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Tradition and Modernity in Chinua Achebe's *African Trilogy*

JAGO MORRISON
Brunel University London
jago.morrison@brunel.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the celebrated status of Achebe's early fiction within African literature has come under attack from leading critics. Novels that were previously heralded for their reclamation of precolonial tradition have instead come in for censure, as works in thrall to the ideology of Western modernity. This essay offers a riposte to these critiques, rereading *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* as three parts of a unified project that problematizes the opposition of tradition/modernity, expressing Achebe's distinctively Igbo commitment to dialogue and boundary crossing. Throughout these works, the problem that occupies Achebe most urgently is that of leadership in changing times. In precolonial culture, the figure of the elder exemplified a model of authority as selfless service, regulating and moderating destabilizing elements. The trilogy shows the systematic erosion of that function and the ascendancy of the colonial bureaucrat, for whom a parallel ideal of disinterestedness merges with a pitiless and dehumanizing gaze. Undoubtedly, this loss is central to the tragedy depicted by the novels. What they also show, the essay argues, however, is a persistent, creative spirit of adaptation in the society Achebe portrays. Facing the existential crisis of colonization, he presents a community still at work in the "messy workshop" where a future might be negotiated.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the reputation of Achebe's early fiction has suffered a significant challenge from leading critics. For several decades after he achieved prominence in postcolonial criticism, the de facto orthodoxy based on early readings by Gareth Griffiths, Robert Wren, and others was that the special significance of

Achebe's work lay in its commitment to the revaluation of precolonial tradition. As such, it was seen as offering welcome opposition to the ideological imperialism of European modernity. This "redemptive hermeneutics" (Gikandi 5) was key in establishing Achebe as a staple of the high school and college curriculum throughout the English-speaking world. As Simon Gikandi argues, however, what this account of Achebe tended to miss was the ways in which his project was always, at the same time, entirely concerned with the idea of an Africa emerging into modernity. Among African writers in the late colonial period, the core aim was to "produce a literary tradition that would herald the coming into being of a decolonized polity, one in which the failed modernity of colonialism would be chaperoned by Africans into a new political kingdom" (Gikandi 7). On the face of it, what that seemed to require was a radical regrounding of European modernity in African cultural traditions. Almost immediately after independence, Gikandi argues however, the coherence of that project fell into question, as it ran up against the inescapable contradiction at its heart. Writers like Achebe were of course—and had always been—intimately implicated in the cultural apparatus established by colonialism, but colonial modernity had also shaped their ideological horizons. While their work attempted to return to precolonial culture in search of dignity and authenticity, it continually betrayed its commitment to the modern as a necessary force of social transformation. In this sense, the real commitment of African writers like Achebe was not, as had been claimed, to the redemption of precolonial traditions, but rather to the emergence of an African modernity that, in fact, required the violent transformation of the cultural systems that preceded it.

After independence, however disillusioned with the modernity bequeathed by colonialism, Achebe and his contemporaries were unable to escape the force field of the culture they purported to oppose, Gikandi argues. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Things Fall Apart*, in which we see the process through which an arch traditionalist, implacably opposed to the colonial order, emerges as a modern subject. Charismatic and alienated, for Gikandi, Okonkwo is paradoxically the classic protagonist of the bourgeois European novel:

The German historian Wolfgang J. Mommsen once said that, in modern society, charisma was "the only revolutionary force in history, and, in a way, it is the only form in which the individual personality is capable of sensibly influencing the course of events in an age of ever more powerful bureaucracies." I am not sure whether Okonkwo's project is reactionary or revolutionary, but I have no doubt that he is caught between two bureaucracies that he finds untenable: the old Umuofian order, which, like the African postcolonial state, is condemned to perpetual crisis and ultimately atrophy, and the emergent colonial order that has no regard for the values that are important to him. In this sense, Okonkwo's charisma, like the palm-wine drinkard's and Efurú's mastery of capitalistic exchange, is a sign of his modernity.

For Gikandi, the emergence of the modern here in *Things Fall Apart* is far from incidental. As for Okonkwo himself, he argues, the "mask of tradition" (7) worn by Achebe in his early fiction fails to conceal the work's enthrallment to the transformative enterprise of modernity. It is for this reason, he argues, that Achebe's purported attempt to redeem and reclaim the culture of the premodern ends up

as an account of its inevitable disillusion and ruin. "Tradition" was, in any case, an idea born of modernity: this is a circularity that Achebe is unable to escape.

In Biodun Jefiyo's "An African Cultural Modernity: Achebe, Fanon, Cabral, and the Philosophy of Decolonization," a connected and no less forceful critique is put forward. In *The African Trilogy*, Jefiyo acknowledges, Achebe does make an effort to explore both sides of the cultural encounter. In so doing, he argues however, what the novels disclose is a largely unreconstructed, imperialist teleology in which precolonial culture is figured as the inevitable casualty of historical development. This loss, he stresses, is not merely social but epistemic in nature. In *Things Fall Apart* particularly, Achebe's "narration of the collapse of all the identity-forming and socially cementing institutions of Umuofia" is accompanied by a fundamental "disintegration of the institutional matrices which organise and shape cognition." Alongside the "collapse of ordered practices and values of kinship, identity and community," he argues, "it is the terror of losing one's cognitive moorings and having little to shape the fashioning of new and viable markers or paradigms to make experience meaningful that leads to the deep historical melancholia at the end of the novel" (Jefiyo 126). This tendency is not limited to the trilogy, moreover. In *The Trouble with Nigeria* also, Jefiyo finds a "teleological, progressivist, quasi-Darwinian view ... on the topic of modernity and modernization" that aligns Achebe with "a major aspect of the hegemonist ideology of empire-building Europe over the course of four hundred years" (136). In the later works, especially *Anthills of the Savannah*, Jefiyo welcomes the emergence of a more nuanced and complex framework of understanding in which "culture" is recognized as "the kernel of resistance to both local and foreign domination." In the earlier works, however, this balancing counter-discourse is at best "muted" (137). Instead, in his reading, the colonial encounter is figured almost entirely in terms of an unequal battle between "Africa and the West, tradition and modernity, the old and the new" (125) in which the ascendance and supremacy of the latter is always inevitable.

In this essay, I want to propose a different reading of Achebe's project in *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* that goes some way toward answering these critiques. What Achebe presents in these novels, I will argue, is far from a linear narrative of ideological colonization leading toward inevitable victory for an imperialist model of modernity. The relationship between Igbo society and colonialism is not, as Jefiyo suggests, represented as an impassable gulf between incommensurable systems. Instead, I will suggest, what Achebe is interested in exploring is the possibility for dialogue between precolonial and colonial epistemes, signs of negotiation and accommodation taking place amid the noise of violent struggle. I have argued elsewhere that in Achebe's reflective, later writings, the theme through which he most clearly defines his oeuvre is that of dialogue. In *The Education of a British Protected Child*, for example, he takes care to define himself as an affirmatively Igbo writer who, nevertheless, claims a cultural "middle ground" as his working space:

The preference of the Igbo is not ... singularity but duality. Wherever Something Stands Something Else Will Stand Beside It. The middle ground is neither the origin of things nor the last things; it is aware of a future to head into and a past to fall back on; it is the home of doubt and indecision, of suspension of disbelief,

of make-believe, of playfulness, of the unpredictable, of irony. Let me give you a thumbnail sketch of the Igbo.

When the Igbo encounter human conflict, their first impulse is not to determine who is right but quickly to restore harmony. In my hometown, Ogidi, we have a saying, *Ikpe Ogidi adi-ama ofu onye*: The judgement of Ogidi does not go against one side. We are social managers rather than legal draftsmen. Our workplace is not a neat tabletop but a messy workshop. In a great compound, there are wise people as well as foolish ones, and nobody is scandalized by that. (5–6)

In *The Education*, we are treated to a view of a writer emerging in the fervor of the independence struggle who is, in fact, strikingly skeptical of doctrinal programs, including both the missionary Christianity within which he was raised and those varieties of nationalism with which he has been carelessly aligned. Like Moses, he styles himself as an ambassador and a steersman rather than an ideologue. In keeping with this, I will argue in this essay that *The African Trilogy* need not, as Gikandi contends, be read as a testament to the inevitability of modernization dressed up in a guise of tradition. Achebe's work is, I will suggest, significantly more probing and attentive to difference than such an account gives credit for. Viewing the trilogy in the light of the author's distinctively Igbo sensibility, rather, allows us to see the ways in which ideas of tradition and modernity are put in conversation in these novels.

DIALOGUE

Achebe is keen to show throughout the trilogy that dialogue, negotiation, and the achievement of social balance are of paramount importance within the ethos of the Igbo communities he portrays. As has often been noted, he stresses that in everyday social life, both eloquence and attentiveness to opposing perspectives are prized accomplishments. In terms of characterization, he presents a picture of harmony in diversity. The qualities of rashness and hyper-masculinity exemplified by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* are, for example, balanced by those of proportion and circumspection in such characters as his friend Obierika and his uncle Uchendu. In part one of that novel, Achebe depicts a hearing of elders and ancestral spirits to consider Uzowulu's violence against his wife. There is hierarchy but also democracy to the scene: all who want to be present, including children, are permitted as witnesses, and there is a stress on the due attention given to each person who speaks. At the conclusion of the proceedings, it is made clear that judgement will not be made on questions of personal guilt or innocence. As the presiding spirit, Evil Forest proclaims, "[o]ur duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute" (66). Harmony is restored by means of concessions on both sides.

Early in *Arrow of God*, similarly, when the elders and titled men of Umuaro meet to discuss the possibility of war with Okperi, Achebe takes time to exemplify the openness and exhaustiveness of debate within precolonial culture. It is Nwaka's eloquence, influencing "[s]peaker after speaker" (19) to concur with him, that carries the day. The clan contains violent and combative impulses, but these are held in check by other voices counseling courtesy, consideration, and patience. A fiery Clansman is chosen to present an ultimatum to Okperi, but he is instructed to contain his voice and listen. The elders of Okperi, too, do their best to handle the

clans' differences in a hospitable and courteous way, until a war of words between two hotheads leads to an act of sacrilege and a death. That this system of balance and restraint has broken down, with dialogue giving way to war, is a sign that the clan are entering new and unsettled times.

Even in the context of the existential threat posed by colonialism, however, things by no means entirely fall apart for the Igbo in Achebe's portrayal. In the first novel, Nwoye is one of those who, by turning to the missionary church, has committed a "shameful sacrilege" (*Things Fall Apart* 143) against the dead fathers of the clan. In *No Longer at Ease*, however, we see the ways in which, under his Christian roof, the communal ethos of conversation and respect for ancient traditions continue to be upheld. Achebe underlines this most clearly when Obi's parents learn of his relationship with a girl whose ancestors were *osu*. In *Things Fall Apart*, we have already seen how missionary Kiaga successfully struggled for acceptance of the *osu* within the church. Decades later among the most stalwart of converts, however, a marriage proscribed by the traditional religion remains taboo. Though Nwoye/Isaac and Josiah Okeke are close kinsman in the church, allowing their children to marry would still constitute an abomination. Obi's proposal to offend against the community in this way is likened to a "swarm of white termites" (135) eating up his mother's bed. Like the Umuofia Progressive Union in Lagos, the Okonkwos have found their own adaptations to colonial modernity, without relinquishing those aspects of the traditional ethos that define them as Igbo.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe does not minimize the scale of the epistemic divide that separates British colonialism from the peoples it is striving to dominate. In the former novel, this gulf of understanding is most dramatically illustrated through the contrast between the narrator's complex and nuanced account of Igbo culture, on the one hand, and the District Commissioner's ignorant and reductive conception for his book on the "*Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*" (148), on the other. In this novel as well as *Arrow of God*, however, the schism between oral culture and the world of the book is not simply presented in terms of an opposition between colonized and colonizer. Indeed, as Neil ten Kortenaar shows in an essay on *Arrow of God*, we see the presence of this divide deep within the domestic sphere. Ten Kortenaar highlights one such scene from the third novel in which two children in their father's compound listen to a traditional story recounted by their mother, while their older brother sits separately, examining his new school primer. While the younger children partake of a communal experience around the hearth, savored over generations, Oduche sits alone, attempting entrance to an interior world promising a different order of knowledge entirely. Like the python that he has brought home earlier in the narrative, ten Kortenaar suggests, Oduche's primer is partly figured as a magic object: this association between literacy and enchantment is reinforced elsewhere in the novel, for example by Ezeulu's wonderment at the sight of a district official writing with his left hand. In *Arrow of God* as a whole, however, ten Kortenaar argues that the effect of Achebe's portrayal is not to reinforce but to "disrupt the binary that would equate literacy with the British and orality with the Igbo" (472). While Winterbottom despairs of the vacuity of the "words, words, words" (56) from headquarters, for example, the masks that surround Edo as he carves in the spirit-house are imbued with great symbolic significance and power.

In each of his early novels, indeed, Achebe returns to the theme of border-crossing between indigenous and colonial rationality, oracy, and literacy. This is especially evident in his handling of the Christianization theme that is implicit in the scene described above and that runs through the whole trilogy. Achebe himself was brought up as an Igbo Christian and, as a child, was a member of a mission making weekly attempts to convert the heathen. Undoubtedly in his fiction, he is particularly interested in examining that section of the Igbo community who embraced the church from the time that his own parents did. As we have already seen with the example of Nwoye/Isaac, nevertheless, his representation is far from formulaic. We do not see people raised in a post-figurative society simply rejecting the oral wisdom of their elders and accepting the authority of an alien text. Instead, Achebe depicts the struggles of Igbo converts both to explore unfamiliar doctrines and, just as importantly, to adapt those doctrines to fit their own values and experience. To put this another way, what Achebe partly portrays in these novels is the process by which a new Christianity is formed in the Igbo image.

Throughout the trilogy, the economic and other benefits accruing to Christian converts are consistently foregrounded. In *Things Fall Apart*, prominence is also given to those aspects of traditional culture—such as the abandonment of twins and the ostracism of the *osu*—that make the new religion attractive to certain members of the community. In the case of Nwoye, however, conversion is more complex, as much an escape from his father's violence as attraction to the teachings of the church. In part three, we learn that the white missionary, Mr Brown, goes regularly to converse on matters of religion with an Igbo elder, Akunna. "Neither of them succeeded in converting the other," the narrator informs us, "but they learned more about their different beliefs" (126). Akunna is shown able to draw detailed analogies between the operation of divine and worldly authority in the Christian cosmos and in that of the Igbo. In *Arrow of God*, set a couple of decades later, the work of hybridization between traditional beliefs and the teachings of the church is still ongoing. In the matter of killing or protecting the sacred python, Achebe shows how a convert, Moses Unachukwu, is capable of manipulating the colonial machinery to force tolerance of traditional beliefs on the missionary church. When a directive from the Bishop on the Niger arrives, ordering accommodation with local beliefs, it inspires a surge of new initiates, but for reasons other than ideological colonization:

This letter from the big, white priest far away reinforced the view that had been gathering ground that the best way to deal with the white man was to have a few people like Moses Unachukwu around who knew what the white man knew. As a result many people—some of them very important—began to send their children to school. (215)

Especially in the later part of *Arrow of God*, indeed, Achebe begins to suggest a structural contrast between Moses Unachukwu and the protagonist, Ezeulu, with one representing accommodation in matters of faith and the other, obstinate adherence to doctrine. As the narrative reaches its climax, it is Moses who is able to resolve the crisis engendered by Ezeulu, which threatens the entire clan with starvation. While Ezeulu perversely refuses to eat the sacred yam, Moses produces the formulation: "If Ulu who is a false god can eat one yam the living God who

owns the whole world should be entitled to eat more than one" (216). At the close of the novel, it is to a yam-eating God that the people begin to dedicate their harvest.

In a larger study of Achebe published in 2014, I argued that in the trilogy, he largely abstains from rehearsing a grand anticolonial resistance narrative of the kind that could readily have been constructed from the historical records of Britain's brutal "pacification" campaign. His preferred narrative approach is instead modeled on (what he identified as) a distinctively Igbo dialogism. In his handling of the Christianization theme, form and content harmonize well in this respect, in his use of a dialogic form to dramatize a process of cultural meeting and adaptation. His exploration of political change within the Igbo community, however, is rather less harmonious. This is the theme I want to turn to now, looking at the ways in which *The African Trilogy* explores the fate of communal guardianship among the Igbo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

GUARDIANSHIP

In Gikandi's reading, as we have seen, *Things Fall Apart* in particular is a narrative about individuation, the inevitable becoming-modern of the African subject. For all the apparent conservatism of a figure like Okonkwo, he argues, Achebe's hero is a quintessentially *modern* figure, self-becoming against the bonds of established authority. My reading here requires an alternative way of reading the trilogy: in summary, as texts in which the story of three impetuous "hothead" figures works as the vehicle for a larger background narrative of cultural negotiation, to which they themselves are somewhat naive. What is this background narrative as it relates to the question of guardianship? Almost from the start of the trilogy, clearly, Achebe depicts a scene in which differing paradigms of authority are locked in an unequal struggle with each other. Importantly, on the level of community, this is reflected in an exploration of the ways in which a settled model of ethical leadership—personified by the elders of the Igbo village—is threatened, disrupted, and subverted by the incursion of colonial modernity. From a narrative perspective, what this creates at the heart of each narrative is a space of uncertainty, mirroring the vacuum of authority opening up within the community itself. It is this space of flux and potential transformation in which Achebe is centrally interested.

In part three of *Things Fall Apart* Achebe suggests this very clearly when he introduces the District Commissioner's regime. The new dispensation is framed, from the start, as simultaneously inescapable and characterized by remoteness and ignorance. The first we hear of the kotma, native officials of the colonial court, is the community's hatred of them for their high-handedness and disregard of traditional obligations. When the titled men of Umuofia are arrested following the burning of Mr Smith's church, Achebe shows them as problematically insubordinate to colonial authority too. Disobeying the instruction to respect the Umuofians as titled men, they shave their heads, beat them, and taunt them where they sit handcuffed, forced to urinate in their clothes. Extortion starts right away, as they exploit the language barrier between the British official and the men of Umuofia. These themes are extended in *No Longer at Ease*, where ideas of bribery, corruption, and the abuse of office become central to Obi's narrative. Lagos, full of frenetic activity, is nevertheless suspended in a vacuum, waiting for the British to depart. In *Arrow of God*, the theme of leadership breakdown recurs again, for

example in the cases that we hear of through Winterbottom, of intimidation and blackmail among both colonial overseers and warrant chiefs. Here, however, Achebe's focus on the local abuse of power is widened to encompass a more systemic failure on the part of the colonial administration, as they attempt to implement a policy of Indirect Rule founded in a fundamental incomprehension of the communities to be ruled.

In the foreground of *Arrow of God*, Achebe narrates that Ezeulu struggles in his responsibility to lead Umuaro according to the requirements of his god. In the background, however, that idea is also mirrored in Winterbottom's difficulties implementing the directives he receives from his own, remote higher authorities. Ezeulu fails not least because of his vanity and over-competitiveness, while Winterbottom is disabled by his ignorance and ambivalence. In an obvious narrative symmetry, both succumb to physical and mental collapse. As this implies, then, *Arrow of God* is undoubtedly a novel about failures of leadership. By the same token, however, it is also implicitly about the opposite. Behind both Ezeulu and Winterbottom, with their evident shortcomings, lies an interest in the idea of selfless service, even if neither man is able to rise to it. In this sense, the novel reprises the narrative of *No Longer at Ease*, much of which is devoted to Obi's (however naive) attempts to measure up to a principled ideal of public office. In later works, of course, this is a theme to which Achebe frequently returns. In his political writings, especially *The Ahia Declaration*—the Biafran constitution for which Achebe was lead author—and in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, a conception of leadership as service and disdain for personal advantage is central. Likewise, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the democratic communion engendered by Beatrice hinges on an essentially similar revelation that power must always entail self-sacrifice:

"I can't thank you enough, Emmanuel, for being there and bringing back the message. . . . Truth is beauty, isn't it? It must be you know to make someone dying in that pain, to make him . . . smile. He sees it and it is. . . . How can I say it? . . . it is unbearably, yes *unbearably* beautiful. That's it! Like Kunene's Emperor Shaka, the spears of his assailants raining down on him. But he realised the truth at that moment, we're told, and died smiling. . . . Oh my Christ!" (223)

The imagery Achebe uses here draws together the figure of Jesus with that of Shaka the Great, each of whom accept death in a spirit of faith in communal redemption and exemplify this at the most monumental level. In the Igbo communities we meet in the trilogy, however, the model of ethical guardianship they suggest can be found closer to home, in the softly spoken but ubiquitous figure of the elder.

Throughout *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, we see elders moderating and restraining self-willed and pugilistic impulses. Even the strongest titled man like Okonkwo is frequently admonished by elders, for example when Uchendu counsels him against yielding to despair in his banishment:

Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you they will all die in exile. (95)

Okonkwo thrives in Mbanta because, heeding Uchendu's teaching, he sees how to embrace it as his motherland. In the killing of Ikemefuna, however, he allows the fear of "being thought weak" (43) to override the counsel of forbearance offered by both Ezeudo and Obierika. In this case, his punishment for ignoring the wisdom of elders is severe indeed: by killing one son, he also loses the other. In a similar way in *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu risks much more than ostracism when he defies the order of the Umuaro elders to eat the sacred yams. As Kalu Ogbaa says:

Their orders to Ezeulu are not expected to be flouted without some serious political consequences. Ezeulu tries to flout them but he pays dearly for it. Although the titled elders have such powers and authority, they always try to use them for the common good of the people because they represent the founding ancestors of their villages. They give this kind of severe command only when the lives of the citizens are in danger; in this case, the clan is threatened with famine and starvation. (70)

In the prelapsarian scene of *Things Fall Apart's* opening, Achebe takes care to show the pivotal role of elders in the guardianship of the clan. In the Igbo ontology, as the narrator explains, "[t]he land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (86). As such, like Christ and like Shaka, their proximity and resignation to death places them closer to perfection than those they guide. As moral exemplars, they are the custodians of justice, but in that role they are also interceders between living and dead, mortal and divine.

In normal times, as we see in the first novel, part of the responsibility of elders is to teach the morality and lore of the clan to those less experienced, especially through proverbs. However, as we see with both Uzowulu and Okonkwo, they also have a key role in containing the unruly and headstrong impulses of the hotheads who would otherwise threaten the common good, conceived as justice and social equilibrium. When the community faces a political and ideological incursion that threatens its entire way of life, however, that function is put in jeopardy. In this sense, Achebe does not, in anthropologizing fashion, present eldership as a timeless and static institution in Igbo society. Conversely, in all three novels he shows an array of continuously escalating threats to the role of ethical leadership elders perform. In parts two and three of *Things Fall Apart*, indeed, we can already hear the mounting anxieties of elders over their diminishing ability to guarantee community cohesion. The elder who speaks at Okonkwo's leaving feast in Mbanta, bemoaning the times when a young man can "curse the gods of his fathers and ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master" (118), for example, expresses fear for the fundamental structures of guardianship that hold the clan together. In *Arrow of God*, set some two decades later, the continuing erosion of elders' influence, together with the proliferation of doubts about the validity of their teaching, form a crucial backdrop against which the clan's division and instability are dramatized. At the end of the novel it is this, combined with the insurgence of the mission, that provides the conditions for the fateful shift of allegiance away from the traditional deity *Ulu*. In an interview

with Michel Fabre, Achebe's own account of this climactic ending foregrounds the paradigm shift he is attempting to capture here:

There is a suggestion of Christian ethics in "the name of the son," nearly in a caricatural sense. There is a bit of parody there.... But there is [also a] deeper possibility in which the harvest in the name of the son becomes a reversal of the natural order. In the society we have been looking at in this story, you do not do things in the name of the son but in the name of the father. The legitimacy is with the elders, the ancestors, with tradition and age. We now have a dispensation in which youth and inexperience earn a new legitimacy. This is something new and different. Wisdom belongs to the elders, but the new wisdom is going to belong to the young people. They are going to go to school, to go to church, and will tell their fathers what it is. ("Chinua Achebe" 50)

In *No Longer at Ease*, the obliteration of the elder function seems almost complete. Even before Obi's birth, as we learn in chapter nineteen, when a woman beheaded a sacred animal dedicated to a powerful god, the matter was soon forgotten, so successful had been "the emasculation of the clan" (166), as the protagonist puts it. No elders appear to bemoan her sacrilege or order a sacrifice to the god. As Obi sees it, something fundamental has died in the community. "He, too, had died. Beyond death there are no ideals" (166), he reflects. In the urban modernity of his present, we see how thoroughly the figure of the elder as wise counselor has transmuted into that of the enfeebled "elderly." Correspondingly, the extent of Obi's own deracination from traditional values of respect is made manifest in his disparaging view of the "old men who have no intellectual foundations to support their experience" (20) who need to be "replaced by young men from the universities" (38).

BUREAUCRACY

If the trilogy is intimately concerned with the diminishment of the elder, however, it is also interested in the rise of the bureaucrat. Since the beginnings of criticism on his work, it has been commonplace to interpret Achebe's fiction as implacably critical of colonialism in all its manifestations. A commonly cited instance of colonialism's epistemic violence is District Commissioner George Allen's study of "*Primitive Tribes*," noted earlier. For critics like Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, Achebe's portrait of "steadfast" (51) anticolonial resistance through the figure of Okonkwo underlines the writer's own commitment to combatting the "africaphobist literature of lies, triumphalism and denial" (107) for which this imagined text stands. Elsewhere in the trilogy, from William Green's unreconstructed racism in *No Longer at Ease* to John Wright's sexual and physical abuse in *Arrow of God*, it is true that Achebe offers plentiful evidence of the violence, ignorance, and perversity endemic to British colonialism. In among these portrayals, however, it is therefore interesting to see the way in which he also tries to tease out the ideal of public service hiding within it. If *The African Trilogy* partly concerns the erosion of ethical guardianship within traditional Igbo communities, in other words, it also makes space to explore the idea of leadership and its breakdown within the colonial enterprise.

In *Arrow of God* we see this interest most clearly. When we are introduced to Winterbottom, Achebe makes us immediately aware that colonial service is a calling

that has imposed a harsh personal cost. Winterbottom's sojourn in the tropics has left him pale, thin, and "limp" (30). His assistant, John Macmillan, has paid the ultimate price for serving the "mission" (30), dying of cerebral malaria some weeks or months earlier. A student of George Allen, Winterbottom willingly forgoes the comfort and security of Europe to answer what the former terms "the call" (32):

"For those seeking but a comfortable living and a quiet occupation Nigeria is closed and will be closed until the earth has lost some of its deadly fertility and until the people live under something like sanitary conditions. But for those in search of strenuous life, for those who can deal with men as others deal with material, who can grasp great situations, coax events, shape destinies and ride on the crest of the wave of time Nigeria is holding out her hands. For the men who in India have made the Briton the law-maker, the organizer, the engineer of the world this new, old land has great rewards and honourable work. I know we can find the men. Our mothers do not draw us with nervous grip back to the fireside of boyhood, back into the home circle, back to the purposeless sports of middle life; it is our greatest pride that they do—albeit tearfully—send us fearless and erect, to lead the backward races into line." (33)

In this account, colonial racism, arrogance, and a taste for violent social intervention rub shoulders with ideas of submission to a higher cause and the willingness to accept personal suffering. Elsewhere, in the directives Winterbottom receives from the Lieutenant Governor, we see a different and no less perverse combination. The aim of the British administration, it is suggested there, is not merely to "purge the native system of its abuses" but to "build a higher civilization upon the soundly rooted native stock that had its foundation in the hearts and minds and thoughts of the people" (56). As a cog within a vast imperial machine ostensibly dedicated to this purpose, Winterbottom struggles to perfectly embody the role of the colonial bureaucrat because as well as lacking respect for "native institutions" (36) he is far from comfortable with the application of democratic principles to Africans. Like the elder, the perfect bureaucrat of modernity is supposed to exemplify, in Sebastiaan Tijsterman and Patrick Overeem's words, "a special kind and class of people" (74). Rigorously separating his public office from personal interest or opinion, his calling is supposed to be the efficient, dispassionate execution of policy. In Hegel's formulation, "the service of the state requires those who perform it to sacrifice the individual and discretionary satisfaction of their subjective ends, and thereby gives them the right to find their satisfaction in their duties and in this alone" (qtd. in Tijsterman and Overeem 82). Shrinking from the stringent requirements of his office, however, Winterbottom prefers to imagine himself in more self-determined terms as "the man on the spot who knew his African and knew what he was talking about" (56). Even when the hierarchy accede to his view on the Paramount Chiefs system, he remains quietly insubordinate, muttering "something like: *Shit on the Lieutenant Governor*" (181). In this, he falls short of the standard set by William Green in *No Longer at Ease*, who strives for modernization in Nigeria in spite of his deep-seated personal racism and antipathy to the cause. As Obi says, "[h]ere was a man who did not believe in a country, and yet worked so hard for it. Did he simply believe in duty as a logical necessity?" (105). In *Arrow of God*, Winterbottom's failure to live up to such a standard again strikes a parallel with Ezeulu's story. Like his counterpart, Winterbottom's weakness lies in his inability to banish pride and willfulness from his calling.

Few of Achebe's characters are heroes in any simple sense and certainly not colonial officers Allen, Winterbottom, and Green, disfigured as they are by a racist inability to see humanity in those around them. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that through them Achebe suggests a potential commonality between the elder of "tradition" and the bureaucrat of "modernity" in the ethos of disinterested public service they are supposed to share. In his portrayal of the colonial enterprise, in other words, racist blindness and public service are by no means incompatible. As Zygmunt Bauman argues in another context, the greatest virtue of the modern bureaucrat is often his greatest flaw. It is no accident that in Allen, Winterbottom, and Green the spirit of service they cling to is bound up with a propensity to objectify those they are trying to "civilize." At the same time that bureaucracy becomes the "prime institutional carrier of ... 'the civilizing process' of modernity" (du Gay 576), its enchantment with system and process also works to blunt the capacity for moral judgement on the part of those who serve it. Achebe's colonial officers are functionaries inside a system that requires them, as George Allen says, to "deal with men as others deal with material" (*Arrow of God* 33). The more obsessively they pursue its modernizing rationality, the more its human objects become "cancelled as potential subjects of moral demands" (Bauman 103). In this sense, dehumanization becomes an inextricable quality of the colonial bureaucrat's gaze. On the dark side of modernity, as Bauman suggests, genocide and the civilizing mission may often become bedfellows. In Achebe's novels, therefore, it is no surprise that the most passionate advocate of self-sacrifice in the cause of progress, George Allen, is also the most barbarically backward in his ability to comprehend the destruction he leaves in his wake. He, Winterbottom, and Green are all, in their way, models of selfless service. As office holders within the hierarchy of colonial modernity, however, the model of efficiency and rectitude they are expected to represent has a dangerous kernel of indifference at its core.

CONCLUSION

In this sense, set against the background of Okonkwo's, Obi's, and Ezeulu's ambitious quests for self-becoming, part of the tragedy Achebe depicts in *The African Trilogy* is the failure of modernity and precolonial culture, in the unequal struggle of colonialism, to produce a model of ethical guardianship for contemporary times. Achebe was a young man when he wrote these novels and had yet to undergo the trauma and disillusionment of Biafra and the military dictatorships that followed it. The germ of the national affliction he would later diagnose in *The Trouble with Nigeria* can, nevertheless, already be seen in them: "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (1), he insists there. In a call to action that is also a eulogy for his political hero, Aminu Kano, he calls for leadership capable of combining modernizing efficiency with a rigorous attitude of ethical self-criticism and a commitment to communal justice. Clearly here, with Simon Gikandi, we can see an Achebe who remains committed to the promise of an African modernity. At that point of crisis in the history of the Nigerian project he was willing to countenance a form of charismatic leadership (even in such a figure as Murtala Muhammed) that radically diverged from the Igbo republicanism he elsewhere praises so strongly. Achebe is speaking in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, however, from a period in which he sees the traditional democratic and meritocratic ethos of the Igbo community as having been disastrously eroded. Since the period of Indirect Rule

described in *Arrow of God*, he says, “the average Igbo leader’s mentality has not been entirely free of the Warrant Chief syndrome. The bankrupt state of Igbo leadership is best illustrated in the alacrity with which they have jettisoned their traditional republicanism in favour of mushroom kingships.... They adopt ‘traditional’ robes from every land, I am told, including the ceremonial regalia of the Lord Mayor of London!” (48). In the trilogy, we do not see this bitterness or this mockery. Writing at an earlier time there, about an era earlier still, he points to a persistent spirit of dialogue and adaptation among the communities he depicts, including in relation to the Christianity they reformed in their own image. Facing the existential challenge of colonialism, he shows the Igbo still busy in the “messy workshop” (*Education* 6) where a future might be forged. On the longer-term prognosis for modernity and traditional ethical values, these novels are filled with disquiet, but not yet despair.

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