

Chinua Achebe and the Post-colonial Esthetic: Writing, Identity, and National Formation

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For many students and scholars of African culture, the most innovative and radical moment in the history of modern African literature was the publication, in 1958, of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Since then, the Nigerian novelist's reputation has never been hard to sustain: Achebe is read and discussed more than any other African novelist, and his works have come to constitute important interpretative spaces in the critique of the colonial and post-colonial situation in Africa and the continuing quest for a post-colonial esthetic. Achebe may balk at the thought that he invented African literature—his artistic sensibilities refuse to countenance this kind of “blasphemous characterization.”¹ Yet, as Abiola Irele has recently noted, the publication of *Things Fall Apart* inaugurated “modern African literature as a mode of transposition,” (62) bringing into focus the two traditions (African and European) which, in both complementary and contesting ways, frame the politics of cultural production in Africa.

However, in spite of his strategic position in the history of African writing, Achebe has often suffered the misfortune of being taken for granted: the intricate and deep structures that inform his narratives are rarely examined, except on an introductory level, and his theoretical reflections rarely seem to have the influence one would expect from Africa's leading novelist. Clearly, Achebe has been a victim of that kind of “first” reading that Roland Barthes condemned as the consumption of the text, a reading that erases the problematics of the work and its contradictory meanings in its quest for the artifice of continuity (15). Unlike many of his contemporaries—the names that come easily to mind here are Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o—Achebe has never been considered to be an important

theoretician of African literature and culture, although his writings in this regard are legion. While many critics of African literature will readily acknowledge the pioneering status of Achebe's novels, Irele's important recognition that Achebe's literary practice is informed by an important theory of writing, one that seeks to mediate the imaginative ethos, the different structures of the African and colonial traditions, and their corollary "referential bounds" (62), is indeed atypical.²

The shadows of silence that surround Achebe's non-fictional discourse negate any serious consideration of the politics and esthetics of his novels, for this discourse is not only crucial to the contextualization of Achebe's fictional texts, but also constitutes a major commentary on their conditions of possibility. Above all, this discourse is generated by, and in turn amplifies the nationalist tradition that provides Achebe with possibly his most important epistemological context. In examining the politics of Achebe's literary practice, one cannot fail to notice the extent to which he has always linked the value and fate of his novels to the contradictions and transformations inherent in the larger fictions of the nation. For Achebe, the initial decision to become a writer was propelled by the (nationalist) desire to negate the colonial episteme and replace it by a new, African narrative and, by extension, order of knowledge: "The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the second world war brought a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves. It suddenly seemed that we too might have a story to tell. *Rule Britannia* to which we had marched so unselfconsciously on Empire Day now stuck in our throat" (*Morning* 70). And thus, as Kwame Appiah has succinctly noted, the gesture of writing about the colonized generates a counter-hegemonic discourse which not only debunks the dominant mythologies of empire, but also "helps constitute the modern community of the nation" (156).

In this essay I want to argue that Achebe's esthetic has evolved in a framework which has been shaped, if not overdetermined, by the changing discourse on representation and national identity in colonial and post-colonial Africa. Through a close reading of his theoretical reflections on the nature and function of African writing in general and his own works in particular, I want to show that Achebe's seminal status in the history of African literature lies precisely in his ability to have realized that the novel provided a new way of reorganizing African cultures, especially in the crucial juncture of transition from

colonialism to national independence. Achebe's anxious quest for a post-colonial esthetic is predicated on the belief that narrative can indeed propose an alternative world beyond the realities imprisoned in colonial and pre-colonial relations of power. In his poetics, questions of national identity are closely related to narrative strategies, but fiction allows the writer to express an alternative order of things to the realities framed by imperialism and Western domination.

Representation, Identity, and African Fiction

Because the project of colonialism had fixed the African as a projection of Western desires and economic interests, the inaugural moment of Achebe's cultural practice was bound to be his quest for techniques and ideologies of narrative that could devalorize the eceumenical colonial discourses that had constructed him as a writing subject. In this regard, Achebe would conceive narrative as a vehicle for what Edward Said has called "an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness" pitted against "the unitary web of vision" embedded in dominant discourse (*Orientalism* 240). However, to acquire the authority needed to articulate an alternative view of the African experience, Achebe needed not only to interrogate the conditions in which an oppositional narrative might be possible, but also the status of the writing subject itself. The quest for a different perspective is hence tied to questions about identity and representation. Looking at an African world turned upside down during centuries of slavery and foreign domination, confronted with the cultural disorganization of this world, Achebe looks around and fails to see "a space I want to stay in" (Moyers 333). He hence turns to narrative and to the process of narration as modes of rereading the world; fiction provides a space of imagining a different universe, of organizing ourselves in a world that holds many perils for black people: literature "is one of the ways, I think—at least one of the ways available to the writer—to organize himself and his society to meet the perils of living" (TLS).

Achebe's textual practice, then, seeks not only to mediate the African experience through a different order of discourse, but also to transform and re-invent the African world. Indeed, the historical significance of Achebe's works lies in his ability to evolve narrative procedures through which the colonial language, which was

previously intended to designate and reproduce the colonial ideology, now evokes or hints at the possibility of what Iyay Kimoni had called “the evolution of African culture towards a new form” (quoted by Ngate 5). Although Achebe has never been one to shy away from the anthropological and mimetic functions of African fiction, he is also eager to underscore the capacity of art to reinvent identities and to transform realities: “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 experience *through his imagination*” (*Hopes and Impediments* 95–96).

But for writing to function as an agent of new African identities, it must begin by confronting the ideologies of colonialism, interrogate the colonial imagination and vision, its historical claims, and its theory of Africans. For Achebe, confronting the colonial project in its totality becomes a precondition for theorizing on the post-colonial condition itself: “[C]olonization was the most important event in our history from all kinds of angles . . . most of the problems we see in our politics derive from the moment when we lost our initiative to other people, to colonizers” (TLS). Moreover, the need to interrogate the colonial experience is linked to the author’s desire to imagine a future beyond colonialism, a desire that necessitates the production of a literature which, among other things, is self-conscious about its counter-hegemonic function. Here, rereading the Africanist (colonial) text—in order to denigrate its magisterial claims—becomes a precondition for an “authentic” African literature. Thus, there was a time when Achebe would read European adventure stories set in Africa and “would instinctively be on the side of the white man”; however, at the University of Ibadan,

I suddenly saw that these books had to be read in a different light. Reading *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, which was a very, very highly praised book and which is still highly praised, I realized that I was one of those savages jumping up and down on the beach. Once that kind of Enlightenment comes to you, you realize that someone has to write a different story. (Moyers 343)

The colonial text was legitimized by two assumptions that Achebe, as an African reader of the colonial canon, needed to reverse if he was to become a writer: one was that there was ideological

continuity between the colonizer and the colonized, that the metropolis and the margin were united by a common culture and could hence read the colonial narrative uniformly; the second was that the colonized could always read the colonial text from a point of identification with the colonizer and hence not recognize their othering in texts such as *Heart of Darkness*. For Achebe to learn how to read the colonial text “in a different light” was to ascend to an important level of disalienation: he could show that this text was not only informed by a plurality of meanings, but also that its dominant ideologies negated the African’s subjectivity and temporality. He could therefore conclude that the act of reading such texts was the restatement of a “lack” that only a counter-narrative could fulfill. The African writer needed to invent a social terrain in which he or she was an actor rather than a victim of history.

Thus, the idea of a national culture which, in Frantz Fanon’s words, restores dignity to African peoples, describes and justifies, and praises “the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (233), is an important function of Achebe’s narrative and poetics. The context in which national consciousness is written into fictional texts may change, or the signifiers of the nation may be questioned by its post-independent history, but even after the disappointments of African independence and a civil war which will almost tear Nigeria apart, Achebe will still insist that the first goal of African literature is its commitment to the notion of a national community. The transmission of “a national culture to Nigerians” through “works of imagination” is a primary function of writing; literature “is a life and death affair because we are fashioning a new man. The Nigerian is a new man. How do we get this into his mind?” (Ogbaa 13).

The last question points to Achebe’s anxieties about the relationship between identity and representation as narrative categories, and national consciousness as a political idea: how can the idea of a national community—which is often taken for granted and propagated in narrative texts—be transferred into the body politic? Achebe’s anxiety about this kind of transference is exacerbated by the only too familiar fact that the nation in Africa is an arbitrary and often fictional colonial creation. The African writer’s relationship to his nation is precarious; there is not always a determinate relationship between the idea of the nation and its political terrain. And in the

post-colonial situation where what Jean Franco calls “the blueprints of national formation” have become a “sceptical reconstruction of past errors,” the novel makes visible “that absence of any signified that could correspond to the nation” (205).

The important point though, is that in the absence of real signifiers to correspond to the idea of the nation, African writers must often invent significant narrative frameworks within which questions of cultural formation and national identity can be posed, even wished into being. Also, the writing of culture, as Michael M. J. Fisher has observed, is the search, from the repressed past, for an ethic for the future: “Whereas the search for coherence is grounded in a connection to the past, the meaning abstracted from that past, an important criterion of coherence, is an ethic workable for the future” (196). For Achebe, narrative, in a different light, must have the power to point to a future world and destiny beyond our current “disasters”: “We have to work with some hope that there is a new generation, a group of survivors who have learned something from the disaster. It is very important to carry the message of the disaster to the new dispensation. With luck, they will succeed” (Moyers 339).

Furthermore, although Achebe has been a strong advocate of the use of European languages in the production of African literature, his quest for a post-colonial esthetic is driven by uncertainty and anxiety about African writers’ relationship to the “European identity” which their works seek to negate. As a result, the novelist, in striving to establish adequate forms and strategies for representing or reinventing the African experience, is tempted to seek or recover an African esthetic that might reinvigorate the borrowed colonial language. Achebe’s belief here is that there is “a genuine need for African writers to pause momentarily and consider whether anything in traditional African esthetics will fit their contemporary condition” (*Morning* 21). And yet, the two terms evoked here—“traditional African esthetics” and the “contemporary condition”—are placed in a state of undecidability. The traditional esthetic, it could be argued, is precisely what colonial modernism and the post-colonial state have denigrated and renounced in order to create the contemporary condition. Moreover, what lessons can be learned from an esthetic that gets a lot of lip service from official institutions, is easily romanticized but not evoked in real practice, or is simply consigned to the proto-history of African culture?

The Lessons from Mbari³

Achebe might be tentative about the ways in which an African esthetic can be evoked to represent the contemporary post-colonial condition, but he is quite certain that inherent in pre-colonial artistic practices is a certain ideology on cultural production that might aid the African writer's quest for new forms of representation. Clearly, what Achebe values most in the Igbo esthetic, as he says in an introduction to an exhibition of Igbo art, is the emphasis his people place on process rather than product:

Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore, the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and experience of creation. (Foreword to Cole and Aniakor ix)

Analogical to this rejection of product in preference to process is the theoretical assumption that experience is not original and primary, but is an effect of the semiotic processes that realize it as art and the modes of knowledge the resulting representations promote. Indeed, Achebe is categorical both in his insistence that "[E]xperience is necessary for growth and survival," and his conviction that "experience is not simply what happened. A lot may happen to a piece of stone without making it wiser. Experience is that we are able and prepared to do with what happens to us" (*Morning* xiii).

Furthermore, ideology as process and critique, rather than product or dogma, is the key to understanding Achebe's narrative strategies. If there is a discernible ideology of writing in his texts, it is to be found in the author's acceptance, like the Mbari artists of his ancestry, of the precariousness and temporary nature of any artistic and intellectual project and of the contradictions that inform the Igbo esthetic. According to Achebe, the Igbo esthetic is founded on the assumption that there is neither absolute value nor resolution in human life and social practice. Rather, "[I]t is the need and the striving to come to terms with a multitude of forces and demands which give Igbo life its tense and restless dynamism and its art an outward, social and kinetic quality" (Cole and Aniakor ix).

The multiplicity of forces that Achebe's ancestors had recognized as crucial to any artistic project has become central to those African writers who were born in the heyday of colonialism and came of age in the period of decolonization. Those writers are defined both by the consciousness of colonialism—which fixed their identities as colonial subjects—and the failure of the colonizers to live up to their promise to turn them into what the Igbo call “oyin oji” (black Europeans) within the traditions and mythologies of empire. Ironically, what makes the lessons from *Mbari* so pertinent to Achebe's project is the realization that as a novelist he thrives in the “in-between” position between two cultures and categories and that his challenge is not to deny any of these influences, but to turn them into the raw materials of his art. Even the erratic and foreign figure of the District Officer, no doubt a metonym of the colonizer, must be given a place in the Igbo pantheon, for only when the alien is domesticated, by being represented in Igbo forms, is it controlled (“*Literature of Celebration*” 167).

More significantly, the artist in the Igbo esthetic achieves creativity when he or she is isolated “from the larger community in a ritual with more than a passing resemblance to their own death and funeral” (“*Literature of Celebration*” 167). Indeed, *Mbari* has defined the province of artistic creation as both inside and outside the ethics of a tradition. According to Herbert Cole, “[T]he history of all *mbari*, as well as the development of a single one, can be visualized as a dialogue between a conservative adherence to tradition and a series of breaks with that tradition” (196). In *Mbari*, tradition is affirmed and questioned at the same time. Although it is hard to argue that Achebe's equivocation on the meaning of tradition is consciously shaped by *Mbari*, it is plausible that it was the African writer's lack of a tradition, or rather his problematic relationship with the colonial tradition that constituted him, that ignited his desire to produce an African literature. In truth, and in spite of our defensiveness about this important imperative, African literature belongs to that tradition of writing which, as Michel de Certeau has noted, is not “authorized by a place,” but is generated by doubts about one's tradition and hence the desire for a compensatory narrative (320). The most profound form of artistic production takes place when the artists are most removed from their ontological ground.

Indeed, it is the African writer's awareness of the lack of representation in what Fanon once called “the settler's place” (38) that

propels the colonized writer to seek an alternative narrative, a narrative that strives not only to install a cultural genealogy but also to mark a terrain in which the colonized writer can express his or her identity, a terrain which is signified as the nation. Because the desire for the terrain of the nation—and the narratives that represent it—is predicated on a “lack,” nationalism is essentially linked to exile. Hence Edward Said’s important claim that “[N]ationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs; and, by so doing, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages” (“Reflections on Exile” 162).

If the Mbari artists of Achebe’s Igbo culture are propelled by an awareness of the instability of life—of the inherent condition of exile that defines existence—then creation of an artwork seeks to secure a sense of belonging (Cole 196). Similarly, if Achebe’s desire for an African narrative is motivated by a negative consciousness—knowledge about the loss or repression of an African tradition under colonialism—this negative consciousness, in turn, generates narratives such as *Things Fall Apart* that revalorize Igbo culture. For this reason, we need to take Achebe seriously when he argues that it was precisely his alienation from his ancestral traditions that made him a writer. As the son of Christians, Achebe was excluded and distanced from Igbo culture, but as he tells Robert Serumaga, this distanciation “made it possible for me not to take things for granted” (*African Writers Talking* 12). Finding himself situated at what he aptly calls “the crossroads of cultures” (*Morning* 67)—at the point where the Igbo tradition intersects with the colonizing structure—Achebe adopts the crossroads as the juncture where even the most disparate paths inevitably meet to create something new. So the author’s distance from his ancestral culture “becomes not a separation but a bringing together like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully” (*Morning* 68).

An important lesson from Mbari seems to be that art can indeed mediate the multiple identities—Igbo, Nigerian, African, and black—that define the African subject. Since such multiple identities are not always defined by the intersection of racial, historical, or geographical factors, the Mbari esthetic has to allow for the unconscious as an engine of cultural identity, what Achebe calls the “Powers of the Events”—the “repositories of causes and wisdoms

that are as yet, and perhaps will always be, inaccessible to us" (*Hopes* 39). In a masterful reading of Onitsha market and its literature, Achebe provides pointers to the nature of his own writing by insisting that, in seeking to establish why "pamphlet literature" developed in Onitsha, it is not enough to evoke geographical, political, economic and "other rational explanations," for there will "always remain an area of shadows where some (at least) of the truth will seek to hide" (*Morning* 90). The unnameable, the area of shadows where truth hides itself from the analyst, the unconscious side of history, "the esoteric region from which creativity sallies forth at will to manifest itself"—or even the Fanonist "zone of occult instability"—is the region where the imagination thrives (*Morning* 90). Indeed, Onitsha becomes, in Achebe's analysis, a space defined by what Jacques Derrida has termed the "play of differences" as a precondition for signification (*Margins*, 10): the town is located at the place where the Niger "has answered many names, seen a multitude of sights." Its claim to difference might not be justified by historical data, but it feels "different from the peoples and places in its vicinity" (*Morning* 90).

Above all Onitsha, like the figure of the crossroads, is a site of temporal differences, doubleness, and reversal. "[I]t can be opposite things at once": "It sits at the crossroads of the world. It has two faces—a Benin face and an Igbo face—and can see the four directions, either squarely or with the tail of an eye" (*Morning* 90–91). As a place of exchange, Onitsha rejects singular meanings. As a historical phenomenon, the town stands as the mark of the cash nexus that dominated the colonial economy, an economic system that weakened traditional Igbo modes of production and yet sustained essential mechanisms of this culture, including the extended family. A similar kind of doubleness and reversal will be apparent in Achebe's novels.

Evidently, the principle of duality appeals to Achebe precisely because it produces a multiplicity of meanings and indeterminate zones of representation that generate narrative invention. In another sense, this duality allows the author, like his Igbo ancestors, to contest the central claims of Western metaphysics and its dependence on "reason." As Derrida puts it aptly in a now famous expression, metaphysics is "the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own 'logos' the 'mythos' of his idiom, for the

universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason" (213). Such a claim will not make sense to the Igbo mind, which thrives on a temporal reversal of concepts and categories. For the Igbo, says Achebe, there are no fixed taxonomies: "Wherever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute. 'I am the truth, the way and the life' would be called blasphemous or simply absurd for is it not well known that a man may worship Ogwugwu to perfection and yet be killed by Udo (*Morning* 94). This dualism—what Cole and Aniakor aptly call "the dynamic relationship between opposites" (17)—could well be the key to understanding Achebe's textual practice.

Ultimately, however, no resort to Igbo ideologies of art can find a detour around the linguistic problem Achebe faces—how to evoke an African identity through the language and textual practices borrowed from the colonizer. How can writing in a European language abet our desires for alterity, for a second order of representation? Achebe is aware that colonialist criticism has the tendency to dismiss the African novel "on the grounds that it is a peculiarly Western genre." However, isn't the African writer's appropriation of the privileged discursive instruments of the West just what gives the African novel its subversive force? To answer those among his critics who might view his use of a foreign language and form as an inexplicable subordination to colonial ideologies of domination, Achebe finds a masterful analogy in Afro-American cultural formation:

did not the black people in America, deprived of their own musical instruments, take the trumpet and the trombone and blow them as they had never been blown before, as indeed they were not designed to be blown? And the result, was it not jazz? Is any one going to say that this was a loss to the world or that those first negro slaves who began to play around with discarded instruments of their masters should have played waltzes and foxtrots and more Salvation Army hymn tunes? (*Morning* 17)

The power of a form—whether it is in music or fiction—does not solely lie in its claim to be original, but in its irruption of the already-written discourse. The borrowed instrument, in this case the "realistic" novel that the dominant culture has discarded because it was supposed to have outlived its usefulness, is taken up by Achebe and is bent around and used against the culture that produced it.

Moreover, if the post-colonial condition in Africa is still overdetermined by Western economic, political and communicative practices, a decolonized esthetic, as it emerges in Achebe's theoretical work, is constructed primarily on the corpse of the already-written discourses that have hitherto sustained repression and domination.

Notes

This article is an abbreviated version of my introduction to *Reading Chinua Achebe* (London: James Currey; Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991).

1. On the day of his presentation at a recent forum in Dublin on literature as celebration, Achebe was referred to by *The Irish Times* as "the man who invented African literature." He took "the opportunity of the forum to dissociate myself from that well meant—but blasphemous characterisation." See "Literature of Celebration." The point, though, is that *Things Fall Apart* re-invented our conceptions of African literature.
2. For a more historical survey of Achebe's critical and theoretical writings, see Ihechukwu Madubuike's essay.
3. Although Mbari is an artistic institution encompassing different art forms and festivals of life, I use it here in a more narrower sense—a philosophy of art and its mode of production.

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