

# *The Form and Function of the Folk Tradition in Achebe's Novels*

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The good orator calls to his aid the legends, folklore, proverbs . . . of his people; they are some of the raw material with which he works. . . . They are like dormant seeds lying in the dry season earth, waiting for the rain.<sup>2</sup>

LITERATURE STILL TILLS its crops in many virgin forests, and art continues to speak in many voices. It is now commonplace knowledge that contemporary African literature cannot be properly understood and appreciated as an isolated expression but rather must be viewed as part of the totality of human experience. As a literature of a people it cannot be fully understood by the simple separation of form and content, for literature is part of a social situation and must be approached primarily as a mode of collective belief and action. The folk tradition in African literature has thus become part of the essential qualities of its literary expression, for the value of a work of art transcends its documentary function as the artist gives expression to perceptions of which he may not be entirely conscious. And judicious use of the folk tradition is at the root of the appeal of much of the literature emanating from black Africa, especially the works of Achebe. A writer with the sophistication of Achebe does not aggressively intrude the African folkways into his works but rather subtly and cunningly works them into his narrative.

By folklore we mean the unrecorded traditions of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstitions, and proverbial sayings. Folklore also includes myths, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells found among a homogeneous group of people; it is a major component in the total folk culture of such a homogeneous group of people. The most

inclusive part of folklore is the folktale which is a popular tale handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told either about animals or the common folk, to draw attention to their plight and to teach a lesson. But others need to be considered.

Achebe has told us in *Things Fall Apart* that among the Igbo, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Proverbs enter into the realm of literature because of the imaginative possibilities they are capable of evoking. A proverb, of course, is a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognized truth or shrewd observation about practical life and which has been preserved by oral tradition. Proverbs are generally accepted as truths ascertained through experience and they are marked by the epigrammatic and figurative turn in their expression. In a famous essay Bernth Lindfors catalogues the functions of the proverb in Achebe's novels. Achebe makes use of proverbs, he argues, to provide a "grammar of values" by which the deeds of his protagonists can be measured; to serve as thematic statements reminding us of some of the motifs in the novel, for example, the importance of status, the value of achievement, and the idea of man as a shaper of his destiny; to add touches of local colour and to sound and reiterate themes; and finally, to comment or to warn against foolish and unworthy actions.<sup>2</sup>

Myths represent a people's perception of the deepest truths about nature through narratives that stir us as something "at once familiar and strange." Myths have their roots in the primitive folk beliefs of a people or a nation and generally present supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in order to concretize or particularize a special perception of man or his cosmic view. Myths differ from legends in that legends are unauthenticated narratives, folk-embroidered from historical material and often mistaken for a historical account. The legend is thus distinguished from myth in that it has more of historical truth and less of the supernatural. But pure myth tries to offer explanations for the great forces found in nature. For example, myth tries to explain away the origin of creation, the origin of life and death, and tries to account for natural phenomena and the great forces found in nature. So much for abstract definitions.

## II

One function of the folk tradition in the novels of Achebe is to form the background for his stories. *Arrow of God* is replete with the customs, myths, and legends preserved among the common people of Umuaro. These vestiges of primordial ritual and ceremony — the voice of immemorial community, the unspoken and unconsciously held beliefs and value systems, and the unique religious rituals and ceremonies — all mirror the cosmic view held by the people of Umuaro. The legend of Umuama as narrated to a skeptical, even sneering Mr. Good-country by Moses Nwachukwu and the legend-cum-myth of the phenomenal growth of Okperi market as narrated by Akukalia to her travelling companion with all the earnestness of a believer help to form the background of events in *Arrow of God*.

To show Achebe's technique in the use of the folk tradition, one might best begin with the least complicated element: the simple folk tale. In *Things Fall Apart* a memorable folk tale is told Ezinma by her mother Ekwefi. It is the story of the birds and the tortoise who accompanied the birds to a great feast in the sky. It is a story that is sandwiched between chapters ten, where it is revealed that Okonkwo had attained the second highest position of importance in Umuofia, as a masked Egwugwu during the case between Uzowulu and Mgbafor (when the Egwugwu appeared, Okonkwo's position was next to the leader, Evil Forest. As Achebe reveals "Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo"),<sup>3</sup> and chapter 13, where Okonkwo was forced into exile for the inadvertent murder of Ezeudu's son.

The simple tale of Tortoise and the birds is a paradigm for the entire novel. It is the story of the sudden rise and fall of Tortoise, just as *Things Fall Apart* is the story of the rise and fall of Okonkwo. The story says that the birds lent Tortoise their feathers so he could accompany them to the sky. This is paradigmatic of the massive communal support given to Okonkwo by his people that enabled him to be Umuofia's proud and imperious emissary on a mission of war to Mbaino where he "was

treated with great honour and respect" (p. 10) just as the hosts in the sky took Tortoise "as the king of the birds" (p. 86) and so accorded him a befitting respect. After Okonkwo's elevation to membership in the highest decision-making body in the land, he is exiled to Mbanta, abandoned even by his closest friends who took part in destroying his compound. After Tortoise is elevated to the highest place in the sky, he is exiled there abandoned by all the birds, his former friends. Tortoise, finding himself deserted in the sky, sent word to a woman, his wife, to arrange for his survival. This is a paradigm for Okonkwo's flight to his maternal kith and kin for survival. The folk tale tells us that when Parrot misinstructed Tortoise's family, he fell and "his shell broke into pieces." This reflects Okonkwo's return from exile only to find Umuofia "breaking up and falling apart" (p. 163). Now, the folk tale says that a great medicine man gathered all the bits of shell and stuck them together to give Tortoise his rough "skin." After Okonkwo's suicide, the tribe, though broken, was held together and stuck together by the sheer resilience of collective will, after, according to Obierika, the white man has "put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (p. 158). Tortoise survives, a patchwork of himself, just as Igbo clanship survives, half pagan (who adheres to its ancestral ways) and half Christian (iconoclasts all). Therefore, as I have said earlier, the simple tale of the birds and the tortoise is a paradigm for the entire novel. Okonkwo, as the representative of Igbo clanship is *all of you*, greedy of things affecting his people so that his break-up and despair becomes symptomatic of the break-up and despair of Igbo clanship before the unassailable and inexorable forces of the white man.

Another folktale is the story of the quarrel between Earth and Sky. It further reveals that Achebe does not randomly tell any tale within the narrative of his novels. He carefully chooses them for their structural importance and for their ability to advance meaning and gain poetic mileage. The folk story of the quarrel between Earth and Sky comes up in *Things Fall Apart* to draw attention to the "effeminate" nature of Nwoye which worries his father, Okonkwo. Achebe tries to point out that Nwoye prefers the "effeminate" story of his mother about Vulture who was sent

to soften the heart of Sky with a song about the plight of men to whom Sky has denied rain, to the story of blood and war told him by his father. The Vulture, Earth's emissary, was sent to appeal to sky for mercy and move him to pity. Vulture succeeded, for Sky gave him rain wrapped in cocoyam leaves which his long talon inadvertently pricked open so that rain fell as it never fell before.

Now, the author's intent is clear here, in a novel full of conflict and violence. Okonkwo must have told Nwoye several times of the days when he was sent as an emissary of war to Mbaino to deliver an ultimatum. The consequences of failure by Mbaino to comply, of course, would be war. This is what Nwoye recoiled from, preferring his mother's version of a different kind of emissary to Sky, to beg, plead, supplicate, and soften the heart. The outcome was peace not war. The story, early in the novel, of course, foreshadows future events: that when a new religion which hates violence and preaches love and brotherhood and tolerance comes to Umuofia, Nwoye would fall for it. By so doing, he would be turning his back for good on the violent and primitive ways of Umuofia — a society that has no qualms about killing twins, segregating the *OSU*, and abandoning diseased people to certain death in the evil forest. Donald Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan add another dimension to the structural importance of the tale. They argue that the initial quarrel between Earth and Sky reflects the novel's basic conflict: the struggle between masculine and feminine powers and principles, which incorporates the more apparent clash between old and new, for the Earth is a goddess, Ani, the source of all fertility, and the Sky is a god. They even add another dimension. They assert that Okonkwo, who occasionally but reluctantly yields his tender emotions most often expressed perversely towards Ikemefuna and Nwoye, is a paradigm for Sky, who withholds rain but releases it reluctantly and perversely since rain fell as it had never fallen before, forcing Vulture, who represents the female principle, not to return to deliver his message just as Nwoye with his effeminate nature did not return to Okonkwo's compound. Attention also is drawn to the opposition between yam, "the king of crops," and cocoyam, a feminine crop.<sup>4</sup>

I might add, that the tale of the quarrel between Earth and Sky traverses the realm of folk tale and dips its toe into the realm of myth. It is one of those tales that try to explain away “why” there is drought and “how” rain returned to Earth. In Igbo mythopoeia, the same tale attempts to explain “why Vulture has his bald head and ragged-looking feathers” for the rain fell and fell so that up to now, Vulture’s feathers still look wet.

So much for *Things Fall Apart*. In *Arrow of God*, there is the story told her children by Ugoye about the jealousy of the two wives. It is the Igbo version of a more universal myth of the origin of disease in the World — the myth of the Pandora’s box, now thoroughly domesticated and purportedly caused by envy, greed, and jealousy between two wives. Mary Ellen B. Lewis offers a perceptive but limited interpretation of the structural importance of this folk tale in *Arrow God*. She argues:

Essentially, Ugoye tells a story to please her children and alleviate her own anxiety over her relationship with the senior wife. . . . Through the tale, Ugoye works out her hostility for, as in the tale, the senior wife will get her due because of her own flawed character — her pride, her selfishness, her envy. Ugoye need do nothing, for envy brings its own reward, ideal advice perhaps to a young woman caught in a tension-filled, tradition-bound relationship. Thus the telling of the tale both releases Ugoye’s hostility, enabling her to find relief in fictive therapy, and entertains her children, instructing them as Ibo tales are said to do about proper behaviour, in this case warning them against envy; and in taking time to tell them a tale, she reassures them that all is well in their world, lately in upheaval.<sup>5</sup>

But I think the tale means more than this limited interpretation. The centrality of its implications touches on every major aspect of the novel. It captures the major conflicts in the novel and gives it a fictive focus. Now *Arrow of God* could be said to be a novel not only about culture-conflict but also about major and minor rivalries between various persons and gods in Umuofia whose unremitting and built-in jealousies and envy lead to a disturbing disquiet in the entire narrative — a disquiet that leads to irreconcilable differences that lead to fragmentation and tragedy. Many people and the gods they serve behave with blind envy and ruin their own cause, like the proverbial lizard that

ruined his own mother's funeral — a proverb that is repeated *ad nauseam* in the novel. To be specific, in Ezeulu's household there are tensions and rivalries existing between Edogo, his eldest son, and Nwafor, the youngest, over the inheritance of the priestly mantle; between Matefi and Ugoye, his wives, as has just been discussed; between Ezeulu the father who saw the wisdom of sending Oduche to school, and Ugoye the wife who saw no wisdom in choosing her son as a guinea pig; between Ezeulu who inherited the priestly mantle from his father, and his elder brother, Okeke Onenyi, who had been led to believe that the priestly mantle would fall to him. Then there are the traditional tensions and rivalries and even jealousies between Umuaro, the bastion of stubborn "unchange," and Okperi, the seat of government administration, and this tension is exacerbated by the long-standing land dispute between the two towns which was ended by Winterbottom's intervention. And how could one miss the rivalry between Ezeulu, the high priest of Umuaro, and Nwaka of Umunneora, his most outspoken opponent, and then the fight-to-death rivalry between Ezeulu, High Priest of Ulu, and Ezidemili, Priest-guardian of the royal python? And among the Christians there are tensions and rivalries between Mr. Goodcountry, the missionary, and Moses Unachukwu, the neophyte convert, over the attitude of Christians towards the royal python. And finally, we are all aware of the on-going ideological battle between Winterbottom, the colonialist on the spot in the hinterland who really knows his natives, and his starry-eyed superiors at headquarters over indirect rule and the method of appointing Paramount Chiefs. The tale of the two jealous wives told by Ugoye to her children is thus a paradigm for the entire novel.

One more strand relevant to this folk tale in *Arrow of God* must be connected here. *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and *No Longer at Ease* seem each to be based on the folkloric formula of "exile and return," which formula offers the basic bipartite structure of the novels. In *Things Fall Apart* the bipartite formula hinges on (a) Okonkwo before exile, when his fortunes rise and crest at their zenith and (b) after exile, when his fortunes sink to their nadir, ending in an ignominious suicide by hanging. In *No Longer at Ease*, the basic formula is vaguely

thus: (a) Obi Okonkwo before going overseas, when he was “at ease” with the customs and traditions of Umuofia which still held sway over the intrusive forces of colonialism, and village lore and custom were still the guiding light for proper behaviour and (b) after his return from temporary exile from studies abroad when he was “no longer at ease” amidst his people in the cities created by the entrenchment of the colonial masters among his people. Now, in *Arrow of God* the formula is simply (a) Ezeulu before imprisonment when he was master of his household and in control of all the refractory forces in Umuaro and (b) after imprisonment when, due to his exaggerated interpretation of his powers over Umuaro, coupled with the capricious behaviour of his god, he loses grips both on his own sanity and on Umuaro as a whole. Thus, the centrality of Ugoye’s folk tale about the two jealous wives becomes self-evident: the older but jealous woman’s son goes into a temporary but forced exile in the land of the spirits expecting the best; he then returns to his mother’s hut bringing the worst.

One other aspect of the Igbo folk tradition exploited at every turn by Achebe but entirely neglected by critics is his use of the masked spirit in his novels. What we have come to regard as “ancestor worship” in Achebe’s works has its roots in the functions of the masked spirits. To those who wonder how an acephalous, classless society like the Igbos functioned, how it enforced its laws with no kings, no organized police force, and no standing army, it must be mentioned that these things were accomplished through the functions of the masked spirits. In a society that paid no allegiance to hereditary kingship, the masked spirit became the primal Father, the UR-father to whom even the oldest and the most powerful must defer and pay allegiance and even worship. In *Arrow of God*, it is sacrificed to: “Both Edogo and Obika were intimately concerned with the Mask that was to come. Apart from its belonging to his age group Obika had been selected as one of the two people to slaughter rams, in its presence.”<sup>6</sup> It was the supreme judicial body in traditional Igbo Society (the case between Uzowulu and his wife, Mgbafo, in *Things Fall Apart* adjudicated by the *egwugwu* comes clearly to mind).

The masquerade cult is wrapped in an aura of myth that even connects the ancestors so that Igbo writers, iconoclasts in other ways, treat it with all the respect due to a venerable institution whose myth no one wants to explode. Achebe sustains the myth in *Things Fall Apart* when he refers to the masquerades as "the ancestral spirits" so that during the annual ceremony which was held in honour of the earth deity, he writes that "the ancestors of the clan who had been committed to Mother Earth at their death emerged again as *egwugwu* through tiny ant-holes" (p. 166) and that "one of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *Egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the un-initiated" (p. 166).

Since the Masked Spirits are believed to represent the ancestors, Achebe tells us in *Things Fall Apart*, thus sustaining the myth: "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (p. 109). No wonder that these ancestors came in very strange ways so that when Ezeudu died, one of the most dreaded of the ancestral spirits who attended the funeral "was shaped like a coffin. A sickly odour hung in the air wherever he went, and flies went with him. Even the greatest medicine-men took shelter when he was near. Many years ago another *egwugwu* had dared to stand his ground before him and had been transfixed to the spot for two days. This one had only one hand and with it carried a basket full of water" (pp. 108-09), and when the nine masked *egwugwu* came to deliver judgement on the case of Uzowulu and Mgbafor, smoke poured out from the head of Evil Spirit, their leader. Thus, the myth of the masked spirits is tantalizingly kept alive.

If we are in agreement that cultural relevance is a must in any work of art, we would even be more disposed to agree that part of the charm, part of the pleasure we derive from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* is his portrayal of the masked spirits. For, as Lionel Trilling tells us in *The Liberal*

*Imagination*, “manners” are the things that for good or bad draw the people of a culture together and that separate them from people of another culture, and since “manners” are that part of a culture which is not art, or religion, or morals or politics, it becomes much easier to perceive the importance of the masked spirits not only in Achebe but also in much of the novels written by Igbos. For the masked spirit in traditional Igbo society was a vehicle of much more than manners: it was the repository of all that was sacred, mythical, mysterious, cultural, superstitious, and supernatural in Igbo culture. It was the throbbing centre of its folk tradition and folk ways. It was the supreme example in traditional Igbo belief that their departed ancestors did still walk the visible earth. Belonging to a society of achievement-oriented individualists where a man was judged by his own achievement and not that of his fathers, and kowtowing to no earthly ruler or king or emperor, the only “Father” the Igbo man would bend knees for is what I have called his “Primal Father” or the masked spirit. One of the rare exchanges in *Things Fall Apart* between the immortals and mere human beings occurs between Uzowulu and the *egwugwu*. The respect due the ancestors is sown in that exchange:

“Uzowulu’s body I salute you”

“Our father, my hand has touched the ground,” he said.

“Uzowulu’s body, do you know me?” asked the Spirit.

“How can I know you, Father? You are beyond our knowledge.” (p. 80)

If ancestor worship in our literary tradition is one of Achebe’s major contributions to African literature, I hazard to assert that the centre of that worship as it affects Igbo culture and folk tradition must be located in his portrayal of the function of the masked spirits in Igbo society. As we read *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, we come to discover that in the cult of the masked spirits is enthroned in Igbo society and culture, all that partake of the religion, the morals, the mores, the esoteric sayings, the judicial process, the politics, and the festivals and ceremonies in Igbo society in a way that makes it impossible to separate from the institution of this cult, manners from culture.

Although the quality of Igbo manhood was tested in the wrestling arena, it was more so in the masquerade cult. Nothing in traditional Igbo manhood was more tempting, more intoxicating, and more dizzyingly heady than donning a mask and distinguishing oneself in it. Unlike in wrestling, to retain his foothold in the masquerade cult, a young man must have been tested by those events which, as Joseph Conrad might put it in *Lord Jim*, show in the light of day the inner worth of a man, the edge of his temper, and the fibre of his stuff; tests that reveal the quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretenses, not only to others but also to himself. Also, the masquerade cult had the quality of Igbo elitism in it, involving a series of progressively deepening initiation rites, and only the most worthy had a place in it. Okonkwo's position was only second to that of Evil Forest in *Things Fall Apart*, as has been noted earlier.

To the point already established that the cult of the Masked Spirits formed the highest judicial body in traditional Igbo Society, as seen in *Things Fall Apart*, must be added at once that they combined in their social functions the duty of the police to maintain order and the force of an army to coerce and enforce the law in those instances when "the law of the land must be obeyed." To the Masked Spirits then, more than to the elders or to any age group, belonged the unquestioned and incontrovertible authority for administering justice and enforcing the law. To the Masked Spirit then belonged the dirty jobs which the normal daylight operation of things made impossible in society. It was the unspoken force that would have compelled Okonkwo to go into exile, assuming that such a powerful man tried to resist the inconvenience. It was the force that razed Enoch's compound to the ground when he unmasked the *egwugwu* and in a swift, ruthlessly terrifying fashion burnt the church premises of the Christians. The masked spirit cult thus exercised social controls in a manner that was unchallengeable.

To the point already made that masked spirits lent dignity and solemnity to burying the dead must be added their entertainment value. The dance by masked spirits was always the high point of every traditional Igbo festival. In *Arrow of God*, it was during the *Akwu Nro* festival that Obika's age grade brought

out a new mask, a fact which Achebe garnished even more by wondering aloud "which one of the million ant-holes in Umualchala it would come through" (p. 223), thus preserving the myth and filling the atmosphere with the cult's magic and witch craft:

An occasion such as this was often used by wicked men to try the potency of their magic or to match their power against that of others. There were stories of Masks which had come out unprepared and transfixed to a spot for days or even felled to the ground. (p. 225)

In *Things Fall Apart*, the role of the masked Egwugwu is thematically important since the Egwugwu are represented as the symbol of communal spirit and the living embodiment of that vital link which exists between individuals and their departed ancestors. The thematic importance of the masked Egwugwu in *Things Fall Apart* thus becomes self-evident: the unmasking of the *egwugwu* by the Christian zealot, Enoch, echoes in *Things Fall Apart* not only the collective break-up of the cohesiveness of the clan after the intrusion of alien forces but also the powerlessness of the clan against those alien forces which the District Commissioner represents. The unmasking of the Egwugwu is the unmasking of the clan. In another significant but unexplored aspect, the jungle justice which the *egwugwu* wields and executes against Enoch and the Christians (whose buildings were swiftly razed to the ground) parallels the equally jungle, retributive justice wielded by the alien forces (which wiped out Abame for killing one white man on an iron horse), and the forces of the District Commissioner which imprisoned leaders of Umuofia — all without due process of law.

In *Arrow of God*, the narrative is suffused with the figurative language of the Mask. The corporal sent to arrest Ezeulu by the sick Winterbottom, having missed him tells Ezeulu's people: "But we cannot come and go for nothing. When a masked spirit visits you have to appease its footprints with presents. The white man is the masked spirit of today" (p. 174); or we can view Nwaka's wives decked with ivory anklets during a ceremony so that their walk was "slow and deliberate, like the walk of an Ijele Mask lifting and lowering each foot with weighty cere-

mony" (p. 78); or we can hear the astute Ezeulu sending Oduche to learn the wisdom of the white man, shrouding his message in a proverb: "The world is like a mask dancing. If you wish to see it well you do not stand in one place" (p. 51); or we see with amused disgust the drunken pair Ofoedu and Obika, coming to work so late that they appeared "like a pair of Night Masks caught abroad by day" (p. 91). The point is that Achebe, in *Arrow of God*, weaves the Mask into his narrative in his use of proverbs and in his use of concrete detail so that just as the place of the Mask in *Things Fall Apart* is a vehicle of meaning, it partakes of narrative texture in *Arrow of God*.<sup>7</sup>

The folk tradition of a people wears many garbs and etches itself unconsciously in the subconscious of the artist. This study has tried to establish the many ways Achebe uses Igbo folk ways in his novels in which Igbo tradition has the pride of place. It goes further to establish that Achebe consciously uses Igbo folk ways to enrich his narrative, to give it form and structure, and from there, to imbue it with meaning. This is the tradition he has established in the African novel.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted by Bu-Buakei Jabbi in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978), p. 136.
- <sup>2</sup> Bernth Lindfors, "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's words are Eaten," in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978), pp. 47, 65.
- <sup>3</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1958), p. 79. Subsequent references to *Things Fall Apart* will be to this edition.
- <sup>4</sup> Donald Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan, "Symbolic Structure in *Things Fall Apart*," in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978), pp. 126-134.
- <sup>5</sup> Mary Ellen B. Lewis, "Beyond Content in the Analysis of Folklore in Literature: Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*," *Research in African Literatures*, VIII, no. 1 (Spring 1976) pp. 47-48.
- <sup>6</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969), p. 223. This and subsequent quotations from *Arrow of God* will be from this edition.
- <sup>7</sup> See my article, "Achebe's Masked Spirits: Culture's Hum and Buzz of Social Implications" (*A.I.C.E. Tablet*, no. 3, 1977), pp. 14-21.