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## Chinua Achebe Writing Culture: Representations of Gender and Tradition in *Things Fall Apart*

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*Kwadwo Osei-Nyame*

Wherever something stands,  
there something else will stand.  
—Igbo saying

While Achebe's early novels have been popularly received for their representation of an early African nationalist tradition that repudiates imperialist and colonialist ideology, his counter-narratives have only been narrowly discussed for their theoretical speculation on cultural and ideological production as a mode of resistance *within* the nationalist tradition that the texts so evidently celebrate. My epigraph not only recognizes that the definition of "tradition" in Achebe's work hinges upon ideological conflict, it comments also on the varying forms of consciousness that arise within discourses of self-definition within Igbo traditional culture. Moreover, it communicates the idea of complex rather than simple relationships between individuals and groups in the world of Achebe's "fictional" Igbo communities.

This essay intends an appropriation of Bakhtin's notion of "heteroglossia" and dialogism in its exploration of some concerns relevant to the question of the representation of ideology in *Things Fall Apart*. Bakhtin's notion of dialogism views narrative discourses as forms of social exchange that locate "the very basis" of individual and social "behaviour" within conflicting worldviews and "determine the very bases" of "ideological interrelations" in a manner similar to that found in Achebe's narrative. Novelistic discourse thus performs "no longer as [mere] information, directions, rules, models," but enables us to locate dialogue in its more immediate ideological and political context (342). Hayden White implies something of this immediacy of context when he suggests distinguishing between "a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it" and one that "make[s] the world speak itself and speak itself as a story" (2).

Writing stories that speak for themselves is central to Achebe's novelistic agenda. In a famous early essay, he wrote: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels . . . did no more than teach my readers that their past . . . was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" ("Morning Yet" 45). Representing an African worldview through narratives that speak for themselves meant that Achebe would draw upon Igbo oral traditions to narrate the stories of his communities, while bearing in mind Richard Bauman's exhortations that in utilizing oral traditions to engage the "canons of elite" Western literary "traditions and texts," oral narrative must not be taken merely to be "the reflection of

culture” or “the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes” in historical writing: instead, oral narratives must be utilized “contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning” (2).

Challenging and displacing the narratives of colonialist writers like Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad meant for Achebe the appropriation of ethnographic modes of representation to prove that the communities of his African past were neither “primitive” nor “without history” (Clifford 10). James Clifford, borrowing from Bakhtin, argues that since culture is not “a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted,” ethnographic representation must incorporate a narratological dialogism that reveals culture’s “contested, temporal, and emergent” nature (19). As George Marcus also contends, this dialogical approach to ethnographic representation must be borne in mind by both “outsiders” like Conrad and Cary writing about the Other and “insiders” like Achebe writing about themselves and their own cultures.<sup>1</sup> Henrietta Moore, among anthropologists welcoming the new dialogical ethnography of Clifford and others, agrees with them on the use of “new forms of writing such as those predicated on dialogue, intertextuality and heteroglossia to unmask and displace the unitary authority” of the “author” (107).

*Things Fall Apart*’s famous ending describes the District Commissioner’s yearning to write the story of his colonized natives as a challenging ethnographic project in a moment of the colonial encounter in Africa. Having just witnessed the death of Okonkwo, one of the greatest men of Umuofia, the Commissioner fabricates an imperialist narrative and his colonial imagination prefigures the narration of the “interesting” (149) story

[o]f this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself . . . .  
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.  
(149-50)

His story is contemplated as an extension of the civilizational enterprise of pacifying his “primitive” African “tribes” (150). However, the passion the Commissioner will devote to his account is merely a seductive desire for storytelling and a “function of [his own] desires, purposes, and constraints” (Chambers 4). His narrative is already displaced as his “interesting” story has already been anticipated by the skepticism of Achebe’s “insider” narrative. For Achebe has already written back to contest the “reasonable” paragraphing of history by writers like Cary and Johnson, “outsiders” who devoted their accounts to similar ambitious projects as the Commissioner’s. The Commissioner’s potentially seductive story about one of the most tragic events in his administration is an almost impossible future project. His highly controversial and abrupt “reasonable paragraph” has already found adequate representation and space in the entire exchanges among Umuofians and between Umuofia and the Christian missionaries and the colonial government in Achebe’s narrative.

As Chambers suggests further, since there is a direct “relationship between storytelling and the art of government,” we must contextualize “storytelling as an event that *presupposes* a situation and mobilizes social relationships so as to give it a performative force” (4-5; emphasis added). Achebe, following Fanon, locates Igbo societies in the liminal space of history in which they grapple with the imperialist endeavors of colonial power by telling Bernt Lindfors in an interview that it is in “that ‘zone of occult instability’ where the people dwell” that their regenerative powers “are most potent” (“Achebe on Commitment” 16). The complicated occult zone of African and colonialist history and the representation of the ideologically “real” and “fictional” dimensions of that zone is encapsulated in the Commissioner’s effort both to represent “reality” and to “censor” it.

This near appropriation of a totalizing narrative of culture finds another form of expression in the tradition and politics of *Things Fall Apart*. The story re-enacts phases of the precolonial and colonial traditional order of African history by featuring the beginnings of some significant moments of nationalist ideological crises in the communities of Umuofia and Mbanta. Masculine traditions operate as forms of consciousness that act foremostly to legitimize specific ideals and values and to distribute and restrict authority within Umuofia, one of the most powerful of Igbo communities. Umuofia is not only “feared by all its neighbours,” but is also “powerful in war and magic” (8). Achebe relates the reasons behind individual and communal crises in a society in which war heroes, titled and wealthy subjects, and other celebrated figures are dominantly male.

Umuofia is already weakened by internal cleavages and it is only when the processes of cultural breakdown intensify with the arrival of the white colonizers that Obierika, one of the greatest men in the society, affirms how the “clan can no longer act like one” and has “fallen apart” (127). The story of Okonkwo and Umuofia at the threshold of historical transition may be read in the first instance as the narration of an epic African masculine nationalist tradition.<sup>2</sup> Achebe’s text links and identifies power and authority with masculinity. Umuofia’s masculine traditions are heralded and celebrated and the representation of masculine ideology is progressively played out mainly through the representation of the legendary Okonkwo and his obsessive pursuit of the fulfilment of personal power and recognition within the clan. As a young man, Okonkwo “invents” himself and consolidates his position within the clan by overthrowing Amalinze the Cat. With this feat, “Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan” (3). Okonkwo’s victorious feat in the famous wrestling match that begins the story of Umuofia is also one that “the old men” (3) agreed was one of the most laudable exploits “since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights” (3). The legitimation of male-centered traditions in Umuofia resonates in many ways with Raymond Williams’s view that dominant traditions often aspire to “an active and continuous selection and reselection” and “a projected reality, with which we have to come to terms on its terms, even though those terms are always and must be the valuations, the selections and omissions” of “men” (16).

From a very early age, Okonkwo is obsessed with championing his masculinity

[1]est he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was an *agbala*, that was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (10)

Okonkwo's masculinity becomes a defensive resource and his adherence to a masculine philosophy will thenceforth order his world. In articulating his identity and justifying his actions, he cultivates his masculinity as a defense of personal honor in the face of potentially overwhelming circumstances in an antagonistic universe. The obsession with masculinity is an essential shield marked also by the excessive indulgences expressed in Okonkwo's outrageous assertiveness and his intense repudiation of certain subjective values such as "gentleness" and "idleness." In Okonkwo's world, the ignominious predicament of his father, Unoka, simultaneously torments and propels him towards achieving his highest ambitions in life. Okonkwo is in a way led to define himself and to apprehend his world *negatively*. By constructing his identity and embedding his actions in a perverse sense in his rebelliousness against everything that his father Unoka represents, Okonkwo apprehends his world pessimistically. To a considerable degree, then, Okonkwo's "cosmos" is self-made and his identity "depends entirely on its creator [himself] for its configuration" (Olney 4).

Umuofia's acknowledgment of Okonkwo's spectacularly masculine feat exists in potential opposition to other events and achievements. However, Umuofia's selective traditions and Okonkwo's masculinist assertions converge to marginalize the women, *efulefus*, *osus*, *agbala*s, and others within the community. Umuofians have a special word for dispositions such as "gentleness" and "idleness": the Igbo word *agbala* is not only another name for women, it also refers to weak and lazy men such as Okonkwo's father, Unoka. In inventing its traditions and linking Okonkwo's feats with them, Umuofia's authoritative discourse consciously omits other representable values and ideals and Okonkwo's own exclusion from his worldview of, among other things, "gentleness" and "idleness," is a position that Umuofia's fabricated traditions sanction.

However, as Derek Wright observes regarding the social order in Umuofia: "Okonkwo's impetuous, aggressive individualism and the belief behind it—that he must wipe out his father's memory by succeeding in everything his father has failed at—are out of harmony with a society which is renowned for its talent for social compromise and which judges a man according to his worth, not that of his father" (78). Further, Wright contends that Okonkwo's "cult of virility, by mistaking the nature of courage and confusing gentleness with weakness, upsets the sexual equilibrium that

maintains a delicate balance between male values and female and maternal ones" (78). We can agree with Judith Butler that "limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures" that "distorts what is assumed to be true" about the formation of identity and subjectivity and restricts the "imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture" (9).

With Williams, too, we can argue that the ideology of culture establishes a "structure of feeling" and the selective tradition of a dominant culture when we trace the modes by which Okonkwo's adherence to certain values and ideals and Umuofia's validation of these values converge to generate the masculine nationalist tradition represented by *Things Fall Apart*. Simon Gikandi has already made very strong points arguing that "ideology as process and critique, rather than product and dogma, is the key to understanding Achebe's narrative strategies" (12). It is important, however, to add that Achebe's story depicts the organization of the Umuofian community and its control of authority within the specific context of a gendered ideology and politics.<sup>3</sup>

Umuofia's dominant traditions exist in tension with what Williams describes as "residual" or oppositional traditions (41). *Things Fall Apart* also exposes the limitations of the system of values that the phallogocentric traditions of Umuofia endorse by answering to Chambers's belief that "meaning is not inherent in discourse and its structures, but is contextual, a function of the pragmatic situation in which the discourse occurs" (3). The functioning of language in the narrative also supports Jonathan Culler's observation that "what is involved in narrative is an effect," that "a hierarchical opposition, in which one term is said to be dependent upon another conceived as prior, is in fact a rhetorical or metaphysical imposition and the hierarchy could well be reversed" (183). Language and proverbs in Achebe's narrative provide significantly adjustable orders of interpretation and underscore the view of Umuofians themselves that "[a]mong the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs [and other forms of language] are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (5). Achebe examines the ways in which language functions in his community and the means through which individuals articulate resistance, exposing especially the flaws within the social order that allow for an ambivalent approach to tradition and culture.

Differing sets of values expose the limits of representation and authority within Umuofia. The language of representation that orders hierarchy and authority within Umuofia initially engenders, as Barthes would argue, a kind of fixed ideological "index" for the regulation and distribution of authority within the social order. However, as Barthes also contends, "signs" and significations might be invoked in place of the restrictive "index" of language to reorder narrative and to enforce the abolition of the "limit, the origin, the basis" and "the prop" of tradition. Signs, then, provide the means to "enter into the limitless process of equivalences" and "representations that nothing will ever stop, orient, fix," or "sanction" (S/Z 40).

Umuofia's traditions thus sustain a different order of things and enable diverse modes of self-consciousness and a skeptical relativism that allows

individuals to look beyond the rigid hierarchies of a restrictive social order and to redefine their roles and positions within culture. Achebe's essay on *chi* in Igbo cosmology reveals the flexible order of his society:

Since Igbo people did not construct a rigid and closely argued system of thought to explain the universe . . . anyone seeking an insight into their world must seek it along their own way. ("Morning Yet" 94)

Achebe demonstrates that a selective appeal to "tradition" is wholly feasible within the Igbo worldview. This accommodating spirit of tradition enables individuals to appraise the limitations that are seen to inhere within the traditions of Umuofia, making it possible to identify in Molly Hite's formulation the fact that "in a given society and historical period, changes, emphasis and value can articulate the 'other side' of a culturally mandated story, exposing the limits it inscribes in the process of affirming dominant ideology" (4).

How might we pursue further Barthes's distinction between the stable indices and contradictory signs of narrative? In the story of Umuofia, Barthes's identification of the open-endedness of representation is played out at a level of human interaction where the contest between Williams's "dominant" and "residual" traditions is also staged. A fascinating moment in the narrative has Okoye, one of the most important men of the clan, a titled man, "also a musician" but "not a failure like Unoka" and "a great talker" (5), visit his friend, Unoka, to retrieve a debt owed him. After "skirting" around the subject "for a long time" (5), Okoye finally asks Unoka to pay back the money owed him. Unoka's response draws Okoye's attention to the visual illustration of his debts to different people:

'Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries . . . I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under it. I shall pay my big debts first.' (6)

Negotiating his survival while trapped by economic necessity, Unoka, compelled into being resourceful, is also at his most articulate. Unoka's response touches on the general issue of survival within the culture. Achebe seems concerned here with raising the question of survival. As he told Feroza Jussawalla in a recent interview, his narratives define the relationship between storytelling, storytellers, and survival: "It is important that the storyteller tells the story the way he sees it, not the way the emperor wants it to be told" (81). Unoka's response is most significant for its manipulation of the wisdom implicit in the language of proverbs as a strategy of survival by deferring the debt he owes. Additionally, he questions the hierarchy of eminence and authority that titled men like Okoye and Okonkwo represent within Umuofia. Richard Priebe remarks in reference to the tradition of Umuofia that "proverbs encompass strategies for individual equity that are

antithetical to the closed system of prenatal destiny we find in the story” (51).

Unoka operates within the flexible codes of his culture and its definition of reality to question the interpretive forms that order existence. Unoka’s reinterpretation and reconstruction of the “real” and the important circumvents the signifying economy of realism of his culture and he finds a way to “invent” a conceptual universe where the redefinition and reinterpretation of reality enable him to emerge momentarily within its traditions as a figure of authority. As Wahneema Lubiano notes about the social order of Umuofia, character is “not a unified and stable identity” but an ability “to renegotiate the terms of someone else’s perception of reality or of oneself” (198). The encounter between Okoye and Unoka reveals complex forms of masculinity not necessarily of the order represented by Obierika, Okonkwo, or other great men, and these forms of masculinity are also asserted. Margaret Turner argues persuasively regarding Unoka’s importance within the clan as a whole that “Unoka [the musician] is a failure in material terms, but not if his stature is measured on a scale one might think is Achebe’s own—ensuring the survival of the culture by recording the deeds of past greatness and lessons for continued living” (34).

Discussing the use of African literature as a mode of restoring value within his traditional society, Achebe observes that “any presence [within his culture] which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement” may become a “focus for anxiety and disruption” (“African Literature” 3). Although Umuofia’s laws, customs, and the proclamations of its oracles communicate coercive impulses, individuals may also renegotiate themselves around the sacrosanct traditional values represented as incontrovertible and which are meant both to ensure the clan’s survival and to consolidate its traditions. The story of Obiako, the palm tapper, illustrates further the power of disruption and resistance. Obiako’s interesting story is almost self-explanatory:

‘Obiako has always been a *strange* one’, said Nwakibie. ‘I have heard that many years ago when, when his father had not been dead very long, he had gone to consult the oracle. The Oracle said to him, “Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him.” Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, “Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive.” Everybody laughed heartily . . . .’ (15; emphasis added)

Retaining a stable system of values within Umuofia’s traditions is threatened by such personal accounts as Obiako’s. Umuofia’s consciousness of itself, which it articulates through ancestral veneration, is challenged by such “marginal” stories as Obiako’s, which in their rebelliousness are not merely obstructive to the perpetuation of Umuofia’s traditions, but appraise the restrictiveness of tradition in ways that men like Okonkwo and wealthy, titled men like Nwakibie cannot comprehend. Implied in Nwakibie’s derisive reference to Obiako’s “strange” disposition is the insinuation that Obiako’s position is of little ideological significance within the respected traditions of the clan. Within the highly ideological and coercive ambience

of Umuofia, however, stories like Obiako's are not merely trivially subversive but are of emancipatory significance. Characterizing the ideological crisis within his traditional society uncovers the ambivalences of ideology in narrative and reorients the meaning and import of the relationships between Achebe's "texts" and their reproduction of historical narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Reading the "other side" of Achebe's Igbo-African nationalist tradition means alternating the narrative viewpoint to radically transform the story and its underlying assumptions. As Hite argues, "the coherence of one line of narration rests on the suppression of any number of 'other sides.'" Further, she adds, "alternative versions . . . might give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphasis and values" (4). By highlighting themes and characters seen conventionally as peripheral, Achebe's story transgresses the perception of his writing as penetratingly masculinist.<sup>5</sup>

The personal narratives of "marginalized" individuals such as Obiako and Unoka together with those of women correlate the narrative as encapsulating a progressively consolidating framework of resistance and survival. Achebe seems interested in confirming Foucault's interesting observation that "[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (*History* 95). Following Foucault's hypothesis in *The Order of Things*, Achebe sets his text within a reflexive liminal phase, or "middle region," where culture is "continuous and graduated" and "linked to [a] space constituted anew and at each time by the driving force of time" (xxi). Indeed, Achebe himself proposes an order of things not unrelated to Foucault's: "[A]rt is what I have chosen to call my Middle Passage." He adds further that if art is to be offered as a "celebration of . . . reality," it must involve the "creative potential in all of us" and a demonstration "of the need to exercise this latent energy again and again" ("African Literature" 3).

Achebe's dilemma in finding an appropriately "democratic" means of representing the Igbo nationalist tradition he narrates is reiterated in the following statement made to Raoul Granqvist: "If you look carefully, the women were never really dealing alone with issues pertaining to women, they were dealing with issues pertaining to society" (Granqvist 18). Achebe characterizes Umuofia's women in the joys and tribulations of their motherhood and selects specific moments of their lives to represent some of the most meaningful cultural and historical aspects of existence in Igbo communities. Some agonizing moments that members of Okonkwo's household undergo communicate the complications of existence and reveal how the forces disruptive of life tie Umuofians to rituals and customs central to the traditions of Igbo culture. The stories of Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, and her daughter Ezinma are vital to the narrative's enactment of the strategies of survival within Umuofia's world. Ekwefi has a special relationship with Ezinma, "an only child and the centre of her mother's world. Very often it was Ezinma who had decided what food her mother should prepare" (55). The two women partially deny Okonkwo some of the authority he seeks to wield over them by conspiring to ensure that Ezinma eats eggs despite Okonkwo's threat to beat Ekwefi if she continues to let Ezinma have the delicacy.

Ezinma is born an *ogbanje* (55), a child who endlessly appears in her mother's womb in a sequence of birth and death and is probably destined to have a short life. Ekwefi's previous "nine children had [all] died in infancy, usually before the age of three" (55) and Ekwefi blames "her own evil *chi* who denied her children" (57). The story links the two women to the importance of custom and ritual to direct attention to the importance of motherhood and childbirth within an Igbo-African framework of historical interpretation. The epic dimensions of the story are registered symbolically but not fully explored in the temporary leadership role that Ezinma holds in the search for her *iyi-uwa* (57), which links her to the spirit world. The *iyi-uwa*, if found, will end Ezinma's *ogbanje* cycle and terminate Ekwefi's suffering.

Significantly, women and children "returning from the stream" (58) and a whole "crowd" (59) of clan members follow Ezinma who, unintimidated by Okonkwo's threatening presence, leads the community on a sort of merry-go-round in the search for her *iyi-uwa*. When Ezinma finally discloses the secret location of the *iyi-uwa*, its retrieval marks the severance of her links with the spirit world and the mutual triumph over death by Ezinma and Ekwefi makes the relationship between them even more special, for under the circumstances of evil destiny with which Ekwefi seems afflicted, mothers are denied the joys of motherhood while children are not allowed the opportunity to grow up.<sup>6</sup> As Grace Okereke argues in her poem on childbirth, "the war of childbirth is the gunfight / of women" (23). Achebe explores further in the *ogbanje* story of Ezinma the importance of human communal struggles within a *gendered* context by making the triumph of the two women an affirmation of the strength of their individual *chi*'s. Their survival where Okonkwo does not eventually survive in the clan foregrounds the unwavering dispositions that allow women control over their existential predicaments. Achebe's text, to use Dominick LaCapra's words, reveals how "human entities" may "rework and at least partially work through . . . in critical [and] transformative fashion" their social struggles (4). The inappropriateness of the colonial imagination of "primitive" behavior in traditional Igbo society is exposed by the stress on ritual and custom within traditional culture and the demonstration of the power of narrative to educate about history in order to refute the idea that traditional Igbo communities were "victims of circumstance(s)" whose politics were "very largely one of drift" and whose actions were "not controlled by logic" (Basden 9).

An extraordinary episode in the novel has Okonkwo reclining after an evening meal, while Ekwefi and Ezinma and Okonkwo's other wives and their children also enjoy an evening of storytelling. Ezinma is about to relate how "Tortoise and Cat went to wrestle Yams" (71) when Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, interrupts Okonkwo's household with the message that Agbala, the deity of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, "wanted to see his daughter," Ezinma (72). Okonkwo is severely reprimanded by Chielo for protesting against Ezinma being taken away and for daring "to speak when a god speaks" (72). Ekwefi has her own exchanges with Chielo, who

is "possessed by the spirit of her god" (71), while her voice "like a sharp knife cutting through the night" (71) is "as clear as metal" (72):

'I will come with you too,' Ekwefi said firmly.

'Tufia-a!' the priestess cursed, her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder in the dry season.

'How dare you, woman to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware woman lest he strike you in his anger.' (72)

When Chielo finally takes the crying Ezinma away, "a strange and sudden weakness" (73) descends upon Ekwefi. Ekwefi becomes "a hen whose only chick has been carried away" (73). Defying the likelihood of retribution from Agbala and with a curt reply to Okonkwo when he asks where she is going, Ekwefi pursues Chielo on a circuitous journey from Umuofia to what turns out to be "Umuachi, the farthest village in the clan" (75) on a night described also as "full of thick darkness" (73). It is important to recall the fear that the clan as a whole has of the night and its darkness: "Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them" (7). The extremely bold Ekwefi who follows Chielo is deterred neither by the fact that on several occasions "her eyes were useless in the darkness" (74), nor that she "hit her left foot against an outcropped root and terror seized her" (74), nor even by her remembrance of "a dark night like this" (74) when, returning with her mother from the stream, they "had seen *Ogbu-agali-odu*, one of those evil essences loosed upon the world by the potent 'medicines' which the tribe had made in distant past against its enemies but now had forgotten to control" (74). Ekwefi relives "all the terrors of the night" and even remembers how on that occasion both she and her mother had expected "the sinister light" of the clan's "uncontrolled medicine" to descend on them and "kill them" (74), but she perseveres in following Chielo throughout. We are indeed reminded of the moment when Okonkwo's own wrestling feat that establishes his popularity with the clan is compared to the fight Umuofia's founding father had "with the spirits of the wild" (1).

The journey with Chielo intimates a positive and epic heroic venture in which Ekwefi's bravery accords her an important status. Throughout the whole traumatic journey, Ekwefi's life is endangered and the particular threats for her are intensified by the ever-threatening possibility of encountering the itinerant spirits of the wild and also by the possibility of very severe retribution from Agbala, who as Chielo had warned earlier could "strike" Ekwefi. Bearing in mind the sexual difference and gendered politics of the novel that are articulated especially within the overt masculinist ideological framework that contextualizes the assertions of Okonkwo and the patriarchs of Umuofian society, we must look beyond the surface interpretation of the episode as journey and attempt a theoretical reflection that extends the surface meaning of the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter to locate it as an alternative Igbo nationalist tradition within which we can construct a specifically female-centered paradigm of resistance.

Ekwefi's pursuit of Chielo actually disregards the masculine traditions of the clan, for Chielo is merely the messenger of Agbala, the male deity

whom Ekwefi defies. Ekwefi's defiance of Agbala constitutes an important statement on her challenge of Umuofia's sacrosanct masculine traditions. Ekwefi engages in a transgression of Umuofia's traditions and represents what Barbara Babcock describes as a "symbol of negation." As Babcock argues, the transgression of tradition is attained through symbolic "negation" when "the thinking-process frees itself from the limitations of repression and enriches itself" so that its "intellectual function" obtains "a first degree of independence from the results of repression and at the same time from the sway of the pressure principle" of tradition (30).

The epic dimensions of Ekwefi's heroic venture are also best appreciated in terms of the importance of the "journey motif" in traditional African mythology. As Daniel Kunene's retelling of the journey motif in traditional mythological narratives reveals, one of the most significant thematic aspects of these journeys is the dangers courageous mothers experience in the attempt to protect their endangered children.<sup>7</sup> Seen also in the light of Okonkwo's own singular and spectacular defeat of Amalinze the Cat in which Okonkwo's feat is compared to the battle in which the founder of Umuofia "engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (3), Ekwefi's journey through the darkness in defiance of all the wandering malevolent spirits whose destructive power she somehow evades is of loaded theoretical and ideological significance. The Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter touches also on crucial issues of gender and the authority of narrative.

Although Okonkwo's courageous overthrow of Amalinze evokes a manner of association whereby Umuofia associates virtues like heroism and bravery with him, the Ekwefi story also creates processes of reconstruction through which we associate women with heroic values. We may ponder also some interesting questions regarding the particular details and circumstances of Ekwefi's journey. Why, for instance, does Okonkwo not follow Chielo into the "darkness" *immediately* with the same impulsiveness and defiance that mark some of his more audacious actions, but instead allows a "reasonable and manly interval to pass" before going "with his machete to the shrine where he thought they must be" (80)? Why does Okonkwo resign himself so easily to Ekwefi's decision to follow Chielo *immediately* into the darkness, in spite of the priestess' admonition to Ekwefi that Agbala might "strike [her] . . . in anger" (72), an event that is likely to also affect Okonkwo and possibly his entire household? And why does Okonkwo only begin to feature in the whole scene when both Ekwefi and Ezinma are already out of any substantial danger? In his usual manner of concealing his real thought and feelings, Okonkwo "had felt very anxious but did not show it" (80) when "Ekwefi had followed the priestess" (80). May we not suspect that Okonkwo was less inclined to brave all the odds on this particular occasion?

Definitely one discerns, when Okonkwo finally appears with his machete in hand at the end, that his own masculinity has been both literally and symbolically violated, for he has already been on several futile trips to Chielo's shrine. As Carole Boyce Davies comments regarding the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi episode, Okonkwo's "machete, the symbol of his male

aggression, is of no use at all in this context" (247). We might add, though, that the very presence of the machete and the fact that Okonkwo arms himself signify the real threat of danger confronting Ekwefi as she alone braved the darkness. Further, Okonkwo's emasculation is not only foregrounded; his very impotent incursions into the night and the spirit world at the time when both Ezinma and Ekwefi are most endangered prefigure for him a loss of authority and a deeper disillusionment about his position within the clan that he is later on to experience.

Is it not of some significance to the story of Umuofia as a whole that barely a day or two after the Chielo-Ekwefi-Ezinma incident has highlighted Ekwefi's strength of character and at a time when the "spirit(s)" have again "appeared from the underworld" (87), Okonkwo is forced into exile after accidentally shooting the son of the dead Ezeudu at the latter's funeral? May we not read the story of the three women and the displaced Okonkwo with all its insistent re-orderings of significations of gender and authority as being of cardinal importance to Achebe's construction of the contested nature of power and authority within the clan? Foucault's observations on the erosion of authority and identity are instructive here. Foucault argues that in analyzing the move from wholeness to disintegration or from origination to fragmentation, it is no longer a question of establishing the place of an "originating subject" but rather one of identifying the "modes of his functioning"; in particular, it is also a question of establishing and "depriving the subject" of his "role as originator, and of analysing" him "as a variable and complex function of [the] discourse" in which he is implicated? ("Author?" 158).

In reading about the fearless Ekwefi and especially after our familiarity with her struggle with Ezinma in their mutual triumph in the "war" of childbirth, the narrative foregrounds the emasculation of Okonkwo at precisely the point where it constructs alternatively viable significations around the women. Boyce Davies makes the very important observation that "the Chielo-Ezinma episode reads like a suppressed larger story circumscribed" by the focus on "Okonkwo's/man's struggle with and for his people" (247). However, it is important to note also that in a very significant way, the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi episode evidently prefigures the displacement of Okonkwo and to a large degree masculine authority within the clan as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

Other ideologically important questions support Ato Quayson's view of the "potential inherent in Ezinma and Ekwefi's characterization for subverting the patriarchal discourse of the text" (131). Significantly, Ezinma is about to relate to Ekwefi how Tortoise and the Cat "went on to wrestle against Yams" (71) when Chielo interrupts them. A close reading of the unfinished tale in relation to the symbolic value attached to the yam, the most "important" crop within Umuofia, reveals significations associable with Ezinma and Ekwefi and the subversive potential encoded in their characterization.

Okonkwo's attempt at a young age at "fending for his father's house" (16) is made more difficult by the fact that although his "mother and sisters worked hard enough," "they [only] grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava" (16). Since "Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop"

(16), the narrative intimates that Okonkwo's mother and his sisters can only make a minimal contribution to their own lives, especially since, as Elizabeth Isichei argues, within the Igbo economy, yam, being of "supreme importance," was "given ritual and symbolic expression in many areas of Igbo life" (8). Women's crops, such as coco-yam, are seemingly of little importance within Umuofia's culture and in its political economy as a whole. Achebe himself, however, furnishes a different account of the importance of women in the economic domain of Igbo society and of the value of putatively *female* crops:

Men owned the yam, 'the king of crops,' but yam was a monarch more visible in metaphor than in reality. In traditional Igbo menu this crop yam was eaten only once a day, in the afternoon, morning and evening meals were supplied from women's crops, cassava and coco yam etc. ("Myth and Power" 15)

As Gayatri Spivak cautions, identifying the real relationships between "marginality" and "value" within culture is complicated since the symbolic sites of exchange of value within the "socius" of culture often involve affective relations. Spivak argues that "the socius as an *affectively* coded site of exchange and surplus" is where "'marginality' . . . a constantly changing set of representations," becomes "coded in the currency of *equivalences*" of "knowledge" (227; emphases added). In the context of the gender politics of *Things Fall Apart*, meanings become unstable and even the powerful symbolic economy within which yam is privileged is threatened with disruption.

Ezinma's uncompleted fable in which "Yams" are wrestled has the dominance of yam, the symbol of authority and power within Umuofia, already under question. In Barthes's view, the text becomes "a contradiction in terms" and "multiples . . . in its variety and its plurality" (S/Z 15). Ezinma's tale supplies a contrastive paradigm for questioning not only Okonkwo's authority but also the masculine traditions of the clan as a whole. Indeed, the multiple configurations of masculine ideology, the authority and supremacy of the laws of the clan, and the importance of *male* gods like Agbala, whose messenger Chielo the courageous Ekwefi pursues on that memorable night and whose authority Ekwefi actually challenges, all have the very *grounds* of their authority under question. Attention to the discourses of folklore and indeed motherlore within Umuofia open up possibilities for renegotiating reality and identity within the clan.

Achebe's folktales form part of the Igbo "ethno-text," or "discursive segments that belong to the vast corpus of African traditional oral material" (Zabus 20). As forms of the "ethno-text," fables, folktales, proverbs, myths, and other forms of indigenous wisdom provide modes of interpretation that discursively engage the order of traditional society and form part of what Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* has called discursive formations. Characters' ability to reinterpret various discourses empowers them to interpret "each discourse" beyond "something other than what it actually says" (116, 118). In the world of fables, as in the real world of Umuofia, speakers can therefore "embrace a plurality of meanings" (116, 118).

In Umuofia's world, the authoritative discourses of Okonkwo and the patriarchs of Umuofia would not therefore be unchallenged. Indigenous folk wisdom, to borrow an expression from Barthes, would "save the text (and the world) from repetition." Subsequently, as Barthes argues in yet another context, we are led into an endlessly important process of interpretation and reinterpretation where the invincible image of "closed" worlds of meaning are both contestable and transformable. All first readings either of world or of text themselves become indefinite and transgressive. We visualize in Barthes's "social utopia" a complex arena for ideological negotiation where the text provides "not the transparency of social relations" but rather "the space in which no one language has a hold over any other, in which all languages circulate freely" ("From Work" 80).

Ezinma's unfinished tale of "Tortoise and Cat" versus "Yams" encodes significant possibilities for undoing the hierarchies of power and authority within a tradition where masculine authority is supplanted by female insights and indigenous folk wisdom acquires not only subversive and residual but even dominant potential. We are back then to Williams's formulations on dominant and residual and emergent cultures and to Williams's conviction that "we have to recognize the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture" (39). Achebe's narrative takes Williams's arguments beyond accommodation as it evaluates the crisis of masculine authority within traditional Igbo culture. In commenting on societal politics while masterfully contemplating the limitations of coercive masculine traditions in a society where knowledge of traditional lore and the appropriation of the "ethno-text" facilitate the continual redefinition of roles and statuses, Achebe dramatizes the internal tribulations of the clan.

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## NOTES

1. See Marcus for a further discussion and also acknowledgment of the limitations of the project of dialogical representation, among other issues.
2. Traore provides a brilliant exploration of the novel as epic in his "Matrical Approaches."
3. Representative studies on Achebe, such as by Innes and Lindfors; Carroll; and Innes have ignored this issue. The most probing analysis of the ideology of gender so far is Quayson's "Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both." See also Jeyifo for a brief but incisive correlation of the politics of gender in *Things Fall Apart* with wider issues of gender criticism in postcolonial African literature.
4. Bennett's "Texts in History" is a fruitful polemic on the ideological determinations of texts in historical narrative.
5. Stratton makes this argument. See esp. her chapter "How Could Things Fall Apart for Whom They Were Not Together?"
6. Okereke's interesting article, "The Birth of Song," compares childbirth in Igbo society and the honor attached to it to the bringing home of human heads in war by men.

7. See Kunene. It makes little difference here that the gender-reversal in Kunene's tales makes the endangered children mostly males.
8. This relates also to the new dispensations stimulated by colonialism such as the rise of a new social class of *efulefus*, *agbalas*, *osus*, and those whom the clan has hitherto marginalized. While the clan as a whole experiences disunity, Okonkwo's personal narrative is also thus only a subtext of the nationalist crisis in Umuofia.

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