role as a writer, one discerns his high valuation of the productive interplay of multiple voices, on what, in Bakhtinian terms, may be called a dialogic consciousness. Achebe embraces the principle that a writer does not necessarily echo or reinforce a society’s dominant voice, but rather is able to question that voice, and he articulates this principle in clearly political terms: “The

struggle and the conflict between [the storyteller] and the ruler, the emperor, is also something we mustn't take lightly. It is important that the storyteller tells the story the way he sees it, not the way the emperor wants it to be told" (Interview with Jussawalla 81).

Not surprisingly, then, the silencing of multiple voices is portrayed unfavorably in Achebe's works—as when, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo attempts to silence his wives and eldest son, and when the British succeed, partly by destroying Okonkwo, in suppressing independent Igbo culture as a whole. In *A Man of the People*, moreover, Chief Nanga, the treacherous government minister, does whatever it takes to stifle competing political voices in order to secure his hold on power. And in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the suppression of open speech and criticism by His Excellency, Sam, the ever more autocratic ruler of the fictional African nation of Kangan, proves disastrous. Through Sam, *Anthills* depicts the bane of so many struggling modern African nations: the ruthless consolidation and exercise of power by despotic rulers and supporting elites. The editor, Osodi, calls Sam “the Emperor” (42), a label that evokes his retrograde, authoritarian style of leadership. For Achebe, the kind of leadership that leads forward is that which values and practices political dialogue.

A character's use of Nigerian Pidgin in Achebe's work does not, of course, signify that the character honors the free interplay of multiple political voices. One of the languages that the corrupt and controlling Chief Nanga speaks adeptly is Pidgin, and he employs this skill to reinforce his dubious persona as “a man of the people” (Obilade 435). Nanga's Pidgin also produces both of the effects, verisimilitude and comedy, specified by Wren. But in Achebe's oeuvre Nanga's use of Pidgin represents the exception, for typically the author's invocation of the language helps bring a new dimension of truth into the drama. Instances of this function are cited above in connection with male characters, but the function is seen as well in relation to two important female characters: Gladys in the short story “Girls at War,” and Elewa in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Gladys's use of Nigerian Pidgin is examined further in Chapter 7, but here it may be noted that this language helps establish her forthright and well-meaning nature despite the war-related adversity she faces. Pidgin creates similar associations for Elewa, whose first speech in *Anthills*, made to her lover, the newspaper editor Ikem Osodi, realistically evokes both the dynamic and sensitive aspects of her personality. Elewa opposes Ikem's practice of hiring a taxi to take

her home, for he neither permits her to stay in his apartment nor drives her home himself:

“You explain what? I beg you, no make me vex . . . Imagine! Hmm! But woman done chop sand for dis world-o . . . Imagine! But na we de causam; na we own fault. If I no kuku bring my stupid nyarsh [arse] come dump for your bedroom you for de kick me about like I be football? I no blame you. At all!” (31; Achebe's ellipses)

The hurt, indignation, and ironic humor that Elewa expresses here, in combination with the vitality of her Pidgin, help to convey a proud, vibrant nature. Here too, Pidgin partly signifies class: individuals like Elewa who are in contact with people of varied linguistic backgrounds, but whose lack of formal, Western-influenced education has limited their fluency in Standard English, tend to be those who speak Pidgin.⁸ Also, elite characters, such as *Anthills'* Beatrice Okoh and Ikem Osodi and *No Longer's* Sam Okoli and Christopher, use Pidgin as an alternative mode of self-expression, or to speak with less formally educated characters (see *Anthills* 138), or to imitate such people in an ironic, though not necessarily malicious, manner (see *No Longer* 78, 125).

Although Elewa lacks extensive formal education, her discerning and vigorous nature helps connect her to the respected and progressive editorialist, Ikem, whom she is to marry. Before the wedding can take place, however, he is assassinated at the behest of Kangan's repressive regime. Yet Elewa bears their daughter and, because of her relationship with Ikem, becomes closely associated with two other leading intellectuals in Kangan, Beatrice and Christopher Oriko. Elewa's vivid Pidgin dialogue expresses the strength that permits her to transcend not only social and educational disadvantages, but also the disadvantage of being a woman in a male-dominated culture. The dynamic rhythm as well as content of her speech quoted above express both an indictment and lament over the recurring exploitation of women by the customary habits and outlook of men. Achebe represents, in short, Elewa's essential qualities through the vitality and content of the Pidgin English she speaks.

Clearly, Achebe paid close attention to the process by which the faithful rendering of speech helped evoke character, and such attention was interdependent with the social and political commitment of his writing. Shortly after the publication of *Anthills of the Savannah*, in an interview conducted by Jane Wilkinson (1987), Achebe characterizes “the real Nigerian

Pidgin” as “a language in itself, not something you can just cook up” (49) and attests to his nuanced portrayal of each individual’s linguistic identity. His remarks certainly are consistent with his portrayal of Elewa:

“If I’m going to explore a certain kind of character, I must *listen* to this character. Before I can understand how his or her mind operates I must also know how he or she uses words. . . . I must know what they sound like, I must know *how* they speak language. This character deserves to be listened to seriously, so that when I introduce what he’s saying, I’m doing this with integrity and you can recognize him through the way he uses language. Of course if you have the kind of linguistic richness that we have in a place like Nigeria, it’s an advantage to the writer. . . . This dialogue must come from the source, from the people. This is part of commitment to the people. . . .” (49)

Comments like “I must know what they sound like, I must know *how* they speak language” imply that the sound of language, as well as its content, guides the author’s, and potentially the reader’s, understanding of Achebe’s characters. Achebe’s idiomatic and multifaceted use of Nigerian Pidgin helps shape the personality of Elewa and other characters as well as significant dimensions of numerous scenes. The author heightens the moods and meanings expressed in these scenes partly through Nigerian Pidgin’s expressive qualities. These moods include joviality, submission, anger, encouragement, and compassion. Such a versatile application of this hybrid language helps it evoke African experiences and relationships with an authenticity that exceeds the reach of Standard English.

NOTES

1. See “Chike’s School Days,” “Civil Peace,” and “Girls at War” in *Girls at War and Other Stories*, as well as the young person’s novella *Chike and the River* (1966).
2. See Tony Obilade: “In the works of Achebe and Soyinka (and probably a few others) . . . PE [West African Pidgin English] rises above the level of a slot-filler or a curiosity item to that of a vehicle to express certain meanings” (434).
3. According to Nicholas Pweddron, Gerald Moore “refer[s] chiefly to the use of pidgin in *A Man of the People*, when he notes ‘the humour and inventiveness of popular speech, its capacity for irreverence and deflation’” (Moore 55; Pweddron 95).

4. With *Mister Johnson* (1939), which is set in colonial Nigeria, Anglo-Irish author Joyce Cary became the first writer to incorporate a type of Nigerian Pidgin into a novel. (Daniel Defoe incorporates a similar Virginian Pidgin in *Colonel Jacque* [1722]; Obilade 442.) At the same time, *Mister Johnson* is a novel whose portrayal of Nigeria the young Achebe found rather inauthentic and thus helped motivate him (as discussed above) to portray his native land “from the inside” and “to show what was false” in European representations of Africa. Achebe’s older Igbo contemporary, Cyprian Ekwensi, beginning with *People of the City* (which appeared in 1954, four years before the publication of Achebe’s first novel, *Things Fall Apart*), also has been a pioneer in the novelistic rendering of Pidgin in a Nigerian setting. See Chantal Zabus (54–70) and also Wren (178–84).
5. See Pweddron: “[Pidgin’s] use [by Achebe] reflects . . . the linguistic heterogeneity of his world” (95). Also see Zabus: “This complex interlingua [i.e., a pidgin language] grows best in linguistic crucibles where people speaking mutually unintelligible languages coalesce, that is, in the metropolis” (75).
6. See Pweddron: “One quality of [pidgin English] that usually frustrates attempts to use it for serious writing is its tendency to make people laugh.” Achebe himself was asked at a class discussion to spell out the limitation of pidgin English. He notes that a “version of a book of the Bible . . . was translated into pidgin in the Cameroons long ago. All that it did was make you laugh . . . Now this is not the intention of the Bible” (in Morell 46).
7. In this particular case it is not apparent whether the non-Pidgin conversation, which is rendered in Standard English, is conducted entirely in English (Okoli uses a few English idioms) or whether it includes Igbo dialogue as well. Though Achebe does not clearly do so in this scene, he does evoke at times the nuances of Igbo speech in a stylized English. For more on this topic, see Achebe’s essay “The African Writer and the English Language.”
8. See Zabus: “Following in the wake of Ekwensi and Onitsha Market pamphleteers, recent [Nigerian] popular fiction tends to confirm the role of Pidgin as an index to the social status of a character and its association with a semi-literate urban subculture” (71). While Achebe’s fiction would not be identified as “popular,” Zabus’s statement is applicable to it. Indeed, compare Zabus’s phrase “a semi-literate urban subculture” to a reference in *Anthills of the Savannah* to the social background of Elewa, who speaks almost exclusively in Pidgin: “A half-literate salesgirl in a shop owned by an Indian; living in one room with a petty-trader mother deep in the slums of Bassa” (168). See also Booker and Reynolds: “In [*No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*], the use of pidgin is often a marker of class position, just as dialect often indicates the class origins of characters in British novels” (220–21).

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Beyond Black and White: British Identity in Achebe's Fiction

Vital to Achebe's fictional project is the deconstruction of Western narratives about African culture and, in relation to this, about Western colonialism. The discrediting of these narratives may have stood as an end in itself for Achebe, but it was also an inevitable effect of the author's attempts to dramatize from an African viewpoint the traditional lives of his people, their forced encounter with empire, and the changes their societies underwent during and after the colonial period. Under the circumstances, one might expect to find in Achebe's fiction consistently unflattering or flat portrayals of English personages in Africa, or a combination of these. After all, prominent British authors characterized Africans in unflattering and one-dimensional ways; additionally, a number of Achebe's African characters see the British in a harsh light—as violent intruders, for example, and arrogant administrators. What is more, these African characters, in their thought, speech, and action, serve to belie Western stereotypes about Africans, as well as their cultures and use of language, a situation that discredits British beliefs.

Indeed, a glance at Achebe's early novels may lead one to surmise that he approaches the English missionaries and colonial administrators as ruthless and bigoted interlopers who deceive and coerce Africans into submission. However, later works, specifically the short story "Sugar Baby" (1972) and his final novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, clearly demonstrate that Achebe does not reflexively stereotype the British, or more broadly whites. (The short story's Father Doherty is a white Westerner

who may or may not be a British subject.) Examination, too, of the early novels reveals that the English characters are not inevitably straw men, held to account for British exploitation and oppression in Africa. To be sure, several English characters are exposed for their arrogance and prejudice, but Achebe's representations of these characters, as with African ones, are at various points also multidimensional and sympathetic. He shows us that to convey his African characters richly demands not only that he present their imperfections as well as their virtues, but also that he portray the virtues as well as the imperfections of his white characters. Yet in contrast with the telling functions of race in his first three novels, Achebe lowers its profile in his later fictional works. Its fierce burden is still carried by his characters, but his writing of individual and community is not as overtly oriented to race.

In a scene that occurs about two-thirds of the way into *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo is in his second year of exile in Mbanta, Achebe introduces the association of British characters with violent domination in his first three novels. In a conversation between Okonkwo, his best friend Obierika, and his uncle Uchendu, Obierika discloses to the others that the arrival of a white man on a bicycle (an "iron-horse") has had devastating repercussions for the town of Abame. The man Obierika mentions is the first English missionary to enter this area, and his arrival leads in the short term first to his own death and then to a retaliatory British massacre at Abame (138–40). In the long term it leads to the devastation of the autochthonous Igbo society for which the novel's protagonist Okonkwo lives and dies. This cultural outcome is one that Abame's Oracle seemingly predicted and that prompted Abame's killing of the missionary in the first place. (The historical events at Ahiara on which the events at Abame in the novel are based are sketched in [Chapters 2](#) and [8](#) of this volume.) Not only does the missionary's arrival augur the decline of a viable culture, it also broadens the very structure of *Things Fall Apart* as a narrative. What fundamentally has been a portrait of Okonkwo's character and of his traditional Igbo society becomes additionally a portrait of the religious, military, and administrative processes that dismantle this society and that leave Okonkwo, "one of Umuofia's greatest men" (208), helpless to challenge it. Obierika fearlessly describes Okonkwo this way to the uncomprehending District Commissioner, and it is Obierika who earlier, in light of the incidents that have, in his words, "'wiped out'" Abame, recognizes the full scope of British depredations in his world: "'I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about white men who made the

powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas”” (138, 140–41). This is the terrifying threat underlying the colonial process that begins with a presumed benevolent purpose: the Christian missionary’s endeavor to save souls. The man’s arrival, the Oracle’s prophecy, and the deadly reactions of villagers and especially troops at Abame, moreover, reveal a certain commonality between the Africans and the colonialists; each group is propelled by religious assumptions into lethal action, asymmetric though the resulting violence is.

The missionary’s arrival and subsequent violence in this episode of *Things Fall Apart* introduce a significant tension in Achebe’s treatment of the relationship between African and British characters. This is the tension between, on the one hand, the British concept of their cultural superiority and altruistic intent in Africa and, on the other hand, the Igbo association of the British with brutality and cultural loss. In the book’s final part, Obierika pithily states the Igbo view:

“But [the white man] says that our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad.... The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We... allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (176)

Obierika’s knife metaphor tellingly reflects the reality of coercive British methods that already have been displayed in the utterly disproportionate collective punishment against Abame for its killing of a missionary. In short, the colonialists employ not only “clever” methods, but also a stunning scale of violence in order to gain political control and to sustain their authority. In Achebe’s third novel, *Arrow of God*, set in the 1920s, about a generation later than *Things Fall Apart*, the perception of Nwaka, a villager at Umuardo, distills the Igbo view of British violence and of its long-term impact: “Would [the village of Okperi] have laid claim on our farmland in the days before the white man turned us upside down?”” (16). The phrase “white man turned us upside down” metaphorically encompasses both the devastating quality of British force, which has flipped a people on its head, and its ultimate purpose of transforming a society, of making what was once understood as high now perceived as low. Nwaka’s trope that his people have experienced physical and cultural inversion at the hands of the British encapsulates the hegemonic colonialist effort to

fashion Igbo culture after its own image, to make it something completely different from itself. Bonnie Barthold gestures to the violation that such fundamental alteration produces: "In Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, a portion of Africa becomes symbolic of the destructive oppression worked by the peoples of the West" (4–5).

As discussed elsewhere in the present study, Achebe, while conscious of the arrogance, bigotry, and abusive attitude that fueled the British domination in Igboland, did not see the colonial enterprise there as wholly without benefit to his people. Still, an air of lament hovers over *Arrow of God*'s tracing of the process by which the British obtain physical and spiritual control. Barthold captures the multivalenced quality of this process as represented in *Arrow*: "The spiritual is sacrificed for the sake of the material. The missionaries have confiscated the yams much as the soldiers in the land dispute took away the guns; and the war within Umuaro among gods, priests, and the people has again been resolved through the intervention of Western imperatives. The yam fields belong to the Son" (148). Of course, the same process with variations of emphasis is traced in *Things Fall Apart*, in which Okonkwo recognizes, like Obierika, the scale and ruthlessness of the British violence. He knows that it enables the missionaries to accelerate the pace of conversion and the colonial administration to impose its authority by means of its court. At that court, Okonkwo and several other Umuofian leaders become the victim of both clever and brutal tactics employed by that authority.

Okwonkwo's meeting there with the District Commissioner after the burning of Umuofia's church is an experience that helps clarify his actions at the novel's close. No sooner do the Umuofian leaders cooperate in every detail with the Commissioner's wishes, arriving at his court for dialogue and laying down their sheathed machetes, than they are handcuffed and become the object of his monologue. He assures them that "We shall not do you any harm...if only you agree to cooperate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration....If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue" (194). The Commissioner's hypocrisy is evident when moments later his head messenger shaves the men's heads, and a group of the messengers deprive them of water and the means to relieve themselves, taunt and mock them, and "knock their shaven heads together" (194–95). The scene highlights the gulf between the benevolence the empire professes and the brutality of its actual methods. Furthermore, in light of Okonkwo's awareness of British ruthlessness, we

may view his suicide, at least partly, as an honorable act, notwithstanding the traditional culture's classification of it as an "abomination" (207). No doubt this suicide functions as his statement of defiance against Umuofia, which will not support his call for war, and also against the white man's rule. Yet since Okonkwo has killed the District Commissioner's messenger, his suicide is also comprehensible as an act of self-sacrifice, because it may spare Umuofia the kind of collective retribution that the British visited on Abame.

Notable in the scene quoted above in which Obierika associates British methods with a knife is his disclosure of an incident that counterpoises the idealistic British concept of itself in its colonizing mission and the sordid reality of the transactions made under its authority, in this case institutional corruption: "The white man's court has decided that [disputed land] should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter" (176). This is Achebe's first novelistic exposition of colonial graft, and what he has Obierika impart is that British authority and its African subjects are complicit in the tolerance and practice of bribery. Such complicity recurs in the novels that follow, including in the university scholarship bribes that Obi Okonkwo takes in *No Longer at Ease* and the neocolonial compact between British Amalgamated and Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People*. This venal relationship is highlighted in a comment by the Vice-President of the Umuofia Progressive Union to its President at a reception for Obi in *No Longer at Ease*: "You think white men don't eat bribe? Come to our department. They eat more than black men nowadays" (38). While reinforcing Achebe's indictment of British and Nigerian governmental corruption, this statement also draws further attention to a previously noted British colonial trait that Achebe portrays: British actions, notwithstanding the noble purpose they proclaim, are at times indistinguishable from their negative stereotypes of Africans. Such a mirroring of traits is one of the factors that destabilizes the moral basis for British control. In a related vein, the author's rounded African characters stand in contrast to the routinely simplistic Africans presented by British colonial authors. The multidimensional portrayal of Africans is one of the methods that Achebe uses to write back to the colonizer, in fact to employ literary art to fulfill the political purposes that originally motivated him to respond through a book of his own to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*.

Relevant to this discussion of colonial British authors is the propensity of certain British characters in Achebe's work to stereotype Africans

unfavorably. *Arrow of God's* District Officer Captain Winterbottom illustrates this tendency in a casual conversation with his newly arrived assistant, Captain Clarke. Winterbottom, who has been drinking, unleashes a verbal torrent against the Igbo that, in the context of the fuller picture supplied by Achebe's Igbo characters and narrator, is marked by self-contradiction, hypocrisy, and falsehood:

We [British] do not only promise to secure old savage tyrants on their thrones—or more likely filthy animal skins—we not only do that, but we now go out of our way to invent chiefs where there were none before. They make me sick. . . . This war between Umuaro and Okperi . . . started because a man from Umuaro went to visit a friend in Okperi one fine morning and after he'd had one or two gallons of palm wine—it's quite incredible how much of that dreadful stuff they can tuck away—anyhow, this man from Umuaro having drunk his friend's palm wine reached for his *ikenga* [carved ancestral spirit] and split it in two. . . . The outraged host reached for his gun and blew the other fellow's head off. . . . And so a regular war developed between the two villages until I stepped in. I should mention that every witness who testified before me—from both sides without exception—perjured themselves. One thing you must remember in dealing with natives is that like children they are great liars. (36–37)

Since many of the details of Winterbottom's account here are false, including that the Igbo, who in reality do not have kings (see, for example, *Arrow of God* 27¹), are ruled by savage tyrants on thrones, and since Winterbottom himself acknowledges shortly after the passage above that Ezeulu, the novel's protagonist, did testify truthfully, his charges of Igbo mendacity are soon understood by the reader as themselves falsehoods. This is not to say that Winterbottom consciously lies in every detail, but rather that his presentation is suspect on multiple counts. One of the impediments to his accurate presentation of the African community's affairs is that while he seems to understand the general contours of events, he gets crucial details wrong. Partly this reflects the limits of reliance on translators; of not really understanding the language of the people he governs. What Achebe also wants us to notice is that Winterbottom's projection onto Africans of undesirable traits and his reference to his own admirable ones—that is, his ending a war and serving as an arbiter of truth and justice—are symptomatic of a forceful psychological need. But Winterbottom's scorn for Africans, whom in accordance with the paternalistic logic of colonialism the white man protects, or “serves,” as Rudyard Kipling puts it in

“The White Man’s Burden” (l. 4), only superficially reinforces the British officer’s self-image as that of enlightened civilizer. And his insistence on the Igbos’ deficiencies raises doubt as to the validity of his complaints and his own sense of self. Partly what this situation illustrates is Achebe’s finely etched portrait of British characters, even the most prejudiced. In this regard, we learn that Winterbottom is indeed insecure, having failed to gain the promotions in the colonial service enjoyed by his peers and having been deserted by his wife. Of course this does not justify prejudice, but it does provide insight into this particular Englishman and also, by extension, into the African characters who are subject to his will and who inhabit the hybrid cultural space that he has helped create.

As for the question of distinguishing between colonial fact and fiction as posed in *Arrow of God*, arguably to some colonial British officials it does not even really matter whether the British self-concept strictly comports with the reality of the circumstance; rather, what is vital is that the officials’ conduct appears to do so. In *Things Fall Apart*, the District Commissioner (whose name we learn in *Arrow*’s third chapter is George Allen) muses that “a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him” (208). Without considering the narrow-minded value structure that leaves Allen without compunction about the great man he has hounded to suicide, his concern over the dignity of his appearance to the colonial subjects accords with that expressed by George Orwell in his essay “Shooting an Elephant” (written between 1931 and 1936), which treats his experience as a colonial officer in Burma. Orwell recounts his experience of putting an elephant through an agonizing death that, for practical purposes, was pointless, because the elephant was no longer a threat to the villagers under his authority. Yet because Orwell knew that he must represent British authority in the best possible light, he acted against his conscience: “A white man mustn’t be frightened in front of ‘natives’ . . . It was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do. There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine. . . . I often wondered whether any of the other [‘Burmans’] grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking like a fool” (160, 162). For some of Achebe’s British characters, as with Orwell as a colonial officer, the honorable appearance counts for more than what is true or simply just. The truth is elusive in the colonial context, which includes its missionary dimension, because it is built on two doubtful premises: first, the categorical social and religious inferiority

to Europeans of the multitude of their colonial subjects; and second, colonialism's self-justifying appeal to its altruistic mission of redeeming the colonial subjects from their social and religious customs.²

These premises nurture the impulse to dominate, as reflected in District Commissioner Allen's treacherous treatment of the Umuofian leaders on behalf of the Queen (194); in Captain Winterbottom's desire to have the Igbo villagers Westernize rather than retain and build on the firm foundation of their traditional culture (56–57; see Reynolds 282–83); and in Reverend Smith's Manichean outlook in *Things Fall Apart* that leads to an expanding cycle of violence: "He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness.... He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal" (184). Yet if Achebe renders Smith as rather a stick figure and stock image of the inflexible and fierce colonial missionary, he humanizes his predecessor, Mr. Brown, by connecting his Christian zeal to an abiding belief in the humanity of both the Igbo converts and the non-converts. That belief is reflected in Brown's recurring and lengthy religious discussions with the non-Christian leader, Akunna (178–81). These discussions are not truly dialogic since, for all his tolerance and patience, Brown is unyielding in viewing Akunna's religious convictions as erroneous.

Still, it may be observed not only that Brown speaks to Akunna as a human being, not only that he serves as a kind of spiritual father to Okonkwo's eldest son, Nwoye, but also that such humane methods have the practical advantage of fulfilling his missionary objectives. Whereas Mr. Smith's severe ethos leads to the burning of the Umuofia church, Mr. Brown's seemingly benign approach yields for him and his cause a favorable result: he "came to be respected by the clan.... Akunna had given one of his sons to be taught the white man's knowledge in Mr. Brown's school" (178–79). Meanwhile, Nwoye converts to Christianity, is renamed Isaac, and matriculates at the new missionary teaching college. Even from the perspective of the missionary endeavor that works interdependently with colonial rule, ruthless intervention in the colonized community proves counter-productive in the long term.

Another British character whose humanity enables him to surmount narrow-minded colonial chauvinism is *Arrow of God*'s Tony Clarke. In one scene Captain Clarke is aggrieved at the desecration of an Igbo ritual by Wade, an employee in Winterbottom's colonial office. Wade pays respect to King George's image on a coin by removing it from an Igbo sacrifice.

Clarke considers that Wade's action "showed a monstrous lack of feeling" and, knowing that he may be appointed District Officer if Winterbottom's illness at the time ends in his death, Clarke anticipates "defend[ing] the natives if need be from the thoughtless acts of white people like Wade" (162). Wade places a higher valuation on a coin's imperial image and, symbolically, on the capitalistic conquest that gives it monetary value than on the dignity, to say nothing of the spiritual wholeness, of an African. Clarke on the other hand, though steeped in colonial ideology, aligns himself with the African's humanity and even with that man's spiritual health—and perhaps his own.

By the late 1950s, the period in which *No Longer at Ease* is set, William Green, Obi Okonwko's jaded boss in the colonial Nigerian civil service, does not threaten his subordinates with the physical violence at the disposal of his predecessors in the colonial service, Allen and Winterbottom, but nevertheless intimidates those subordinates with a similarly imperious manner. Green still is influenced by the colonial principles sketched above: he assumes the inferiority of the colonial subject in Africa and has committed to what has been, in his view, the honorable self-sacrifice that motivates the colonial project. However, he regards a crucial underpinning of these principles as hopelessly flawed: namely, the belief that the colonizers had it within their power in the first place to redeem their African subjects. Green crudely remarks, "'The African is corrupt through and through'" (3); "'the African.... has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him?'"(4); "'In a country where even the educated have not reached the level of thinking about tomorrow, one has a clear duty'" (109). And, like Captain Winterbottom, Mr. Green has determined that Africans do not understand time.

Yet Obi not only finds Green's thwarted idealism fascinating, but also feels a certain sympathy toward him and thinks that he, Obi, "must write a novel about the tragedy of the Greens of this century" (122). Obi understands that Green's sense of a noble purpose motivated him to come to Africa years before, so although Obi "disliked Mr. Green, he nevertheless had some admirable qualities" (120). Obi infers that the reality of what Green found in Africa undermined his honorable purpose, and here Obi's point of reference is Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As in Achebe's "Image of Africa" essay written about fifteen years later, the author gestures through Obi to Conrad's novel's cultural chauvinism. The greater emphasis, however, is on Conrad's recognition of colonialism's self-serving lie that empire is motivated first and foremost by the desire to help the native:

[Green] must have come originally with an ideal—to bring light to the heart of darkness, to tribal headhunters performing weird ceremonies and unspeakable rites. But when [Green] arrived, Africa played him false. Where was his beloved bush full of human sacrifice? There was St. George horsed and caparisoned, but where was the dragon? (121)

Achebe asks how a salvific purpose may be postulated if the object of that purpose does not need saving. In the process, the author makes clear that both the African and British characters, Obi and Green, are motivated by complex human factors and divided by the colonial barrier. The phrasing in the previous quotation, moreover, perhaps implies that Green recognizes the error of his original understanding of his purpose in Nigeria, but if so, that recognition does nothing to curb the racist chauvinism he espouses. To the contrary, it may make that chauvinism worse if Green believes that African backwardness is the reason that he cannot play his idealized role of St. George, England's patron saint, in Africa.

Mr. Green, it should be noted, is not the only character in *No Longer at Ease* who is associated with the stereotype-based barrier between Africans and the British, and Achebe wrests a degree of humor from this divide. Obi recalls a woman in England with whom he had sexual relations and who afterwards “said she thought she had been attacked by a tiger” (100). The possible misconception by this woman concerning indigenous African fauna may serve as a commentary on the general ignorance of the British toward Africans, as well as destructive Western stereotypes concerning African sexuality. Nothing more is said about relations between Obi and this woman, suggesting that their liaison did not evolve, that no psychological or emotional bond was forged. Assuming this is the case, then this encounter points again to the wall between African and British characters, a wall built to a substantial degree on distorted British constructs about Africans.

Yet further layers in Achebe’s portrayal of Mr. Green remain to be acknowledged. In chapter 11 of *No Longer at Ease*, Obi’s English secretary, Marie Tomlinson, confides to Obi that Green and his wife “are a most delightful couple. [Mr. Green] is quite different at home. Do you know he pays school fees for his steward’s sons?” (120). Obi responds with a similar report that Green spared a deferential office messenger, Charles Ibe, from being fired by another administrator for sleeping on the job. Green “tore out the query from Charles’s personal file,” according to Obi. “He said the poor man must be suffering from malaria, and the next day he bought him a tube of quinacrine” (120).

Under the right circumstances Green is an old colonial softie. On the other hand, in Marie and Obi's office, Green displays his contemptuous attitude toward British-educated Nigerians with a rant whose conclusion is his own question, answer, and commentary: “Education for what? To get as much as they can for themselves and their family. Not the least bit interested in the millions of their countrymen who die every day from hunger and disease” (132). While Green utters several repugnant statements about late colonial-era Nigerians, there may be hints of a limited narrative sympathy with his charge (which recurs in chapter 17) that the Nigerian educated elite do not sufficiently identify their interests with those of the nation at large. One of these hints is found in the comment by the narrator about the Umuofia Progressive Union’s chairman’s use of “they” to signify the government: “In Nigeria the government was ‘they.’ It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble” (37).

Another indication that Green’s strictures on formally educated Nigerians may not be entirely contrary to the novel’s narrative viewpoint is found in the author’s later short story, Achebe (1972). In that story, one of the trilogy of tales concerning the Nigeria–Biafra War that Achebe published not long after the war ended that will be more fully considered in the next chapter, Father Doherty, a director of relief in Biafra, rebukes the relatively privileged Cletus for requesting that Doherty help him obtain some sugar. Specifically, Doherty “prayed God to remember this outrage against His Holy Ghost on Judgement Day. Sugar! Sugar!! Sugar!!! he screamed in hoarse crescendo. Sugar when thousands of God’s innocents perished daily for lack of a glass of milk!” (102). Father Doherty’s indignation is framed sympathetically, and his last sentence in particular echoes the above-quoted condemnation by Green of those formally educated Nigerians who supposedly lack concern for their compatriots. One crucial difference, of course, is that while Father Doherty trains his anger on Cletus (and to some extent on Cletus’s friend and collaborator Mike, who also is the story’s narrator), Green makes and repeats a generalization that encompasses many educated Nigerians. Notable too is that the outrage expressed by Father Doherty, admirable in his Biafran relief efforts, carries few of the ironic undertones that accompany white men pronouncing on morality in prior Achebe fiction.

A still later echo of Mr. Green’s charge of selfishness against the Nigerian elite arises in the final chapter of *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Elewa's elderly, unnamed uncle, who participates in the naming ceremony for the infant girl of Elewa and the now-deceased editorialist Ikem Osodi, declares, "We have seen too much trouble in [the fictional African nation] Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans make plans for themselves only and their families" (212). Elewa's uncle by no means embraces Green's degrading view of "the African" or asserts the need for the return of white colonial rule in Kangan, but he is willing to acknowledge the shortcomings of his people in order to clear a better path to a postcolonial nationhood that fulfills its potential. Exposing abuse in Kangan is actually the role of another character in *Anthills*, John Kent, affectionately known as Mad Medico. He is a likeable English hospital administrator who uses unorthodox methods to publicize and denounce an unethical doctor in Kangan and ensure that a gravely ill man unable to afford the doctor's fee gets operated on, too late as it happens, by another doctor (46–54). For his moral consciousness-raising Mad Medico eventually is deported from the nation, a sign of the Kangan regime's increasingly oppressive grip (150). Mad Medico's eviction functions as an echo of the eviction of the colonialists at independence, but in this case the onus of oppression has shifted: the heavy-handed colonialist has been supplanted by the African dictator (Chilala). The eviction further validates an authentically postcolonial British character, Kent, whose role suggests that race and nation of origin are no longer central to the author's concerns. What is more to the point is that Kent makes public the petty and selfish mindset of precisely those Kangan citizens and groups about whom Elewa's uncle complains, those who "make plans for themselves only." Kent's role in the novel suggests that by the time of *Anthills*, Achebe no longer saw race in the same way he did decades earlier in terms of shaping a character's actions or ethical outlook: race can longer account for the blighting of Africa's hopes.

Both Elewa's uncle and Mad Medico illustrate Achebe's willingness both to challenge and to affirm African and British characters and their communities. Racist norms remain influential in the society portrayed in *Anthills of the Savannah*, but those norms guide less transparently the actions of individuals and institutions. What the author does foreground in *Anthills* is the scourge of post-independence tyranny and self-interest, as well as the potentially mediatory role of tradition and ritual in the chaotic present. Tradition's mediatory role is illustrated in the naming of Elewa and Osodi's baby in *Anthills*, which locates healing partly in traditional values and offers in this way reassurance to the struggling postcolonial nation. Yet

tradition here is informed by an important affirmation of feminine strength and centrality. The baby significantly is female, and she symbolizes the nation's future hopes, as does the fact that, as does the fact that the baby-naming is conducted by a woman, Beatrice Okoh, who exercises agency in this context as a latter-day priestess. Achebe himself recalls that in writing of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* he aimed to "repair the foundations of the past" (qtd. in Barthold 139). This remains an objective in his final novel that, at the same time, fashions an explicit dialogue between tradition's reservoir of wisdom and the present day's political and moral turmoil.

"Sugar Baby" and *Anthills of the Savannah* bring Achebe's representation of British and white identity full circle insofar as Father Doherty and John Kent, respectively, actualize the altruistic impulse that had motivated some previous Europeans in West Africa. Achebe delineates in his early novels the ways in which even well-motivated British colonialists and missionaries, in their arrogance and racial prejudice, could act destructively in West Africa and beyond. (Before his disappearance Osodi reflects that the English have had "a long career of subduing savages in distant lands" [47].) Yet while British figures in his fiction speak or act monstrously at times, they are not monsters; as are their African counterparts, they are flawed and fully human. In keeping with other dimensions of Achebe's fiction, the theme of racial identity is informed by the principle of complementarity discussed in the first two chapters of this study. If characters such as Mr. Smith, District Commissioner Allen, Captain Winterbottom, and Mr. Green degrade and violate their African hosts, there is nevertheless a side of the colonial-era British character embodied in these fictional figures that is motivated by humane impulses. These impulses are occasionally revealed in the early novels, but also are expressed in Achebe's post-Civil War fiction; that is, in the beneficial endeavors of Father Doherty and Mad Medico. Certainly their contributions fall far short of offsetting the many harms imposed by their predecessors and by those Westerners today who work against the material interests and political rights of multitudes. Yet those contributions gesture to an expanding, well-meaning consciousness on the part of Westerners in their relationships with the people of Africa.

NOTES

1. See Robert Wren: "Each [Igbo Town] was independent of every other town, and each was ruled by a consensus of leading citizens—as in Umuofia—and not by an autocratic chief" (40).

2. The gulf between colonialism's self-validating concept of the principled sacrifice that motivates an empire's hegemonic practices and the empire's true fundamental motivation of materially benefitting itself may be discerned in the juxtaposition of Kipling's use of the word "profit" (to aid the backward colonial subject) in the "White Man's Burden" and Tracy Kidder's use of the word "profits" (to secure material gain for one's own group) in his book *Strength in What Remains* (2009):

From "The White Man's Burden":
 By open speech and simple,
 An hundred times made plain,
 To seek another's *profit*
 And work another's gain. (ll. 13–16)

From *Strength in What Remains*:

In effect, the [colonizing] Europeans altered the societies [in Burundi and Rwanda] to suit their main purpose, which was to make *profits* for themselves. (196)

(Emphasis added.)

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Catastrophe, Aftermath, Amnesia: Chinua Achebe’s “Civil Peace”

Although the tale by no means abandons hope for either this family or its community, it wryly suggests that civil peace is the mirror image of civil war, since the human tendencies that push people to war are not completely resolved in its wake, regardless of political settlements. In the post-war civil society, civility is in short supply: people continue to bully, deceive, and overreach in the struggle for a foothold in the peace. The author challenges us to understand that peace, to locate certain enduring lessons of war, and, perhaps, to circumvent its needless repetition by contemplating a range of human behaviors in war’s aftermath. “Civil Peace” asks us, in short, to probe human conflict and aggression *after* armies have halted their most destructive operations.

Along with “Civil Peace,” the tales “Sugar Baby” and “Girls at War” form Achebe’s masterful short story trilogy that is set during and immediately after the Nigeria–Biafra War and that brings to a close the Nigerian author’s 1972 volume of short fiction, *Girls at War and Other Stories*. While “Civil Peace” is the focus of the present chapter, it is considered partly in relation to the two other war-related tales in *Girls at War*. All three stories probe the experience, roots, and legacy of war, rather than the question of who was at fault. As an Igbo, Achebe might well have done the latter, given the catastrophic impact of the war on his own life and on the people of Biafra, for whom he was a spokesman. Yet, in the poised voice characteristic of his novels, he rejects a fundamentally partisan approach in favor of understanding the psychic and social effects of war.

Achebe does give noble action a place in the war-related trilogy, but he also draws attention to the greed, selfishness, and dishonesty that perpetuate war. Although the author makes clear in these tales that the enemy has reduced the proud people with whom he sided to utter ruin and desperation, he balances insights about war, tracing its roots to recurring human impulses and choices, irrespective of sides. Such balancing reflects the author's "middle ground" utterances that did not always win him friends, although it was not his balancing of views alone that stirred the ire of commentators. As previously discussed, he was admonished by Africans and non-Africans on issues ranging from his writing primarily in English rather than an African language to observing racist elements in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Yet it is Achebe's almost neutral point of view in the war trilogy that is especially unexpected, given the horrors to which Biafra was subject. Certainly, the author does not fail to depict highly particularized elements of the post-war society in what had been the Republic of Biafra. But his rather impartial viewpoint affords him the kind of narrative distance he needs to represent several powerful perceptions of war itself.

In her review of Achebe's second to last volume, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, Kaama L. Glover comments on his penchant for traveling along the middle terrain as well as the humane quality of his perspective:

Achebe is...clear in his intention...to concern himself with individuals rather than ideologies. This personal and political position, which he calls the "middle ground"...is the place from which he strives to act and to write with empathy and nuance rather than with fanaticism.... Of course, for a postcolonial intellectual, even one heralded as the father of modern African literature, the middle can be a rather tricky space to navigate. (16)

Along the middle path of his three war-related stories, Achebe perceives that both enemy and victim may act immorally, but also underscores the appalling repercussions of war for a vanquished society. He depicts the sacrifices made by those working for the losing Biafran cause and the military force that overwhelmed it. Devastating as that force was, it generally remains abstract and impersonal in these tales, while Biafran foibles are on full display. In presenting the war this way, however, Achebe certainly does not seek to indict fellow Biafrans, but rather to trace the

vagaries of thought and impulse that are part of war and its fallout and that at times can precipitate organized violence.

In both "Sugar Baby" and "Girls at War," Achebe evokes the everyday concerns and needs that dominate personal consciousness despite the traumatic chaos at hand. While Cletus, the title character of "Sugar Baby," is a strong, well-meaning man, he simply cannot suppress his craving for sugar. Similarly, in "Girls at War," Reginald Nwankwo feels and expresses concern for the suffering of others, but he is too intent on gratifying sexual and other urges to act unselfishly and takes advantage of his privileged governmental position. His egotism and hypocrisy contrast in a dramatic moment with the innate altruism of Gladys, a former checkpoint guard, whose idealism has only partly succumbed to the fears and rigors of war. Although she enters a liaison with Nwankwo, she also exposes through words and action the flimsy quality of his principled rhetoric, and as grimly ironic his privileged position in the Ministry of Justice. War inevitably stands society on its head, and "Civil Peace," the main focus of the present examination of Achebe's war-related tales, provides a carnivalesque glimpse of the social upheaval that occurred in the aftermath of Biafra's defeat. The story reveals both the stunning risks that people take when motivated, paradoxically, by fear of material loss and the moral shifts that occur when the chain of violence reaches breaking point.

The chain of violence that resulted in the Nigeria–Biafra War (or the Nigerian Civil War) began with the breakdown of civil, democratic society in Nigeria, along with a military coup d'état and counter-coup, both of which Achebe's *A Man of the People* seemed to anticipate (see [Chapter 3](#)). The ensuing civil war stretched from July 1967 until January 1970 (when Nigeria's pre-war boundaries were reinstated) and remains deeply etched in world consciousness as a post–Second World War political, military, and humanitarian catastrophe. In January 1966 a coup against the Nigerian civilian government was led by five army majors, most of whom were Igbo, and this led to the persecution of members of the Igbo community outside of Nigeria's East, which has an Igbo majority. The worst of the persecutions was the [1966](#) massacre of thirty thousand Igbo civilians living in Nigeria's Northern Region. Diplomatic attempts in 1967 to achieve reconciliation between Eastern Nigerian leaders and representatives of the federal government broke down. Many Igbos and non-Igbos in the Eastern Region believed that they could no longer trust or be fairly treated by the rest of the nation. On May 30, 1967, General Chukwuemeka

Ojukwu proclaimed the independent Republic of Biafra, the short-lived nation that he led and that, as of June 1967, was home to nearly fifteen million people. The Igbo people represented about 65 percent of the population, while many other ethnic groups, the largest of which were the Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, and Ikwerre, made up the rest. For its part, Nigeria's recently established military government, led by General Yakubu Gowon, was determined to prevent the dissolution of the Nigerian federation portended by the Biafran secession.

The ensuing civil war brought immense levels of slaughter, famine, malnutrition, and disease, while according to Achebe "the callous interference of the great powers led to great despair and prolongation of the tragedy" (*There Was a Country* 105). Both Britain, concerned with its oil holdings in its former colony, and the Soviet Union, aware of the potential to expand its influence in West Africa, supplied Gowon's federal military government with arms, including "brand-new MIG-17 and II-28 Beagle (Ilyushin) jets . . . Soviet T-34 battle tanks, antiaircraft guns, AK-47 rifles, machine guns grenades, mines, bombs, etc." (*There Was a Country* 154). Federal Nigerian forces thus had access to far greater resources, enabling them to inflict appalling losses on Biafra and to impose a blockade on the secessionist republic. One of Gowon's cabinet members stated, "All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war," and similarly another commented, "Starvation is a legitimate weapon of war" (qtd. in *There Was a Country* 233, 314n.3). The result was one of the deadliest wars in human history. By the end of the war three million or more Biafrans may have died—mostly children and mainly from starvation—that is, about 20 percent of the whole population; however, multiple sources estimate that the total number of people who perished was over two million. The adverse economic effects of the devastation to the region comprising Biafra persisted long after the war ended, the psychological damage to Biafrans was profound, and writers continued to contemplate the war many years into the future. Such a writer was Achebe himself, who made it the focus of his final book, the memoir *There Was a Country* (2012), in which he wrote: "The suffering and humanitarian disaster left in the wake of war's destruction goes on long after the weapons are silenced—for months and years. . . . The Igbo were not and continue not to be reintegrated into Nigeria, one of the main reasons for the country's continued backwardness, in my estimation" (227, 235).

Achebe supported the doomed Biafran cause, notwithstanding his stated abhorrence of violence, and as a spokesman for the nation traveled

within Africa and abroad during the war. Although he undertook this role as an "unofficial envoy," he was asked to do so by the Biafran leader General Ojukwu himself (160). Meanwhile, Achebe and his immediate family narrowly eluded physical harm during the lead-up to war and the war itself. Amid the anti-Igbo violence that preceded the war, according to Achebe, "drunken soldiers...came to my office 'wanting to find out which more powerful, their guns or my pen.'" Later, in wartime, a bomb landed on the property of the family home in Enugu. Achebe's wife "Christie and the children had left in the nick of time. Had there been anyone in the house they would not have survived" (70, 182). However, due to the war the Achebe family did suffer the loss of relatives and friends, including Christopher Okigbo, an important Nigerian poet of Igbo ancestry and Achebe's long-time friend and associate, who was killed while serving in the Biafran army.¹

Although Achebe's fictional trilogy that closes *Girls at War* makes no pretense to encompass the range of cruelty, loss, and suffering occasioned by the war, elements of these lend tension and gravity to the tales. "Civil Peace," the first and shortest of the three, is set mainly in the war's aftermath, when the threat of violence continues to bear down on the life of the decimated town of Enugu (which was, until it was bombed, not only the Achebe home during an early stage of the war, but also the first Biafran capital). Enugu embarks on peacetime activities that are refracted through the Iwegbu family, which is intent on regaining some measure of financial security. Members of the family add to their meagre income by using a bicycle as a taxi, picking mangoes, preparing a breakfast item, "akra balls," in quantity, mixing palm wine, and selling these last three items to neighbors, soldiers, and soldiers' wives. Of course, what partly motivates the Iwegbus industriousness is the material devastation the war has visited on them, but, as will be considered shortly, the family has endured emotional trauma as well.

In *There Was a Country*, Achebe reflects on the psychic trauma suffered by the Igbo due to the war and its linked circumstances: "The experiences of the Igbo community from the pogroms onward had different effects on different people. There were a multitude of reactions—anger, loathing, sorrow, concern, depression, etc." (116). "Civil Peace" observes such effects in the post-war destitution that permeates the community in which the Iwegbu family subsists. Although members of that community begin the process of reclaiming life, material privation and lingering shock underpin the recurring association of their war-related experience with a

living death: "thousands more came out of their forest holes looking for the same things" (discarded bits of zinc, wood, and cardboard with which to rebuild); "neighbours in a hurry to start life again"; "ex-miners who had nowhere to return at the end of the day's waiting just slept outside the doors of the offices" (84). Later in the tale, when post-war violence, which would seem to arise almost inevitably from the convergence of human impulse and dire need in a ravaged community, directly confronts the Iwegbu family, the expressions of living death resurface dramatically: the family "raise[d] the alarm.... 'We are lost, we are dead!'... Maria [Jonathan's wife] and the children sobbed inaudibly like lost souls" (86).

But death has struck the Iwegbus in more than a figurative sense, for, of their four children, only three remain at war's end, although the details of the death of the fourth are not given. As the previous two quotations indicate, moreover, the Iwegbus feel the encroachment of death again when violence returns to their lives. The post-war violence is relatively mild at first: "endless scuffles" occur in the lines that people form to receive Nigerian currency in exchange for Biafran money (84). Yet these eruptions not only foreshadow the more organized violence that confronts the Iwegbu family in the story's penultimate scene, they also are symptomatic of the social deterioration at war's end. Achebe describes this deterioration as well in "Sugar Baby," the story that follows "Civil Peace" and that likewise is set during the period immediately after the war, though vitally drawing on war flashbacks. Its narrator, Mike, wishing to avoid provoking a hostile exchange between his friend Cletus and himself, recalls a story about the Yoruba trickster-god Esun (sometimes called Eshu):

Then I realized how foolish it was and how easy, even now, to slip back into those sudden irrational acrimonies of our recent desperate days when an angry word dropping in unannounced would start a fierce war like the passage of Esun between two peace-loving friends. So I steered myself to a retrieving joke.... (100)

Nigeria of course is one of the homelands of the Yoruba people, who fought with federal forces during the civil war, and it may be that that the reference to a Yoruba god and tale at the end of the Igbo master's wartime story reinforces the drive for peace. On the other hand, the story about Esun to which Mike alludes does embody the volatility that likewise prevails after the war within the overwhelmed Biafran community in "Civil Peace."

The fractious social elements portrayed in "Civil Peace" contrast with the stable patterns of life in the precolonial Igbo community that Achebe evokes in *Things Fall Apart*, a community that appears able to adapt to the capricious qualities of existence that Esun signifies. In this "well-ordered society of *Things Fall Apart*" (Peters 24), a wide array of mechanisms safeguard the peaceful conduct of social relations despite occasional outbursts of violence. Thus, the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, is chastised by a priest for beating his wife and thereby defying the cyclically observed Week of Peace:

"We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil... Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her." (30)

Clearly, the community's traditions hold the earth goddess, Ani, as a guarantor of peace and peace itself as a singular virtue.

Vestiges of the traditional society and its cohesive patterns remain in Achebe's *Arrow of God* (set in the 1920s), despite the now fully established system of British colonial rule that it represents. The source of these stable patterns is specified by Gareth Cornwell: "If these novels [*Things* and *Arrow*] depict communities in the process of disintegration, then what had hitherto held them together was a strong social consensus, a shared and largely unquestioning knowledge of and belief in their values, customs, and institutions" (16). In the three novels that Achebe sets to a considerable extent in a modern period, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*, the note of social instability is prevalent; yet even in this "chaotic present," with its "alienated people" (Peters 19), the traditional patterns are recalled and occasionally practiced: in *No Longer at Ease* communal gatherings are organized in the protagonist's rural homeland; in *A Man of the People* the bride-price is returned when Edna Odo withdraws from the marriage agreement her family has made with Chief Nanga; a traditional baby-naming ceremony for the daughter of Elewa and Ikem in *Anthills of the Savannah* expresses the communal aspiration for a better future. In each case the traditional practices are meant to foster peace.

In this context, "Civil Peace" suggests that the war's destructive impact has been almost categorically different, at least in the shorter term, from

that of colonialism and modernity, for the Igbo society portrayed in the story seems to have lost its handle on peace and mutual support. The hostile outbursts in its midst suggest that the organized violence so recently directed against a formidable enemy has now, in the post-war devastation, been redirected against itself. The Enugu community in which the Iwegbu family lives seems to suffer from a collective amnesia concerning social solidarity and from a resignation toward violence. Still, a group within the community that does exhibit social cohesion is the Iwegbu family itself: its spirit of cooperative and productive labor appears to be one of Enugu's few vital signs. Perhaps its cooperative spirit may subtly reflect the bitterness of the family's loss of a child during the war, but in any case a notion that repeatedly occurs to the father and husband, Jonathan, does seem to render explicit the heavy blow to the family of that death. Having lost one child, Jonathan thinks, how abundantly should the lives that were spared be valued and how paltry by comparison are the material possessions that have been secured. The story's opening paragraph provides the initial iteration of Jonathan's notion: "He had come out of the war with five inestimable blessings—his head, his wife Maria's head and the heads of three out of their four children. As a bonus he also had his old bicycle—a miracle too but naturally not to be compared to the safety of five human heads" (82).

Two variations on this thought arise in Jonathan's mind prior to the climactic scene. He discovers that his family's small house is still standing despite the destruction everywhere around it, but still, "needless to say, even that monumental blessing must be accounted also totally inferior to the five heads in the family" (83). Then, when repairs to the house are completed by a "destitute carpenter" whom Jonathan engages, the "overjoyed family" moves in "carrying five heads on their shoulders" (84). Jonathan's recurring acknowledgment of the members of his family who are alive reveals indirectly the unspoken emotional burden of the lost child. At the same time, his family's determined efforts to restore their lives and the pleasure they take in their material gains may be comprehended fully only in reference to their recent poverty.

Yet "Civil Peace" reminds us that a community's war-related wreckage cannot be offset merely by industriousness or material upgrades. Some weeks after they move back into their house, the Iwegbus stand to lose their hard-won assets when thieves knock on their door at night and "violently awaken" them, demanding first to be let in, then to be given one hundred pounds. A threatened consequence of doing otherwise is an

encounter with “guitar boy,” which is given a demonstration: “a volley of automatic fire rang through the sky” (87). The entire scene attests to the general disorder that has befallen Enugu in the aftermath of war, for what makes the greatest impression is not so much the desperation that motivates the thieves, but rather the collapse of community support for the Iwegbus and the thieves’ brazen use of their advantage in the circumstance.

This scene is a remarkable literary evocation of a world turned upside down and may be helpfully viewed through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s exploration of concepts associated with carnival. Bakhtin indicates that carnival’s unruly and irreverent humor partly reflects social affliction, and that an “essential element” of carnival is “a reversal of hierarchic levels” (*Rabelais* 81). Some of the drama and macabre humor of the robbery of the Iwegbus arises from multiple reversals of this nature. Although the thieves are, by their unnamed leader’s testimony, poor in comparison to Jonathan and Maria’s family (“But we sef no get even anini,” 87), they are the ones directing the course of the transaction. More pointedly the thieves, who speak Nigerian Pidgin, take over from the family the responsibility of calling on neighbors and police for assistance, highlighting in their effrontery the breakdown of social support in the war-shattered town:

Maria was the first to raise the alarm, then [Jonathan] followed and all their children.

“Police-o! Thieves-o! Neighbours-o! Police-o! We are lost! We are dead! Neighbours, are you asleep?” . . .

“You done finish?” asked the voice [of the leader] outside. “Make we help you small. Oya, everybody!”

“Police-o! Tief-man-o! Neighbours-o! we done loss-o! Police-o! . . .”

There were at least five other voices besides the leader’s. . . .

“My frien,” said [the leader] at long last, “we don try our best for call dem but I tink say dem all done sleep-o . . . So wetin we go do now? Sometaim you wan call soja? Or you wan make we call dem for you? Soja better pass police. No be so?”

“Na so!” replied his men. Jonathan thought he heard even more voices now than before and groaned heavily. His legs were sagging under him and his throat felt like sandpaper. (86–87)

Achebe extends the carnivalesque humor moments later when the leader reassures the Iwegbus through another striking conceptual reversal: “We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble.” He continues: “Trouble done finish. War done finish and all the katakata [chaos] wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. No be so?” ‘Na so!’ answered the horrible chorus [of thieves]” (87). In Bakhtin’s view, “carnival . . . marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (*Rabelais* 10), and similarly the thieves in “Civil Peace” gain their practical and literary purchase from a suspension of ordinary rank in the post-war environment.

The term (and story title) “Civil Peace,” like the robbery of the Iwegbus, ironically acknowledges the war that continues within a ravaged community once the external threat has passed. Insofar as the term “peace” in this context actually signifies violence, it reinforces the concept of a world turned on its head. It attests to the resilience of aggressive urges and the fertile soil that nurtures them in economically, psychologically, and socially compromised environments. At the same time, Achebe’s carnivalesque treatment of the robbery may caution against dismissing entirely the head thief’s more hopeful-sounding remarks: the war is indeed finished along with certain of its troubles. Carnival, as Bakhtin observes, expresses “hopes of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order, of a new truth”; it represents “death and rebirth” (81–82). And while the robbery itself brings more trouble for the Iwegbus and a reminder of death, it also occurs partly because of their budding affluence, which, like the “water which had recently started running again in the public tap down the road” (84), is evidence of the town’s incipient renewal: better days may lie ahead.

Heightening the robbery scene’s carnivalesque mood, which sharpens the war-related societal upheaval, is the thieves’ use of Nigerian Pidgin, a discourse that contrasts with the Standard English representation of Jonathan’s Igbo dialogue. As discussed in Chapter 5, Achebe employs Nigerian Pidgin to enhance narrative realism and impart humor (Wren 71), and the thieves’ Pidgin in “Civil Peace” heightens both features during their nocturnal shakedown of the Iwegbus. At the same time, Achebe’s deployment of Pidgin in this scene helps realize the further aims of marking class distinctions and dramatizing maneuvers for power that correspond to such distinctions. In this robbery scene, as elsewhere in Achebe’s fiction, a less affluent character’s use of Pidgin may express insubordination or irreverence at the same time as it reveals a lower social

status. Thus, Pidgin dialogue heightens the atmosphere of post-war social disorder that "Civil Peace" explores.

The fragile quality of social cohesion and trust is further accentuated by the unstable role of money. Although the Iwegbus can scarcely be called rich, the gauge of a family's socio-economic status is partly its community, and by that standard the Iwegbus are well-off. Not only do they possess a house and a bicycle, they also have gained a certain solvency from their recent income-generating activities. Jonathan has made "a small fortune of one hundred and fifteen [Biafran] pounds" from his use of the bicycle as a taxi; the children have earned a few "real pennies" from the sale of mangoes to the soldiers' wives; Maria's preparation of "breakfast akra balls" has contributed to the "family earnings"; and "soldiers and other lucky people with good money" (that is, evidently, Nigerian money—the kind the soldiers' wives give the children) pay Jonathan for the palm wine he mixes with water. Later Jonathan receives twenty Nigerian pounds in exchange for the Biafran money he turns in (83–85).

The thieves at his door demand one hundred pounds of the Iwegbus, and that may be more than they actually possess; but they do appear to have more than the twenty pounds Jonathan received for the Biafran money. In order to rid the family of the thieves, Jonathan takes a shocking gamble: "'To God who made me; if you come inside and find one hundred pounds, take it and shoot me and shoot my wife and children. I swear to God. The only money I have in this life is this twenty pounds *egg-rasher* they gave me today . . .'" (87–88). While the leader agrees to take only the twenty pounds, his fellows think that Jonathan is bluffing: "There were now loud murmurs of dissent among the chorus: 'Na lie de man de lie; e get plenty money . . . Make we go inside and search properly well . . . Wetin be twenty pound? . . .'" (88).

If, as it appears, Jonathan is indeed bluffing, then, along with the story's other carnivalesque elements, he has turned his own moral compass upside down, risking his life and that of his family to protect some material assets—having previously set the opposite valuation on these after the death of one of his children during the war. Perhaps, in that respect, he may be said to be suffering his own kind of amnesia in connection with what he previously maintained was most important, in fact sacred: "five inestimable blessings" (82). In any case, the mere gesture of staking the lives of his family members as collateral in an encounter with a group of men bent on crime and possessing at least one automatic weapon seems foolish at the very least. Yet, after all, the operation of folly in a mad post-war world may

be efficacious: the thieves do leave with the twenty pounds, and the next morning the Iwegbus resume their lives and income-producing endeavors.

Their tenacity in these enterprises helps us partially comprehend, if not condone, Jonathan's gamble in his encounter with the thieves. Having emerged from the sustained traumas and privations of war, the family members succeed in briefly piecing together a modest level of comfort and security, which not only is compelling in its own right, but also represents the psychic reconstruction of their world. Returning to a state of destitution might well seem unendurable to Jonathan. Achebe actually reflects on just this kind of psychological dynamic in *A Man of the People*. Enjoying the luxurious accommodations of his politically corrupt host, the novel's narrator Odili Samalu, despite his hostility to the corruption in his newly independent African country, fully grasps the appeal of corruption's material benefits. Samalu's meditation is rather allegorical in his circumstance, but almost literally applies to Jonathan Iwegbu:

A man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time. The trouble with our new nation—as I saw it then lying on that [luxurious] bed [in Chief Nanga's home]—was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say “To hell with it”. We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. (37)

Jonathan, too, is afraid of going back into the rain—or worse than rain. Losing what few resources he and his family have gathered since the end of the war looks to him, if not other family members, like a return to a living death. And death seems close at hand when the thieves beset the family: “We are lost, we are dead! … Maria [Iwegbu] and the children sobbed inaudibly like lost souls” (86).

So Jonathan's apparently reckless response as the thieves threaten to enter his house is partly driven by fear. The fear that influences a nation to adopt a warlike footing, to be willing to sacrifice the lives of many of its members, is related to the fear that pushes Jonathan into a kind of psychological war with the thieves, one that entails the potential sacrifice of family members and himself. Elise Boulding speaks to this fear: “War culture itself is also based on fear—the fear of being dominated, destroyed by [the] enemy. It is a pathological form of the basic need for autonomy, for having one's own space, and its smothers the other basic human needs for nurturance, empathy . . . ” (237). Still, one cannot help but be struck

by the dissonance between Jonathan's gamble and his prior notions of the surpassing importance of his family's lives and the comparative insignificance of material benefits. Offering those lives to the thieves as forfeit to dissuade the men from entering may indicate that he is protecting something in his home that he values besides those lives, and beyond the twenty pounds he concedes to the thieves.

The hypocrisy that Jonathan evinces concerning the value of his family members' lives links him to the central male characters in Achebe's two other war-related stories. In "Sugar Baby," Cletus's misery over the lack of real sugar has left him debilitated, but the story's narrator, Mike, reveals that Cletus writes radio scripts that encourage Biafrans to face war's hardships. Consequently Mike confronts his friend: "I really lost patience with him and told him a few harsh things about fighting a war of survival, calling to my aid more or less the rhetoric for which his radio scripts were famous" (93). Evidently one of war's presumed manageable hardships, the loss of a food amenity, renders Cletus no match for his own rhetoric.

In "Girls at War," Reginald Nwankwo serves as a study in almost continuous hypocrisy, a trait all the more visible through his privileged position in the Ministry of Justice. Though married, Nwankwo begins an affair with Gladys, who in spite of her own self-indulgence exposes his self-serving pronouncements and actions—as when he directs his driver to pick up the youthful Gladys rather than a desperate old woman. Gladys remarks simply but pointedly: "I thought you would carry her" (106). In one instance Gladys's Pidgin, though superficially lighthearted, underscores the untruthful quality of Nwankwo's comments about who she is and what he wants from her:

"Here is one man who doesn't want you to do that. Do you remember that girl in khaki jeans who searched me without mercy at the checkpoint?"

[Gladys] began to laugh.

"That is the girl I [Nwnankwo] want you to become again.

Do you remember her? No wig. I don't even think she had

any earrings..."

"Ah, *na lie-o*. I had earrings."

"All right. But you know what I mean."

"That time done pass. Now everybody want survival." (112; emphasis added)

Although she adopts a jesting tone, Gladys reveals the truth to Nwankwo when she says he lies ("na lie-o"). As with the thief whose Pidgin speech reinforces his irreverent address of Jonathan, Gladys's Pidgin supports her momentarily defiant response to Nwankwo; it also exemplifies Achebe's recurring deployment of Pidgin to dramatize truth speaking to power.

Gladys's honesty and compassion extend to her actual behavior: at the end of the story she tries to save a wounded soldier and, along with the soldier, gets killed by an enemy bomb, while Nwankwo, who at the same moment flees his responsibilities to the others, survives. On this pessimistic note (a pessimism tempered by Gladys's nobility) Achebe ends the longest of the war-related tales, the one that pays most attention to the accretions of hypocrisy generated through war. The self-serving distortion of conventional principles that furnishes hypocrisy also helps Achebe represent war in the trilogy as an extension of egotism and untruth. Why be surprised that a family man risks the lives he counts as blessings to avoid losing money to thieves, when a military ruler oversees the slaughter of more than a million people to avoid losing them as citizens? Such hypocrisy overlaps with amnesia: the family man and the ruler both forget their bond with those whose lives are at stake. Hypocrisy and amnesia are lapses—of values and memory, respectively—whose convergence in Achebe's stories occasions madness: Jonathan's madness in offering his family's lives as collateral; Cletus's madness in destroying his relationship with Mercy, "a nice, decent girl[,] because he wouldn't part with half-a-dozen cubes of... sugar" (99); Nwankwo's madness in believing that somehow the young woman he is with should not be diminished by a war that has diminished everyone else, including himself.

In "Girls at War," Achebe describes the atmosphere that developed when the Nigeria-Biafra War had raged for over a year and a half, when death and starvation were rampant:

It was a tight, blockaded and desperate world but none the less a world—with some goodness and some badness and plenty of heroism which, however, happened most times far, far below the eye-level of the people in this story—in out-of-the-way refugee camps, in the damp tatters, in the hungry and bare-handed courage of the first line of fire. (104)

Achebe asks in this passage and in all three of the war-related tales whether the virtues in our nature can offset the traits that degrade us: the distortions of truth and fairness that people routinely construct and that allow them to perpetrate unjust violence in the first place. Each of the stories

attests to the varied ways in which the civil war without is an extension of the civil war within. “Civil Peace” reminds us, moreover, that the violence that has raged between communities at war continues afterwards within a single, defeated community. The possessiveness, self-centeredness, and irrationality that trigger war assert themselves in the post-war landscape of “Civil Peace” and potentially augur a return to the enormities of senseless destruction.

Yet the means of escape from such a cycle of violence may be discerned as well in “Civil Peace.” It consists of the courage and social stability to conduct rational dialogue between competing parties and to pursue the justice of an equitable distribution of resources. This means of escape is congruent with Boulding’s observation that “humans are not condemned to endless rounds of violence and counterviolence. But to break that cycle requires much more attention to human development...as well as to national and regional institutions” (256). “Civil Peace” dramatizes the human habits that perpetuate violence, but through the Iwegbu family’s cohesive and determined efforts to survive and flourish, which continue during and after the robbery, the story presents, too, a microcosm of the collective human bonds and strength that promote human development rather than destruction.

NOTE

1. This chapter’s overview of the Nigeria–Biafra War and Achebe’s connection to it has been drawn from the following sources: Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country* (70, 78–92, 96, 100, 103–105, 149, 154, 156, 160, 182, 195, 226–27, 233, 235, 304n.3, 312n.3–4, 6, 314n.3) and “The Truth of Fiction” (152–53); Booker, “Nigeria–Biafra War” (173–74); Cornwell (2); Fountain (qtd. in Achebe, *There Was a Country* 100); Peters (34); Sallah and Okonjo-Iweala (94–96). Detailed treatment of these topics is found in both *There Was a Country* and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (111–60).

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Unfolding Dialogue: Teaching Achebe's Fiction

How may literature instructors in the United States (and more broadly in the West), including those teaching world and multiethnic literatures, reach out to undergraduate students as the literary canon changes, as interdisciplinary approaches emerge, and as digital media are ever more readily available? Literature instructors alone neither can nor should maintain their formerly commanding position in the interrogation of literary discourses. Furthermore, the “hegemonic overlord,” to invoke Peter McLaren’s term, enacts a teaching role antithetical to some of the core purposes and values embodied in postcolonial and intercultural literatures. When instructors pronounce, *ex cathedra*, on the meaning of a text, that is, in the spirit of monologue, “knowledge [is] passed on perfunctorily—as though it were a tray of food passed under a cell door” (McLaren 114). The lecture format still plays a role, of course, but varied interactions are needed between instructor and students, and the latter also need to build meaning with each other. Actions speak louder than words,¹ and pedagogical methods rooted and implemented in a mode of domination—reflecting, indeed, colonial mentalities—contradict the affirmation of equality and dignity projected in global literatures.

To return to the opening question, literature teachers may reach out to students by drawing on methods of intercultural, personal, and intertextual comparison, remaining mindful, though, of the potential pitfalls associated with the comparative mode. In addition, the instructor of world and multiethnic literatures seeks to “engage in a pedagogy that is

at once intercultural without being trapped into a simplistic exoticism" (Desai, Introduction 13). The instructor of these literatures builds awareness of diverse texts and of potential multivoiced responses to them. Ideally, the range of these responses will be commensurate with the diverse experiences and perceptions projected by the texts themselves. While encouraging students to take spontaneous pleasure in literary writing, the teacher helps them to ground their understanding of this writing through consideration of relevant cultural, historical, political, and critical perspectives.

Achebe, who for a great part of his life taught literature himself,² generates this kind of multidimensional response to his writing since it traverses such boundaries and definitions as African and English literature, colonial otherness, postcolonial agency, transnational perspective, and canonical standing. John Marx notes Achebe's complex positioning in the academic context:

Paradoxical as it may seem, Achebe has earned a place in the Western canon at least in part as a representative of Nigeria and the Igbo. Nevertheless, when one argues that Achebe belongs alongside canonical stalwarts like Dickens and Woolf, it still matters whether we foreground his African roots or his literary genius. (84)

Given the fraught topics addressed by his writing and his complex place in the academic sphere, engaging Achebe's fiction with students demands an open mind and a supple analytic and pedagogic approach. Yet in several respects, Achebe's writing teaches us how to teach him and will guide the suggestions for classroom dialogue offered in this chapter. Worth noting, too, is that the compelling character portrayals and rich evocations of African culture, British colonialism, and post-independence misrule offered in Achebe's novels—including *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *A Man of the People*—make them particularly attractive candidates for classroom exploration. And while Achebe's fiction, informed by recurring dualities, is useful in generating student give-and-take, its embrace of diverse texts and authors lays the groundwork for intertextual exploration as well.

With respect to the intertextual approach, we may recall that one legacy of colonialism has been a transnational network of cultural exchanges. From an early stage Achebe's work supported cross-cultural dialogue, which accounts in part for the widely held view of him as "a literary and

political beacon" (Kandell). The intertextual aspect of his writing allows instructors and students to examine ways in which seemingly remote cultural traditions may illuminate each other. Achebe was steeped in Igbo culture, but he also began reading British authors early in life and perceived them in highly personal ways, precisely because he saw their relevance to as well as distortions of the Africa he knew. Although he draws on traditional Igbo storytelling and verbal art, he brings it into dialogue with the literatures of Western civilization, especially English-language literature. Achebe's work suggests that giving narrative cultures formerly overlooked in Western classrooms their full recognition does not make mindfulness of Western traditions extraneous.

One of the obvious manifestations of cultural interplay in Achebe's writing is that while all of his fiction is set in Africa, it is written mainly in English (as discussed in [Chapter 4](#)). Another striking sign of the dialogue between African and Western cultures that Achebe cultivates consists in his first two novels' titles and epigraphs. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's most famous work, these are drawn from "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats, while Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, takes them from "The Journey of the Magi" by T.S. Eliot. These elements not only encourage examination of the lives of African characters and societies through prisms of English-language poetry, they also invite fresh consideration of that poetry through African narrative.

Achebe himself portrays just this kind of reciprocal interpretation in *No Longer at Ease* when its protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, interviews for a civil service post in late colonial Nigeria. Since the Chairman of the interview committee is an Englishman interested in modern literature, and since Obi has concentrated on English literature at university, he comments on various English writers as well the pioneering Nigerian author of English-language narratives, Amos Tutuola, for the benefit of the Chairman. Obi deems Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* "the only sensible novel any European has written on West Africa and one of the best novels I have read [although] nearly ruined by the happy ending" (45). The Chairman registers surprise at this last remark (aware of the suicide that occurs toward the end of Greene's novel), prompting Obi to articulate his own theory of tragedy, which rejects the Aristotelian notion of a clear-cut resolution, such as suicide and "a purging of the emotions." Rather, according to Obi, "Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever." In order to support this view, Obi refers to

W.H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, and Charles Dickens, but he also recalls an elderly Igbo man, a Christian convert whom he knew in his Nigerian hometown, “‘who [had] suffered one calamity after another. He said life was like a bowl of wormwood which one sips a little at a time world without end. He understood the nature of tragedy.’… ‘That’s most interesting,’ said the Chairman” (45–46).³

Although Obi is no longer a student, having graduated from an English university a short time prior to the interview, his exchange with the Chairman in both its content and format—a subordinate instructing his social superior—models the possibility of productive and worthwhile cross-cultural dialogue in the literature classroom. The hierarchical setting may prove difficult to avoid, but the teacher can offer, as the Chairman does with Obi, a forum in which the student has a voice and in which different cultural traditions, ones with a long history of hierarchical tensions, may speak to and disagree with each other as equals. During the interview, which notably leads to his appointment as Secretary to the Scholarship Board, Obi juxtaposes, as indicated, a Western theory of tragedy with tragedy as he personally has grasped it. The method he employs in a non-academic setting carries value for the study of literature as well: comparisons that tie textual narrative to personal experience can yield fuller access to unfamiliar storytelling and cultural signs. Making such comparisons spark students’ interest, allowing them to take ownership of the analysis and a stake in the class’s literary investigation. Through classroom discussion, collaborative group work, and informal or formal writing that build class interest and investment, the instructor helps students sharpen and expand their analytic skills.

The use in the classroom of comparison that encompasses both literary text and student experience will be considered below, but for the moment comparison itself needs attention. The comparative approach brings into focus conflicts, motivations, and themes in a story that would be undervalued or hidden without the reciprocal influence of the other text. What Susan Stanford Friedman observes about the comparative method of “collage” applies as well to other forms of literary comparison: “Each [text] produce[s] new insights about each” (759). Patterns of motif, myth, and psychology emerge, moreover, in the cross-cultural juxtaposition of texts, revealing both bonds and distinctions between different cultures. In fact, Friedman speaks directly to the importance of comparison in the analysis of global literatures: “Comparison is an ever-expanding necessity in many fields, including literary studies, where the

intensification of globalization has encouraged comparative analysis of literature and culture on a transnational, indeed planetary, scale" (753). If the world is growing ever more interconnected, then comparison may be unavoidable, and it potentially yields greater understanding between cultures.

Historical and social distortions are dangers that attend a comparative approach, however, and Friedman acknowledges these. Yet she maintains that the benefits of comparison tend to outweigh its potential for effacing intercultural power relations:

We compare because we must. We compare because it is one way in which we think or know. We compare because if we do not there are consequences worse than the political, decontextualizing problems of comparison. What are the ethics of not comparing? To refuse comparison is also a political act, one that can potentially reinstate the existing hierarchies by not challenging them. (755)

To be sure, teachers of world and multiethnic literatures must be prepared to acknowledge with students the inequalities that underlie the comparisons they make, or, in Gayatri Spivak's terms, the "judging and choosing" that they will enact: "comparison assumes a level playing field and the field is never level," as Spivak observes. "It is, in other words, never a question of compare and contrast, but rather a matter of judging and choosing" (609). Still, as Friedman argues and as Achebe shows in Obi's interview, comparison remains a useful vehicle for literary engagement.

One Igbo proverb in particular, previously discussed in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#), helps illuminate the power of comparison and of the collaboration between teacher and students. In *No Longer at Ease* that proverb, "Wherever something stands, another thing stands beside it," is invoked by a man who criticizes Obi for not attending his mother Hannah's funeral (181). The speaker recalls to a group of other Umuofians that Obi's father Isaac (formerly Nwoye) similarly did not attend the funeral of Okonkwo, his father and the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. The proverb in this context conjures the axiom "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Achebe, however, provides a fuller sense of "Wherever something stands, another thing stands beside it" in later discussions, including his essay "Chi in Igbo Cosmology" (1974): "It is important to stress what I said earlier: the central place in Igbo thought of the notion of duality. Wherever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute. *I am the truth, the*

way, and the life, would be blasphemous or simply absurd, for it is well known that a man may worship Ogwugwu to perfection and yet be killed by Udo” (161).⁴ Furthermore, in a 1999 video, *Chinua Achebe: Africa's Voice*, which features an interview with Achebe, in reflecting on Okonkwo’s demise he suggests that this proverb stands for the counterpoints that our world creates. Okonkwo overcompensates for his “shame” in relation to his indolent father, Unoka, according to Achebe, and “goes too far” in the direction of “valor,” “strength,” and “war”; consequently he does not “see this other thing,” the elements of life, such as “poetry” and “stories that mothers tell their children,” that observers associate with the “feminine” (*Chinua Achebe: Africa's Voice* ch. 2–3).

Taken together, these three presentations by Achebe of the Igbo proverb “Wherever one thing stands, another thing will stand beside it” (*Chinua Achebe: Africa's Voice* ch. 2) remind us that the world is constructed through relational elements that we perceive as contrapuntal, complementary, or ironic—and often some combination of these. Furthermore, Friedman’s remark “We compare because it is one way in which we think or know” is more fully understood in this light: comparison arises from our tendency to notice and try to make sense of the competing, complementary, and coincidental elements that meet and produce new, often unanticipated, realities. One need only think of key elements in the process that thwarts Okonkwo’s powerful trajectory: a defective rifle, having missed his wife, Ekwefi, at whom he has deliberately shot (though he is relieved it has missed), later kills a boy whom he has no intention of shooting, causing his and his family’s seven-year exile. At the end of this period Okonkwo’s anticipated return to power in the traditional society at Umuofia is blocked by the British missionary and administrative incursion into Okonkwo’s region. How could Okonkwo have anticipated that other force placing itself next to him?

Among the individuals who fulfill complementary roles in both *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are teachers and students. One context for their meeting is mentioned by Achebe in the *Chinua Achebe: Africa's Voice* video interview: “the stories that mothers tell their children” (ch. 2). Both books include scenes in which a mother tells a traditional story to her child. Ekwefi shares with Ezinma, her 10-year-old daughter, the partly cautionary tale of the Tortoise who betrays the birds and is in turn sabotaged by “Parrot, who had felt more angry than the others” (96–99). In *No Longer at Ease*, Hannah Okonkwo, transgressing her husband Isaac’s zealous Christian prohibition on “heathen [Igbo] . . . stories” (66), tells Obi the story of the “wicked

leopardess" who fails in her scheme to eat the "lambs of [her] old friend the sheep" (68). These folk stories and their transmission from mother to child correspond to Achebe's observation that "Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight) . . . Their artists created their works for the good of that society" ("Africa and Her Writers" 29). Ekwefi and Hannah share in the fulfillment of this purpose.

The educational dimension of these scenes consists not merely in the tales' edifying content, but also in the role of the pupil: in each case the tale-telling involves the empowerment of the child through narrative practice and a stake in her or his own education. After Ekwefi concludes the Tortoise and birds tale and responds to Ezinma's remarks about it, she says to Ezinma, "your turn now" (99). Although Ezinma stumbles at first, Ekwefi does not interrupt her, but rather allows her to try again. Ezinma then begins to narrate adeptly a tale about Cat: "Once upon a time there was a great famine in the land of animals. Everybody was lean except Cat, who was fat and whose body shone as if oil was rubbed on it" (100). At this point, though, Ezinma is interrupted by the ominous approach of the priestess Chielo, which puts an end to storytelling for the evening (100).

In a comparable vein, Obi takes his turn at school to narrate the story of the leopardess and lambs and "even added a little touch at the end which made everyone laugh . . . [the third lamb] in Obi's version . . . slapped the leopardess in the eyes" (68). Perhaps the young Obi reveals awareness here that oral storytellers place their individual stamp on a tale and that this can help entertain the audience; certainly his classmates take pleasure in his version.⁵ This moment in *No Longer at Ease* reminds us not only that spontaneous elements in a presentation can ensure student involvement, but also that students need to talk to each other in the classroom. Overall, the scenes with mothers sharing folk tales with their children help underscore the active role that students need to take in their own education. Ekwefi and Hannah act, directly or indirectly, as "liminal servants," to use McLaren's phrase, by fostering the full capacity of their students; that is, their children. They do "not merely present knowledge to students; [they] transform the consciousness of students by allowing them to 'embody' or incarnate knowledge" (116).

Still, as McLaren observes, encouragement of the self-realizing agency of each student does not preclude these teachers, who work within "a liberatory pedagogy" but who are not "ideologues," from drawing on

more conventional forms of presentation as well as the resources of their scholarship and experience (114, 115):

The liminal servant is the bringer of culture.... She does not eschew theory (which would be a form of pedagogic pietism), nor does she avoid intuition that comes with practice (where avoidance would amount to a moribund intellectualism or "siege mentality").... Modes of symbolic action are employed [by the liminal servant] that do not betray a cleavage between the passive reception of facts and the active participatory ethos of "learning by doing." (115–16)

Ekwefi in *Things Fall Apart* and Hannah in *No Longer at Ease* do act as presenters and as authorities, but they also facilitate the development of autonomy in their respective students. As suggested above, moreover, the manner in which the Chairman oversees the recently graduated Obi's interview—and discourse on literature—also illustrates how one in a position of authority can choose to support a subordinate's creative self-direction. He gives Obi the scope he needs to work out a persuasive comparison between a Western, textually based theory and an experientially based one.

Comparing the events in a text with personal experience has a productive role in literary study, but of course comparing two or more texts is also valuable, not least when this comparison, too, draws on student experience. Comparing and contrasting the forms of indebtedness dramatized in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* help illustrate this. The first novel establishes almost at the beginning that Okonkwo's father (that is, Obi's great-grandfather), Unoka, accumulated massive debt, which was a source of the shame that turned Okonkwo against him. Unoka spent his money "improvident[ly]" and was "lazy"—except in his application to the flute—so he was unsuccessful at farming, which contributed in turn to his inability to repay his loans and adequately to feed his family as well as himself; he died from a "swelling in the stomach" (4–5, 17–18). In certain respects Obi's path to debt unfolds differently from Unoka's. He adamantly rejects bribe-taking at the outset of his career in the late colonial civil service, believing that an independent Nigeria will succeed only if official corruption is eradicated. Later, however, he falls ever more deeply into debt, despite his relatively handsome salary, and eventually begins to accept the very bribes he previously condemned. As with his grandfather Okonkwo, Obi works hard but, as with Unoka, he spends improvidently.

What happens is that, on obtaining his government post, Obi enters the world of Western-influenced consumer culture, in which everything from his student loan (which is called a scholarship in the novel) to his auto insurance contributes to his mounting debt. As students readily perceive, these are precisely the kinds of debt that Obi shares with many young people in the West. In addition, though, Obi shoulders financial burdens associated particularly with the traditional culture that persist into the late colonial era and beyond: it is his duty to pay for his parents' food and medical costs and his brother's school fees. He also is expected to return to his hometown of Umuofia laden with gifts for the larger community (142–43). These are the competing pressures that influence Obi's desperate decision in the latter part of the novel.

A multifaceted comparison that encompasses the pressures of debt in relation to Unoka, Obi, and students today does not privilege a Western ethos, nor does it assert the superiority of "authentic" African culture, although *Things Fall Apart* certainly depicts traditional Igbo culture's virtues. Further, such a comparison does not deny the impact of Western societies on African ones. What this and related comparisons do seek is to locate the rich layers of meaning, value, and irony between cultures that were originally forced into contact, and also between them and the cultural circumstances that present-day students recognize. The continuity of the issue of debt, despite differing circumstances, tends to confirm Friedman's statement: "One effect of comparing cultures is to call into question the standards of the dominant precisely because it is unveiled as not universal. . . . A more inclusive comparison of narratives from different sites on the globe can dismantle the false universalism of Western forms" (756). Achebe himself counters such universalism in his essay "Teaching *Things Fall Apart*" (1991), observing that "in spite of serious cultural differences it is possible for readers in the West to identify, even deeply, with characters and situation in an African novel" (127).

This form of identification can aid in the fulfillment of a writing assignment that compares such multidimensional intersections as those between Unoka, Obi, and Western students on the subject of indebtedness. Even though not all college students carry debt, the personal experience of a student without debt is still relevant, providing a basis for useful contrasts with fictional characters and with peers. Further, a writing assignment of this kind may point students away from "the mind-numbingly dull [compare and contrast] college papers [in which] the method is essentially static, not sufficiently dialogic" (Friedman 757). It may do so because,

along with the connections between Unoka, Obi, and the student's life that can be drawn, this essay will need to encompass multiple generations, varied cultural contexts, and fictional as well as personal experiences, among other divergent factors. Whether carried out in writing, classroom dialogue, or both, a complex comparison of this sort challenges students to employ their critical reading skills, to connect their studies to their lives, and, hopefully, to extend their empathy.

While literature instructors may be reluctant to investigate with students more than a single novel by the same author, a class may benefit from comparing an Achebe work to ones from other traditions, including Western and Western-related traditions. David Damrosch contends that "world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode . . . available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike" (5).⁶ So Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* may be seen, for example, in relation to Homer's Odysseus: each longs to return home and re-establish his reputation and influence. Then there is the biblical Job, who like Okonkwo must endure upheavals that are beyond his control. Likewise, the Chief Priest Ezeulu, protagonist of Achebe's novel *Arrow of God*, tries to navigate an array of forces, including colonial rule, missionary influence, and the tensions attending his role as high priest, that prove overwhelming. As with Shakespeare's King Lear, whose rupture with his beloved daughter, Cordelia, contributes to his madness, Ezeulu loses his sanity at the novel's close after the death of beloved son Obika (227–30). Lastly, an especially useful point of reference for *Things Fall Apart* may be discovered in a classic British novel. C.L. Innes notes that the "characterisation and enclosed rural world [of *Things Fall Apart*] have been compared to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy, a novelist Achebe admired" ("Chinua Achebe Obituary"). Indeed, Hardy's protagonist, Michael Henchard, may be viewed as a kind of counterpart to Okonkwo because Henchard, too, is a powerful and natural leader whose self-destructive tendencies are almost inseparable from his strengths. The abusive behaviors of these two characters toward their wives may generate particularly lively classroom discussion.

By no means is this to suggest that the stories traditionally valued in the West have greater intrinsic value than others. Rich interconnections are to be discovered between Achebe's writing and that of many other non-Western writers. In this vein, students may be asked to locate, for example, points of contact between Okonkwo and Jashoda, the protagonist of Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's story "Breast-Giver" (1980). At first

glance the only commonality would appear to be that each is the central figure in a work of fiction, but while their activities and cultural milieus offer stark contrasts, the arcs of their lives track each other in significant respects. Jashoda and Okonkwo both strive courageously and successfully to provide for their families, act as surrogate parents, and fulfill their societies' standards for women and men, respectively. Yet they lose status in those communities, which, along with one or more family members, ultimately turn away from each of these characters, and each dies isolated and hopeless.⁷ Students will find worthwhile an examination of the early conditioning of both characters, as well as of the way in which the prevailing standards of their societies work temporarily for but ultimately against them. One of the important distinguishing factors with respect to the end of their lives, however, is that the influence exercised by an external power (the British missionaries and colonial administration) is crucial to Okonkwo's demise, whereas Jashoda, who nursed fifty children (including twenty of her own), dies, tellingly, from breast cancer.

Not least among the benefits of comparing Jashoda and Okonkwo, whether in discussion or in writing, is the opportunity it gives students to consider social contexts and gender roles. Women in many societies are expected to submit to and support their husbands, and certainly these expectations are present, if challenged, among Okonkwo's wives in the world that Achebe portrays. For her part, Devi suggests in "Breast-Giver" that women of India are conditioned for an irrational level of self-sacrifice by long-standing codes: "Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani" (1073). As Jashoda and, earlier in the story, the female cook in the Haldar home show, however, self-sacrifice does not ensure that women will not be tossed aside when that seems expedient. If there is almost no end to a woman's self-sacrifice in Jashoda's society, limits do exist on the ethos of masculine forcefulness in Okonkwo's world. As with many societies, the Igbo value restraints on, as well as exhibitions of, male aggression, and the restraining influences are those that Okonkwo tends to overlook: "Okonkwo, like the wrestler in the [oral] tale, seeks to enthronize the supremacy of one cultural value or principle over all others, and this attempt goes against the foundational principle of multiplicity and relationality that guides the culture" (Garuba 329). What Okonkwo shares with Kangali, Jashoda's husband in

“Breast-Giver,” is the belief that wives (Okonkwo has three) serve their husbands’ needs.

Still, as previously discussed, women are teachers in the Igbo culture that Achebe portrays. And just as Ekwefi in *Things Fall Apart* and Hannah in *No Longer at Ease* embody a cultural attitude that children benefit from learning some part of their community’s storytelling tradition, so teachers of global and intercultural literatures can help students make contact with unfamiliar communities partly by expanding consciousness of ones closer to what, for many, may be called their own. Achebe himself embraces multiple storytelling traditions, those originating both near to and far from his birthplace in southern Nigeria, and he challenges us to bring awareness of these traditions to our reading. Obviously this is not easy to do for many undergraduates, but literature instructors do have a role to play in enlarging such awareness. They may wish to discuss or even assign one or more of the Western authors alluded to by Achebe and explore the beauty and subtlety of West African oral traditions and literature as well as Western prose, drama, or poetry.

Criticism responsive to the varied narrative traditions that Achebe’s work bridges may hold particular interest for students and instructors of world literature. One pathway to understanding Okonkwo, for example, has been to compare him to heroes of ancient Greece. “Achebe’s opening,” in Richard Begam’s view, “is to establish Okonkwo as a particular kind of tragic protagonist: the great warrior who carries with him the fate of his people” (209), and Begam then quotes from Michael Valdez Moses: “Like Achilles, Okonkwo is ‘a man of action, a man of war’” ([*Things Fall Apart* 10] 110). Begam goes on to observe that “like many of the heroes of classical tragedy, Okonkwo’s immoderate behavior consistently places him at cross-purposes not merely with his fellow Umuofians, but with the gods themselves . . . ” (210). At the same time, Begam also asserts that “if we are to appreciate the tragedy of [*Things Fall Apart*’s] first-ending [which begins with Okonkwo’s beheading of the head messenger]—something that Achebe clearly intends—then we must recognize that Okonkwo’s faults are essentially virtues carried to an extreme, and that while he is obviously not perfect, he nevertheless represents some of the best qualities of his culture” (210). In this context, one may note that Achebe himself does not necessarily recognize “African” and “Greek” in strictly binary terms: “If we are to believe what we are hearing these days the Greeks did not drop from the sky. They evolved in a certain place which was very close to Africa. . . . I think a lot of what Aristotle says makes sense” (Interview

with Rowell 97). Of course, in regard to *Things Fall Apart*, no comparison to a previous model is complete because Okonkwo's cultural milieu and personal trajectory are all his own. On the other hand, the integrity of narrative traditions and characters should not preclude classroom consideration of meaningful parallels between works and characters, including, indeed, between Okonkwo and two kings of ancient Greek tradition, Oedipus and Priam. All three struggle against a feared destiny: for Okonkwo it is the shame that surrounded Unoka, including his final illness, which is "an abomination to the earth goddess" (18); for Oedipus it is the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother (Sophocles; Graves 9–12); for Priam it is the prophecy that his newborn son will bring ruin to Troy (Graves 268–75). The suggestion that the struggle against one's fate serves to seal it may be discerned in each case, including that of Okonkwo, whose suicide, like his father's final illness, "is an abomination . . . an offense against the Earth" (207).

To take cultural comparisons in a different direction, the question of whether Okonkwo fulfills the concept of the "American Dream" can stimulate students of *Things Fall Apart*. They may elaborate their understanding of that concept and whether its application to Okonkwo is valid. The multiple successes that Okonkwo achieves through talent, determination, and effort—even his troubling relations with those around him and his startling death—would appear to indicate that the American idea has a certain relevance to this character. Students may consider here F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby (or even numerous American celebrities), whose demise is associated with his apparent realization of the American Dream. In light, moreover, of the narrator's observation that "among [Okonkwo's] people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father . . . achievement was revered" (8), the social meritocracy on which the American Dream concept is predicated exists in Okonkwo's Igbo community. But such an approach to understanding Okonkwo also provides an object lesson in the limitations of generalizations, for, as suggested, Okonkwo has been shaped by his own experience, one that includes, on the individual plane, being the son of the shamed Unoka and, on the collective plane, traditional Igbo mores. These mores determine, for example, that Okonkwo and his family must endure a seven-year exile and the destruction of their home for the accidental killing of the young son of Ezeudu at the latter's funeral, a consequence of Okonkwo's defective rifle. Students may do some research in this regard in order to gain a general sense of what the penalty would be in the United States (or another Western

nations=) for the same kind of crime. A brief paper justifying the differing approaches to punishment (or its absence) may be helpful in connecting their research to this turning point in the novel.

Yet if Igbo society as represented in *Things Fall Apart* evidently treats some of its members harshly (including those called “*osu*” who are outcasts by birth), it does not validate long-standing Western notions of Africans as bloodthirsty. The novel details the methods, such as the Week of Peace, that Okonkwo’s people use to promote and safeguard peace—that, indeed, they use at times to safeguard it against Okonkwo himself. This is why the question raised by the novel’s single mass slaughter at the fictional town of Abame (based on an actual 1905 incident in which a British contingent massacred people at the Nigerian town of Ahiara to retaliate for the killing of J. F. Stewart, an Englishman bicycling in the vicinity; Wren 40; Irele et al. 2920n.5; Booker, “Stewart” 245) deserves particular attention. That is the question of who the “bloodthirsty savages” are. The incongruity of a “might makes right” principle guiding those who, like the colonialists and missionaries in *Things Fall Apart*, claim to be motivated by nobler codes and a higher power provides a valuable opportunity for classroom reflection. The pointed irony that this massacre creates captures the imagination of many students.

Things Fall Apart challenges in fact the long-standing portrayals by Western authors of Africans as inarticulate and uncivilized. This is one reason that the novel is studied productively side by side, for example, with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which was commonly assigned at the high school and college level until, it would appear, fairly recently. Indeed, in perhaps his most famous essay, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” Achebe notes that “it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities” (14–15). Achebe repudiates the racism that he finds fully displayed in Conrad’s novella, yet he does not demand an end to the novel’s inclusion on course syllabi. He may have believed that it should be studied from a responsible perspective, in contrast to the tendency in the past to overlook what he sees as Conrad’s racism. If instructors today assign *Heart of Darkness* less frequently than twenty years ago and more, then altered perceptions of its racial thematics may be partly responsible. Another possible factor is that other masterworks of literature from around the globe are increasingly commanding teacher and student attention. Yet the novel’s expression of a set of deeply ingrained negative attitudes toward Africa and Africans, despite its denunciation of the treatment of Africans under colonialism, and the way these

attitudes contrast with those articulated by Achebe and other authors are among the reasons that it is not easily replaceable.

If an instructor does not assign *Heart of Darkness*, then she or he may provide some form of summary—one, for example, that helps students better understand why Conrad's novella is an important point of reference for the study of *Things Fall Apart*. Nevertheless, summary falls far short of what they will discover themselves through their engagement with both texts. Another option if one does not assign *Heart of Darkness* (and of course even if one does) is to adopt a much shorter work such as Rudyard Kipling's poem “The White Man's Burden,” which shares numerous points of contact with *Heart of Darkness* and was published in the same year (1899). To be sure, such a substitution has significant limitations, partly because Kipling and Conrad reveal fundamentally different perspectives on the morality of colonialism, with Kipling defending colonialism by peoples of European descent and Conrad to some degree repudiating colonialism and racism. Undoubtedly bringing these two works in relation to each other as well as to *Things Fall Apart* will generate a rich discussion and underscore the power to enlighten that often accrues from intercultural (and intergenerational) dialogue.

In another important essay, “The Novelist as Teacher” (1965), Achebe explicitly draws attention to the vital relationship between his work as an author and the practice of teaching. In a passage that partly is given at the outset of Chapter 2 of this volume, Achebe lays emphasis on the salient place of education in strengthening society and expressly identifies his writing as a mode of teaching:

Here, then, is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word . . . I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive. (“The Novelist as Teacher” 71–72)⁸

This passage underscores the degradation and alienation endured by a substantial portion of humanity as a consequence of colonialism, and these

are issues with which students of modern world literature are likely to grapple, whether or not Achebe is on the syllabus. What Achebe celebrates here is literature's role in correcting the distorted representations of the people he knows, so while his purpose in writing certainly is to give pleasure, he means to instruct as well. This dual motive is consistent with tenets of Igbo oral tradition mentioned in "Africa and Her Writers" (above): the narratives were created and told "for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight)... Their artists created their works for the good of that society."

In light of the previously quoted passage from "The Novelist as Teacher," it may be observed that what the novelist and the literature instructor share is a commitment to enlarging the literary, cultural, and historical understanding of their respective audiences. Consequently, frank interrogation of these areas is unavoidable, which means that potentially volatile moral questions are on the table. The classroom study of *Things Fall Apart*, for example, may lead to students asking whether any long-term benefits of European colonialism outweigh the devastation it wrought. At various points Achebe himself has weighed in on this issue, including in response to Robert Serumaga's (1967) interview question concerning changes in African society, as reflected in Achebe's novels, from the onset of colonialism to post-independence:

Although you see life is not simple—it's often so complex. There have been gains—I mean let's not forget that, there have been gains, I am not one of those who would say that Africa has gained nothing at all during the colonial period, I mean this is ridiculous—we gained a lot. But unfortunately when two cultures meet, you would expect, if we were angels shall we say, we could pick out the best in the other and retain the best in our own, and this would be wonderful. But this doesn't happen often. What happens is that some of the worst elements of the old are retained and some of the worst of the new are added on to them.⁹ (13)

These views may take some readers by surprise. Putting aside religious questions, after all, few if any of the activities of Europeans in *Things Fall Apart* seem to augur well for the interests of the majority of Africans. Kwame Anthony Appiah observes, indeed, that Achebe "captures the sense of threat and loss that must have faced many Africans as empire invaded and disrupted their lives" (qtd. in Kandell). So Achebe's observation that benefits have accrued from colonialism in Africa can hardly be

regarded as an inconsequential gesture by the author. It is the gesture, though, of one who is trying to locate and express ideas as truthfully as possible, even when those ideas appear contradictory or invite opposition. And this kind of effort characterizes as well the work of many an inspiring literature teacher.

What is evident is that Achebe's reproaches of colonialism and its legacy do not preclude expressions by him of respect toward the West, and, conversely, his affirmations of Africa, illustrated by the quotations above from "The Novelist as Teacher" and "Africa and Her Writers," do not silence his opprobrium toward African abuses—or, in the case of *Anthills of the Savannah*, the opprobrium toward these of editorial writer Ikem Osodi (see 144–47). Furthermore, Achebe's fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, which builds on the educational foundation of teacher and student, derides in some measure Africa, the West, and the neocolonial bargains that have been struck between them since independence. As discussed in Chapter 3, this novel, set in a fictional African nation whose political upheavals famously anticipated what actually occurred in Nigeria, traces the career of the title character, Chief Nanga, a politician and government minister given to virtuous pronouncements and sketchy arrangements with a company called British Amalgamated (42–43). As a grammar school teacher before entering politics, Nanga elicited an admiring response from the novel's narrator, Odili Samalu, who was, in turn, "something like his favourite pupil" (3). Samalu later becomes a teacher himself and also allows Nanga to mentor him briefly after they meet again, during which time Samalu enjoys staying at Nanga's "big mansion built with public money" in the capital city of Bori (76). Their association dramatizes the extent to which a teacher's actions can prove more influential than the words of the formal lesson, and why a teacher's personal integrity is crucial. At the same time, their relationship represents the potential negative impact when "one thing comes to stand by another," even, of course, when this involves a student and a teacher. For, in important ways and in spite of his idealistic inclinations, Samalu follows the sweet-talking Nanga's dubious path.

Early in the novel, while visiting the school in Anata at which Samalu teaches, the government minister avenges himself over a perceived petty insult from the school principal, Jonathan Nwege, by "ostentatiously ignor[ing the principal] for the rest of the day" and "probably," as Samalu infers, depriving the principal of "the chance of getting... dilapidated government wares with which he was no doubt hoping to replace

the even more worn-out equipment in his school" (20). In satisfying his vanity at the expense of basic student needs, Nanga reveals that his public identity as "a man of the people" is specious (1). Samalu reflects Nanga not only through subsequent rudeness toward Nwege (20, 103), but also through disproportionate revenge—against Nanga himself for his relations with Samalu's female friend Elsie (77–78). Nanga's intervention with Elsie shatters their amicable relations, a rather ironic outcome since previously the two also resembled each other while discussing women in sexually disrespectful terms (60). As with that circumstance, the course that Samalu's revenge takes underscores the force of Nanga's example because, on the one hand, Samalu transforms, as Nanga did, from school teacher into politician—one who seeks Nanga's parliamentary seat—and, on the other hand, he courts Edna, the woman whom Nanga has been grooming to be the second and more "polished" of his two wives.

At the story's outset Samalu scorns his father, Hezekiah, and the Anata community for tolerating Nanga's corruption, their attitude captured in a proverb that asks whether "a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth" (2). Eventually, though, Samalu's own behavior seems to fall in line with this rationale. Like Nanga, Samalu appropriates political funds for personal gain, using the money of his political party, the Common People's Convention (a name that ironically echoes the "man of the people" phrase associated with Nanga), to reimburse Nanga for expenses, including bride-price and tuition, that he incurred for Edna (148). The influence of the former teacher, Nanga, on the path followed by his protégé, along with Achebe's observations in "The Novelist as Teacher" and elsewhere, emphasizes that the work of the teacher is, for better or worse, morally charged and profoundly consequential.

A class studying *A Man of the People* may consider the theme of morality in the novel by having one group censure and another defend Samalu's decision near the end to use his party's money for personal purposes:

I had already decided privately to borrow the money from C.P.C. funds still in my hands. They were not likely to be needed soon, especially as the military regime had just abolished all political parties in the country and announced they would remain abolished "until the situation became stabilized once again." (148)

This passage can generate lively debate given the flaws as well as apparent strengths of Samalu's ethical logic. Nanga's transgressions seem to dwarf

Samalu's, so that the disproportion may help exculpate the younger man. Students may reflect, however, that when it comes to morality what counts is not only degree but also substance. Is the money really Samalu's to use this way? And, assuming that the government of his nation eventually will reinstate political parties *and* that the C.P.C. will reconstitute, where exactly will he find the money to pay it back? On the other hand, if the C.P.C. is not re-established, to whom would Samalu return the money it gave him? Classroom groups can usefully debate whether Samalu may ethically use the C.P.C. funds for his personal purposes and, if not, how he *should* handle the money. A classroom jury may then adjudicate the matter.

Literature instructors endeavor, of course, to sharpen an array of student skills, including those of reading, research, and writing, but for many teachers a classroom in which students wrestle with ambiguities of motivation, behavior, virtue, and guilt provides one of the greatest satisfactions. Notwithstanding its sometimes satiric approach, *A Man of the People* delineates these ambiguities without abandoning a deeper consciousness of right and wrong. Appiah speaks of an "intense moral energy" in Achebe's writing (qtd. in Kandell), and indeed the compelling moral challenges intrinsic to that writing, as *A Man of the People* attests, make it especially worthwhile to teach. More broadly, Achebe's writing offers students and instructors varied opportunities to discover and debate significant historical, social, and literary questions. Students are responsive, moreover, to the author's vividly etched characterizations and situations, which are both accessible and challenging.

NOTES

1. Rather in keeping with this aphorism is John Locke's comment in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: "I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts" (28).
2. Achebe mentions in his 1991 essay "Teaching *Things Fall Apart*" that he has "taught literature in African and American universities for many years." Although he acknowledges in the essay that "because I wrote *Things Fall Apart*, I have never taught it," he also indicates why he has something to offer that is relevant to teaching the novel (*Education* 124–25).
3. Obi's concept of tragedy ironically anticipates the fate of Obi himself in *No Longer at Ease*, as opposed to the tragedy of his grandfather, Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, whose life ends in suicide.
4. Similarly, Achebe discusses in *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (5–6) the Igbo view of duality and its reflection in the proverb ("Wherever

- Something Stands") under consideration here (as indicated in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#)).
5. See Oyekan Owomoyela, who is Yoruba: "Folktales in general... come in virtually unlimited variants... The 'functions' that combine to form the particular tale at a particular telling can and do vary widely... In all cases, though, I have attempted to do what the storyteller does in typical Yoruba setting... I have striven to tell the tales in as entertaining a fashion as I could..." (xv-xvi).
 6. Damrosch's view that world literature encompasses both accepted classics and lesser-known works is compatible with that of Verlyn Klinkenborg in the recognition that formerly marginal or unknown authors now rightfully claim our attention: "The canon—the books and writers we agree are worth studying—used to seem like a given, an unspoken consensus of sorts. But the canon has always been shifting, and it is now vastly more inclusive than it was 40 years ago. That's a good thing. What's less clear now is what we study the canon for and why we choose the tools we employ in doing so." For perhaps many world literature instructors, the purpose of studying a canon that now includes many international authors is to understand richly diverse cultures, their storytelling, and their verbal artistry—and to recognize both commonalities and differences between various traditions, including of course the ones the classroom comprises. This too is consistent with a comment by Klinkenborg: "That kind of writing—clear, direct, humane—and the reading on which it is based are the very root of the humanities, a set of disciplines that is ultimately an attempt to examine and comprehend the cultural, social and historical activity of our species through the medium of language."
 7. Students will find similar points of contact between Okonkwo and Nnu Ego, the female protagonist of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, by Anglophone Igbo novelist Buchi Emecheta. In addition, British colonialism in Nigeria has a powerful impact on Nnu Ego's life, as it does Okonkwo's.
 8. The enduring value of this statement by Achebe may be gauged partly by its correspondence to a much later view, articulated by Shaobo Xie, of "post-colonialism [as an approach] vindicating and asserting the identities of the formerly colonized... [P]ostcolonialism signifies an attempt by the formerly colonized to re-evaluate, rediscover, and reconstruct their own cultures..." (164).
 9. See as well two related statements by Achebe, the first from "The Novelist as Teacher":

[A self-respecting writer] must remain free to disagree with his society and go into rebellion against it if need be. But I am for choosing my cause very carefully. Why should I start waging war as a Nigerian

newspaper editor was doing the other day on the “soulless efficiency” of Europe’s industrial and technological civilization when the very thing my society needs may well be a little technical efficiency? (69–70)

The second is from “African Literature as Restoration of Celebration”:

To call my colonial experience an inheritance may surprise some people. But everything is grist to the mill of the artist...We must...accord appropriate recognition to every grain that comes our way...We had better learn to appreciate one another’s presence and to accord to every people their due of human respect. (3, 10)

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Conclusion: The Ends of Narration

How Chinua Achebe arrived at his particular narrative methods that draw on oral tradition in prose fiction partly involves the mystery of artistic inspiration. What is clear, though, is that he recognized that a powerful resource was available to him in the implementation of a new kind of novel about West Africa. By melding African oral tradition with the novelistic form that he learned mainly through Western authors, Achebe tapped into a powerful residual storytelling bond.¹ Through his construction of multiple bridges between orature and literature in his fiction, moreover, he disclosed the power that lies in directly connecting these two storytelling realms. For no matter how sophisticated and innovative a prose work and style may be, written fiction has its roots in oral narrative (which, as folkloric tricksters show, has commonalities across cultures). That the novel was so responsive, moreover, to Achebe's innovations may also be understood, in part, as a function of the novel's protean nature. As Bakhtin observes, the novel is "a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established form to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality" (39). The developing, counter-colonial political reality that influenced the young Achebe partly was expressed through his and others' Africanization of the English novel.

In this regard, Achebe's fictional innovations are not merely a means to express certain ideological ends, but are also ends in themselves. The novel in its very form contributes to the political statement that Achebe makes: as an

entity that continuously redefines itself, the novel may be viewed, in the words of M. Keith Booker, who builds on Bakhtin's perspective, as "inherently antiauthoritarian" (20). As Booker perceives in this context, the novel is an especially useful vehicle "for postcolonial literature, which, in its engagement with the European literary tradition, represents not the smooth continuation of European conventions, but instead entails a direct challenge to a tradition that often worked in direct complicity with the European colonial domination" (21). In addition, since Achebe's use of African orature in his novels celebrates African discourse and culture, his writing places the English novel in the service of African interests, thereby reversing patterns of Western appropriation of African resources for Western ends. Indeed, Achebe reveals in *Arrow of God* a parallel reversal, the process by which colonized African communities found non-authorized ways to leverage British resources in spite of apparently strict British control. As Neil ten Kortenaar explains, "the Christians, led by [the catechist John Jaja] Goodcountry invite the disenchanted and hungry worshipers of Ulu to join the church and to eat the yams that Ezeulu has forbidden. The people of Umuaro agree so that they can harvest their yams and preserve the community. Who is using whom?" (37). Both in form and content, then, Achebe's writing reinscribes established concepts of the owners and ends of colonial resources, and it vividly delineates the negotiation of multiple cultural influences by communities altered through the incursion of an alien civilization.

Achebe's foundational contributions to the content of fictional discourse in English are thus the assertions of African perspectives on colonialism and on African culture itself. Still, these assertions do not posit a radical alterity on the part of African cultural expression; to the contrary, Achebe could reveal the potential of literary dialogue between African and Western traditions because he recognized the ground they shared—ground in which his own intellectual consciousness was cultivated. Ultimately, the author's counter-narrative extends beyond the realm of colonial attitudes to encompass both European and African assumptions and abuses in the postcolonial era. Yet implicit in all of Achebe's literary dramas is a belief that material and political conditions in Africa can improve, that consciousness in the West, and beyond, can evolve, and that a more just path can replace models of exploitation and corruption that have so brutalized African lives. Intrinsic as well to the hopeful element in Achebe's work is his commitment to a certain kind of writing, namely, "beneficent fiction," which fosters an "imaginative identification" that "manifest[s] in fellow-feeling, justice and fair

play” (“Truth” 151). The author committed himself, in short, to narrative that possesses a profoundly moral dimension, a view reflected in his assertion that the African cultural traditions to which he was heir did not undertake storytelling as an end in itself, did not practice “art for art’s sake,” but rather “created their works for the good of . . . society.” Achebe embraced the view that “art is, and was always, in the service of man” (“Africa and Her Writers” 29).

Certainly, the historical and political adversities in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent—colonial and postcolonial political violence, dictatorships, political corruption, widespread and unremediated poverty—discourage easy optimism on Achebe’s part. The sobering political and societal realities that the novels and the last three short stories depict leave no doubt that whatever the author’s hopes, they are balanced by his unflinching recognition of the abuses and tragedies that Africans face in the modern era. Yet, what Ato Quayson perceives about the culture portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*, that it possesses “a resilience that ensures its survival despite [its] tensions” (123), extends to Achebe’s narrative vision. The deeply humane qualities of that vision are resilient. They are reflected in the author’s recurring affirmations of individuals and their communities—of their cooperation, their negotiations, and to an extent even their conflicts. And this humane perspective transcends the degradation of human potential to which Achebe also bears witness.

NOTE

1. “All literature goes back to oral storytelling—all the foundational epics, from South Asia via Greece and Africa to Central America, are deeply rooted in oral storytelling . . . writing has coexisted with oral storytelling since the invention of the former” (Puchner et al. xxiv).

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