

*Sophisticated Primitivism:  
The Syncretism of Oral and Literate  
Modes in Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"*

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I

THE USE OF THE English language and literary forms by African (and other Third World) writers must be understood in the context of a larger social, political, and ideological dialogue between British, and particularly colonialist, literature on the one hand and the ex-colonized writers of the Third World on the other. Faced by the colonialist denigration of his past and present culture and consequently motivated by a desire to negate the prior European negation of indigenous society, the African writer embarks on a program of regaining the dignity of self and society by representing them, in the best instances, in a manner that he considers unidealized but more authentic. This negative dialogue transcends the literary polemic about authentic "images" of Africans and manifests itself in an opposition of forms as well: thus, for instance, Chinua Achebe is drawn to realism partly in order to counter the "racial romances" of Joyce Cary.<sup>1</sup>

However, some critics have argued that the African end of this dialogue is unable to negate colonialist literature totally precisely because it relies on the English language to do so. The question that underlies this criticism is indeed an important one: can African experience be adequately represented through the alien media (ones that were fashioned to codify an entirely different encounter with reality) of the colonizers' language and literary forms or will these media inevitably alter the nature of African experience in significant ways? But the question cannot be

answered very easily. While the ideological sentiment behind this criticism is perfectly understandable and laudable, the critics who want Third World writers to abandon European languages and forms have not concretely examined the results of the contemporary syncretic literatures of the Third World. Whatever answers are ultimately given to the underlying question, the concrete evidence must be scrutinized first. Thus I would like to bracket temporarily the controversy about English in order to examine, in this essay, an issue that, one can argue, has causal priority: how is the encounter between the predominantly *oral* cultures of Africa and the *literate* cultures of the colonizer represented and mediated by anglophone African fiction? Is such fiction, which, to stress the obvious, is *literate* and written in *English*, able to do justice to the phenomenology of oral/mythic cultures, which is radically different from that of chirographic cultures? From an ideological viewpoint we must also inquire whether or not the adoption of the alien language makes a significant contribution to the negative dialogic relation between African and English literatures.

The African writer's very decision to use English as his medium is engulfed by ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions. He writes in English because he was born in a British colony and can receive formal education only in English. More significantly, however, he is compelled to master and use English because of the prevailing ideological pressures within the colonial system. At the surface level these manifest themselves through the ethnocentric narcissism of the European colonialists who will only recognize the other as a "civilized" human being if he recreates himself in their image by adopting the appropriate European language as well as literary forms. This applies to all aspects of culture and politics: for instance, the granting of "independence" itself is contingent upon the adoption of some version of Western parliamentary democracy. At a deeper level the insistence that the colonies accept European forms, values, and beliefs represents a deliberate, if subconscious, strategy to ensure an unproblematic change from dominant to hegemonic colonialism. "Independence" marks the transition from the dominant phase, where "consent" of the dominated is obtained by direct coercion, to the

hegemonic phase, where "consent" is procured through the ideological formation of the dominated subject. Thus the adoption of European languages, and subsequently European values, beliefs, etc., by the native remains crucial to the hegemonic transfer, which generates, as by-products, anglophone, francophone, etc., Third World writers who may or may not be involved in a negative dialogue with European literature. (Some writers, such as V. S. Naipaul, who has clearly adopted the "author function" of the colonizer, are more inclined to represent a version of the colonialist viewpoint.) Finally, a potential writer from a British colony is induced to use English because it is an intimate part of a powerful society that will control all technological and cultural development in the foreseeable future.

Yet the decision to use English produces a contradiction between, on the one hand, the unconscious and subconscious psychic formations of most Third World writers, determined by the indigenous languages, and, on the other hand, the more superficial, conscious formation, determined by the formal, public function of English in most colonies. The problem is compounded by the fact that, unlike English, most African languages were non-literate and that the noetic structures of these oral cultures are significantly different from those of chirographic ones. The African writer who uses English, then, is faced at some level with the paradox of representing the experience of oral cultures through literate language and forms. Chinua Achebe, on whose first novel I shall concentrate, is subconsciously aware of this problem and has depicted in his fiction not only the material, political, and social destruction of indigenous societies caused by colonization but also the subtle annihilation of the conservative, homeostatic oral culture by the colonialists' introduction of literacy. Thus his novels not only depict the materiality of the destroyed and destroying worlds, but as chirographic representations of oral cultures they also become simultaneous agents of the preservation and destruction of the oral world. The style and structure of *Things Fall Apart*, I shall argue, do encode the phenomenology of oral cultures and thereby create a new syncretic form and contribute to the negative dialectics by deterritorializing, to some extent, the English language and the novelistic form.

## II

The differences between oral and chirographic cultures have been articulated most thoroughly and systematically by Jack Goody and Walter J. Ong,<sup>2</sup> and the following, somewhat schematic summary of these differences is based on their modulated analyses. Goody correctly emphasizes the fact that traditional anthropological formulations of the differences between these kinds of cultures through the binary and ethnocentric categories such as civilized/savage, rational/irrational, scientific/mythic, hot/cold, etc., are essentially manichean, that is, they tend to valorize morally one term at the expense of the other and to characterize the differences as being qualitative, categorical, and ontological rather than quantitative, material, and technological. Both Goody and Ong insist that the essential differences between these cultures can be explained through a scrutiny of literacy and its effects. The point, as Goody puts it, is that the "relationship between modes of thought and the modes for the production and reproduction of thought . . . [lies] at the heart of the unexplained but not inexplicable differences that so many writers have noted,"<sup>3</sup> that changes in the modes of production and reproduction of thought, i.e., (alphabetic) literacy and later printing, are bound to affect the very content and modes of thought.

Literacy, by isolating thought on a written surface, tends to alienate language, knowledge, and world in positive and productive ways. When an utterance "is put in writing it can be inspected in much greater detail, in its parts as well as in its whole, backwards as well as forwards, out of context as well as in its setting; in other words, it can be subjected to a quite different type of scrutiny and critique than is possible with purely verbal communication. Speech is no longer tied to an 'occasion'; it becomes timeless. Nor is it attached to a person; on paper, it becomes more abstract, more depersonalized."<sup>4</sup> This kind of scrutiny eventually leads to the development of syllogistic and other forms of analysis. By allowing one to record events as they occur, to store them for long periods of time, and to recall them in their original forms, literacy eventually builds up a dense representation of the past and thus leads to the development of



historical consciousness and secular teleology. The availability of a dense past and more sophisticated analytic tools in turn encourages greater reflexivity and self-scrutiny. One must emphasize again that oral cultures are unable to develop these characteristics not because of some genetic racial or cultural inferiority but simply because they lack the proper tool, namely literacy. Yet in the absence of these essential features of chirographic societies, the phenomenology of oral cultures tends to be characterized by the following traits: it defines meaning and value contextually rather than abstractly; it is conservative and homeostatic; its universe is defined by mythic rather than historical consciousness; it valorizes collectivity rather than individuality; and it is dominated by a totalizing imperative.

Oral cultures tend to define concepts through situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract. Ideas are comprehended either through their concrete manifestations or through their context, but rarely in terms of other abstract ideas; lexis is controlled through direct semantic ratification, through experience rather than logical definition. Writing, on the other hand, creates a context-free or "autonomous" discourse. Written words are no longer directly bound up with reality; they become separate "things," abstracted from the flow of speech, shedding their close entailment with action and context.

Since the conservation of conceptualized knowledge in oral cultures depends on memory, that which is not memorized through repetition soon disappears. This mnemonic need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that tends to inhibit experimentation and innovation. On the other hand, the mind in chirographic cultures, freed from this mnemonic constraint, is not only able to experiment but, perhaps more significantly, to record and build on innovations and changes. Consequently, oral societies tend to adopt a protective attitude towards their epistemological and phenomenological categories and established theories and practices, whereas literate societies, particularly after they have embarked on a program of "scientific" inquiry, are more sceptical, critical, and analytic. The former tend to systematize and valorize belief, the latter, doubt. A corollary of the conserving function of the oral community is its

homeostatic imperative, that is, its decision to maintain the equilibrium of the present by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance. The present needs of oral societies constantly impose their economy on past remembrances, and past events that are released from memory can never be recuperated in non-literate cultures.

The inability of oral cultures to document this past in a systematic and detailed manner, of course, means that they are dominated not by a historical but a mythic consciousness. As an account of origins, myth differs from history in that its claims cannot be verified with anything like the kind of accuracy available to literate societies. Based on this fundamental difference, Ernst Cassirer makes further distinctions between oral/mythic and scientific/historical consciousness that seem to be accurate but that are unfortunately formulated in fundamentally ethnocentric, manichean terms.<sup>5</sup> However, at the very least, one can say that because the noetic economy of oral/mythic consciousness is not burdened by the needs of ratification it is able to develop a more fluid symbolic exchange system. This fluidity not only facilitates the enactment of the central teleological imperative of oral cultures, i.e., to maintain a constant homeostatic balance, but also permits the development of a specific relation between collectivity and individuality (weighted towards the former) and the economy and configuration of its totalizing imperative.

Communication in oral societies necessarily takes place in "primary group" relationships, that is, through intimate face-to-face contact. The result of this "intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group."<sup>6</sup> Thus oral cultures tend to valorize collectivity over individuality and to create "individual" personality structures that are in fact communal and externalized, not inclined towards introspection. The externalized individual, then, is easily managed through the symbolic exchanges involved in communal ritual and practices. Writing and reading, on the other hand, are solitary achievements that tend, at least momentarily, to throw the psyche back on itself, and the knowledge that one's thoughts, when they are committed to writing, can endure

in time encourages the emergence and recognition of individuality.

According to Ong, sight (and hence writing) isolates, while sound (and hence speech) incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer; while sight is unidirectional, sound is enveloping. The centring action of sound affects man's sense of the cosmos. For oral cultures, the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at its centre. Man is the *umbilicus mundi*. In such societies, where the word has its existence only in sound, the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into a human being's feel for existence. All the characteristics of oral cultures discussed above relate intimately to the unifying and centralizing effect of sound. If we add to this tendency the fact that, in the absence of the analytic categories that are predicated on writing, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings, then we begin to glimpse the totalizing imperative of oral cultures. In such societies words, ideas, and reality are intrinsically bound; they are part of the same continuum. There is little distinction made between the pragmatic and non-pragmatic, the phenomenal and the numenal. All mundane reality is impregnated with spiritual significance, and the entire cosmos inheres in the most insignificant object; metonymy and metaphor, as essential phenomenological and epistemological structures, are more deeply integral to the oral consciousness than they are to the chirographic mind. If man is the centre of the fluid symbolic economy of such a society and if such a universe is conceptualized through its humanization, then potentially man has total control of it if only he knows the correct formulas and practices. In such a culture an "individual" can easily become the emblem of the desires and conflicts of the entire society, and this characteristic is, of course, important for the production of heroic, epic narratives.

Narrative is more functional in oral cultures than in others for two reasons. Since oral cultures cannot generate abstract or scientific categories for coding experience, they use stories of human (or anthropomorphized animal) action to organize, store, and

communicate knowledge and experience. Second, such societies use narratives to bind a great deal of cultural signification that exists in less durable verbal forms. Thus, for example, oral narratives will often incorporate folktales, orations, genealogies, proverbs, etc. Unlike the linear or pyramidal plots of chirographic narratives, which are predicated on careful written revision, the plots of oral narratives are episodic and non-sequential: the narrator will report a situation and only much later explain, often in great detail, how it came to be. Yet, as Ong insists, this is not due to the narrator's desire to hasten into the midst of action. Such an interpretation is a product of literate cultures which assume that a linear plot has been deliberately scrambled. The episodic oral "plot" is really a product of the narrator *remembering* the story in a curious public way — remembering not a memorized "text" or a verbatim succession of words but themes, episodes, and formulae, which, along with the entire story, are *already known* by the audience as part of the culture's myths.

The narrative thus simultaneously exists as a public and private event: "as a traditional and external fact, the oral tale is foreseeable; as a literary fact (poetic, individual experience, etc.), the produced oral text has an internal finality that finds support in the foreseeable." The relation between the public (already known) and private (a specific retelling) version of a narrative is dialectical. The narrative is a potentiality that exists prior to the productive act of the narrator, while a specific performance of the story is a variation and an innovation that refers to the potentiality just as *parole* refers to *langue*.<sup>7</sup> Thus creativity as well as aesthetic appositeness lie in choosing a formal element (proverb, folktale, etc.) and in (re)arranging of episodes in a plot sequence in ways that are appropriate to the specific narrative context. The oral narrative, then, is "situational" in a double sense: it proceeds episodically, that is, it reports a situation that is modified or explained much later and apparently at random; and the specific performance is partly determined by the narrative situation, that is, by the interaction between audience and narrator. The "scrambled" sequence of an oral narrative, with its necessary recapitulations and postponed amplifications and explanations, results in repetition or *copla* as one of its characteristic

features. Yet repetition must not be mistaken for redundancy (a term that Ong uses as a synonym). As Harold Scheub has shown, it has an aesthetic function; oral narratives deliberately cultivate and intensify repetitions in order to realize their cumulative effects.<sup>8</sup> We may add to this the possibility that the neotic function of repetition may be to reinforce the homeostatic imperative of oral cultures because well-modulated repetition would have the effect of recreating the balance of an already known, ordered, controlled, and rhythmically harmonious universe. A specific aesthetic corollary of *copia* that also characterizes oral narrative is the predominance of parataxis, both at the level of syntax and that of larger narrative units — formulas, episodes, etc.

The neotic economy of oral narratives also tends to generate heroic figures, not for romantic or deliberately didactic reasons but for more basic ones. In the first place, outsized characters are more memorable than the “ordinary” individuals of literate texts, and this is, of course, an important consideration for cultures without texts. In addition to encouraging triumphalism this economy also prefers heroic “flat characters” because around them can be organized the most significant elements of the culture: in fact these characters serve as the emblems of the culture and can be used to manage all kinds of non-narrative elements embedded in the story. Psychic and social interiority, the “roundedness” of well-developed chirographic characters, is rarely a significant concern of these narratives. Since such narratives emblemize, through the heroic figure, the totality of the culture and since the formal features of such stories evoke the neotic structures of a oral universe, the very performance of an oral narrative is itself a profoundly totalizing act. As Ngal insists, such narratives incorporate and commune with the core of the culture and evoke a “sense of belonging to a common history.”<sup>9</sup> I think it might be more accurate to say that such narratives allow the narrator and the audience to (re)integrate themselves with the totality and the totalizing imperative of their culture. As Goody points out and as Ruth Finnegan’s study illustrates,<sup>10</sup> while the content of these narratives can vary widely, the formal characteristics invariably remain constant.

## III

Chinua Achebe's style in *Things Fall Apart* is consonant with the oral culture that he represents. In fact, the congruence between the style, elements of the narrative structure, and characterization, on the one hand, and the nature of the culture represented, on the other, account for the success of the novel: because Achebe is able to capture the flavour of an oral society in his style and narrative organization, *Things Fall Apart* is able to represent successfully the specificity of a culture alien to most Western readers.

His sentence structure is on the whole paratactic; it achieves its effect largely through juxtaposition, addition, and aggregation. Consider the opening paragraph of the novel:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight . . .<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the glaring opportunities for consolidating the short, simple sentences and subordinating some of them as modifying clauses, thereby emphasizing the more important elements, Achebe refuses to do so precisely because syntactic subordination is more characteristic of chirographic representation than it is of oral speech. The desired effect of this parataxis, which, as we will see, is echoed in the narrative organization of the novel, is the creation of a flat surface: since one fact is not subordinated to another more important one, everything exists on the same plane and is equally important. Of course, as one proceeds through the novel one begins to see that all the details coalesce around the heroic figure of Okonkwo, but while reading any one paragraph or chapter the initial effect is one of equivalence. This style and its effects, it must be emphasized, are deliberate. As Achebe himself has shown by comparing a more abstract and hypotactic version of a paragraph from *Arrow of God* with the concrete and paratactic original, the former is inappropriate for the protagonist

of the novel and his context.<sup>12</sup> The deliberateness of this style is also emphasized by its contrast with passages of oratory at political gatherings, funerals, and other formal occasions when the language, though still paratactic, is characterized by greater rhetorical formality. For instance, Uchendu's avuncular advice to Okonkwo is not only very dramatic and punctuated effectively with rhetorical questions but is also tightly structured according to the demands of the logic of his argument (*TFA*, 122-25).

The effect of parataxis, however, is modulated by the repetition of various kinds of details. Significant facts keep resurfacing like a leitmotif: for example, Okonkwo's achievement of fame through wrestling is introduced in the first paragraph on page seven, then repeated again on pages eleven and twenty-nine, and finally the narrator devotes an entire chapter (*TFA*, 46-50) to the importance of this sport in Igbo culture. At times virtually identical statements are repeated. Chapter three begins with the following statement: "Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit" (*TFA*, 19). This is followed by a two-page depiction of his father's laziness, which ends with "With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a tile, nor even a young wife" (*TFA*, 21). Playing against the flat surface of the paratactic prose, such repetitions create a sense of rhythm and valorize some facts above others. This does produce a kind of subordination, but the fact that these repetitions are embedded in a flat narrative surface implies that they must be understood in terms of the overall situation; without the context these facts lose their value. In this novel significance is a function of recurrence, not of logical analytic valorization. The importance of context is illustrated by the fact that meaning of complex concepts is defined by reference to concrete situations rather than abstract elaboration. Thus, for example, *efulefu*, a worthless individual, is defined as follows: "The imagery of an *efulefu* in the language of the clan was a man who sold his machete and wore the sheath to battle" (*TFA*, 133). Or the apparent contradiction between the two definitions of *chi* as they appear on pages twenty-nine and thirty-three is explained by the

context, which makes it clear that the *chi* is in agreement with the self when one is in harmony with oneself and the entire culture but that it becomes antagonistic when one is alienated from self and society. Though repetition and contextual definition modify the flat surface of the narrative, they do not, as we shall see later, create a distinction between background and foreground. Rather their function is to create a series of patterns on that surface.

Elements of the narrative structure and organization repeat and amplify, on a different register, the same effects. Yet the narrative, like the style, is a product of a double consciousness, of a syncretic combination of chirographic and oral techniques. Just as the style represents in writing the syntax and thought patterns of oral cultures, so the narrative operates on two levels: in its novelistic form the story of Okonkwo is unique and historical, yet it is told as if it were a well-known myth. The narrative acknowledges the latter fact in its opening sentence: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (*TFA*, 7). The story of his poverty "was told in Umuofia" (*TFA*, 19), and that of Ikemefuna's sacrifice "is still told to this day" (*TFA*, 16). Similarly other aspects of this narrative manifest themselves as circulating oral tales, and the white colonizers first appear to the hero in the form of stories. The reader is left with an impression that these tales are loosely connected but that the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* will (re)stitch them in his own unique order. However, even though the "myth" about Okonkwo and his family is common knowledge it has to be told (and heard) as if for the first time. Thus, for example, after introducing the fact of Nwoye's apostasy and after depicting for several pages the first encounter between the Christian missionaries and the Igbos, Achebe returns to Nwoye's conversion with the following sentences: "But there was a young lad who had been captivated [by Christianity]. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son" (*TFA*, 137). This presentation of the apostasy, the name of the character, and his parentage as if for the first time is not due, we must assume, to narrative amnesia. Rather it is a part of the process of remembering in a public way, a product of returning, after a "digression" and in the absence of a text, to the facts. This tech-



nique of public remembrance, which seems to annoy many "literate" readers, accounts for the pervasive pattern wherein Achebe introduces a topic and then repeatedly returns to it in order to explain it piecemeal (see, for example, the series of reversions to the story of Ikemefuna until he is finally executed in chapter seven). Aspects of this pattern can be accounted for by the need to foreshadow, which is common to both chirographic and oral narratives. The overall effect of this pattern of postponements and reversions, of the juxtapositions of central themes and "digressions" is to create an interlocking mosaic of episodes out of which the significance of the story gradually emerges.

By proceeding through public remembrance the narrative makes ample use of periphrasis, which, according to Achebe, is a highly prized technique of Igbo conversation: "Among the Igbo the act 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" (*TFA*, 10-11). Like Okoye, the narrator skirts around his subject but carefully maintains certain ambiguities (which we shall examine later). The first chapter provides a good example of this narrative circularity. It covers the following subjects in that order: Okonkwo's fame, wrestling ability, personality, his father's character and indebtedness, Okonkwo's shame, his struggle for recognition and wealth, and his consequent custody of Ikemefuna, and the latter's destiny. In this spiral the chapter encapsulates the entire plot of part one of *Things Fall Apart*. The other twelve chapters of part one explore all of these issues in much greater detail, but not in the same order. In fact, the topics are thoroughly scrambled and a great deal of space is devoted to the depiction of the central events in the life of an agrarian community — planting, harvesting, etc., and the various festivals that accompany them — as well as rituals such as marriages, funerals, convening of the legal-spiritual court of the *egwugwus*, etc. Out of the one-hundred-and-eighteen pages that comprise part one of the novel only about eight are devoted, strictly speaking, to the development of the plot.<sup>13</sup> The narrator is therefore anxious to represent the cultural "background" as much as the heroic figure, and in doing so he is able

to depict the core of his culture and show that Okonkwo is one of its heroic representatives. Having thus depicted the interconnected totality of the culture and having established Okonkwo as its emblem in part one of the novel, the narrator, who in keeping with the already known narrative, is sensitively aware of the arrival of the destructive colonialists and their chirographic culture, changes the organization and the pace of the second and third parts of the novel: the plot now follows a more rigorous and increasingly urgent chronological and causal pattern until it ends suddenly with Okonkwo fixed as a minor detail in a minor book of a vast chirographic culture. The elaborate oral narrative that has been sustained throughout the novel is startlingly displaced by a causal, "objective" paragraph about Okonkwo in the District Officer's book.

However, the narrative principle that leads to this dramatic end is not causality but contiguity. As the outline of the first chapter illustrates, most often the narrative proceeds through association of subject matter. At times, however, the association focuses explicitly on a word, such as "household" which provides the link between the three parts of the second chapter. Achebe's studied avoidance of causality as an organizational principle is consonant with the epistemology of oral cultures, which have not developed their analytic capacities because they do not have access to literacy. The subsequent dependence of the plot on contiguity results in parataxis at the narrative level, which in turn reinforces the flat surface of the novel.

Nowhere is the decision to preserve this flatness, the refusal to emphasize the divisions between foreground and background, between the phenomenal and the numenal more apparent than in the narrator's management of the border between the secular and the sacred. In pure oral cultures such a distinction does not exist, but Achebe and his novel both exist in the margins of chirographic and oral cultures. The author is thus challenged with the unenviable task of ensuring that his characters do not seem foolish because they believe in the absence of that border while he is obliged to acknowledge it for the same reason. Achebe meets this challenge by endowing his characters and narrator with a double consciousness. At the beginning of the legal-spiritual court

where *egwugwu* first appear, the narrator tells us that "Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have notices that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible . . ." (*TFA*, 85). Thus the narrator demonstrates for us the double consciousness — the awareness of the border and its deep repression — of the characters, while admitting to the reader that Okonkwo is "dressed up" as an *egwugwu* and then proceeding to deny that admission (i.e., Okonkwo "*was one of the dead fathers . . .*", italics added). By maintaining a deliberate ambiguity, a double consciousness in keeping with the syncretism of a written narrative about an oral culture, the narrator refuses to emphasize either the chirographic/scientific or the oral/mythic viewpoint, thereby once again reinforcing the flat surface.

The same effect is obtained through the monotony of the narrative voice and the timeless aura of the story. The voice remains unchanged even when it is retelling a folktale recounted by one of the characters (e.g., *TFA*, 91). The chronology is extremely vague; temporal locations are designated only by phases such as "many years ago," "years ago," "as old as the clan itself," "the worst year in living memory," and so on (*TFA*, 7, 9, 15, 25). The only specific periods in the novel are associated with ritual punishment: Ikemefuna's three years in Okonkwo's custody and Okonkwo's seven years in exile. Otherwise the novel is as timeless as one with a historical setting (indicated most obviously by the arrival of English colonialists to this area, around 1905) can be: the narrative, as an aggregation of an already known, circulating stories, exist in seamless mythic time rather than segmented historical time.

Characterization too is a product of the oral aesthetic economy; it is, however, more clearly modified by the historicizing demands of the (chirographic) novelistic imperatives. As Bakhtin points out, in the historicizing move from the epic to the novel, it is "precisely the zone of contact with an inconclusive present (and

consequently with the future) that creates the necessity of [the] incongruity of man with himself. There always remains in him unrealized potential and unrealized demands." Unlike the tragic or epic hero, who can be incarnated quite satisfactorily within the existing sociohistorical categories, the "individual" in the novel invariably raises the issue of his inadequacy to his fate and situation, and thereby calls into question the efficacy of the existing sociohistorical categories. The movement from the monochronic and totalized world of the epic to the historicized and dialogic world of the novel also leads to the disintegration of the individual in other ways: "A crucial tension develops between the external and the internal man, and as a result the subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation. . . ." <sup>14</sup> *Things Fall Apart* is delicately poised at the transition from the epic (oral) to the novel (chirographic). In keeping with its oral origins, Achebe's novel entirely lacks the tension between internal and external man. Although Okonkwo's repression of the "feminine" emotions and Nwoye's revulsion towards the discarding of twins and the execution of Ikemefuna are so crucial to the plot and the meaning of the novel, Achebe never explores them as dense interiorities (as a contemporary western writer would have). Rather he stays on the flat surface and represents the emotions through concrete metaphors. Consider, for example, Okonkwo's "meditation" of his son's apostasy. As he contemplates the incredulity of his son's action, Okonkwo, whose nickname is "Roaring Flame," gazes into the fire in his hut. The narrator finally presents the results of the ruminations as follows: "[Okonkwo] sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smoldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply" (*TFA*, 143). From our viewpoint, the crucial aspect of this procedure is that Achebe chooses to represent interiority only through its concrete, material manifestation or reflection. Similarly, Nwoye's revulsion is represented through metaphors of physical sensation: when confronted with Ikemefuna's death "something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow" (*TFA*, 59). Thus, unlike Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, *Things Fall*

*Apart* refuses to “experiment” with the representation of subjectivity in a way that is familiar to contemporary Western readers.

However, the externality of representation does not mean that Okonkwo lacks subjectivity. The reader is made fully aware of the pride and anger with which the hero attempts to mask his shame and fear. In fact, the narrative focuses on the binary relationship of these emotions to the point where other aspects of the hero's psyche are ignored. Thus in keeping with the tradition of oral narrative Okonkwo remains a relatively flat character, whose efficacy must be judged not according to the criteria of some vague realistic notion of “roundedness” but rather in terms of his twofold narrative function. First, he is an emblem of his culture. Through his mundane preoccupations and tribulations — his involvement in harvesting, planting, building houses, weddings, funerals, legal and spiritual rituals, etc. — we are allowed to penetrate the interiority of the Igbo culture before the arrival of British colonizers. Consequently when he commits suicide — which not only cuts him off from his ancestors but which is also the product of a complicated alienation from the principle of the continuity of ancestral lineage (he rejects his father, kills his foster son, and drives away his real son) — his death leaves us with the feeling of massive cultural destruction, of an end of traditional Igbo culture. His second, ideological function is tied to the first; his shame and pride are also emblematic: the former represents the shame produced among the colonized by the colonizers' rhetoric about savagery and the latter reflects the resurgence in the African's pride in the moral efficacy of his culture as he understands it. For if Achebe introduces us to traditional Igbo culture through Okonkwo, he is doing so in order to show that it was civilized and, by extension, that the colonized individual need not be ashamed of his past. Yet in the process of using Okonkwo as an emblem Achebe also accedes to novelistic pressures. The transformation of Okonkwo from a heroic figure to an insignificant detail in a paragraph about savage custom is clearly a deflationary movement that raises questions about his potentiality and his adequacy to his situation. The novel is content neither with leaving Okonkwo as a completely stylized heroic figure nor with the impulse to idealize traditional Igbo culture.

The reflexivity of the novel manifests itself through the dialogic relation between Okonkwo and his friend Obierika. While the former, driven by his fear, voices a simplified version of his culture's values, the latter voices its doubts. Obierika briefly but significantly questions general practices such as the discarding of twins and Okonkwo's participation in the execution of Ikemefuna, and at the end of the novel he is left contemplating the transition of Okonkwo from hero to pariah. Similarly, Nwoye's apostasy opens up another horizon: by espousing the new chirographic culture he creates the potential for one of his descendents to write a novel like *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe's first novel, then, can be seen as a unique totalizing and syncretic achievement. Its totalizing ability is most clearly visible in its syncretism. While rescuing oral cultures from their inevitable transitoriness, writing also alienates the objects as well as the unreflexive (or rather less reflexive) subject of that world by allowing one to examine them at a distance. In turn the fixity, distance, and scrutiny permitted by writing facilitate greater familiarity with and understanding of self and the world. This dialectic of distance and proximity, of alienation and understanding is inevitably involved in the configuration of Achebe's novel. *Things Fall Apart* documents, among other things, the destruction of oral culture by a chirographic one. However, Achebe uses that very process of chirographic documentation in order to re-create and preserve a symbolic version of the destroyed culture; in recording the oral culture's preoccupation with the present, Achebe historicizes its evanescence. The novel incorporates its own condition and occasion into itself. However, the most fascinating aspect of this totalization is that while *Things Fall Apart* depicts the mutual misunderstanding and antagonism of the colonizing and colonized worlds, the very process of this depiction, in its capacity as a *written oral* narrative, transcends the manichean relations by a brilliant synthesis of oral and chirographic cultures. By deliberately adhering to a flat surface Achebe obtains a result curiously similar to the effect obtained by one of Picasso's paintings: the illusion of depth and perspective, of the third dimension in symbolic representation, is deliberately wrenched and displaced in order to create a two-dimensional

representation that includes within it an abstract reminder about the third dimension. While Picasso drew his inspiration from West African art, Achebe draws his from West European fiction. Like Picasso's paintings, Achebe's novel presents us with sophisticated primitivism, with a deliberate return to an innocence re-presented.

#### IV

The syncretism of Achebe's fiction, most clearly evident in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, has two important ideological consequences. As we saw at the beginning of this essay, the Third World writer uses European languages because of certain ideological and technological pressures. In Achebe's case there is an additional compulsion to write about his culture in English because not to do so would leave the definition and representation of his society at the mercy of (usually) racist colonial writers. However, under these constraints he uses English in a way that deterritorializes it. By deliberately simplifying and willing a certain kind of poverty he pushes the English language to its limits: the rhythm of the endless paratactic sentences negates the diversity and complexity of which the language is capable. The deliberate simplicity is combined with a dryness and sobriety of voice to create a new register. Achebe develops a mythic voice that can evoke sympathy and concern while remaining entirely neutral. This neutral, mythic voice, which is entirely new in modern English literature, is able to recuperate a vanishing cultural experience without lapsing into sentimentality or spitefulness. In addition to this innovative deterritorialization, Achebe is able to expand the English language through the transfusion of Igbo material. For example, the transliterated proverbs reintroduce into the language a kind of figurative, analogical element that has gradually been displaced by the scientific-empiric consciousness that favours precision based on literalness. Finally, as we have seen, Achebe also expands the form of the novel through his sophisticated primitivism. Thus we must conclude that *Things Fall Apart* is able to do justice to the phenomenology of oral cultures and that by deterritorializing the English language and the novelistic form, Achebe's novel also contributes to the nega-

tive dialogic relations between African and English literatures. Achebe takes the English language and the novelistic form and creates a unique African form with them. Of course, this does not mean that African fiction cannot be written in African languages, but it also does not mean that English can be excluded as a language of African fiction on purely ideological grounds.

The second ideological implication of the syncretism is a less happy one. Both the synthesis of oral and chirographic cultures enacted by the form of *Things Fall Apart* and its deterritorialization of English contradict the substance of the novel and thereby reveal the major ideological implication embedded in the contradiction. The content creates a longing for a vanished heroic culture, but the linguistic and cultural syntheses within the form of the novel point to future syncretic possibilities. While the content laments a loss and points an accusing finger at colonialist destruction, the form glories in the pleasures of a new formal synthesis and transcends the manichean antagonisms of the colonizer and the colonized. Thus while the initial layer of the emotive intentionality coincides with the traditional ideology of colonized resentment and bitterness and reveals the ideological bondage of the colonized man who is caught between historical catalepsy and cultural petrification,<sup>15</sup> the deeper layer of emotive intentionality which finds pleasure in linguistic and formal syncretism implies a freedom from that ideological double-bind. Achebe's long silence in the field of fiction is probably due to his preoccupation with catalepsy and petrification and perhaps to the ideological pressure to discard the use of English as creative medium.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I have examined the social, political, and ideological dimensions of this dialogue in detail elsewhere. See *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst, Ma.: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1983).
- <sup>2</sup> Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977) and Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). For a very useful descriptive survey of the work being done on orality and literacy see F. Niyi Akinnaso, "On the Differences Between Spoken and Written Language," *Language and Speech*, vol. 25, part 2 (1982), pp. 97-125.
- <sup>3</sup> Goody, p. 43.



- <sup>4</sup> Goody, p. 44.
- <sup>5</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, Vol. 2 *Mythical Thought* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955).
- <sup>6</sup> E. H. Cooley, quoted in Goody, p. 15.
- <sup>7</sup> M.a M Ngal, "Literary Creation and Oral Civilization," *New Literary History*, vol. VIII, no. 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 337-38.
- <sup>8</sup> Harold Scheub, "Body and Image in Oral Narrative Performance," *New Literary History*, vol. VIII, no. 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 346-48.
- <sup>9</sup> Ngal, pp. 341-43.
- <sup>10</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).
- <sup>11</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1959), p. 7. All further references to this novel will be incorporated in the essay.
- <sup>12</sup> Achebe feels that a "new English" will have to be "still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings." For his discussion of this topic see "The English Language and the African Writer," *Transition*, vol. 4, no. 18 (1965), pp. 27-30.
- <sup>13</sup> The predominance of the "background" characterizes the entire novel. As Robert M. Wren points out, "In page count, the marriage group (wedding and family chapters together) take up more than one-fourth of the novel, and in them there is virtually no plot progression whatever. The chapters on the agricultural year, including the account of Okonkwo's disastrous beginnings as a farmer, amount to one fifth of the novel. The white man and his religion are dominant in about one-third of the novel — almost all of Parts Two and Three. Through most of the novel Okonkwo is passive or subordinate, though he is the link that holds all together." *Achebe's World* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 25.
- <sup>14</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), p. 37.
- <sup>15</sup> I have explored this dilemma in detail elsewhere. See *Manichean Aesthetics*, pp. 178-84.