

Playful Ethnography: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Nigerian Education

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Abstract: This paper looks at the critical and popular reception of Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, as an authentic text offering an "insider" perspective on Igbo culture. Drawing from small magazines and university publications in 1950s Nigeria, this paper suggests that early Nigerian authors like Achebe were educated and began writing in a culture that valued a playful exploration of meaning in Western texts. These early publications express multiple uses of the texts students read in colonial school, and I read Achebe's novel as an extension of this playfulness. Although it is generally seen as an example of the empire "writing back," I argue that *Things Fall Apart* actually uses ethnographic accounts of Nigerian village life—especially G. T. Basden's *Niger Ibos* and C. K. Meek's *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*—in an open and exploratory manner. Seeing Achebe's work in this light allows for a complex view of the novel's presentation of Igbo life, and I argue that such a reading resituates his first novel as a playful encounter with ethnography rather than as a literary response to more traditional literary texts like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe; *Things Fall Apart*; writing back; ethnography; play

The June 20, 1958 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement* contains one short review of Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, recently published with a print run of two thousand hardcover copies by Heinemann's educational department. The reviewer, Philip Rawson,

immediately notes the novel's authenticity, for in the second sentence, he credits Achebe's ability to "[draw] a fascinating picture of tribal life among his own people at the end of the nineteenth century" (341). Rawson's assessment is by no means exceptional, as the book was praised by *The Listener* for its "clear and meaty style free of the dandyism often affected by Negro authors" (qtd. in Ezenwa-Ohaeto 66), while *The New York Times* noted that the novel "takes its place with that small company of sensitive books that describe primitive society from the inside" (Rodman 28). Despite the fact that Achebe's novel describes a culture in transition from a previous century, the immediate response in Western newspapers was to praise the authentic glimpse into tribal culture that the book offers.

In a telling anecdote, Alan Hill, Achebe's publisher and friend, describes how the novel was accepted for publication in the first place:

So the rather doubting bunch at the top of Heinemann's thought of the educational department, who after all sold books to Africa and were supposed to know about Africans. So they showed it to one of our educational advisers, Professor Donald MacRae, who was just back from West Africa. He read it in the office and ended the debate with an eleven word [sic] report: "this is the best novel I have read since the war." (qtd. in Ezenwa-Ohaeto 65)

To what, exactly, MacRae responded so enthusiastically is never mentioned, although his position within the educational department may hint towards the answer. As Hill notes, the Heinemann educational department already had a presence in West Africa as a publisher of textbooks; thus, this division was "supposed to know about Africans." MacRae's particular authority on Achebe's novel seems to extend directly from this: his job required knowledge of Africans, and his recent experience in West Africa lent further authority to his judgment. In this sense, MacRae's approval is tantamount to stamping the book "authentic" or "African" based on its similarity to his own experiences in the region as a publisher.

What is remarkable, however, is that on the African continent, Achebe's novel was received in almost an identical way at the time of its publication: African students especially have responded to *Things Fall Apart* as a book that conveys inside information about Igbo culture. Simon Gikandi, in describing how Achebe "invented African culture," tells of his own early realization that Achebe had deftly revised "objective" accounts of African cultures, such as McBain's *Geography for Africa*: "The novel was teaching us a fundamental lesson that old McBain could never comprehend. *Things Fall Apart* provided us with a different kind of education" (4).

That both Gikandi and Heinemann executives responded to *Things Fall Apart* by identifying its educational value is revealing; these details hint at the extent to which Achebe's first novel is thoroughly enmeshed with cultures of teaching and learning in Europe and Africa. Scholars have often noted the influence of European education and culture on Achebe, especially when they characterize *Things Fall Apart* as "writing back" to the British canon.¹ However, the relationship between Achebe and Western education goes beyond his allusive title or mode of narration. At University College, Ibadan (UCI), especially, Achebe was part of a culture that valued play with British texts, and *Things Fall Apart* reflects that culture of revision, extending it to non-literary and ethnographic texts that produced "knowledge" of African cultures. The type of play active in this culture is somewhat Derridean, as the students at UCI engaged in exploring meaning in relation to Western texts, rather than explicating an antagonistic or merely responsive Nigerian point of view.

Achebe's portrait of Igbo life in *Things Fall Apart*, often celebrated as "authentic" and unmediated, is an expansion and playful use of what had long been considered the European's final word on African village society. Acknowledging the relationship between the British canon, ethnography, and a budding Nigerian literary culture can help to shift our understanding of Achebe's first and most famous novel. By situating the book within a variety of influences, *Things Fall Apart* becomes more than the paradigmatic example of "writing back"; rather, the novel ex-

presses a complex negotiation of influences that permeates its style in ways that “writing back” simply cannot convey.

Nigerian Curriculum, Productive Playfulness, and Literary Production

A major portion of the British colonial project in Africa was the instillation of a British educational system: courses, pedagogy, exams, and classroom materials were all modeled on those in Britain, with textbooks often coming directly from British publishing houses. S. I. A. Kotei comments that colonial Africa and Europe had “identical structures” in terms of “educational systems; hence the former’s dependence on the latter for educational material” (*The Book* 87). Before World War I, the education system in Africa was mostly run by missionaries, and the educational material reflected their religious efforts. However, between the wars, the British Empire began to take more control in African education, eventually calling for “more uniformity in education policy” and “a bolder role for government” in the daily activities of colonial schooling (Windel 8). Significantly, surveys on potential African-based publishing industries found that close ties to British forms of education, even after formal independence had been achieved, were barriers to new, continental publishing ventures (Nottingham). In terms of education, Kotei notes, “Even the few books that were published on the continent derived their intellectual content from the European system of education. Books recommended as textbooks for African students were the same as in Europe, right up to university level” (*The Book* 87). In British West Africa, the majority of presses between the wars remained expatriate because the British educational system was largely adopted. Such was the case in Nigeria—with the notable exception of the popular Onitsha Market literature in the Southeast—where popular educational books included the *Atlantic Readers* series, among others (Kotei, “Some Cultural” 177).²

While such a portrait of the publishing industry establishes the imperial routes of knowledge in printed form, some of the most significant developments for early postcolonial literature came about in response to this perceived one-way transmission of knowledge and

culture. In Nigeria, in particular, university culture fostered a sense of productive playfulness that extended through literary as well as a more seemingly objective form of writing on African cultures—the ethnographic study. Achebe’s education was typical of this relationship to non-Nigerian “knowledge” of Nigerian cultures. His early years were spent learning “the books English boys would have read in England,” yet at UCI he approached these works as texts that could allow him to more productively write Igbo culture, a critical approach that he and others chiefly expressed in university literary magazines (Achebe, “The Education” 21).

Typically, the story told about UCI in the years leading to independence is one of a developing political and literary awareness in Nigeria. Between 1948 and 1966, UCI saw some of the most influential Nigerian writers as students, such as Achebe, J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, and Wole Soyinka. Achebe himself portrays his experience at UCI as one in which intellectual awakening coincided with political awakening. In *Home and Exile*, Achebe comments on his class’s uprising over Joyce Cary’s novel *Mister Johnson*, a book that was presented as a story sympathetic to native Africans but which taught Achebe “that although fiction was undoubtedly fictitious it could also be true or false, not with the truth or falsehood of a news item but as to its disinterestedness, its intention, its integrity” (32–34). This account initially positions the novel as an expression of “writing back,” as Achebe links this moment of uprising to his own literary awakening and the composition of *Things Fall Apart*, and it is in this spirit of critical response that the book is still widely read and taught. As Harry Garuba rightly notes, the reading that privileges a “celebration of African culture and its counterdiscursive relation to discourses of empire” is indeed a valid reading of the novel, but it is a reading that has become hegemonic (322). The back-and-forth nature of “writing back” has been a powerful and dramatic shorthand for understanding this text’s genesis and effects, but this narrative of response obscures potentially productive relationships between Achebe’s novel and what passed for knowledge of Africa at the time.³ I suggest that the culture of productive appropriation that flourished at UCI in Achebe’s time there and his relationship to major ethnographers

of Nigeria give a different sense of the “knowledge” *Things Fall Apart* supplies its readers and how that knowledge can be used. I do not deny that *Things Fall Apart* is responsive to portrayals of Africans in books like Cary’s or Conrad’s but rather conceive of the relationship between published accounts of Western “knowledge” of Africa and Nigerian literature as more porous and less bound by the narrowly defined literary domain. In short, Achebe responds to multiple genres in more complex ways than the notion of “writing back” can account for because his literary sensibilities grew in his university’s environment, where writers received and were influenced by multiple genres but not necessarily in antagonistic ways.

This particular relationship between Western accounts of Nigeria and the country’s emerging literary culture is visible in the kinds of writing that were a result of university experiences such as Achebe’s. For the first two decades after World War II at UCI, the production of African texts, both literary and scholarly, was at the forefront, especially in student papers like *The Horn*, *The Horizon*, *The University Herald*, and *The Bug*. These publications were the venues for what Bernth Lindfors characterizes as “popular literature for an African elite,” for the works included in these student publications were often witty and stylistically sophisticated and contained a willingness to playfully reorganize the university curriculum as knowledge to be used rather than absorbed. While Lindfors focuses on this work as “apprentice experience,” these short stories, poems, reviews, and opinion pieces indicate some of what this generation of writers valued about university and literary study (486). In fact, they suggest that students could productively re-work traditional writing of any sort into original compositions. For example, in a 1953 letter to the editor of *The Bug* in protest against some hecklers at a campus concert, Soyinka included a parody of Mark Antony’s famous funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*:

Oh Decency
 Thou art locked in an iron chest
 And men have lost its key
 Bear with me,

My heart lies in degradation there with Third Hall
And I must pause till it comes back to me. (qtd. in Lindfors
480)

Similarly, Achebe, in his first issue as editor of the *University Herald*, included a limerick. The poem was written in an effort to change the tone of the publication from serious to more lively and interesting:

There was a young man in our Hall
Who said that because he was small
His fees should be less
Because he ate less
Than anyone else in the Hall. (qtd. in Lindfors 484)

These are not overt instances of “writing back,” as there is no indication that the limerick or *Julius Caesar* have offended these authors and must be responded to. Rather, the formal elements of these works are used in a way that advances Soyinka and Achebe’s points of view as budding writers. While neither Achebe’s limerick nor Soyinka’s parody will go down as his greatest literary achievement, these works point toward the type of literary culture that was being developed at UCI and in other Nigerian universities.⁴ This culture took a playful stance towards the formal and thematic elements of the works these students had learned throughout their schooling in the British colonial system. Seeing this culture as “playful” suggests that the works these authors studied were neither taken at face value nor immediately dismissed as offensive portraits of their culture. Rather, playfulness—and the textual production that such an attitude inspired—implies that any work in the educational system held the potential to be used, critiqued, or productively re-worked into new Nigerian texts. Such an attitude differs from “writing back” in that texts are actively re-used, sometimes as integral parts of the new literary work, and acknowledged as valuable points of view to be understood rather than dismissed.

There is evidence to suggest that Achebe’s literary sensibility was at least partially fostered in the act of writing for these publications. Ezenwa-Ohaeto cites an early story in the *University Herald* as an im-

portant step in Achebe's development as an author: "It is in the short story 'In a Village Church,' published in the *University Herald*, that Achebe indicates most clearly the extent to which he is already capable of observing, assessing and narrating" (41). As Ezenwa-Ohaeto describes it, the story is an indication of the type of narration *Things Fall Apart* would be commended for, for in it he "had learnt to localize his imagery" (42). That the story was published in his university's newspaper is significant: it shows that Achebe's style developed out of the productively playful university literary culture. In the decade leading up to Nigerian independence, Western writing began to take on both influential⁵ and insulting⁶ characteristics for Achebe, and at UCI, he seems to have seen both characteristics and developed his style accordingly. For *Things Fall Apart*, this means writing a novel that does more than "correct" colonialism by "writing back" to a narrowly conceived version of African culture. Rather, Achebe's style, especially in its most ethnographic moments, shows European accounts as useful elements of storytelling that go beyond offending and eliciting response.

One of the most often-cited portions of *Things Fall Apart*, in fact, is an important example of this culture of revision at work. The sudden appearance of the District Commissioner at the end of the novel is an obvious moment in which "knowledge" of Africa and Igbo life is clearly at play. Upon leaving the site of Okonkwo's suicide, the DC thinks about the field guide he is beginning to compose. His thoughts are some of the novel's most famous lines:

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (208–9; emphasis in original)

This conclusion to the novel, with the DC's ethnographic project outlined and explained, is often cited as an example of colonial discourse

inserted into the otherwise authentic African text—indeed, the entire story presented before the DC’s appearance is relegated to a paragraph, necessarily pared down because of generic demands. In order to convey the “number of things” he has learned over the years spent “[toiling] to bring civilization to different parts of Africa,” the DC cannot dwell on particulars, like the story of Okonkwo, in full (208).

The conclusion is a major reason that Achebe’s account is assumed to be the “authentic” text in the story of Okonkwo and that the novelist is granted insider status and therefore cultural authority on the Igbo peoples. In a short article discussing the impact of *Things Fall Apart*, Kenneth Harrow claims that Achebe’s novel began the discussion of African ways of thinking and knowing, not simply African literature: “It was always *Things Fall Apart* that was to frame the debate about how to constitute an African sensibility. . . . The ironic dismissal of the district administrator who presumed to devote an ‘entire footnote’ [sic] to Okonkwo had clicked in our consciousness” (156). Harrow rightly identifies how profound an effect *Things Fall Apart* had and continues to have on readers, for its semi-ethnographic narration inspires feelings of understanding and sympathy.

Achebe himself has even contributed to the conception that his novel can help a reader learn about Igbo culture. In his 1965 essay, “The Novelist as Teacher,” Achebe writes of his duties as a fiction writer in postcolonial Nigeria. Although he sees many of the “traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe,” Achebe does not consider himself in the role of leading systematic change Nigerian culture and politics (72). Instead, he promotes “an adequate revolution” for himself: “[T]o help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement” (72). He continues: “I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (72).⁷ It is easy to imagine that the readers Achebe mentions here are Africans recently independent from colonial rule, and he presents his novel as a work ready to teach about Igbo culture from a non-imperial point of view. Given

the variety of influences on Achebe's writing, however, this "long night of savagery" might be taken as something textual—namely, a tradition of writing about Africa that places African cultures in an ethnographic present. Non-porous ethnographic accounts, like the ones examined below, frame observations about Igbo culture as non-negotiable and unchanging. In them, festivals are ancient, people are concerned with subsistence farming, and speech is peculiarly accented with proverbs. The ethnographies that Achebe both admired and was inspired to challenge present Igbo culture in factual but non-detailed terms, resonating with the District Commissioner's paragraph on Okonkwo's suicide.

Things Fall Apart: Ethnography Engaged

While Achebe was busy editing and writing for the *University Herald* at UCI, he also spent time exploring a variety of courses of study (originally attending UCI for the sciences and medicine, Achebe lost his scholarship when he switched to pursue a degree in the arts). Although he studied geography for a time, it was comparative religion, specifically the courses taught by Geoffrey Parrinder, that caught his interest. In addition to fostering a new interest in how Christianity and "worshipping your ancestors" could be practiced simultaneously, Parrinder introduced Achebe to some of the major ethnographic works about Nigeria, including G. T. Basden's *Niger Ibos* and C. K. Meek's *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (Wren 61; Ezenwa-Ohaeto 43). Given the culture of textual play developing at UCI and other Nigerian institutions, these ethnographic influences are essential in understanding *Things Fall Apart* as Achebe's first major literary work. In the university magazines, Achebe and others began to explore a literary identity in relationship to such modes of knowing Nigeria, but the ethnographic richness of his first novel suggests that this culture of play also extended to studying Basden, Meek, and other anthropological works about Africa. The significant influence of ethnographic works like Basden's, in fact, is almost impossible to ignore in light of Achebe's novel's reputation as a vessel for authentic cultural truths. Much recent criticism of the novel relies on its relationship to ethnographic conventions, and juxtaposing the novel with specific works like Basden's and Meek's highlights the degree to which

Achebe makes these seemingly authoritative ethnographic accounts of Nigeria more fluid and penetrable.

Basden's major work, *Niger Ibos*, carefully documents his time in Southern Nigeria and his observations of Igbo life there. In particular, Basden notes the "traditional" cultures and beliefs, occasionally interrupting his descriptions to lament the loss of tradition that Western contact has precipitated. Although admitting that cultural change has occurred, Basden chooses to emphasize the "heart of the Ibo"—the ways of "old tribal life" (33). Thus, Basden can lament the importation of European liquor not on religious or moral grounds but because it is "not the best way to conserve native customs" (125). Basden chronicles a society that was historically in transition, but these cultural changes are largely unacknowledged in *Niger Ibos*. Rather, the narrative thrust is always backwards: he continues to reassert the importance of "tradition" or "primitive life" rather than the practicalities of lived Igbo culture during European colonialism. Thus, Basden casts a seemingly static and authoritative gaze on what being Igbo means, and his ethnographic prose assertively delivers such a perspective. For example, on the subject of "primitive life," Basden writes: "A more or less adequate supply of yams is the chief concern of the Ibo" (300). In a discussion of etiquette and social norms, Basden notes that "[o]ld people seldom fail to conform to the traditional conventions; the younger generation is becoming less particular, a trait which brings displeasure to their elders. . . . The ancient custom of sharing the kola nut is a typical instance" (161). What Basden methodically chronicles in cold, ethnographic prose Achebe's novel reworks in creative—but not necessarily antagonistic—ways. Rather than correct Basden's ethnographic sureness, *Things Fall Apart* uses similar ethnographic conventions to supply knowledge in a different register.

Achebe's own accounts of these two cultural artifacts—the yam and the kola nut—suggest an approach to delivering knowledge about Igbo practices. While he does not take the ethnographic accounts at face value, Achebe's work cannot really be considered to "write back" to Basden's text either, as he places both the yam and the kola nut into a more complicated cultural system. Achebe's novel does not claim to

offer an “insider’s account” of the yam and kola nut but allows such ethnographic knowledge some space to develop meaning. The earlier sections of the novel, especially, engage ethnographic significance with more nuance than Basden affords such cultural moments. The yam, for instance, is fleshed out as a cultural signifier that designates, among other things, social status. While Basden’s assertion that “adequate” supplies of yams are a chief concern among the Igbo, Achebe introduces the yam by noting the consequences of an inadequate supply. Having no yams means more than just going hungry: “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” (16). In Okonkwo’s case, his father’s lack of initiative reflects upon Okonkwo’s status in Umuofia—without a barn or yam seeds, Okonkwo is forced to share-crop and slowly build his store of yams through years of hard work. The narrator further develops the yam’s significance when he notes that the “[y]am, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (23). In these early depictions of Igbo agrarian practices, Achebe’s novel reworks the traditional Igbo value of “an adequate supply of yams.” Basden represents the yam as a food necessity: “Without the cultivation of this staple vegetable, the country would be short of food” (300). Yet, *Things Fall Apart* makes a claim for adequacy measured in terms of cultural status rather than amounts of the food staple—a revision to the ethnographic suggestion that practical measures are the only concerns in Igbo yam cultivation. While Achebe’s yam certainly exists as the primary source of food, it also functions as a signifier of status: “Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man, indeed” (33). As the “man’s crop,” the chief inheritance from father to son, and the symbol of success, Achebe’s yam measures Basden’s notion of adequacy in nuanced and culturally significant ways.

Like his portrayal of the yam, Achebe addresses Igbo customs and traditional conventions as significant pieces in a complex world order. The language of tradition is most prominent at the beginning of the novel, as Achebe chronicles Okonkwo’s early attempts to get the start in life he was not afforded by his father. When meeting with Nwakibie, a wealthy man in the village, Okonkwo asks for yam seeds only after observing

the traditions of sharing kola and drinking wine. From the outset, Okonkwo makes his purpose—and the format of his visit—absolutely clear: “I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask a favor. But let us drink the wine first” (19). Strict adherence to time-honored rituals clearly pays off for Okonkwo, as he is given the yam seeds and commended for his attention to these customs. Nwakibie tells Okonkwo: “It pleases me to see a young man like you these days when our youth has gone so soft” (21–22). All of this dialogue is couched in ethnographic terms, much like the language found throughout Basden’s study. The narrator clarifies the group’s drinking order: “The first cup went to Okonkwo, who must taste his wine before anyone else. Then the group drank, beginning with the eldest man” (19). The novel then goes on to explain the rationale for a wife’s appearance: “She wore the anklet of her husband’s titles, which the first wife alone could wear” (20). Like Basden’s assured prose style, Achebe’s ethnographic descriptions lend a sense of authority to his narrative, as the distant, third person narrative is full of facts about some of the more traditional aspects of Igbo life. In combination with his treatment of the yam, then, Achebe is able to paint a portrait through narrative that achieves many of the ethnographic ends that Basden sets out for his own work. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, these ethnographic encounters have the additional benefit of nuance because their place within the narrative world of the novel gives such details context.

The ethnographic language about yams or the kola nut ceremony is complexly situated in the novel, as it offers explanatory detail while also chronicling a culture that is clearly in transition. Much of what gives Achebe’s novel its reputation for “writing back” is the conflict narrative itself, as he tells of “first contact” between Umuofia and white missionaries from the previously unheard perspective of the Igbo. Ethnographic language at the time of Achebe’s composition was a hallmark of Western “knowledge” of Africa, an assurance that certain African cultures could be observed, questioned, and ultimately understood. *Things Fall Apart* offers the same sense of assurance through its ethnographic language, but placing such language in a moment of cultural transition shows the cul-

ture as dynamic in ways that traditional ethnography does not. So while observations often deepen a reader's understanding of Igbo practices, they simultaneously cut away at the ethnographer's narrative assurance that these are ancient, timeless, and authentically African traditions. As the novel portrays the missionaries' first settlement in Umuofia, these cultural traditions change and change continuously, as ceremonies, oracles, and long-held beliefs are reinvented to suit the needs of a transitory moment. The novel's ethnographic language is a major factor in the novel's ethic of reinvention.

Such reinvention extends beyond ethnographic language on cultural practices to Igbo legal structures as well. Just as Achebe reworked Basden's descriptions of yams, the portrait of the Igbo world in C. K. Meek's *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* heavily influenced him. Meek goes to great lengths to show how Igbo legal structures are determined by the cultural and religious perspectives of each village throughout Southeastern Nigeria. Meek's central point is that ethnographic knowledge of Igbo peoples can lead to more efficient and culturally aware colonial administration, and in this way he is not unlike the District Commissioner whose work in progress ends Achebe's novel. But Meek's particular language and his descriptions of an Igbo religion-law complex appear throughout *Things Fall Apart*.

Before his comprehensive overview of various Igbo legal systems, Meek focuses his work on the religious and social structures that guide a majority of Igbo daily life, including the implementation of laws. He is careful to note from the outset that "[a]mong the Ibo religion and law are so closely interwoven that many of the most powerful legal sanctions are derived directly from the gods" (20). One of Meek's most powerful examples is the role of Ala, the earth goddess Achebe calls Ani in his novel. Meek claims that "Ala is regarded as the owner of men, whether alive or dead. The cult of ancestors is, therefore, closely associated with that of the Earth-deity, who is Queen of the Underworld. Ala is the fount of human morality, and is, in consequence, a principal legal sanction" (25). He further portrays Ala as an important yet invisible force in Igbo community decision-making: "Ala is, in fact, the unseen president of the community, and no group is complete without a shrine of Ala"

(25). Meek's depiction of Ala identifies the goddess in one clear and narrowly-defined role: as a figurehead for justice, law and morality. In Meek's terms, Ala is primarily a deity identified with a specific set of rituals and sacrifices.

When Achebe introduces Ani he does so in language that mimics Meek's initial description of the deity. He describes the Feast of the New Yam, a celebration of Ani, and focuses on the earth goddess's significance to the people of Umuofia: "Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other diety [sic]. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth" (36). The content of this passage is essentially Meek's, as Achebe carefully outlines the same qualities that Meek ascribes to Ala—her importance in the community as judge and as representative of the dead. Yet, from Meek's foundation, Achebe is able to dramatize the kinds of justice that Ani represents near the end of the novel. Although he begins with detailed ethnography, Achebe lends adaptability and responsiveness to Meek's portrait of Ala when a crime against the deity is committed during the festival to honor the earth goddess.

The novel explains that, during the festival's ceremonies, "the ancestors of the clan who had been committed to Mother Earth at their death emerged again as *egwugwu* through tiny ant holes" (186). Imperative in this celebration of the ancestors is that unmasking an *egwugwu* is almost inconceivable in Igbo society, as doing so would "reduce its immortal prestige" (186). When Enoch, a Christian convert, unmasks one of these returned ancestors, he effectively "killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion" (186). Unlike Meek's portrait of Ala as "closely associated" with the ancestors, Achebe's portrait outlines Umuofia's intuitive links between the earth deity and the ancestors, and how both are represented and treated in Umuofia's society. In addition, the administration of justice in Achebe's novel is a violent and less structured form of retribution than Meek's description of "legal sanction" suggests: "The band of *egwugwu* moved like a furious whirlwind to Enoch's compound and with machete and fire reduced it to a desolate heap. And from there they made for the church, intoxicated with destruction"

(188). Like Achebe's relationship to Basden, his dramatization of Meek's ethnography serves to show the "unseen president of the community" as a more dynamic and responsive force than ethnography claims it to be. To be sure, Achebe begins his account with ethnographic language, but as he expands and revises this language throughout the novel, it becomes clear that the teachings of *Things Fall Apart* concern the changing and adaptable nature of Igbo society in ways that authoritative ethnographic accounts like Basden and Meek simply cannot accommodate.

Even the novel's most quoted moment, in which the narrator describes the Igbo use of proverbs, is a moment of engaged ethnography, specifically with the language Basden uses to describe Igbo storytelling. In the final chapter of his study, Basden notes, "the Ibo has a generous store of proverbs which are continually brought into use. They are so profuse that often it is impossible to understand the full meaning of a conversation without knowing some of the more common ones" (436). This descriptive moment at the very end of Basden's text relates directly to Achebe's famous formulation: "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (7). The two passages convey the nearly identical message that understanding and using proverbs is essential in the Igbo culture being described; however, Achebe's intervention comes with his revision of the ethnographic language. The beginning of his sentence is a relatively straightforward moment of description: the narrator gives the characteristics of a particular group in the present tense. With the second half of the sentence Achebe takes the description out of the ethnographic present through metaphor. Using a literary device in an otherwise ethnographic moment is indicative of Achebe's use of ethnography throughout the novel: it is a tool that can be constantly revised, played with, and even reused in order to explain a certain pattern of Igbo culture. Reading the novel as a playful ethnography requires that a reader pay attention to the complexities of ethnographic texts to grasp the novel's use of its conventions.

To be sure, other scholars have analyzed and commented upon the role of ethnography in Achebe's novel at length, but these works tend to think of ethnography as a whole rather than the specific works of Basden

or Meek. Typically, analyses of the novel's narrator tend to focus on the story's point of view as both inside and outside the represented Igbo culture. Angela Smith pays particular attention to Achebe's manipulation of the narrative voice throughout the novel and how it deceives the reader into thinking that the tale is "timeless" while suggesting that "the world described is irretrievable" (89). Carey Snyder and Oliver Lovesey extend Smith's reading by engaging with the ethnographic voices of *Things Fall Apart*. Snyder calls for reading "*meta-ethnographically*, in a way that attends to the complexity inherent in any ethnographic situation" (157; emphasis in original). Snyder notes "many of the dilemmas of ethnographic observation" that are highlighted in the novel's narrative voice, which exists where the implied authority of both insider belonging and outsider observation intersect (157). Similarly, Lovesey analyzes how Achebe's use of ethnographic convention lulls the reader into a false sense of knowledge. By presenting Parts One and Two of the novel in the voice of a cultural insider and then suddenly switching to the imperialist District Commissioner at the end, Lovesey argues that Achebe startles the reader into seeing his or her own imperial reading of the novel: "Like the District Commissioner who assumes insider knowledge, the reader has acquired a carefully packaged pretense of grasping Umuofian culture in Part One" (295). The ultimate tragedy of the novel, in this line of thought, is that the reader is confronted with his or her own position as an ethnographic reader: when the District Commissioner comes into the story, the reader can recognize that he or she "is an outsider who has believed him/herself to be a sympathetic insider and is now positioned with the arrogant, myopic, annihilating District Commissioner" (Lovesey 295).

Snyder and Lovesey, in particular, use a more complex perspective on ethnography to shed light on the ways in which Achebe's novel uses ethnographic conventions in order to present Igbo culture in the colonial past. These critical observations of the narrator are directly related to the "literary turn" in ethnographic theory, a turn described and espoused by James Clifford, among others. In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, Clifford notes that, for generations, ethnographic accounts were understood in terms of their "transparency of representation and immediacy

of experience" (2). In place of this ideology, Clifford proposes seeing ethnography and fieldwork accounts as, first and foremost, textual productions that largely create rather than reflect culture: "the historical predicament of ethnography [is] the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (2). In noting the intimacy between language and the creation of cultures, Clifford reveals the extent to which narratives of cultural description can never truly be formed "from the inside." Elsewhere, Clifford proposes that culture itself is far from a given or knowable entity; rather, he sees it as "an assemblage of texts to be interpreted" (*Predicament* 38). Certainly, the ethnographic moments of Achebe's novel align with this more open, interpretive version of culture that Clifford theorizes—the more so because they stand in contrast to the closed, definitive portraits of Igbo culture in Basden and Meek.

As Snyder and Lovesey, among others, argue, *Things Fall Apart* cannot be read as an unmediated portrayal of Igbo culture, and their attention to the ethnographic moments reveals how mediated this account truly is. In this way, both critics challenge the assumption that the novel's realism indicates that Achebe has an uncomplicated relationship to the culture he describes. Surely, this type of reading should be questioned, as Achebe's complex use of ethnographic texts suggests that finding and digesting information about Igbo or Nigerian culture is not a straightforward process. But this essay is not necessarily a call for a different type of reading of *Things Fall Apart*; rather, it is intended as a link between the colonial system of educational publishing and the most widely read African novel of all time.

Things Fall Apart begins to show Achebe's complicated relationship to Igbo culture, on the margins of which he grew up. Yet, Achebe often positions himself as a cultural insider when he writes about African authorship. In "Africa and Her Writers," Achebe discusses the role of *mbari* in Igbo culture, relating this ritual to his role as an author. *Mbari* is an annual festival in honor of the earth goddess Ala; to celebrate, ordinary citizens are chosen by Ala, via her priest, to commemorate her in images. Achebe notes that this festival is indicative of how art in Africa works; it is a "holistic concern of our traditional societies": "*There is no barrier*

between maker of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all and is a 'function' of society" (34; emphasis in original). Clearly, Achebe is interested in his own position within an African tradition of artistry and storytelling, but invoking *mbari* is only half of the story. The other half is Achebe's educational experience, especially at UCI. When the colonial educational experience and Achebe's textual production are linked, *Things Fall Apart* is perhaps more indicative of Nigerian or Igbo culture than the novel itself can present. While traditional Igbo society may have already "wept for . . . its own death" (*Things Fall Apart* 187), Achebe narrates in the style of the still-living culture—a culture offended, influenced, and educated by the British colonial system.

Notes

- 1 This reading is probably the standard interpretation of the novel, although critical work has (in recent years) moved away from seeing the novel as a response to British colonialism. Generally, articles and guides for teaching still stress pairing Achebe with a European novel, most often *Heart of Darkness*. Agathocleous and Goesselink argue that teaching Achebe alongside a more familiar text for Western readers, like Conrad's, can give students confidence to apply the reading strategies in the familiar text to a less familiar situation and thus gain more from reading the "multicultural" text. Klein's essay comments on the uses of the novel in a history course, for it shows students "what Africa looks and feels like and how Africans think and relate to each other" (25). Sugnet is another critic who notes the ways in which Achebe responds to British literature: "*Things Fall Apart* conducts a polemic against Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Cary's *Mister Johnson*, two texts that are never mentioned in the novel, but hover near every page" (75).
- 2 Although it seems to be common knowledge that Anglophone African students used British textbooks in the colonial and immediately post-independence eras, few specifics about which textbooks were used is available. Heinemann and Longman had significant presence in West Africa, specifically in the educational field, and Oxford University Press (later renamed OUP Nigeria and then University Presses, Ltd.) was the first press in Nigeria with a strong educational emphasis. For general publishing trends in Africa, the authorities are Kotei, *The Book Today in Africa*; Kotei, "Some Cultural and Social Factors"; and Altbach and Rathgeber.
- 3 For example, Newell claims that the novel's popularity is largely because "on the level of plot, this is a 'culture conflict' narrative *par excellence* with its linear, ideological storyline, and numerous dichotomies between Africa and Europe" (87).

- Ogede's excellent and complex reader's guide to the novel still begins with the premise that Achebe "breaks away from [the] model" of Cary and Conrad (x). Obi is perhaps most direct when he characterizes *Things Fall Apart* as "literature of identity" and a "literary response" (27–28), while Killiam writes, "Achebe felt the record had to be set straight" (21). Whether culture conflict, literary response, or setting the record straight, these interpretive stances generally see the merits of *Things Fall Apart* in its relationship to the unflattering and often insulting portrayals of Africa by European observers.
- 4 Lindfors describes how these small publications led to the development of Nigerian literature, but his focus in this particular article, for the most part, lies elsewhere. He is more concerned with "the intellectual climate in which most Nigerian writers and readers were nurtured" rather than the later literary works of authors like Achebe, Soyinka, Clark, and Okigbo, although the two are certainly connected (486).
- 5 Achebe recalls being influenced greatly by Thomas Hardy and A. E. Housman: "I think that the things that really make the world, the human world, are the serious, the tragic. And this is, roughly, what Hardy says to me; this is what Houseman [sic] says to me. It is, you know, the man who fails who has a more interesting story than the successful person. If you ask me why, I don't know" (qtd. in Wren 61–2).
- 6 Achebe's response to British works on Africa extended beyond Cary. Famously, Achebe dismissed Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a racist novel: "The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" ("An Image of Africa" 11–12).
- 7 In his 1991 essay, "Teaching *Things Fall Apart*," Achebe acknowledges that the title of "The Novelist as Teacher" has led to some misconceptions about *Things Fall Apart* (mostly the misconception that he knows how to teach it). However, his basic stance that his novel is pedagogical to some extent has remained the same; at the very least, he sees his novel as an opportunity for teachers to correct misconceptions about Africa (often misconceptions that result from reading the novel as an unproblematic description of an African tribe): "I suspect that in any class of thirty American students reading *Things Fall Apart* there may be a handful who see things in the light of a certain young fellow from Yonkers, New York, who wrote to thank me several years ago for making available to him an account of the customs and superstitions of an African tribe! It should be the pleasant task of the teacher, should he or she encounter that attitude, to spend a little time revealing to the class some of the quaint customs and superstitions prevalent in America" (126).

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