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# "The Story We Had To Tell:" How Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka Reclaimed Nigerian Identity Through Their Writing

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“The Story We Had To Tell:”  
How Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka Reclaimed Nigerian Identity  
Through Their Writing

Clara Sophia Brodie

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Prerequisite for Honors  
in English

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## Introduction

For more than half a century the poems, plays and novels of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have defined African literature. Born just four years apart, these two Nigerian writers have led lives that are simultaneously similar and distinct. Their differences are obvious for example they have disparate origins within Nigeria— Achebe is Igbo<sup>1</sup> and Soyinka Yoruba—but important common experiences invite comparisons between their lives and careers. To begin with, they share an index of national historical phenomena, from the history of colonization and independence, which came to Nigeria in 1960, to the continued political struggles against dictatorships and through civil war leading finally to their exile. On a familial level, both Achebe and Soyinka grew up in Christian households where they formed some sort of hybrid identity that melded the Christianity of their fathers with the Igbo and Yoruba mythology of their grandfathers. Both men were impacted by facilities of colonial education—they actually both attended Nigeria’s first university at Ibadan—and are as a result pre-occupied with predicaments of the educated elite. Most importantly and probably as a result, both men have chosen English as their language of expression. This final choice has made their international fame possible and secured their lasting significance. All of these common factors are visible in their creative work. Although they are divided by many important factors, from tribal origin and political beliefs to the format and style of their writing, Achebe and

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<sup>1</sup> The word *Igbo*, which refers to the region and language of the *Igbo* people in southern Nigeria, can also be spelled with the more archaic *Ibo* spelling. (Floyd 51). In this essay I use the *Igbo* spelling, but I have left quotations from Achebe and other writers as written, using both *Igbo* and *Ibo* depending on the context.

Soyinka are united by their shared efforts to represent the history, contemporary reality and future of their nation to the larger world.

On March 21, 2013 Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe died at the age of eighty-two. Since then his significance and legacy have been crystallized by the public reaction to his death. Achebe, arguably the most famous African writer of any generation, published his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958 when he was just twenty-eight years old. This extraordinary book, which has remained the single most recognizable African novel throughout the fifty-five years since its initial publication, has sold more than 10 million copies and been translated into forty-five languages (Kandell). The text is studied in innumerable high school and college classrooms throughout the English-speaking world and as a result is credited with introducing that world to the stories and perspectives of colonial and post-colonial Africans. Achebe's *The New York Times* obituary, which occupied the lead spot on the homepage of their website for over twenty-four hours, announced the passing of this "literary titan" with the following sentence: "Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author and towering man of letters whose internationally acclaimed fiction helped to revive African literature and to rewrite the story of a continent that had long been told by Western voices, died on Thursday in Boston" (Kandell). Achebe, who wrote in his 1988 collection of personal essays *Hopes and Impediments* that "the story we [Africans] had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned" (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 568-77), would have been pleased with this assessment.

Born on November 16, 1930 in Ogidi, an Igbo village in southern Nigeria, into a Christian family, Chinua Achebe studied at the University College of Ibadan, which was affiliated with the University of London at the time. He studied western literature under European professors and was aghast at the portrayal of Africans in these colonial texts, most especially Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (Kandell). His resulting conviction that it is essential for Africans to tell their own stories is reflected in all of his novels. While in London working for the BBC, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* (Kandell). This novel tells the story of the rise and fall of Okonkwo, an Igbo farmer who is forced to leave his home and returns to find that Christian missionaries have transformed his village. Okonkwo is unable to adapt to his new surroundings, and the book ends with his suicide. The novel's title, which is taken from a line in W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," takes its readers from pre-colonial society to the moment when things fall apart, immortalizing the presumption and violence that are colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

After the success of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe continued to reconstruct the history of his people in the two later novels of his African trilogy. His second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), tells the story of Okonkwo's grandson, who returns to Nigeria after attending university in England and is unable to reintegrate into Nigerian society. This book was followed by *Arrow of God* (1964), which moves back in historical time to tell the story of the downfall of the Chief Priest Ezeulu who loses

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<sup>2</sup> This thesis does not examine *Things Fall Apart* in detail, partially because it does not fit well into the comparisons that are used to structure the first two chapters and also because it is by far the most famous publication by either author and, as a result, has an advantage in terms of recognition and quantity of existing interpretation.



his position and his sanity to encroaching Christianity. Achebe's fourth novel, *A Man of the People* (1966), so accurately predicted the events of the Nigerian Civil War that Achebe was forced to leave the country with his family (Kandell). Since the war's end Achebe has taught English in the United States and Nigeria, where he published his fifth novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, in 1988. Soon after, a violent car wreck left him paralyzed, forcing him to relocate to England and then the United States. Although Achebe lived out the remainder of his life in exile, only returning to visit, Nigeria was never far from his thoughts. It was the constant subject of his writing, including his final book *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* that was published in the fall of 2012 (Kandell). The deluge of admiration and emotion inspired by his death has reinforced Achebe's importance as the voice of a generation, a nation and a continent.

Wole Soyinka, who would grow up to be a very different but similarly significant figure in African literature, was born into the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria on July 13, 1934 (nobelprize.com). Like Achebe, he was raised in a Christian household: his father was the headmaster of the local school and his mother, whom he refers to as Wild Christian in his memoir *Aké*, was an activist against unjust taxation (Stanford). After attending the government college in Ibadan like Achebe, Soyinka studied at the University of Leeds in England where he eventually earned a doctorate in 1973. During his time in England he worked as a dramaturge with the Royal Court Theatre in London. His first plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, were written in London and first performed at Ibadan in 1958 and 1959 (nobelprize.org). Other notable plays include *The Road*

(1965) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Although he is primarily known as a playwright, Soyinka's works of prose, include the innovative novel *The Interpreters* (1965) and a cycle of memoirs beginning with *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981). Soyinka's works of theater and prose often incorporate aspects of Yoruba mythology. In a 2005 interview with South African journalist Simon Stanford, Soyinka said, "the mythological figures are in fact humanity to the *nth* degree" (Stanford). Perhaps his greatest achievement is his ability to mold the English language to reflect his historical mythology and, in so doing, enlighten the larger world to all that it represents about humanity.

During the Nigerian Civil War, Soyinka published a call for peace and was subsequently accused of conspiring with Biafra rebels and imprisoned for twenty-two months (from 1967-1969) (nobelprize.org). After his release Soyinka continued to write plays and to teach at the Nigerian Universities of Ibadan and Ife until mounting political unrest prompted him to seek voluntary exile (Stanford). Soyinka's writing style, which combines lyricism with mysticism, humor and farce, makes his plays at their best transcendent but also difficult to decipher. As a result of this obscurity, Soyinka's work has nowhere near the popularity of Achebe's. Yet it was Soyinka, not Achebe, who was singled out by the Nobel Committee in 1986 as the first African to win the prestigious award. According to the committee Soyinka's writing, "... in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence" (nobelprize.org). The choice of Soyinka as the first African laureate was surprising, even to him. In the previously quoted interview Soyinka intimated that he himself was shocked to be named a Nobel laureate, that he had

actually nominated other, contemporary writers for the honor. In his opinion, the prize has raised his notoriety and made him a lightning rod for criticism as well as praise (Stanford).

A profound spirit of political activism has marked Soyinka's writing and life. This spirit has inspired a number of famous incidents from the time Soyinka took over a radio in Nigeria in order to publicly dispute the rigging of an election to his call for a cease-fire during the Nigerian civil war, which earned him almost two years in solitary confinement (Stanford). Soyinka used his Nobel lecture, and the zenith of his fame, to call for the end of apartheid in South Africa. He said, in the 2005 interview, "Writers throughout the ages have one weapon, which is literature, but they also have responsibilities as a citizen when literature does not suffice." (Stanford). To him activism and writing can be separate. In the same interview, he cautions aspiring writers against forcing a political agenda into their writing. Soyinka claims that although political content is integral to his temperament as a writer, forcing a political ideology into works of literature often produces propaganda. In writing, truth to inspiration and creativity are the most essential. He claims: "I do not think it is necessarily the duty of the writer [to reinforce the civic voice]. If a writer is true to his vocation, the very process of creativity enlarges the human horizons" (Stanford).

Like many Americans, I first encountered Achebe and Soyinka in classroom settings. I learned about Achebe during my junior year of high school when a class on postcolonial African history piqued my interest and inspired me to read *Things Fall Apart*. I discovered Soyinka during a first year seminar at Wellesley on the

Nobel Prize in Literature where we read *Death and the King's Horseman*. In both cases I was fascinated by the fact that these foreign writers were accessible to me in English without the mediation of translation. The beginnings of this project are the result. I set out to explore what it meant for writers in post-colonial nations to express themselves in the language of their former colonizer. By examining the plays and novels of Achebe and Soyinka I was able to glean two sets of different, though not necessarily contradictory responses to the language question, which is explored in the third and final chapter of this thesis. My work on the language issue uncovered many other questions about the evolution and aftermath of colonialism and how Achebe and Soyinka address these topics in their writing. These efforts make up the first and second chapters. Instead of following the chronology of Achebe and Soyinka's careers, I have grouped their books together by topic, regardless of publication date. Chapter I explores both writers' representations of the past through the lens of religious colonization. Chapter II moves forward in time to the moment of decolonization and compares how Achebe and Soyinka address the difficulties of identity that the group of young Nigerians educated abroad in England and America face after their return.

The comparison between these two writers is familiar in post-colonial criticism. As the two most recognizable African writers from any nation, the juxtaposition of Achebe and Soyinka is, to a certain degree, unavoidable. Despite the differences in their chosen modes of expression, the commonalities in the subjects that they choose to write about as well as the relative closeness of their ages make the comparison feel natural. For example, Nigerian writer Kole Omotoso's book,

which is actually titled *Achebe or Soyinka? : A Study in Contrasts*, compares their writing in great detail. Ultimately Omotoso traces the great differences in their writing to their different tribal backgrounds. Specifically he sees Soyinka's approach to writing the colonial past as less condemning than Achebe's and cites incidents and differences between British colonialism in Yorubaland versus Igbo as the reason (Omotoso 49-53). He simultaneously cautions against larger pan-African readings of both authors' work (Omotoso 24-42). Though the evidence that he presents is convincing, I find that the fame of both writers makes a larger comparative response to their writing natural and interesting. In comparing the similarities as well as differences in their approaches to three important topics—religion, education, and language—I have endeavored to avoid choosing sides. Instead I have tried to look at what is divergent and what is similar in these two writers' representations of their nation and to gain from this a more complete understanding of the African story that both men endeavor to tell.

## Chapter I: Religion

### Part I: *Arrow of God*

*Arrow of God*, the final novel in Achebe's African trilogy, is set early in the colonial period among the Igbo people in a cluster of six villages called Umuaro. The story centers on the Chief Priest Ezeulu, an intermediary between the six villages and their local god Ulu, controller of the harvest and other forces. Ezeulu is a proud man who disregards politically calculated actions that might curry support or sway public opinion. Though open minded in select contexts, he feels that customs dictated by religious tradition or delineated through his communications with Ulu are set in stone. *Arrow of God* is also a story about misunderstood intentions and the irrevocable consequences that ineffective communication can cause in the colonial setting. While Ezeulu endeavors to learn from the colonial officials, he assumes that they too want to learn from him. When he discovers the more stringent reality based on colonial ambitions to gain control of the villages, he is unwilling to adapt to the changing circumstances.

The novel carries two parallel narratives, one from the African perspective and a second from the colonial authority in the region. The first is very difficult for an outsider to unravel. Layers of foreign customs and similar sounding names are presented in a manner that seems to pre-suppose some previous knowledge of the region. In these sections, Achebe makes no concessions to his post-colonial readers. He forces them to try to interpret the world from the Igbo perspective, allowing gaps in understanding to hang in the air. The sections from the colonial perspective, which are interspersed throughout the text, are a welcome relief to a western

reader. Written in a vernacular that isn't steeped in unexplained terms, they are easy to understand and provide some much-needed context. But, even in the short sections of colonial insight, the evidence of misunderstanding between the two cultures is clear. The British misunderstand everything, from the motives of the Africans around them to the structure of their government.

To begin with, the British do not understand the intimate relationship between religion and social structure in the six villages. Achebe spends a considerable amount of the novel's first section exploring Ezeulu's relationships within his own very large family and, through them, the structure of the community. The customs he chooses to include show that he is not attempting an idealized, pastoral image of Igbo life before colonialism. For example, in one early scene Obika, one of Ezeulu's sons, retrieves his sister from a husband who beats her savagely. Obika retaliates, beating the husband and leaving him tied to a bed. In the context of the novel, his action denotes extreme disrespect for the in-laws, who have by this time purchased the daughter from Ezeulu. Indeed, in the eventual negotiation between the families for the return of Akueke, the daughter, it is clear that Obika is technically at fault. Yet the fact that Obika feels the need to defend his sister tacitly acknowledges that beating your wife is not acceptable in the Igbo community, even if the prohibitions are less formal than those against running away from your husband. This is a society with gradations of wrongness that create potentially contradictory standards.

Ezeulu's actions in the negotiation underscore this contradiction. After copious formalities, Ezeulu extracts a promise from the in-laws, ensuring that

Akueke will not be beaten if she returns. He then asks Akueke if she will return to her husband. Although Akueke clearly does not have much power—her father has admitted, internally, that he is anxious to reunite her with her family— the pretext of getting her permission is made. Ezeulu ends the meeting with a brief discourse on the subject of domestic violence, where the lines between his role as father and as Ulu's Chief Priest are blurred.

'My in-laws, I salute you,' said Ezeulu. 'Akueke will return, but not today. She will need a little time to get ready. Today is Oye; she will come back to you on the Oye after the next. When she comes, treat her well. It is not bravery for a man to beat his wife. I know a man and his wife must quarrel; there is no abomination in that. Even brothers and sisters from the same womb do disagree; how much more two strangers. No, you may quarrel, but let it not end in fighting. I shall say no more at present.'

Ezeulu was grateful to Ulu for bringing about so unexpectedly the mending of the quarrel between Akueke and her husband. (Achebe 77)

Ezeulu begins with a formal salutation, maintaining politeness above all. Although custom makes Akueke's return inevitable and we know that Ezeulu desires it personally, Ezeulu asserts that Akueke and he will not tolerate further abuse. He continues in a more general vein, calling wife beating an act of cowardice. While acknowledging that quarreling, even among siblings is normal, Ezeulu asserts that taking disagreements further into the realm of violence is an abomination. There is a possible connection between Ezeulu's mention of the inevitability of conflict between strangers and colonialism: what are the British but the ultimate strangers to Umuaro, and their colonization a broader, though no less terrifying, conception of violence than beating.

Ultimately, Ezeulu does not excuse Obika's actions or forgive his son-in-law; instead he makes a general acknowledgement that while disagreement is inevitable,



violence is never permissible. This statement has implications beyond this domestic dispute; it reveals an essential facet of Ulu and Igbo religion. After the dispute ends, Achebe enters Ezeulu's mind to show how he regards the whole matter. "Ezeulu was grateful to Ulu for bringing about so unexpectedly the mending of the quarrel between Akueke and her husband" (77). Ezeulu gives the credit for this resolution to Ulu showing readers the lack of distinction between his own personality and that of the god he serves and also that this god stands, above all else, for peace. Achebe's tone during this entire exchange could be interpreted as detached: he does not corroborate the opinions he ascribes to Ezeulu but instead makes sure that the reader can trace a divide between Ezeulu's thoughts and reality, perhaps calling into question Ezeulu's unquestioning faith in his god's powers of intervention. While this incident illustrates the violent realities of this society and the rigidity with which Ezeulu adheres to its traditions, it also demonstrates that the peaceful voice of the deity enacted through the priest, attempts to bring about a cessation of violence. It exposes a tension between Ulu's advocacy of peace and the impulse towards violence of the community.

Before this story, Achebe has already hinted at the role of Ulu (and Ezeulu) in handling the tension. Early in the novel, Achebe recounts an incident from five years before the action of the novel. He remembers the debate between the people of Umuaro on whether or not to go to war with Okperi, a neighboring village with whom they have a land dispute. Ezeulu invokes Ulu to urge for peace arguing that the land originally belonged to Okperi and that "Ulu would not fight an unjust war" (18). Nwaka, Ezeulu's main rival from within the six villages responds by

discounting Ezeulu's authority as judge with special access to historical legitimacy: he insists that "neither Ezeulu nor any other in his village can tell us about these events" (19). In this instance, though the village listens to Nwaka and goes to war, Ezeulu's counsel ultimately proves wiser. This war moved Ezeulu and his people into the territorial sphere of the white man, beginning the series of interactions that ultimately results in Ezeulu and Ulu's destruction. Ulu's counsel in this instance, as mediated through Ezeulu, is wise; it would have been better to push for peace.

The confrontation between Ezeulu and Nwaka demonstrates the uncertain borderline between religion and political authority in Igbo culture. The outsiders do not see the admittedly confusing distinction between religion and politics in the six villages and therefore make the fateful wrong assumption that none exists. Religion and politics in the six villages are neither completely separated nor synonymous. This interesting yet unstable balance, where religion and politics are distinct, yet inextricably connected, creates a misunderstanding of the situation for the English.<sup>3</sup> Their goal is to find the head of the villages and get him to report to the colonial authority. Perhaps due to an assumed similarity between the Igbo and the religious and political structure of England, or simply as the result of an inability to conceive of a system that functions differently from their own, the British are pre-occupied with identifying corresponding positions in the six villages, positions which do not

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Mathuray asserts in his essay "Realizing the Sacred: Power and Meaning in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*" that though "Ezeulu fulfils the function of most kings south of the Sahara, as Duerden suggests: he fixes the calendar, foretells the seasons and is bearer of the sky spirit" the division in his authority, between spiritual and political exists because of a cultural division between power that comes from earth— from people— that power that is granted by gods in the sky which necessitates that, regardless of the duties he performs, he can never hold both types of power. Mathuray asserts that Ezeulu actually transgresses this division when he engages in political discussions (Mathuray 54).

necessarily exist. Ezeulu gives advice on political matters, such as the prospect of inter-village war, but his contributions are heard as the opinions of their god. The actual political decision is made by a council of influential community members, who take Ulu's opinion, related by Ezeulu, into account but ultimately base their decision on a variety of factors. This tiered structure with no definitive head is difficult to translate into European terms.

As he stresses in one of the book's climactic moments, Ezeulu's main duty is to Ulu. Before the six villages united, a group of medicine men were hired to create a common deity powerful enough to protect the villages from the hired soldiers of Abam, who were kidnapping and enslaving their people.

Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders came together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them. This deity whom the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu. (17)

The medicine men created Ulu and, as a result of their common allegiance, the six villages came together and ultimately defeated their enemy. They have stood strong ever since—it is clear that since his creation Ulu has been pre-occupied with unification and peace, the key to the political stability of the region (17-18). The chief priest was selected from the smallest village, Umuaro, to speak for Ulu and perform earthly religious duties mostly concerned with practical matters such as blessing the harvest. Religious festivals seem to coincide with market days, promoting unity, worship, and commerce at once. The chief priest is not a king, and the villagers are determined to keep him from becoming one. As Nwaka asserts, "...I will not see with these eyes of mine his [Ulu's] priest making himself lord over us.

My father told me many things, but he did not tell me that Ezeulu was king in Umuaro” (33).

Though the myths that surround this religion are no stranger than any in Judeo-Christianity—perhaps they are even more practical—to an external audience, some of the ceremonial aspects of Igbo beliefs seem primitive and mystifying. The most evocative example in *Arrow of God* concerns the creation and ritual use of masks. Masks are carved by villagers in secret; no one is allowed to see them before they are worn in performance, and when they are revealed, the wearer is identified, not by their actual human identity, but as the ancestral spirit on the mask that they wear. Ezeulu’s son Edogo is a gifted carver and constructor of masks. He describes his special hut where he carves masks:

Apart from the need for secrecy, Edogo had always found the atmosphere of his hut right for carving masks. All around him were older masks and other regalia of ancestral spirits, some of them older than even his father. They produced a certain ambience which gave power and cunning to his fingers. (62)

Achebe’s narrative explains in terms of “atmosphere” and “ambience” how the mask tradition connects the carver, Edogo, and his community to their god, their ancestors and each other.

The belief that people truly become something else when they wear masks instead of merely acting out roles seems superstitious to the Christian missionary and colonial official. They, however, fail to look at their own beliefs with the same level of criticalness. Transubstantiation, for example, seems no more rational when viewed from a culturally relative perspective. Ezeulu, in his role as Chief Priest, leads these ceremonies and remains completely convinced of their spiritual validity

and importance. Ezeulu is the titular character, and in his role as the “Arrow of God,” he is Ulu’s voice, his defender, but he cannot act on his own. “Who was Ezeulu to tell his deity how to fight the jealous cult of the sacred python? It was a fight of the gods. He was no more than an arrow in the bow of his god” (241). An arrow is dangerous; it has the potential to do great violence. It is also straight and inflexible, and if shot well, nothing can shake it from its course. Ezeulu’s religiosity, whether natural or a part of his personality that he acquired during his time as Chief Priest, guides his actions. In his role as Chief Priest he endeavors to take on the characteristics of the “Arrow of God” and exist within the limits that come with them.

While Ezeulu’s rigidity about sacred rituals ultimately seals his downfall, the tragic interaction between Christianity and colonialism is foreshadowed in a moment of seemingly uncharacteristic flexibility. On the advice of the colonial official Winterbottom “Wintabota”, Ezeulu sends one of his sons, Oduche, to learn the customs of the white people. The boy’s subsequent indoctrination and resulting rejection of his customs and his family foreshadows the cultural violence that will soon befall their community on a far larger scale. Ezeulu’s decision to relinquish one of his children to a foreign religion seems out of character—it is clear in his interactions with his children and his wives that his authority is his most cherished possession. Over the course of the novel, his son Edogo develops a theory. He surmises that Ezeulu gives his son away in an attempt to secure the transfer of his godly connections to his favorite son on his death—in Igbo culture, the job of being Chief Priest is not transferred automatically to the first son, it rather chooses the son who is most deserving. Edogo, Ezeulu’s oldest son who doubts his own

temperament is suited for the job, thinks that Ezeulu is trying to tip the balance in favor of his brother. Edogo's cynical assessment suggests that Ezeulu's confidence in Ulu is not as complete as he asserts and that Ezeulu is not content to leave the fate of his children and his community up to a god (113). Edogo's suspicion is unsubstantiated and never addressed outside of his thoughts, but it suggests an instability already present in the six-villages that the British could easily take advantage of.

Ezeulu's own analysis of why he gave Oduche to the Christians is perhaps less cynical but similarly pragmatic. Though the original idea was a request from Winterbottom, Ezeulu tells Oduche that,

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow. (55)

The phrase "bring home my share" jumps out of this passage. While it makes Ezeulu seem opportunistic, implying that he wants to investigate Christianity to see if he can get something from it, the phrase also demonstrates his pluralistic view of religion. The existence of a Christian god does not automatically threaten him or his belief in Ulu. To the contrary, he wants to see if there is anything in this new doctrine that will help enrich his understanding of and his relationship with his god. In fact he claims that his prediction of the white man's future importance comes from "his spirit" which is joined with Ulu's. It seems that, in this case, Ulu is giving him good advice—try and befriend the British and understand their ways. This

inclusive instinct proves to be an integral part of the Igbo psyche. It is the Christian characters in the book who see religion in exclusive terms.<sup>4</sup>

Ezeulu's tolerance only extends so far. Even in the novel's opening chapter, his dissatisfaction with Oduche's performance as a go-between is evident. Oduche asks to be allowed to skip some family chores in order to go to Okperi and help a new teacher move to Umuaro. Ezeulu angrily tells his son, "I did not send you so that you might leave your duty in my household....Your people should know the custom of this land; if they don't you must tell them" (16). From this speech it is clear that Ezeulu expected the exchange of information to go both ways—for the Christians to learn about Igbo culture while Oduche brings the Bible home. The complete conversion of his son was not a result that Ezeulu anticipated.

Persuaded by what he learns at the mission school, Oduche's ultimate rejection of his culture is violent. The Igbo people worship the python snake and it is considered an unforgivable crime to kill one. This custom opposes both the prohibition in Genesis of the worship of false idols and the biblical association of the snake with the Garden of Eden, temptation, and the devil. A missionary called John Goodcountry tells Oduche that to be a Christian:

You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian. (57)

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<sup>4</sup> Mathuray sees Ezeulu's motivation in sending Oduche to the Christians as an example of a sacrifice that Ezeulu hopes could potentially appease the gods and hold colonialism at bay. In his words "Ezeulu believes that sacrificing his son Oduche to the Christian god will protect Umuaro." This characterization of Ezeulu's actions as a religious rather than practical action is an interesting idea that potentially compliments Ezeulu's status as a true believer. Mathuray asserts that this sacrifice fails because of ritual transgressions (Mathuray 58).

Both Goodcountry's imperious, dictatorial tone and his message of dismissal show that Christians fail to see the contradiction of berating the pagans for thinking of pythons as their father, while in Genesis they claim snakes are the father of temptation and sin, a different, but no less symbolic, role. This capacity for contradictions is an integral part of humanity and Achebe's ability to depict them is part of his great power as a writer. Oduche takes this lesson seriously. Though he does not have the courage actually to kill a sacred python, he traps it in a box hoping the confinement will lead to its death (61). Though the snake is discovered before it actually dies, the resulting scandal is terrible for Ezeulu. This incident demonstrates the lack of self-awareness in Christianity, which seems to demand that converts ignore similarities in myth-making between their old religion and their new one. While Ezeulu had hoped to gain something from Christianity, the European Christians have no room for Igbo customs in their religion. The trapping of the sacred snake is a simple metaphor for the ultimate interaction between Christianity and Ulu in the novel's close, but also a revealing lesson about a seemingly insurmountable divergence between the two religions.

Another Christianized African demonstrates a different side of this impasse. Moses Unachukwu, a Christian convert and, like his Savior, a carpenter, is an intermediary between the villagers and the colonial powers. He contradicts Goodcountry's invitation to kill the sacred python. Initially, he uses Christianity to substantiate his protest, claiming that "neither the Bible nor the catechism asked converts to kill the python, a beast full of ill omen" (58). Then, he uses the Umuaro mythology to explain why it would be unwise to attack a python. He tells the story of



a supposed seventh village that had been destroyed by discord when its members killed a sacred python (58). This story, which has an air of magic and mythology, is remarkably similar to the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis. In this moment Moses demonstrates his pluralistic understanding of religion; though Moses has chosen to adhere to one set of mythology, he does not see them as mutually exclusive. He is a thorough convert, well versed in Christian mythology and proud of the deference it earns him. But even this most Christianized of Africans does not view conversion as a choice between incompatible belief systems—he does not see why both mythologies can't be, in some way, true. Moses acts both as a practical disseminator of information—his understanding of English, acquired through religious studies, makes him an indispensable interpreter—and as an ambassador for what the white man, through Christianity, can offer. Moses Unachukwu, together with Goodcountry and Oduche, provides the spectrum of in-betweenness that Christianity in the colonial setting creates. Together they exemplify the progression of religious colonization. Goodcountry, the white missionary teaches, Oduche, the pagan boy, the true word of God in the hopes that one day he, like Moses, who learned Christianity from someone similar to Goodcountry, will act as a mediator and help spread what he learned in the larger community.

In his role as an interpreter Moses demonstrates the impossibility of accurate communication between white people and black people in Umuaro. In one scene Moses acts as an interpreter for a group of young villagers and the white overseer who has come to supervise their construction of a road. While his ability to speak English is considered to be an honor by some, the age group that has been called to

do the construction, which Moses is not a part of, resents his presence, especially because he is often the bringer of bad news. In his dialogue Moses switches between an air of superiority in his dealings with the Africans to one of groveling and complete submission when he speaks to the British.

'No more lateness.'

'Pardin?'

'Pardon what? Can't you understand plain, simple English? I said there will be no more late-coming.'

'Oho. He says everybody must work hard and stop all this shit-eating.'

'I have one question I want the white man to answer.' This was Nweke Ukpaka.

'What's that?'

Unachukwu hesitated and scratched his head, 'Dat man wan axe master qeshon.'

'No questions.'

'Yessah.' He turned to Nweke. 'The white man says he did not leave his house this morning to come and answer your questions.' (102)

Moses doctors what each group says, in part to reflect the limits of his understanding—it is clear that he is not as fluent in English as he has led the villagers to believe— but also to adapt his speech to his own different roles. This fluctuation demonstrates the lack of common understanding between these two groups. The two groups would not be able to communicate at all without him, but the flaws of his translation are easily discernable. Through him the Igbo and the colonists can communicate, but not well enough to truly understand each other. His existence preserves their relationship, enabling them to function in their respective roles, but also condemning them to continued misunderstanding.

In addition, the colonial government misunderstands the foundation of the Igbo political structure—they assume that the six villages are composed of a class of subordinate workers and higher aristocrats headed by a chief. In reality, all men in

the village are used to some level of autonomy: their hierarchy is based more around the family unit than politics. This misunderstanding ultimately leads to Ezeulu's downfall. As previously mentioned, a strange friendship had grown between Ezeulu and Winterbottom, the colonial official, based on what both men thought was a mutual understanding. Ezeulu sees the power that the white man has, and thinks he would be a fool to ignore it. Winterbottom sees a place for Ezeulu the Igbo leader in his colonial administration. The British strategy of colonialism relies on a structure of indirect rule, where a few colonial officials use the existing tribal structure, in addition to Christian missions, to control vast territory. Winterbottom thinks he has finally found a "reasonable" African, someone to be an internal mouthpiece inside the most troublesome of the six villages, someone who will submit to British authority and help solidify their control.

Winterbottom, a long time veteran of Africa, has his own dissatisfaction with the conventions of British colonialism. In one of the book's most enlightening passages he compares British strategy of colonization with the French.

We British are a curious people, doing everything half-heartedly. Look at the French. They are not ashamed to teach their culture to backwards races under their charge. Their attitude to the native ruler is clear. They say to him: 'This land has belonged to you because you have been strong enough to hold it. By the same token it now belongs to us....' What do we British do? We flounder from one expedient to its opposite. We do not only promise to secure old savage tyrants on their thrones—or more likely filthy animal skins—we not only do that, but we now go out of our way to invent chiefs where there were none before. (43)

This passage, in which Winterbottom seeks to dissuade his new Assistant District Officer, Clarke, from his liberal minded attitude towards their colonial charges, highlights the muddled relationship between the colonial official and his tribal

constituents. The British strategy of giving power to chiefs in order to shore up their own footing in the community— which effectively takes authority out of the villages— seems like a simple solution, far less bloody than an all out war. But, it sends a confusing message to the colonized about their status. Still, despite his opinion of his nation’s strategy, Winterbottom is resigned to his position and he expects that Ezeulu, the reasonable African, will agree to help him out.

Winterbottom’s expectations are based on a misconception of Ezeulu’s position in the six villages. He explains to Clarke that, “...I have now decided to appoint him Paramount Chief for Umuaro. I’ve gone through the records of the case again and found that the man’s title is Eze Ulu. The prefix *eze* in Ibo means king. So the man is a kind of priest-king” (133). Winterbottom’s translation is probably based on the best evidence available to him, but it demonstrates the limits of casual translation. Ezeulu is not a Priest King, he is the Chief Priest, and, while the line between politics and religion is not immovable in Umuaro, Ezeulu has made it clear that his role in things is as the earthly voice of Ulu. His loyalty will not be divided.

Winterbottom does not see the complexity of this position; he thinks Ezeulu will be delighted to make their association more formal. He sends messengers to find Ezeulu and bring him to the colonial station in Okperi to receive his appointment. Given his position in the six villages, Ezeulu is unaccustomed to being summoned or the position of subordination that it indicates. People come to him to interact; he takes meetings on his own terms. Ezeulu sends the messengers away, then perhaps remembering his earlier admonition not to underestimate the power of the white man, sets out on his own to hear what the colonial officials have to say.

Winterbottom, through some twist of fate, has taken seriously ill and is not there to receive the esteemed Chief Priest when he arrives. Clarke takes his place and during their interaction, “the proud inattention of his fetish priest” (215) causes all of the liberal minded notions that Winterbottom had chastised Clarke for to fall away. Ezeulu feels insulted by the imposition of having to wait to meet with this younger man and by the way that Clarke and his interpreter speak to him. He pushes back ruining what Clarke had assumed would be a cordial conversation. Ezeulu rejects the offer telling Clarke that, “Ezeulu will not be anybody’s chief, except Ulu” (215).

Neither Clarke nor Winterbottom had foreseen Ezeulu’s rejection and the novice colonial officer is not sure how to respond. Ezeulu did not break any formal rules, but the whole situation is highly embarrassing for colonial government. To release him would be to give tacit permission for others to refuse offers made to them by the British. Ultimately, with no articulate reason to hold him, Clarke releases Ezeulu. The length of the imprisonment, however, has unanticipated and lasting consequences, punishing Ezeulu in an indirect manner. One of Ezeulu’s sacred duties is the ceremonial eating of a sacred yam once a cycle. Once all twelve sacred yams are eaten, he can bless the harvest. Because he was imprisoned for two market cycles, Ezeulu has been unable to eat the last two yams. He feels that it is his duty to Ulu to eat those Yams over the next two cycles, even though the crops, already ready to be harvested, will rot in the ground. The Igbo religion was once based around nature and the harvest, but it seems as though Ezeulu’s imprisonment has knocked their religion off its natural cycle. The calendar of the harvest cannot be realistically put aside, even for Ulu. The villagers beg him to relent, to make an

exception and save their children from starvation, but Ezeulu cannot see a way to adapt without admitting that Ulu has been unable to protect the villages from this.<sup>5</sup> Though he fears the consequences he will not disrespect his god.

Why does Ezeulu refuse to relent? While his personality is marked by pride and rigid confidence in his views of the world, his decision to send Oduche to the mission showed that he is sometimes willing to alter tradition to accommodate the white man. Perhaps Achebe is attempting to show how the unanticipated consequence of that experience affected this character. Perhaps the brain washing of his son showed him that the white people did not have an even exchange of customs and ideas in mind. Or maybe his recent imprisonment made Ezeulu feel like it was time to draw a line in the sand; to show that he had decided to stop making concessions and that the god he works for was truly an immovable force, unshaken by the starvation of his own people, much less the guns of a foreign power. Ezeulu is not blind to the distress of his people, according to Achebe, "...although he would not for any reason see the present trend reversed he carried more punishment and more suffering than all his fellows" (274). But Ezeulu fears more than anything that he has lost his connection to his god and this fear makes him immovable.

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<sup>5</sup> Ato Quayson explains in his article "Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature: Achebe's *Arrow of God*" that Ezeulu's inability throughout the novel to articulate his actions in a way that earns his peoples' support results in his alienation. That in endeavoring to be true to his beliefs, he is perceived as "inauthentic." He writes: "...the ambit of moral judgment (is it right to go to war, to inform on his people to the white man, or to respond to the white man's invitation to become a chief) is intricately tied to questions of action, but in such a way as to ensure that any action that he might undertake will, while seeming authentic in his own eyes, remain decisively inauthentic in the eyes of his own people. His existential condition is that of being the victim of an alienating world while being a central and indispensable part of it" (Quayson 42-43).

John Goodcountry proposes a solution. He suggests that the villagers convert to Christianity and that the Christian god will bless their harvest and protect them from the wrath of Ulu.

Now Mr. Goodcountry saw in the present crisis over the New Yam Feast an opportunity for fruitful intervention. He had planned his church's harvest service for the second Sunday in November the proceeds from which would go into the fund for building a place of worship more worthy of God and of Umuaro. His plan was quite simple. The New Yam Festival was the attempt of the misguided heathen to show gratitude to God, the giver of all good things. They must be saved from their error which was now threatening to ruin them. They must be told that whoever made his thank-offering to God could harvest his crops without fear of Ulu. (269)

This quotation demonstrates Goodcountry's strategic mind: he is shrewdly opportunistic, choosing a moment of weakness to attack Igbo religion and fund the construction of a new church. This pragmatism is ultimately successful, but it provides a stark contrast to Ezeulu who holds to his god as a true believer even in the face of the tragic consequences.

After the death of Ezeulu's son all of the villagers convert to Christianity. Ironically, this solution demonstrates a concession to the Igbo way of being. Goodcountry could not convince the villagers that Ulu was fake; instead, he incorporates the god into the Christian mythology. He creates a pluralistic world where both the Ulu and the holy trinity live, but where Ulu is the outsider, suppressed and subordinated by Jesus. This small concession allows Christianity and colonialism to get everything they wanted. Ezeulu descends into madness, not even aware of his complete defeat. It seems as though an unconscious exchange of ideas occurred—Christianity, in a strategic move, became more flexible and Ezeulu, when threatened, dug his heels in. This obstinacy is not out of character for Ezeulu,

but in this context, its similarity to the Christian single mindedness previously displayed by John Goodcountry and Oduche is hard to overlook. The tragedy is that while the Christians adopted the strategy they needed to dominate, Ezeulu, backed into a corner, ended up contributing to the destruction of the very thing he was trying to protect.



## Section 2: *Death and the King's Horseman*

Wole Soyinka addresses the impact of Colonialism on traditional Nigerian religion in a different manner in his play *Death and the King's Horseman*. This play, set among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, confronts controversial religious practices and stereotypes, dismissing all assumptions and forcing the reader to reserve judgment on issues that, in a western context, might be easy to dismiss as wrong. Though Soyinka approaches the topic with a complexity that is reminiscent of Achebe's feelings expressed in *Arrow of God*, Soyinka's story ends with a less decisive conclusion, modeling the sacrifices necessary to allow a traditional religion to potentially survive in the colonial context.

Like *Arrow of God*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, carries two narratives and represents two perspectives on the actions that transpire: that of the Yoruba, represented most importantly by Elesin, the King's Horseman, and the feelings and opinions of the white officials at the nearby colonial station. This play is more definitively fixed in time: Soyinka reveals in his author's note, placed before the text of the play, that the plot is based on actual events that took place in the ancient Yoruba city of Oyo in 1946 (Soyinka 3). Soyinka comments that he has backdated the play so that the action takes place during World War II; as a result the violence abroad highlights the dramatic contrast between a local dispute and the backdrop of an entire world turned upside down. It provokes the question of why the sacrifice of one man according to Yoruba tradition should be considered so barbaric, when the slaughtering of millions of troops in the name of nationalism is simultaneously

glorified by western patriots. At this time, colonial power in Nigeria had been solidified. The officials we see are political in nature, divorced from the missionary origin exemplified by Achebe in *Arrow of God*, their task is not to subvert village authority, but to preserve their own. The historical truth of this story gives Soyinka's dramatic situation more than emblematic importance, which is all the more intriguing as a facet of a play that fluctuates so effortlessly between realism and mysticism.<sup>6</sup>

The format of the story, as a play and not a work of narrative fiction, resists the kind of introspection that narrative fiction allows: readers and audience members have to rely on the dialogue and interactions of the characters to gauge how they feel about what transpires and, perhaps even more importantly, we are expected to take these characters at their word. This genre, however, also utilizes information not accessible in novels, which are meant to be read and not seen. The effect of seeing the scenery and the costumes, hearing the rhythm of the language and the dancing of the characters to music audible on the stage makes the aspects of Yoruba culture demonstrated in the play more vivid than any prose description.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Biodun Jeyifo writes about the importance of distinguishing between moments when Soyinka adheres to and moves away from historical fact in his essay "Ideology and Tragedy." Jeyifo sees the fact that *Death and the King's Horseman* is Soyinka's only play based on a real historical incident as significant, but less significant than the fact that many of what he calls "the play's basic dramaturgical supports" were invented by Soyinka. These include Elesin's marriage, the visit of the Prince and Olunde's time in England. Jeyifo sees these departures from historical fact as evidence of Soyinka's "craftsmanship," tying him to other playwrights who were similarly creative with historical facts such as Shakespeare and Shaw (Jeyifo 164-165).

<sup>7</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. corroborates this idea in his essay "Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death." He writes that while: "Soyinka's greatest achievement is just this: the creation of a compelling world through language in language and of language. He has mastered the power of language to create a reality, and not merely to reflect reality. But his mastery of spoken language is necessarily reinforced by mastery of a second language of music, and a third of dance." Though language is Soyinka's primary tool, the world he creates is the result of a blend of expressive mediums (Gates 161).

In order, perhaps, to supply the reader with context, the play begins with two discrete scenes which introduce the two main characters in their respective communities: Elesin, the King's Horseman in the village, and then Simon Pilkings, the District Officer in his home. The first of these scenes takes place in the town market, which is both the commercial and social hub of the town. In this scene we learn explicitly about Elesin's position in relation to the recently deceased King and the extraordinary sacrifice that his duty in this role entails. In Yoruba culture, when the King dies he must be accompanied to the afterlife by his horseman who guides him on his journey between worlds. According to tradition, the King is buried a month after his death and, on the day of his burial, the Horseman must die so they can travel together. It would be easy to characterize this as a ritual suicide but that description ignores the mystical elements of his death that make this act so powerful: in Soyinka's scene, the death of the King's horseman is less a suicide than the peaceful, but literal, journey from one world to the next.

This scene also includes the most vivid depiction of Yoruba pageantry in the play. When the curtain opens, Elesin is walking through the market accompanied by drummers and a Praise Singer, whose name implies that at least some of the dialogue between them is carried out in song or chant. Soon it becomes clear that the village has gathered for a celebration in Elesin's honor and, though the format of what transpires is clearly an established ritual, Elesin's own personality bleeds through. When we meet him he has, to the chagrin of the Praise-Singer, left his "tail" of drummers and the Praise Singer behind to rush and meet a new bride. The Praise Signer chastises him for this, calling him a "cockerel" and claiming that his

excitement is “no reason for shedding your tail on this day of all days” (5). They proceed into a more formalized section of questions, posed, presumably in song by the Praise Singer, which Elesin responds to in verse. Here, Elesin gets to publically demonstrate his wisdom and cleverness.

The opening stage direction claims that “*He is a man of enormous vitality, speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions*” (5). In keeping with this characterization Elesin revels in the praise and attention he receives, as well as in the tangible gifts that are given in preparation for his duty, most especially the gift of the young bride. He pretends to be angry with the market women when they do not offer him a change of rich clothes quickly enough. The women, fearful of upsetting such a great and important man apologize profusely but according to the stage directions “*He roars with laughter and the WOMEN, relieved, rise and rush into the stalls to fetch rich cloths*” (12). Elesin is dressed in the rich ceremonial garments of his position, literally putting on his role so it is visible to the audience. This character who loves women, trickery and the luxuries of the earthly sphere, does not seem like a man who wants to die, but, as it is made clear soon enough, it is this duty and the very prospect of a meaningful death that made his life worth living.

As part of the honorable preparation for his demise, to secure his happiness, thank him for his sacrifice and ensure that he has an heir to carry on the line of horseman to the king, Elesin is given the new bride he desires. The Praise Singer cautions him, reminding Elesin that connections like those make it difficult to leave the mortal world behind. Elesin rebuffs him.

This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I'll touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears. (6)

In this response Elesin reveals that he feels closest to god when he is with a woman, and that performing “a dance that is no longer of this earth” is the closest he has come to experiencing what will happen when he joins the king among the dead. Though described in a thoroughly earthly and sensuous way, Elesin claims to find sex holy. The dialogue reveals that the girl that Elesin chooses to be his final bride was actually already promised in marriage to the son of Iyaloja, the head market woman. One of the other women questions how Iyaloja could so easily release a woman “betrothed to your own son” (16) revealing that this act is controversial, even for the King’s Horseman. Iyaloja dismisses the conflict, explaining that financial reparations will solve any entanglement between her family and the girl; on this day the desires of Elesin supersede all. This moment, like the return of Akueke to her abusive husband in *Arrow of God*, is easy to find troubling when seen from a western and feminist perspective—although the argument could be made that incidents of this kind occur just as regularly in western society. Ritual suicide and the seemingly coerced sexual encounter and marriage of a child to an effectively dying man clashes with many cultures’ moral standards, although the bride does not seem to object. Even within the Yoruba community, the fact that the girl is engaged to another man is enough of an aberration to inspire comments from the market women, but ultimately no one dares oppose Elesin directly; his duty gives him some latitude to act as he chooses. He has a palpable arrogance about what he is entitled to, although Soyinka and his characters do not seem to condemn his pomposity. For the reader,

it also proposes the question of whether Elesin wants a new bride merely to gratify his physical desires or if the conception of an additional heir is a secondary motivation. If so, why does Elesin, who is not a young man and clearly a mature and longstanding Horseman, well established in the community, have no existing son?

In this scene Elesin seems like Achebe's Ezeulu in that he is proud of his position and willing to execute his duty. In a ceremonial recital of dance and word that he performs for the Praise Singer and the women of the village, he speaks in parables and riddles, perhaps contributing to the oral tradition of his people in an attempt to affix his philosophical contributions in a manner that will not be forgotten when he is gone. In one such story, he tells the tale of the Not-I bird who lamented,

What a thing this is, that even those  
We call immortal  
Should fear to die. (9)

Iyaloja asks him if he is afraid, and Elesin responds almost proactively, that he invited the Not-I bird to make a nest on his house, and that the Not-I bird, presumably finding no fear there, flew away. Later he says, in clearer terms,

I am the master of my Fate. When the hour comes  
Watch me dance along the narrowing path  
Glazed by the soles of my great precursors.  
My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside. (10)

This response cleverly dodges the question of fear and puts Elesin's actions in the context of his duty to his ancestors and his people. We know he is a man of sensual and earthly pleasures, but he claims that, regardless of his human desires, his "soul is eager." In addition, the first line of this excerpt, "I am the master of my Fate" is an oddly direct quotation from William Earnest Henley's 1888 poem "Invictus" (Henley

16). While it seems unlikely that Elesin would know this poem, Soyinka, who studied at the University of Leeds, was almost certainly familiar with the text. But, even if the reference was unconscious, it shows the subtle creep of British culture into his vocabulary.<sup>8</sup> The use of this poem, which was written during the height of British Imperialism, has a disorienting effect. The idea of an Englishman putting words into an African's mouth as he embraces death in a sacrificial Yoruba ritual is troublingly reminiscent of their larger assertions of control over Yoruba culture depicted later in this play. The poetry, along with dance and singing, comprises an important part of this vivid ritual. If the derivation of these words is anything other than African, the authenticity of this experience is thrown into turmoil: it becomes a hybrid ritual reflecting the syncretism that colonization leaves in its wake. This unacknowledged quotation suggests the permeation of imperialism into all aspects of Yoruba culture.

After the first scene, the setting of the play moves to the seat of colonialism. Here we meet the colonial characters, Simon Pilkings, the District Officer, and Jane Pilkings his wife. When we first see them, they are preparing for a party that the Prince of England, who is at this time touring the African colonies, will attend. For the occasion, they are wearing a type of "fancy dress" based on the *egungun*, a Yoruba spirit that is feared as the symbol of death and impersonated only for ceremonial purposes. Their casual adoption of this wardrobe, without any respect or understanding of its meaning, is a sharp change from the first scene where

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<sup>8</sup> Henley wrote the poem while recovering from the amputation of his foot (Baker BR4). The poem itself, which tells of fearlessness in the face of great pain and struggle derived from a confidence in the "unconquerable soul" (Henley 4), adds a dimension of awareness to Elesin's boastful confidence.

ceremonial garments were taken as an important symbol of Elesin's position. We are introduced to this spirit and to the colonial attitudes that the Pilkings display, by Amusa, a member of the Native Administration Police who has come to deliver urgent news. When he sees their costumes, Amusa cannot hide his trepidation and refuses to deliver his message until they have taken their *egungun* costumes off. The Pilkings are surprised at this reaction from Amusa, who is "Moslem." "Oh Amusa, what a let down you are." Pilkings chastises him, "I swear by you at the club you know—thank God for Amusa, he doesn't believe in any mumbo-jumbo. And now look at you!" (Soyinka 19).

Soyinka uses Amusa to model the same pluralistic interpretation of religion that Moses Unachukwu, the Christian convert and interpreter in Achebe's *Arrow of God* displayed. Though neither character actually practices their respective native religions—Moses is a Christian and Amusa a Muslim— both continue to respect their traditional regional cultures. As Achebe did, through Moses, Soyinka articulates this stance more directly through Amusa later in the scene in dialogue addressed to Jane, "Madam, I arrest the ringleaders who make trouble but me I no touch *egungun*. That *egungun* itself, I no touch. And I no abuse 'am. I arrest ringleader but I treat *egungun* with respect" (20). He tells her that he is willing to do his duty and stand up to native people when they trespass against the colonial administration, but he will not disturb the spirits. As a Muslim, he is monotheistic in name, but he is still reticent to dismiss the existence of Yoruba spirits like the *egungun*. In fact Amusa is sure enough that Yoruba mythology is real that he would rather risk standing up to the colonial administration than face the *egungun's* wrath.



As Europeans, Pilkings and Jane view this pluralism as a failing and as evidence that all Africans are superstitious and primitive in their hearts. Just as John Goodcountry scoffs at Moses Unachukwu in *Arrow of God*, the Pilkings see the remnants of Yoruba traditions among converted Africans as evidence of the work they still have to do to completely control the region. A more balanced interpretation is that this pluralistic understanding of religion is pervasive throughout Nigeria.

The Pilkings use the *egungun* costume as a prop to impress a visiting sovereign. Their casual and overt disdain shows them to be almost caricatures of proper colonial officials: interested in African culture as an anthropological curiosity, or less charitably, because it makes entertaining conversation at dinner parties. They dismiss every religious feature they encounter in their African surrounding as anachronistic superstition. They have little interest in understanding native society, but consider themselves quite generous in that they are willing to help native people advance if they wish to emulate British culture, even if it risks upsetting the center of power in the village. This attitude is exemplified by their attention to Olunde, who is revealed to be Elesin's son who was conspicuously absent in the play's first scene. Three years prior to the beginning of the play, Pilkings helped Olunde go to England to study to be a doctor, answering the question of why his father needs a new wife and heir to replace him. Pilkings remembers the experience in conversation with his wife, Jane.

The old pagan [Elesin] wanted him to stay and carry on some family tradition or the other. Honestly I couldn't understand the fuss he made. I literally had to help the boy escape from close confinement and load him onto the next boat. A most intelligent boy, really bright. (22)

It is difficult to discern whether Pilkings' notion of Olunde as intelligent comes merely from the fact that he expressed an interest in studying British medicine or if Pilkings actually knows the boy well enough to see that he is smart. It is entirely possible that, in Pilkings' view, the two concepts are synonymous. It is clear, however, that Pilkings did not understand the tradition that Elesin wanted his son to stay and carry on, but readers can guess, from the earlier scene, that the tradition they are referring to is that of the King's Horseman. His interference in this matter foreshadows his later attempt to "save" Elesin.

Pilkings learns about this tradition in the same scene. The message that Amusa was afraid to give was about the horseman's impending death. He reminds his wife about Olunde as part of an expression of dismay at having to clash with the same village official again. The revelation about the duty of the King's Horseman causes Pilkings to reexamine the Olunde affair. He wonders whether Olunde, who was supposed to inherit the role of Elesin (title for the King's Horseman) went to England to avoid eventual sacrificial death when he becomes horseman to the next king. At first Pilkings is reluctant to get involved: he tells his wife, "If it were ritual murder or something like that I'd be duty-bound to do something. I can't keep an eye on all the potential suicides in this province" (25). His wife accurately predicts that he will not be able to help himself from stopping it. His reaction is entirely unsurprising, especially given the Christian prohibition on suicide and the consequences that accompany it in European societies.<sup>9</sup> Far from being honorable,

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<sup>9</sup> This tenet is a generalization; suicide was not, for example, considered sacrilegious or cowardly in ancient Rome. British people would have been familiar with the existence of such divergent standards; Shakespeare includes many examples of suicide in his plays. Cleopatra's death in *Antony*

suicide was considered the height of cowardice; Christians who committed suicide were not even allowed proper burial. He hopes that he can quickly and tidily dispose of the matter without disrupting the Prince's visit.

After Amusa leaves, the Pilkings ask their houseboy, Joseph, who is a Catholic convert, to explain what all the commotion in town is about. Joseph's simple response is the most succinct explanation of the seemingly incomprehensible logic of the impending action in the play. He tells his master that,

JOSEPH: ...He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die.

JANE: But why, Joseph?

JOSEPH: It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven. (22)

His initial statement that Elesin will simply die rather than be killed or kill himself, is as close to an accurate description of what begins to happen in the next scene. In addition, his explanation separates this ritual from the Christian conception of suicide, categorizing it as something different entirely. In the next scene, the beginning of this ritual is played out on stage. After the elaborate ritual celebration of the opening and a sexual encounter with his new bride, Elesin performs a ritual dance. He listens to the beat of the drums, chants with the Praise Singer, and gradually slips farther and farther into a trance, ultimately losing "*any awareness of his surroundings*" (35). Once again aided by the format of presentation, Elesin's mode of departure does not appear violent or sudden; it seems quite peaceful. If death is universal and inevitable, the idea of dying in service of a cause you believe

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*and Cleopatra* has a similar sense of pageantry to that of the King's Horseman and is not characterized as a defeat but, according to Caesar, a "noble weakness" (Shakespeare, Act V, Scene 2).

in, with the praise and respect of your entire community after a large party in your honor is understandably appealing. Even more, the gradual and painless transition through the trance seems peaceful and evolved.

The depiction of Elesin's progress in his journey towards the afterlife does not fit with Pilkings' characterization of the custom as primitive and barbaric. But Elesin is, ultimately, unsuccessful. On Pilkings' orders, he is arrested by the colonial police and in the commotion his trance is broken. He fails to perform his duty and is immediately thrust into disgrace. Pilkings is convinced that he did what had to be done and that his actions prevented a tragedy.

Soyinka's relationship to the ritual of the King's Horseman is complicated. His inclusion of the colonial perspective, as well as his own upbringing and education in an Anglican household, demonstrate that he is not blind to the controversial nature of the King's Horseman's role. Yet he dedicates the play to his father, "*who lately danced, and joined the Ancestors*" (2). This casting of his father's death in relation to the Horseman's trance ritual invokes Yoruba culture, not Christian burial. Its inclusion displays his own syncretic views—his father was a Christian headmaster yet remained connected to the spiritual aspects of Yoruba culture.<sup>10</sup> The converted Africans in the play, such as Amusa, demonstrate this pluralism by maintaining respect for their native cultures even after conversion.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka presents alternative perspectives to the European one from within the Yoruba community. Interestingly, it is only in prison after his fall from grace that Elesin endeavors to articulate more explicitly his

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<sup>10</sup> Soyinka's autobiographical childhood memoir *Aké*, which I will return to in more detail in Chapter III, focuses on the challenge of sustaining this double allegiance (Soyinka, *Aké*).

position as the King's Horseman, perhaps because before he had only interacted with people who understood the custom. He tells Pilkings that he hopes he, and his fellow British, will leave Nigeria before they see the consequences of their interference. While he is in jail, he discusses the custom with Pilkings and enlightens him about the depths of his mistake.

We know the roof covers the rafters, the cloth covers blemishes; who would have known that the white skin covered our future, preventing us from seeing the death our enemies had prepared for us. The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost. Around them, there is nothing but emptiness. (51)

Elesin tells Pilkings that he cannot possibly understand the breadth of his own failure, that it has forced him to re-examine what he himself had thought to be certain. According to Elesin, his failure has revealed that their entire futures are covered by white skin and doomed to emptiness. Elesin offers no direct explanation or justification of the custom, he merely asserts that his failure to complete his task is a disaster beyond the understanding of a white man. Soyinka had previously introduced the idea of African futures being covered in white skin in his 1965 novel *The Interpreters*, which I will return to in the second chapter of this paper. In this novel the story of a minister named Lazarus, who died and was reborn an albino, becomes an important metaphor for colonial influence, and has similarly bleak implications.

Though it is probable that Elesin would have been able to succeed in his duty without the interruption of the colonial police, Elesin maintains that it was his own personal failure; once the trance was broken he could not summon it again.<sup>11</sup> He

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<sup>11</sup> Abiola Irele writes in his book, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, that "For the Yoruba, the balance of human life, the very sense of human existence, consists in the dynamic correlation of individual responsibility and the pressure of external event and forces" (Irele 181).

tells his new bride, “first I blamed the white man, then I blamed my gods for deserting me. Now I feel I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will” (53). Elesin admits that it was a failure of his own will to return to his trance that ultimately prevented him from fulfilling his duty but he also places the blame for “the mystery of the sapping of my will,” on his young wife, simultaneously assuming and abdicating responsibility. During his unexpected awakening, Elesin remembered the pleasures of life, which he delights in, and he finds leaving for a second time much more challenging: his sensual love now seems to bend him to life. This personal failing, although catalyzed by Pilkings and the colonial authority, is what causes Elesin the deepest despair.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the character who best articulates the ambiguous position of this controversial custom is Olunde, Elesin’s son who ran away from Oyo to study medicine in England. Olunde returns to Nigeria when he hears of the death of the King. He endeavors to stop the District Officer from interfering in his father’s duty. He has a long and enlightening conversation with Jane Pilkings. Olunde, like the other anglicized African characters, comments on Jane’s *egungun* costume.

JANE: Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing.

OLUNDE: No I am not shocked Mrs. Pilkings, You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand. (41)

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This interpretation suggests that Elesin’s failure is simultaneously the result of external forces or fate and his own weakness.

<sup>12</sup> Gates sees Elesin’s erotic entanglements as both a cause and a symbol of his failure. In his essay, Gates claims this failure shows the influence of Greek drama on Soyinka, specifically through Elesin’s act of taking a young bride, which he characterizes as Elesin’s hubris. He writes, “ His hubris is symbolized by the taking of a bride on the morning of his death in a ritual in which the thanatotic embraces the erotic; he chooses the satisfaction of the self over the exactions of the will. This is his tragic flaw.” (Gates 158). For Gates, the taking of the bride demonstrates a larger weakness in Elesin’s character.

It seems as though Olunde's stay in England has not convinced him of the backwardness of his culture, but of the imposition of ignorant English interference. Olunde, who the Pilkings assumed ran away to avoid his role as the King's Horseman, comes home to participate in it by attending his father's funeral. Olunde never articulates his reasons for pursuing a British education in the first place; perhaps he was simply curious. The end of his sojourn realizes the British's most terrifying fear: the prospect that a man who is offered all that colonialism can give may reject it in loyalty to his primitive tradition. This character is familiar; Ezeulu from *The Arrow of God* also rejects a colonial offer because he feels it would compromise his religious duty, which, in his mind, supersedes everything else. This reasoning, in both cases, remains incomprehensible to western mentality.

Olunde tries to explain to Jane that she misunderstands his father's duty.

How can I make you understand? He *has* protection. No one can undertake what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What would you think of your Prince if he refused to accept the risk of losing his life on this voyage? (43)

Ultimately, Olunde comes up against the limits of language. He cannot adequately demonstrate the intrinsic importance of the Horseman's sacrifice to an outsider, so he tries to put it in terms Jane can understand. This comparison reminds the audience that the British are not unfamiliar with patriotic sacrifice. Olunde uses the example of the Prince and his dangerous voyage, but the larger historical moment where thousands of European soldiers are dying for their nations—unarguably a far greater sacrifice than the peaceful death of one man— provides an even more significant one. Jane does not respond to his content. She sees his effort at

explanation as evidence of his British education. Olunde pushes this notion aside telling her “You believe that everything which appears to make sense was learnt from you” (43). His rebuttal, however satisfying, does not mask the impasse between these characters and the cultures they represent. Olunde cannot adequately justify the custom and Jane cannot bring herself to admit that there might be a piece she is missing that makes this seeming barbarism make sense. The impasse becomes one where comprehension and reasoned truth are beside the point; Olunde and his father assert that if you cannot understand it, you should not endeavor to control it.

Olunde arrives too late; Pilkings has already been dispatched to collect Elesin and his father is unable to complete his mission. The depth of Elesin’s sense of disgrace is unfathomable to the colonial officials. Olunde, who meets his father as he is being taken into jail, shares this judgment, telling him “I have no father, eater of left-overs” (50) demonstrating the Yoruba attitude to Elesin’s failure, and corroborating his father’s own sense of responsibility and shame. Elesin is effectively dead to his son and, as a result, Olunde decides that he must himself take on his responsibilities as Horseman of the King. Olunde exits the scene and, while his father speaks with Pilkings, his new wife and Iyalaja, accomplishes the death that his father failed to complete.

Olunde’s death, however, has none of the pageantry or prestige that his father’s would have had. It happens offstage, and we, as a result, do not know whether Olunde followed the ritual of the trance, or ended his life by different means. Regardless, he was deprived of the celebration and elevation that his father



enjoyed in the hours leading up to his trance. Olunde presumably kills himself to guide the King into the beyond, but the audience is left in doubt about whether he will be regarded as successful. For one thing, Olunde has been, technically, disowned by his father and is no longer his heir. More importantly he lacks the years of service to the King that his father had undertaken—although nothing about the Horseman's other duties to the King is included in the play, it is not inconceivable to think that there might be some, even under colonial rule. Olunde felt a duty to perform in his father's absence, but all the evidence reminds us that this is not a customary substitution. The invisibility of this action corroborates its shamefulness. Soyinka calls this a story with a "threnodic essence" (3). Though the story is, from the opening scene, about death—the aftermath of the King's death and the coming death of the King's Horseman—until this moment it does not really seem mournful. The early scenes with Elesin are vibrant and joyful, and the scenes in the Pilking's home are amusing in their offensiveness. The aftermath of Elesin's failure and the death of Olunde, however, have a true quality of lamentation.

The Praise Singer brings Olunde's body to Elesin in jail. He admonishes him, saying,

Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness—you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin. (62)

In this speech, the Praise Singer seems to suggest that, while it was the colonial interference that "tilted the world from its course," Elesin had the power to correct

it. Because of his failure to return to his trance and complete his duty, the world has been changed. The success of Olunde's sacrifice is unknowable in this realm, but the Praise Singer is sure that it is mournful and troubled: "this is not the way of life," he tells Elesin. The very possibility that Olunde could have died in vain is too tragic for Elesin. Directly after he hears this speech, Elesin hangs himself in his cell with a loose hanging chain. His death happens on stage, and its violence demonstrates the contrast between the ritual sacrifice and this suicide; though identified with the same word by the British, they are clearly entirely different in Soyinka's dramatization.

In this play we are given only a limited view into the world of Yoruba religion; we know little of how it functions in daily life, perhaps because by this time little of the old social structure is left visible. We do not know what type of political power the King wields, or what earthly duties the King's Horseman is expected to perform. We, as readers and audience members, only see the elaborate rituals, like Elesin's trance. Perhaps Soyinka presented the tradition in this manner to demonstrate that the Colonial officials, who share this fragmented, anecdotal view of what once must have been a far more complex system, willfully misunderstand and dismiss it because of the limitations of their knowledge of the larger culture. Maybe if the tradition of the King's horseman were situated in its larger religious and social context, a sacrifice of this magnitude would make more sense. The Christian religion, after all, is based upon the sacrifice of Jesus to open the way into heaven, so the concept is not entirely foreign to the Europeans. But without an understanding of the surrounding mythology, the British struggle to see this custom

as anything other than barbaric. For the reader and audience member, the poetry and ceremony of the ritual itself demonstrate the intrinsic power of the King's Horseman's role—something so vivid and celebratory does not seem primitive or barbaric, although Soyinka allows it to remain mystifying to a Western audience.

As in the *Arrow of God*, the ill-informed imprisonment of a key tribal leader has knocked an entire religion off of its natural life cycle. Ezeulu's imprisonment threatened his religion's harmony with the seasons, and Elesin's failure shatters the path to the afterlife. It also inverts the cycle of life, causing his son to die before his father and potentially, depending on whether or not Elesin's young bride is actually pregnant, leaving the horseman without an heir. The ending of *Death and the King's Horseman*, however, is ultimately more ambiguous than Achebe's *Arrow of God*. No definitive victory is won for the colonial cause; Pilkings and the British officials probably see the weakness of their position in the events. The Yoruba custom provides for a definite line of succession that, with the possible impregnation of Elesin's new bride—perhaps chosen by his father out of some spiteful urge to hold his position over Iyaloja— the lines of kings and their horseman could continue unbroken. Yet it has been placed at risk. In the end Pilkings and Iyaloja argue over whose fault it all was, but ultimately remain at an impasse with Pilkings believing Olunde's death proves he was right about the custom to begin with and the market woman challenging the colonial right to interfere at all. Perhaps significantly, the market woman gets the last word,<sup>13</sup> with a proprietary manner that would be

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<sup>13</sup> Gates thinks that Iyaloja is “perhaps the most powerful characterization of a woman in African literature” (Gates 158). Though her relinquishing of her son's bride early in the play may seem submissive, her strength in this ending scene leads me to agree with Gates.

appropriate for a mother in law, she directs the bride and the audience, to look to the future and concentrate on the unborn, implying that they may still be able to throw off the white skin that dooms them to emptiness.

## Chapter II: Education

### Part I: *No Longer At Ease*

Chinua Achebe's second novel *No Longer At Ease* returns to the family introduced in *Things Fall Apart* more than a generation after the tragic close of its prequel. At the end of *Things Fall Apart*, the suicide of the novel's protagonist Okonkwo and the subsequent report by the District Commissioner signaling the success of colonial efforts set the stage for what elapsed between the action of these two books: the period of formalized and consolidated colonial rule in Nigeria. The second novel is set in the last years before British debarkation in 1960. In the Nigeria that Achebe describes, this long awaited shift in power has inspired leaders on the national and local levels to look past decolonization to a self-determined nation. With an independent future in mind, the leaders of Umuofia, the home village of both novels, construct the idea of a scholarship to help the village prepare. They decide that the village will tax themselves in order to send the best and the brightest child to England to study law. The child would then return and use his British education to serve the village and fund another scholarship for the next suitable candidate. This is the story of the first recipient of this scholarship. Obi Okonkwo was sent abroad to gain the skills he needed to lead his community into the future. He experiences the expected racism, isolation and frustration that an African in London might face, but when he returns home Obi gradually discovers that finding his place in his own country is just as, if not more, difficult.

The book is prefaced by an epigraph from TS Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*.

The quotation reads:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Eliot's poem is told from the perspective of a Magi who goes away on a long and arduous journey only to return home to find that he no longer fits. He does not find peace abroad, but what he finds at home is worse; facing the loss of faith in his old religion, his people are made alien to him. Without his place in his own community the narrator of the poem wishes for death (Eliot, *Journey of the Magi*). The similarities between this poem and the journey of *No Longer At Ease's* protagonist, Okonkwo's grandson Obi Okonkwo, are palpable and poignant. Like Eliot's speaker, Obi returns home from his sojourn abroad to find himself caught between the world of London, colonial Nigeria, and his idealized conception of what Nigeria should be but never was.<sup>14</sup>

Eliot's poem explains the novel's title and helps to frame the sometimes-frustrating story of Obi Okonkwo. Throughout the story, it is clear that Obi and the group of newly educated Nigerians that he represents are, as the title suggests, no longer at ease. The phrasing of this quotation, however, calls attention to an

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<sup>14</sup> Irele describes the plight of the educated African in the following quotation: "For the educated African, in particular, there is the continuing estrangement from the wellsprings of the traditional culture implied by an educational system that is carried out in the European language, and doubled by the impossibility of a successful assimilation of the culture of that language on anything like a meaningful scale. The educated African completely at home in his traditional culture as well as in the European culture is a very rare bird indeed. The vast majority of us move and live in a dim region of culture and linguistic ambiguity: the fact may not always be present to our consciousness, but it is there incontrovertible, and heavy with real sociological and psychological implications" (Irele 49). This assessment could easily apply to Achebe's Obi.

imperfect aspect of the comparison. Eliot writes “But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.” The phrase “no longer” implies that that the magi had formerly been at ease at home and that the journey deprived the speaker of that security. The same is not entirely true for the characters of Achebe’s novel. It is difficult to pinpoint a moment in the novel’s historical past when the characters would have been at ease in the manner that Eliot’s poem suggests. The period of direct colonialism that precedes the action of this novel, as depicted in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, would just as easily fit the descriptor borrowed from Eliot’s poem: when confronted with their new colonized status, the lack of ease among the characters is palpable. The ease that Eliot’s epigraph laments does not have a noticeable role in the reality of the era when *Things Fall Apart* takes place.

In the story of Okonkwo, things unquestionably fall apart, but the unease does not begin with the colonial invasion. In fact, it is possible to argue that Okonkwo’s downfall stems from his own personal break with the “old dispensation” or the traditions of his people. When the novel begins, Okonkwo is a respected man in his community and because of his position, he is entrusted with the care of Ikemefuna, a boy taken as part of a peace settlement with a neighboring village. The two grow close and Ikemefuna comes to see Okonkwo as a father figure so when the village leaders decide against adopting him in favor of his execution, Okonkwo is given permission to abstain from the execution ritual because it would be like killing his son. A proud man, Okonkwo is afraid of appearing weak in front of his fellow leaders so he participates in the ceremony, delivering the fatal blow. This action, which goes against the mores of Okonkwo’s community, changes his luck.

Soon after, Okonkwo accidentally kills a village member during a ritual, and he and his family are exiled for seven years. While they are gone, Christian missionaries arrive and by the time they come back the people have lost what Okonkwo thinks of as their fighting spirit. He returns home to find that the place has been transformed and his personality is a relic of the disestablished old order. It is Okonkwo's insistence on keeping to the old ways that prompts his suicide, an unforgivable act in both Igbo and Christian beliefs. In the end, it is ambiguous whether Okonkwo's absence prevented him from adjusting along with his village, or if the stubborn streak in his character makes his downfall inevitable. The behavior of colonial characters in this novel is certainly disturbing, but the story also makes it clear that Umofia before the missionaries was not a simple uncomplicated land, full of ease.

This question, of what constitutes the longed for 'old dispensation' from Eliot's poem in the Nigerian context, does not have an easy answer. As Okonkwo's tumultuous story demonstrates, even before the coming of colonialism, the village of Umofia was an imperfect place where, for example, men like Okonkwo struggled to reconcile customs such as the prohibition of killing his own sons with his fear of appearing weak. This suggests that the old dispensation refers, not to a lost reality, but to an ideal of the old Nigeria that never really existed. This makes the search to recapture it a futile and frustrating effort. Obi exhibits this familiar longing for an idealized past. While he was studying literature in England, Obi built an image of Nigeria in his mind. This Nigeria is as close to a pastoral ideal as the novel contains



and is best encapsulated in a poem that he wrote and returned to often while in Europe.

How sweet it is to lie beneath a tree  
At eventime and share the ecstasy  
Of jocund birds and flimsy butterflies;  
How sweet to leave our earthbound body in its mud,  
And rise towards the music of the spheres,  
Descending softly with the wind,  
And the tender glow of the fading sun. (17)

This portrait of Nigeria, rooted in natural imagery, is a lovely picture but it has little basis in the reality of either the Nigeria Obi leaves behind when he moves to London, or the Nigeria he finds when he returns. Instead the heightened imagery and “jocund” diction evokes pastoral conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century English poetry of Wordsworth and Keats, suggesting that it is not a result of his memory of Nigeria alone but the amalgamation of his British education and his increasingly idealized memories of home. Obi acknowledges that this poem and the nation it depicts are a figment of his imagination. He remembers the poem after he returns home, on the street in Lagos and revises it saying, “I have tasted putrid flesh in the spoon,” (17) a line that refers to a different work by T.S. Eliot, his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, which tells the story of the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket and his 1170 murder (Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*). This harsh modernist image is vivid and disturbing—a sharp contrast to Obi’s own earlier poem.

From the information Achebe provides it is clear that the Nigeria Obi leaves behind when he goes to study abroad in England does not correspond to his pastoral description. Moreover, the people who live there, aside from Obi, seem for the most part, unconcerned with reclaiming the tenets of a purer time and are

instead, pre-occupied with preparation for the fast approaching moment of decolonization. Obi is the winner of the first scholarship that his village has been able to fund. He is described as an “obvious choice” for the honor (7), yet fails to display the ambition or competitiveness that one would expect from someone in his position. Instead he displays a type of willful aimlessness. For example, he disregards the wishes of the Union that gave him the scholarship and chooses to study English while he is in London.

Early in the novel it is explained that,

They [the scholarship committee, or Union] wanted him to read law so that when he returned he would handle all their land cases against their neighbours. But when he got to England he read English; his self-will was not new. The Union was angry but in the end they left him alone. Although he would not be a lawyer, he would get a “European post’ in the Civil Service. (7)

This choice on Obi’s part reveals his alienation from the union who provided his scholarship. While he does not dismiss their desires entirely, he also lacks the kind of fealty that the union desires. They describe it as Obi’s “self-will,” a flaw in his character, but one that they believe could be ultimately overcome. The term they use, self-will, implies a purposefulness that Achebe’s portrait of Obi lacks. For example, Obi’s devotion to literature, which it would be reasonable to assume was important to him—important enough to risk angering his benefactors—seems cursory. Perhaps Obi sees the end of his literary career as the inevitable result of his ongoing obligations to the union that will necessitate his getting a Civil Service job and consciously attempts to remain detached.

The mentions of literature that are included provide helpful information about Obi’s character. To begin with, most of the literature that he mentions was

written by British men. In one telling passage Obi has a literary discussion with the Chairman of the Committee assigned to decide whether or not to hire him at the Civil Service in a job that assesses and awards scholarships to other young Nigerians. The man, described as a “fat jolly Englishman” (38), has an interest in poetry and novels and wants to discuss them with the recently graduated literature student. During Obi’s interview the two have a literary discussion that “ranged from Graham Green to Tutuola.” (38).

Obi describes their conversation in dismissive terms, belittling its content and importance. “Obi said afterwards that he talked a lot of nonsense, but it was a learned and impressive kind of nonsense. He surprised even himself when he began to flow” (38-39). In this quotation, Achebe reveals the complicated nature of Obi’s feelings about his academic specialty. His initial impulse is to describe the interaction as nonsense, but he cannot hide the fact that the nonsense has somehow penetrated his mind. In spite of himself, Obi is impressed by his own performance, which demonstrates the amount of this “nonsense” that Obi absorbed while studying in London. In the four years that Obi was abroad, he has mastered the skills of analyzing and discussing literature, an accomplishment that is impressive enough to inspire the chairman to hire him even with his failure of attitude, but Obi is dismissive of this feat. While he allows that literary discussions are an “impressive kind of nonsense,” Obi does not mistake pretentiousness for true import. This realization provides a possible context for his choice of English as a subject of study. Obi chose to study an art that, to him, has little practical value, perhaps implying

that he sees the futility of a colonial education training him and his peers to lead their nation into independence.

Obi and the Chairman discuss Graham Greene, in particular his novel *The Heart of the Matter*. This novel, published in 1948, was based on Greene's own experiences in Africa. Set in an unnamed town on the coast of West Africa, this book was and has remained enormously popular. Obi tells the chairman that he believes the novel to be,

The only sensible novel any European has written on West Africa and one of the best novels I have read.' Obi paused, and then added almost as an afterthought: 'Only it was nearly ruined by the happy ending.' (39)

Obi seems to be attempting to conjure a sophisticated tone, implying that he has read all the novels Europeans have written about Africa. This observation, of which Obi was so proud, could easily be described as intentionally inflammatory. The book, which ends with the European police officer committing suicide, does not have a happy ending in any traditional sense of the word. Obi's suggestion that a European police officer killing himself is happy is a brazen demonstration of pleasure in not being a colonial servant. As Obi intended, the chairman responds with a question, asking whether Obi is indeed discussing the correct novel. Obi justifies his opinion by explaining that the suicide of the protagonist who is "torn between his love of a woman and his love of God" is too tidy.

Obi rather pedantically describes real tragedy, of which Greene's novel does not, in his opinion, qualify.

Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly for ever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot, to quote W.H. Auden. The rest of the world is unaware of it. Like that man in *A Handful of Dust* who

reads Dickens to Mr. Todd. There is no release for him. When the story ends he is still reading. There is no purging of the emotions for us because we are not there. (39)

Obi's opinion that to be true, tragedy must be interminable is interesting. He asserts that an author creates a more authentic tragedy by suspending the characters in the midst of their problems for all eternity, rather than resolving the consequences of the situation and allowing the reader and the characters closure.

Although Obi asserts that *The Heart of the Matter* is "The only sensible novel any European has written on West Africa," even it actually falls short of capturing Obi's idea of tragedy. Perhaps this is because, while the story was set in Africa, its protagonists are European. They cannot experience the depth of tragedy that an African can, so what they think of as tragic is superficial from an African perspective. For example, the most striking moment in *The Heart of the Matter* is when the British police officer, a man named Scobie, betrays his loyal houseboy of fifteen years, causing his death. When he finds his body, Scobie quietly laments that "I loved him," but his thoughts soon return to the tangle of his personal life (Greene 231). On this point Obi's perspective seems to ally with Achebe's own as revealed through his critical writings. In a 1973 essay entitled "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," Achebe writes that "At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised *Mister Johnson*) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned" (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, 567-75). His carefully chosen words side-step the implication that every European novel written in an African context is insulting, but he maintains that they will always fall short of fully capturing the

African experience. Obi does not articulate this point clearly in *No Longer At Ease*, but perhaps Achebe's essay helps clarify the dissatisfaction his character finds with Greene's book— he finds the quick resolution that comes from the protagonist's ability to control his own life, or at least his death, dissatisfying. It seems unrealistic in an African context.

Obi's decision to be intentionally provocative during a job interview provides another example of the sort of "self-will" that disturbed his scholarship committee. While the farce of the interview process that he is reacting to is easy to identify—the fact that this literary discussion, which has no relation to his qualifications for the job, makes up almost his entire interview— Obi's insistence on inflaming the conversation is probably reckless. Even his answer to the only question related to the job that he was asked was insulting to the committee. When asked why he wanted this job Obi replied,

I don't know how you expect me to answer that question. Even if my reason is to take bribes, you don't expect me to admit it before this board. So I don't think it's a very useful question. (40)

Obi's response reflects the growing association of the Nigerian Civil Service with corruption, a stereotype that Obi finds tremendously offensive. But his aggressive remark to his interviewer is also offensive. After the meeting, Obi's friend Joseph reminds him that "a man in need of a job could not afford to be angry" (40). Joseph, Obi's former classmate at Umofia CMS Central School, did not go on to secondary school but instead "joined the Educational Corps of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division and, when the war ended, the clerical service of the Nigerian Government" (14). Joseph seems well adjusted to the contradictions of modern Nigeria and his advice and behavior

contrasts with Obi's ennui. Obi dismisses his friend's practical attitude as "Nonsense! ... 'That's what I call colonial mentality'" (40). Instead of accepting the fact that he badly needs a job to meet his growing financial obligations, which include paying back his scholarship, Obi sees his position as a legacy of colonialism. He is not wrong: the existence of the Civil Service scholarship committee, which provides money for Nigerians to study in England, is a direct result of colonialism.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, Obi seems to find the assumption that he needs a colonial position insulting. The reality of life in Nigeria soon forces Obi to walk back his strong stance.

As a character, Obi is inscrutable in a way that his grandfather, Okonkwo, never was. He returns to Nigeria with a panoply of opinions on a variety of subjects, but these opinions do not point to a coherent set of principles. He seems to have a clearer sense of what he does not believe in, of who he does not want to be, than what he is in favor of. He is neither a true son of the village nor a colonial sympathizer. He accepts the scholarship from the Union in his village, but he refuses to study what they want him to. Though he sees the value of the education the British can provide, Obi never really commits to the subject that he risked

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<sup>15</sup> As is the local scholarship that sent him abroad to London. The existence of these two committees is worthy of note. Although the local one is referred to as a Union in the text, they are essentially the same thing, though on different scales. These committees are an excellent example of what colonial theorist Homi Bhabha would call mimicry: the Civil Service scholarship committee mimics the British educational system, and the village union mimics the Civil Service's. Bhabha writes that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*). Mimicry is a tool that helps the "recognizable Other" undermine the established authority through imitation and subtle differentiation. In *No Longer at Ease* the co-opting of educational funding to Lagos threatens British authority, while the funding of scholarships on a local level threatens the fledgling national authority.

everything to study. In short he does not know who he wants to be, only what he does not want.

As Obi spends more time in Nigerian society, more examples of this aimlessness present themselves. He is adversarial in many aspects of his life, from his behavior in the interview to his attitude towards the Union which funded his studies in London—upon returning, he immediately asks to be allowed to postpone paying back his debt. This curiously ungrateful request, although not entirely illogical given that he does not have a job waiting for him, demonstrates Obi's attitude to his benefactors. He does not seem to take seriously his position as the first recipient of this scholarship. Still, while Obi does not want to blindly serve his village, he is meticulous about not falling into what he views as the pervasive negative stereotypes of Nigerian men as corrupt opportunists. As his severe response during his job interview to the possible implication he might take bribes indicates, Obi is vehemently opposed to the appearance of giving or accepting of bribes, which had, at this time, become almost a symbol of the increasingly corrupt Nigerian civil service.

Obi's job entails the review and awarding of scholarship money. This position forces him to acknowledge the value of a university education, which he had formerly eschewed in his attitude towards his own education.

It was rather sheer hypocrisy to ask if a scholarship was as important as all that or if university education was worth it. Every Nigerian knew the answer. It was yes.

A university degree was the philosopher's stone. It transmuted a third-class clerk on one hundred and fifty a year into a senior Civil Servant on five hundred and seventy, with car and luxuriously furnished quarters at nominal



rent... To occupy a 'European post' was second only to actually being a European. (92)

This passage claims that all Nigerians, including Achebe's narrator and Obi, understand the importance of the opportunity in terms of material advancement. Yet this colonial education, which is essentially the gateway to a better life, also seems to lead inevitably to the slippery slope of bribery and corruption. Even the strongest willed recipients eventually succumb to the constant temptation of extravagances. For example, soon after he begins his assignment, Obi starts receiving requests for assistance in the scholarship process. These bribes that he is asked to accept are not the result of greed or blind ambition. The people who come to him are young and desperate, but he is initially unwilling to sacrifice his honor.

Obi quickly discovers the reason that corruption is so prevalent—though the rewards of a government job are comparatively great, they are not great enough to cover all the expenses of a young civil servant. Obi's financial obligations, from repaying the scholarship to paying for his mothers' medical expenses build up against the hidden costs of the trappings of his new position, from a car to his own houseboy, and Obi finds himself falling behind. Though he is opposed, in principle, to the figure of the spoiled, irresponsible, and corrupt civil servant, he genuinely enjoys the perks of his job and does not see the need to sacrifice them for his beliefs.<sup>16</sup> This contradiction exemplifies the very nature of Obi's unease in Nigeria:

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<sup>16</sup> Adebisi Ademakinwa sees what I think of as Obi's aimlessness as an inevitable result of the introduction of "Acquisitive Culture" in Nigeria. He explains in his essay "'Acquisitive Culture' and its Impact on Nigeria's Socio-Economic Development" that, "The masses in modern Nigeria, on the one hand, have developed a taste for Western material culture and they see those who are occupying the positions just left by the white men as having the ability to afford the perks of office even when these people do not. On the other hand, those who seize the opportunity to occupy these positions must live up to the expectation of the masses even if they find it exceedingly difficult to do so. If they don't,

his principles of integrity do not hold up against rewards of being corrupt. Obi desires both the principles and the rewards but he finds out that they are impossible to reconcile. This descent reveals that his principles are hollow. Obi was unwilling to accept bribes in order to help people—he does it only when he needs the money. If he had made the argument that, although accepting bribes was an ethical grey area, he was a true proponent of education and would do all he could to help people afford it, his actions would have been understandable if not excusable. But Obi says no until he needs the money. He does not compromise the rules for his principles, he compromises principles for money and, in doing so, becomes detached from family and community.

In the midst of Obi's academic and career struggles, Achebe includes a love story between Obi and a nurse named Clara, the consequences of which reveal a different version of Obi's personal contradictions. Obi first meets Clara at a dance in London and they fall in love on the voyage back to Nigeria. In England and on the way home Obi and Clara are the same: two Nigerians with new British diplomas ready to take the lead in their respective fields. They even speak the same language, a fact that makes Obi feel earnestly connected to her. He takes it as a sign that they are meant to be together, "But then she had spoken in Ibo, for the first time, as if to say, 'We belong together: we speak the same language' " (25). In the middle of the ocean, literally suspended between two worlds, they belong together. But as soon as

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they are condemned for being miserly" (Ademakinwa 292). This analysis casts Obi as a representative of a larger group in his society and characterizes his failings as almost inevitable, which I think highlights the larger significance of Achebe's story.

they land on the shore of their own nation, the reality of their nation's hybrid identity tears them apart.

Back in Nigeria, their relationship develops and Obi earnestly wants to marry Clara. She is reluctant to accept him because she belongs to a caste called the *osu* who are forbidden by custom to marry. Obi, being a modern educated man, quickly assures Clara that he will marry her, even with this information, exemplifying his partial allegiance to the British dispensation that he encountered abroad. He goes home to visit his ailing mother and to tell his parents about his plans to marry Clara. His parents are relatively modern; for example his father, Okonkwo's son who converts to Christianity, "believed utterly and completely in the things of the white man. And the symbol of the white man's power was the written word, or better still, the printed word" (126). They do not, however, have the measured reaction that Obi expected from a Christian couple with a well-developed respect for colonial authority. When Obi announces his desire to marry an *osu* the elder Mr. Okonkwo says: " 'We are Christians,' he said. 'But that is no reason to marry an *osu*...this thing is deeper than you think' " (133). Mr. Okonkwo understands that respecting the traditions of a religion he has rejected is illogical, but he reveals that even though they have converted, his feelings about disrespecting the *osu* tradition go "deeper" than that. Their family is caught between two dispensations.

Obi's mother demonstrates the type of visceral reaction that her husband describes. She tells her son, "if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself" (136). Obi had expected his mother to support him but her reaction, which is even more extreme than his father's,

shocks him, and although he is reticent to admit it, it affects his decision. Obi is forced to confront evidence that the Nigeria he imagined in London is even more detached from reality than he had believed, a pastoral allusion like the ones he studied in school. In addition to the corruption, which, despite the authentic desperation that sometimes drives it, Obi finds so appalling, the vestiges of an old culture continue to contradict the fair and equal Nigeria that Obi envisions for the future. The imperfections of this cultural syncretism demonstrate how the nation, like Obi, is caught between history, the foreign influence of the colonial power and an uncertain future. The divide is not generational, but within the consciousness of all Nigerians: even Obi's friend Joseph, relatively his contemporary, finds the idea of marrying an *osu* objectionable. He tells Obi "You may say that I am not broad-minded, but I don't think we have reached the stage where we can ignore all our customs. You may talk about education and so on, but I am not going to marry an *osu*" (144).

Joseph does not think that they have progressed beyond the *osu*, and Obi is more persuaded by his argument than he had hoped. Obi had not wanted to be the type of man who would abandon his love for the sake of anachronistic customs, but he also does not want to cause his parents pain. Their reactions, especially his mother's, leave him in a difficult situation. Matters get worse when Clara becomes pregnant. Instead of marrying her, Obi pays for her abortion and their relationship ends. In this moment his financial problems meet his social problems and as Obi struggles to pay off the abortion, he begins taking bribes, proving that he cannot

continue to hold contradictory principles at the same time.<sup>17</sup> This leads to his arrest and the trial that begins and ends the novel. Obi's downfall shows that the stereotypes he so vehemently opposed were not caricatures but an increasingly inevitable descent for people in Obi's position.

During his job interview Obi holds up *A Handful of Dust* by Evelyn Waugh as an example of true tragedy. This book, like *The Heart of the Matter*, has a colonial element: the hero gets stranded forever in the jungle of Brazil, forced to continually read Dickens to his captor. For whatever reason, Obi feels that with this novel (which also derives its title from a T.S. Eliot poem, this time *The Wasteland*), a British writer was able to capture the tragedy of this colonial context, although only through the eyes of a white visitor, but that the same thing has not so far been possible in relation to Africa. *No Longer At Ease* itself demonstrates Achebe's point in the formation of the novel structurally and in terms of the events that transpire. Obi's tragedy is left unresolved—the reader never knows exactly what punishment he receives for his crime: he is suspended inside the trial for eternity. This suspension in a state of anxiety illustrates the strained reality of the returned students that Obi so aptly represents. Caught between the world of their colonial education, the reality of Nigerian society and the ever present ghost of a fictional

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<sup>17</sup> Taiwo Adetunji Osnubi sees the juxtaposition of the bribe with the disillusion of Obi's relationship with Clara as significant. In his essay "Chinua Achebe and the Uptakes of African Slavery" he expands on the history of the *osu* class in Igbo society and how, as a caste of people dedicated to the gods, they were considered simultaneously above and below chattel slaves because, although they were ostensibly free, they could never earn the rights of freedmen, which slaves conceivably could. He finds it significant that the *osu* survived beyond the abolition of slavery. He sees the connection between these two moments as evidence that "the law of the colonial state codifies and operates upon a moral order distinct from the vestigial moral order in which tradition operated" (Osnubi 42). This implies that his break from Clara constituted a break from Colonial mores in favor of Igbo ones, which eventually brings him into conflict with colonial laws.

ideal Nigeria from days gone by, these young men and women are not able to easily fill the roles created for them in Nigeria and uncertain of how to create a new national identity fit for their approaching independence. Their identities are confused. The push pull of contradictory realities and expectations leaves them only sure of what they do not want yet helpless to avoid it.

## Part II: *The Interpreters*

In one of the final scenes of Wole Soyinka's first novel, *The Interpreters*, a group of the book's main characters clusters around a painting of the Yoruba gods. The canvas, which one of the friends, an artist called Kola, has been laboriously constructing throughout the novel, is entitled "The Pantheon" and it features many of his friends and acquaintances posed as the different divine figures that he thinks they most resemble. For example, Ogun, the explorer, warrior, and creative god, is portrayed by Egbo, an atheist who works for the foreign service; Esumare, the rainbow, is portrayed by Lazarus, an albino who leads an evangelical religious cult; Joe Golder, a bi-racial American homosexual, is Erinle, an animal spirit, and an albino servant girl named Usaye is the handmaiden of Obaluwaiye, the god of smallpox. In this scene, Soyinka's characters crowd around the unfinished canvas, searching for their reflections and wondering what Kola's interpretation of them means. Soyinka shows the rainbow through Egbo's eyes.

Egbo took his eyes away from what he really wanted to see, his own presence in the overpowering canvas. The unfinished part was an arched figure rising not from a dry grave, but from a primordial chaos of gaseous whorls and flood-waters. He is wreathed in nothing but light, a pure rainbow translucence. It was Lazarus, Kola's new dimension to the covenant. (Soyinka 232)

Here, Kola seems to come close to capturing the transcendence of a god depicted in human form: Lazarus almost becomes the rainbow. When Egbo compares the success of this character with his own portrait he becomes indignant. He remarks: "My friend has very uneven talents. Look at that thing he has made of me for instance, a damned bloodthirsty maniac from some maximum security zoo. Is that supposed to be me? Or even Ogun which I presume it represents?" (233). While

Egbo admires his friend's efforts at representing Lazarus the charismatic pastor, he struggles to see any of himself or the god he supposedly represents in Kola's work. He goes on to explain that Kola's conception of Ogun comes from a single myth and is thus limited. It is easy to infer that Egbo also sees his friend's representation of himself as similarly one-dimensional.

In his painting Kola tries to fit his friends into a cosmic scheme but as he works on his project, he discovers that both his subjects and his models have individual realities that resist his perception of them. He discovers that in attempting to fit them into roles of his creation he is denying their independent reality. This tension is reflected in the art itself, which, with the possible exception of Lazarus, never really acquires the spiritual quality that might give it importance beyond the gimmick of its subject matter.<sup>18</sup>

This motif of individual identities which resist confinement in any schematic design corresponds to the predicament that forms the center of the novel. Like Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, *The Interpreters* is a story about the potential challenges that young Nigerians who were educated abroad in England and the United States face when they return to Nigeria, but unlike, *No Longer At Ease*, Soyinka's novel does not have a single protagonist. Instead, the plot swings between the consciousnesses of different members of a group of childhood friends who

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<sup>18</sup> In his essay "The National and the Transnational" Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and *Aké: The Years of Childhood*," Olakunle George asserts that Kola's painting also serves as a metaphor for the creation of the novel itself. He explains that "the novel elaborates a symbolic system over and beyond the bleak comedy that surrounds the characters' lives. It does this by means of Kola's painting of a pantheon of Yoruba gods, using the principal characters as models. The novel thus poses the farcical reality of its characters' lives against the ideality of the world of pagan gods rendered in Kola's painting. In this way, by means of Kola's painting, the novel comments on its own creative effort" (George 284).



reunite after attending university independently in America and England. Together they pursue various professions in Lagos and the nearby university town of Ibadan and try to find their places in their nation. As a result, the commentary that Soyinka's characters provide on the demographic that they represent is more varied than Achebe's. Like the figures in Kola's painting, "The Interpreters" do not fit into any pre-determined ideal of what they should be. Instead they helm their own journeys, constructing myths that they hope are more relevant to their individual realities.

The structure and style of *The Interpreters* reflects the experimental mindset of its characters.<sup>19</sup> The novel is constructed out of a series of interlocking vignettes that center on a group of young Nigerian intellectuals, but these scenes do not progress in a strictly chronological or linear order. Instead, Soyinka shifts from setting to setting and perspective to perspective, often abruptly. Sometimes he returns to tie up plot threads that have been left dangling by one of these transitions, but other characters and events remain undeveloped and unresolved. The prose itself is complex. Soyinka is at times intensely oriented toward observational details and in other moments he is esoteric, using language reminiscent of the most mystical moments in his plays. Decoding his larger meaning, as well as tracking the major plot points, is a difficult task, perhaps reflecting the messy development of his characters and their nation. The novel is set slightly after

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<sup>19</sup> George asserts that, in addition to reflecting a modern version of Yoruba ideals, the very concept of *The Interpreters* reflects European modernism. He explains: "Clearly, both *Aké* and *The Interpreters* detail familiar scenarios of modernist yearning, made urgent by the alienation and intensity, to evoke the cliché, of artists as young men." (George 291).

Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, after the date of decolonization. Without the looming uncertainty of the impending British departure, the characters of Soyinka's novel are free from the hypothetical or theoretical ponderings of what their nation will be like. The future has arrived and they—the youthful elite—are in the midst of shaping the newly independent Nigeria in various ways. Remarkably, in the text of the novel, their national relevance becomes secondary as the characters struggle to shape themselves.

Soyinka's title refers to a comment made with some irony by one of the characters in the latter half of his novel. The friends have converged to go to an evangelical church outside of the city. Sagoe, who works as a journalist, is there at the request of Lazarus, and his friends have accompanied him for various reasons. One of them, a professor named Bandele, says that he has come to gain "Knowledge of the new generation of Interpreters" (178). His remark is glib, intended to rile his friend Egbo, an atheist who doubts that the members of this extreme congregation should be responsible for interpreting anything. This moniker, though intentionally ironical in its context, is a fitting title for the group of friends themselves. Apart from any religious connotation, the term has interesting implications. Interpreters are mediators, responsible for delivering information from one group to another but they are more than just messengers. They have an obligation to analyze the information and make sense of it for their audience, bringing something of their own thought into their interpretation.

The idea of interpretation gives these characters more agency than members of the messenger class, which is featured so prominently in Achebe. According to

Kenyan writer and critic Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the development of this class can be seen in Achebe's writing, "from its inception as actual messengers, clerks, soldiers, policemen, and road foremen in colonialism as seen in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, to their position as the educated 'been-tos' in *No Longer At Ease...*" (Ngugi 63). Obi clearly falls into this category— his passivity and lack of any formulated individual thinking make his downfall a foregone conclusion. Soyinka's group of 'been-tos' are more diverse, both in their hopes and dreams and in their reactions to the struggle of interpreting their hybrid identities in the Nigerian context. They are myth-makers, trying to innovate new identities either by updating old ones, as Kola does, or by creating entirely new principles of integration.

To better understand what Bandele means by "the new generation of Interpreters" it is essential to interrogate the subject of his comment. Lazarus, the evangelical priest, is the epitome of a myth-maker. Though he is a secondary character and not a member of the central group of friends, his story clearly reflects the idea that it is possible to remake your identity and that this rebirth can have unintended consequences. Lazarus is initially identified and set apart by his albinism, as one of two albino characters who, together, provide an interesting motif throughout the novel. Close to the start, Kola paints an albino servant he has encountered as one of the figures in his portrait in exchange for a pair of glasses his model needs. Kola finds this girl intriguing but it is not until Sagoe first notices Lazarus, the novel's second albino, that the significance of albinism is fully realized. When Sagoe first sees Lazarus at a funeral he mistakes him for a white man. The idea of Africans who should have been born black, but came out white by some

accident of biology is interesting in the post colonial context in general but Lazarus's story makes this connection even more explicit. He explains why when he seeks Sagoe, and his friends, out at a bar.

I do not know what I was before I died, or where I came from, but what really frightened the villagers is that before they put me in the coffin, I was like you, like all your friends, black. When I woke up, I have become like this. (160-161)

Lazarus was born black, died, and was resurrected as a white man. His appearance, though white enough to fool Sagoe from a distance, is, in reality, quite disturbing.

The following is a description of Lazarus as seen through the eyes of Kola in the bar at their first meeting.

Across the floor, an albino sat slanted like a leprous moonbeam without the softness. Freckles on his face like poisoned motes, dark scabs, and they floated on sheer phosphorence of the skin. Kola, busy on his everlasting serviettes, blurred the details, dissolving chicken grease blobs in sallow depths of the man's cheek and eye hollows. (157)

This view is dramatically different from the description of Lazarus in Kola's painting and it raises the question of why Kola wanted to include this figure that he originally sees as so grotesque. From this description it would not be difficult to believe that this man used to be dead. His acquired whiteness has not settled naturally on him, in fact it seems to be rotting off of him. His experience, although presented in a religious context that implies special dispensation and salvation, seems to have left Lazarus looking like a monster. Lazarus, Sagoe's brief misconception aside, could never pass as a white man. It seems that this complex changeability and the ability to inhabit more than one race at the same time makes Kola include Lazarus as the rainbow.

Perhaps Soyinka meant this as a metaphor for colonial influence. As Frantz Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become “ (Fanon 2-3). All of the characters in Soyinka’s novel are, in some fashion, a combination of African and European, black and white. The main characters have developed their hybridity from their education and while they certainly inherited a lot from their colonial education in terms of position and opportunity, little is mentioned about its cost. Lazarus died and was reborn white—if his story is a metaphor for theirs, it implies that “The Interpreter’s” black, authentically Nigerian, selves were eliminated by their colonial education and that they have been recreated by their education as semi- white people. Lazarus does not remember who he was before he died. This detail suggests that “The Interpreters” now see their culture in a different way than they did before their sojourns abroad and that this transition is permanent. The whiteness that “The Interpreters” earned through their studies in England and America is incomplete. Practically speaking, this is obviously true—they are still black, inescapably foreign in a European context. But the appearance of Lazarus also implies that their whiteness is rotten. Because of their colonial education, their black selves have died and been replaced by a lesser version of their former oppressors making their efforts to define their own identities a greater struggle.

The character of Lazarus exemplifies a grotesque version of this supposed resurrection. He fails in his attempt to be create a new religious sect out of his transformational experience: his protégé, a thief called Noah, runs away from an

initiation ritual that is literally a trial by fire. The myth that Lazarus tries to create out of what he regards as his personal miracle did not create a strong enough inspiration or interest in his own rehabilitation to induce Noah to follow at the expense of his safety. Lazarus shimmers in Kola's painting, but in Soyinka's narrative his success in transcendence is limited. After failing to create a new messiah with Noah, Lazarus disappears from significance. This shows that, though mythmaking is, in a manner of speaking, a way of reclaiming identity, it is a difficult task that often leads to disappointment and sometimes tragedy, in the case of Noah who ultimately dies.

"The Interpreters" of Soyinka's title, consist of six friends who are identified through their individual jobs as much as by their relationships with each other. They are Bandele the professor, Egbo an official in the foreign office, Sekoni the engineer turned sculptor, Dehwina the confidential secretary, Kola the artist, and Sagoe the journalist. These six have different sets of interests, personalities, and approaches to their task of interpretation, but they are united by a mutual affection and commiseration. The state of the nation, both before and after decolonization, is complicated. As in *No Longer At Ease*, corruption and poverty and identities made messy by outside influence cause a great deal of unease. The friends are often powerless to help each other in practical ways, but the ability to discuss if not solve their problems together sets them apart from Achebe's Obi, who struggled alone.

Of all the characters Sagoe, the journalist, has the most outward similarities to Achebe's Obi. Although they have very different personalities –Sagoe is a comfortable, satirical alcoholic often joking about his "drink lobes" where Obi is far

too serious— they encounter many similar circumstances. To begin with, when Sagoe returns to Nigeria, he avoids his family, choosing to stay in a hotel until he is settled. He explains to his friends:

Well, it is nothing sinister, I can tell you. I just didn't want the family to know I was back. You know, thought I'd dispose of myself first, get a job or decide not to get a job, a brief courtesy visit and then finish. Every man to his own business. (90)

This explanation is straightforward enough—Sagoe wants to figure out what his next step is before discussing it with his family— but Sagoe's explanation leaves a certain amount of ambiguity. The reader never learns whether Sagoe avoids his family in an attempt to avoid burdening them with his indecision or in an effort to avoid taking on any of their burdens. Though the financial element, which is so important in Obi's case, is never mentioned here, it does seem curious that Sagoe feels no obligation to even let his parents know he is back in the country after an absence of a number of years.

Perhaps Sagoe's reticence to reintegrate into his old social circles, which can easily be cast as selfish, has more to do with his lack of direction than a lack of proper dutifulness. Like Obi, when Sagoe returns he chooses to pursue a career that has little relation to the subject he studied at university abroad. He is a qualified surveyor, but becomes a journalist for a paper in Lagos. The reasons for his career switch are never articulated. It is clear that they do not have to do with financial necessity: as the quotation indicates, Sagoe is in a position to choose whether or not he wants to work at all. Nevertheless, this aimlessness evokes Obi's merely oppositional definition of self. After his time studying and traveling abroad, Sagoe is only sure that he does not want to pursue the career he is qualified to perform.

Like Obi, Sagoe has developed a distinctive set of theories while abroad. Instead of examining literature, he creates his own philosophy. Called "Voidancy," it is, in simplest terms, the study of defecation: what it means and what are the proper circumstances to do it best. Though it is hard to see this study as anything more than a mockery of the very idea of philosophy, "Voidancy" represents Sagoe's interpretation of myth making: his personal contribution to society and his own identity. Sagoe produces a treatise that he calls his "bible" that delineates the specifics of this philosophy. At the newspaper, he makes time to read aloud from this document, using a co-opted janitor named Mathias, from whom he buys indulgence and favors with beer, as an audience. The content of the philosophy, excerpted in the book in the context of these read-aloud sessions, demonstrates his disdain for his western education, much like Obi's verbalized dismissal of literary studies. He tells Mathias, when he introduces the bible, that, "It was to have been part of my thesis, but unfortunately my professors did not accept the subject. Found it too esoteric, I suppose" (70). There are layers to Sagoe's insult. To begin with, the implication that a study of defecation had any sort of philosophy to it or implications for the field of philosophy is demeaning to the discipline. Sagoe goes further and asserts that his study of "Voidancy" was rejected because it was "too esoteric" for his professors at an American university because it was some way beyond their capacity for understanding.<sup>20</sup> Sagoe presents this explanation in his customary humorous style, but the larger undertones remain discernable.

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<sup>20</sup> Soyinka is not the only post-colonial author to use defecation as a commentary on hybrid identities. Rohinton Mistry's short story "Squatter" tells the story of a man who immigrated to Canada but was unable to adapt to Canadian toilets. He gives himself ten years to transition, and



Sagoie attempts to practice what he wrote in his manifesto. His obsession with “Voidancy,” in some ways, demonstrates his difficulty in re-adapting to his home environment: after his time abroad he cannot engage in the most natural of human activities without spectacle. His preoccupation, and selectiveness of location for his escapades of voidance are laughed at by his friends and scorned by his girlfriend. It plagues him at the most inopportune moments, for example during his job interview for the paper. The bathroom facilities in the newspaper do not meet Sagoie’s standards—from the narrator’s description, they really do seem disgusting and degrading –and he is unable to relieve himself before the interview. As a result, he is clipped and short during the examination. The committee asks him why he wants the job and Sagoie responds, simply “ I don’t know” (78). The committee members are taken aback by his honesty and ultimately resentful of his attitude. He is told:

We want the kind of person who is going to respect his superior not conceited boys of your type. Suppose you are not begging who is interested in that? Your betters are begging my friend go and sit down....A degree does not make a graduate. (79)

The men of the interview committee resent Sagoie’s lack of solicitation and respect. The extenuating circumstances explain his lack of politesse, but again the content of his responses to the interview committee recall Obi’s defiance during his own job interview. Moreover, his answer voices the larger truth. Sagoie’s personal philosophy

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when he fails to meet this deadline decides to go back to India. The second he steps on a plane, he is finally able to go to the bathroom. I find it significant that Mistry’s “Squatter” is only able to poop in the middle of the two countries—perhaps because with his combined identity that is where he now belongs. The character claims that he wants his story told to discourage children from falling in his footsteps: “Tell them...that the world can be a bewildering place, and dreams and ambitions are often the paths to the most pernicious traps” (Mistry 168). This story paints a bleak picture about the possibility of successfully living with a hybrid identity.

causes more problems than it solves and has been no help in his reintegration. Even with all of his advantages, Sagoe does not really know what he wants to do with his life. His energy is given to drink and extravagant expositions on the subject of “Voidancy.”

Sagoe’s job application process also echoes the corruption demonstrated in more detail in *No Longer At Ease*. After the disastrous interview, one of the men on the panel, Chief Winsala, follows him to his hotel and offers him the job for fifty pounds. This does not shock Sagoe. He is not pleased, but he ultimately seems to decide that he would rather have the job than what Obi would call honor. Sagoe is saved from going through with the bribe when, while he goes back to his room to get the money, Winsala becomes drunk and refuses to pay his bar tab. Sagoe defends the man and gallantly takes him away, while another, more important man on the committee, Sir Derin, who had come to collect his share of the bribe, looks on. Sagoe gets the job: under these circumstances, the act of saving Sir Derin from the embarrassment of having to attend to his friend is enough. Regardless of this outcome, Sagoe’s attitude about the bribe is different from Obi’s. He is annoyed and inconvenienced by the bribe and resentful of the added expense, but he does not take a hard moral stand against it. His decision-making is presented in a fragmented manner, interrupted by memory and influenced by alcohol, but Sagoe still considers both the implications of giving and refusing to give it. Unlike Obi, Sagoe possesses the desire and ability to adapt to the strange rules of his environment even though he appears comically helpless.

Later, while reporting for the paper, Sagoe tries to work against corrupt practices in Nigerian society by exposing them in his writing. He tries to write the story of the corruption that led to his friend Sekoni's dismissal from his job. Sekoni, who speaks with a stutter but seems to have an almost spiritual authority, is an engineer who designs a power plant to bring electricity to a remote village. He is dismissed for incompetence before they even test his work, seemingly because he asks too many questions. Sekoni protests this treatment and returns to the village, where he attempts to vindicate himself by powering the plant with wood. He is led away by the police and ends up in a mental institution. When Sagoe tries to write about these events he is told "I know you think you owe some loyalty to your friend; believe me, you don't. In the end you'll find it's every man for himself" (96). Sagoe rejects the idea that loyalty and friendship are things of the past, but he is still unable to do anything to help his friend. He feels remorse but, despite his protestations, realizes that he is powerless to help.

After his stint in the mental institution, Sekoni goes on a trip to various holy places in Europe and when he returns he begins to sculpt. His sculpture is perhaps his second attempt at Interpretation—his first being the failed power plant. His piece, "The Wrestler," is praised as a triumph of the medium. Kola, the member of the group who has formal artistic training, remarks that "'The Wrestler' was one of those single once-in-in-a-life co-ordinations of experience and record, Sekoni was an artist who had waited long to find himself but had done so finally, and left no room for doubt" (100). This single figure struggling for and with his life is vastly different from Kola's complex and representational Pantheon: ultimately, it is a greater

achievement, although it is noteworthy that this accomplishment is the result of perceived madness. Soyinka, however, interrupts the possible happy ending that this artistic success created. After giving an artistic rendering of individual struggle thematic weight in the first section, Soyinka consigns Sekoni to a sudden death by a car accident in the first lines of book two. His death seems random, a senseless accident, and a great example of Soyinka's embrace of disorganization in the novel.<sup>21</sup> It seems that Sekoni, once he succeeded in constructing a viable myth, ceased to interest Soyinka. Perhaps his death was more meaningfully designed by Soyinka to demonstrate that not every moment of a life fits neatly into a schematic post-colonial narrative. The remaining "Interpreters" are greatly saddened by Sekoni's death. Possibly, it serves to help them see their own lives with more clarity.

Some force of clarity ultimately leads the frustrated and dissolute Sagoe to happiness. He is able to have a successful romantic relationship, demonstrating another difference between his character and Obi's. His girlfriend and, by the end of the novel, fiancé Dehinwa is the only girl in the group of intellectuals. In the early scenes it is difficult to determine whether she is present in the group only as Sagoe's girlfriend, but ultimately a flashback reveals that she went to school with them and then had her own foreign education. While Sagoe was in America, Dehinwa went to England to study and when the novel opens they have reunited in Lagos where she

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<sup>21</sup> George sees the method of Sekoni's death as significant. He writes, "There is of course a modernist echo here, of the fragile human body broken by the efficiency of technological "progress," even as nature glowers relentlessly upon the landscape. Soyinka burdens this modernist trope with allusions that are recognizable staples of his myth-based vision. Sekoni's car accident is presided over by the sky itself: active nature, imaged as a sacrificed bull, destructively agential at the very moment of its ongoing immolation. The dead man is himself a sacrificial victim, claimed by "modernizing" technology and its lethal potential" (George 285). In this moment, Soyinka blends mythical sacrifice with the encroachment of modern technology, demonstrating his syncretic approach to mythmaking.

works as a confidential secretary and he works as a journalist. Their relationship is not exactly tranquil; their teasing seems to continue from childhood and they disagree on many subjects. For example, Dehinwa refuses to sleep with Sagoe before the wedding and Sagoe's eccentricities, such as "Voidancy," annoy her. She even catches him going through one of her confidential files. But teasing emerges as a durable basis of intimacy between them and they are ultimately both willing to compromise. Dehinwa trades her virginity for the destruction of Sagoe's "Voidancy" bible. In the novel's final scene Sagoe says, in his typical humorous tone, "I am trapped...trapped and I love it" (240). Sagoe rejects his own mythology in favor of constructing a different joint reality with Dehinwa, through which he can relate to people instead of repel them.

Perhaps this success has something to do with Dehinwa's balanced personality. Even with the contradictions inherent in her British education and Nigerian nationality, Dehinwa manages to respect both the old guard and her new independence simultaneously. For example, in an early scene Sagoe gets drunk and refuses to be dropped off at his house, despite Dehinwa's protestations that he should not spend the night at her place. When they arrive her mother is there, having unexpectedly stopped by to check up on her on the advice of her *aladura*—the name of a Pentecostal Christian church in western Nigeria. They object to the presence of Sagoe both as a man in her apartment and, more specifically, because they believe him to be a northerner. Dehinwa rebuffs their advice, telling them "Who I move with is my own business" (37) but she is chastened when her mother reminds her that she had saved to send her to England herself, her father having

decided that paying for a daughter's education was unnecessary. Dehinwa feels an obligation to her mother, but she does not believe that respect requires complete obedience. She endures both her mother's interference and Sagoe's eccentricities without losing sight of her own desires and, in the end, she gets what she wants. Perhaps this one successful life in the novel suggests that modern African women have their lives more together than modern African men. In the novel Dehinwa stands alone. Despite paying tribute to the poised modern African woman, Soyinka seems more interested in representing the men, for all their confusion.

Sagoe's relationship with Dehinwa is not idealized—both participants seem to have realistic rather than mythic expectations of the other. Their understanding of reality helps them master their differences and ultimately the imperfection and compromise of their relationship leads to success. This balance is unique in Soyinka's novel. Many of the other relationships that he includes are undone by excessive mythmaking. Perhaps the best example of this is Egbo. During the novel, both of his relationships could easily be described as unhealthy. Although he is a militant atheist, Egbo spends his days searching for something to believe in. During his final days at boarding school he finds it in the figure of Simi, the legendary courtesan who lives in the nearby city. Without ever speaking with her, Egbo convinces himself that he loves her and must have her and, in a mercurial impulse, asks her to dance. Simi sees something in his boldness and his reaction to the jibes of her older, wealthier, suitors, and she takes him home.

What Simi sees in Egbo is never articulated but it is clear that their relationship does not fulfill his needs completely, though her willingness to satisfy

his adolescent lust fills him with mysterious ecstasy. After their first night together, on the train back to school, Egbo climbs out onto some rocks and lies down waiting for a train to run him over. He soon changes his mind and goes for a swim in a nearby pool. He reflects,

He left with a gift that he could not define upon his body, for what traveller beards the gods in their den and departs without a divine boon. Knowledge he called it, a power for beauty often, an awareness that led him dangerously towards a rocksalt psyche, a predator on Nature.

And he made it his preserve, a place of pilgrimage. (127)

In this moment Egbo turns his time with Simi, his perceptions of love, sex and adulthood, into a quasi-religion, his own philosophy. Ultimately this code of worship becomes disassociated from Simi: Soyinka cuts from this scene in the water to one afternoon, years later, when Egbo is visiting Bandele in Ibadan and meets one of his friend's students. The holy feelings he described on his first visit to the rocks have disintegrated over time, as any sort of long-term relationship with Simi is impossible. While her regard for Egbo is made clear by their sustained connection, Simi will not be caged—she disappears for extended periods of time and often fails to show up when she says she will. Frustrated and lonely, Egbo takes the student back to the rock, his “place of pilgrimage” where they sleep together, only after he promises never to contact her again. They do not even exchange names but something about this young woman imprints on Egbo's mind. He thinks to himself, “not since that first night with Simi, have I been so nervous, so fearful of the venturing” (134). The return to this location and to another version of incoherent rapture show that Egbo's feelings and emotions about women are his attempts at mythmaking, and predictably these myths prove false.

Gradually the figure of this young girl replaces Simi in his mind. Even when Simi returns, Egbo tortures himself and his friends, with thoughts of identifying and finding the young student. The student writes him a note after the death of Sekoni and Egbo becomes increasingly enthralled, careless of how this infatuation might affect Simi. Eventually he learns that the girl became pregnant after their encounter and that, unlike Clara in *No Longer At Ease*, she intends to keep the baby and return to school. The impending scandal causes Egbo to become anxious and incredulous. The novel ends with the shattering of Egbo's two fantasies, this girl, who remains unnamed, will not be his salvation but the cause of a scandal that could mean his downfall. And the enigma of Simi, when faced with her lover's clear regard for another, begins to melt away. In the novel's last lines her humanity is indicated.

Soyinka writes:

By Sekoni's Wrestler Simi waited, Kola poised near her in confusion. Egbo watched her while she walked towards him, eyes ocean-clams with her peculiar sadness...like a choice of a man drowning he was saying...only like a choice of drowning. (251)

The women Egbo loves are, in large part, the creations of his mind, almost goddess like. His inability to be realistic makes descent from his fantasies sharper and more dramatic. In the end Egbo, deprived of his own beliefs, is left paralyzed by the discovery of reality.

The characters and outcomes in *The Interpreters* are diverse. There is unquestionably unrest and tragedy, most poignantly indicated in the senseless death of Sekoni, but importantly there are also some happy endings, such as Sagoe and Dehinwa's compromise and engagement. The very diversity implies that there is more than one possible outcome for a "been-to" in Nigeria and that happiness,



though difficult, is not impossible. It is remarkable, however, that Sagoë's rejection of his personal mythology ensures his happy ending, while characters like Egbo, who refuse to let go, end up in tragic predicaments. Ultimately this novel contradicts the idea, introduced by Fredrick Jameson in his 1986 essay *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*, that all literature written in and about the developing world is inherently an allegory for the birth of the nation. Jameson writes,

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (Jameson 69)

It is easy enough to see Jameson's point—plenty of examples of novels that invite allegorical interpretation exist, *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer At Ease*, *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People*, all by Chinua Achebe, easily fall into this category. Aspects of *The Interpreters* could fall under Jameson's moniker as well, for example the failure of Lazarus or the death of Sekoni, but other plots, like Sagoë's engagement, seem to run counter to the very existence of allegory. In totality, the book seems to claim that there is no such thing as a simple national mythology—Kola's updated Pantheon fails, while Sekoni's "The Wrestler," based only on his personal struggle, is a triumph. It is up to individuals to interpret their circumstances and beliefs and construct their own mythology. This act of interpretation can have disastrous consequences, but no one fits into a predetermined pantheon, so there is no alternative except to try.

Like Achebe's *Obi*, Soyinka's characters deal with circumstances of corruption and the weighty expectations that their education brings but instead of succumbing to the terrible ennui that pinions *Obi*, "The Interpreters" experiment with how best to fit into the "new dispensation." Perhaps this story, with its multitude of protagonists, is a representation of post-colonial nations' incoherence on the brink of formation. In hindsight, with the knowledge that while independence may have rid Nigeria of the British it did not end violence, corruption or poverty, maybe Achebe's assertion that descent is unavoidable seems more accurate. But, at the moment that *The Interpreters* was written—before civil war, imprisonment, and exile—Soyinka saw a future where more than one outcome was possible. Whether that optimism could be sustained is an interesting question, but *The Interpreters* remains a varied, and sometimes hopeful portrait of Nigeria in the moment after decolonization.

### Chapter III: Language

While Achebe and Soyinka may disagree on the variability of its lasting effects, they both see the legacy of colonialism as indelible. Writing during and after decolonization, they concur that Nigeria is not the same as it would have been had the British never arrived and perhaps more importantly that there is no going back. Their task, as postcolonial Nigerian writers, is to construct a body of work that encompasses the diverse and divergent aspects of the twentieth century Nigerian—to reclaim their histories and futures by telling their stories from their own perspectives. While there is a consensus that this work is essential to definitively end the postcolonial era and advance into the period of true independence, the issue of how best to promote this progress through literary writing has become divisive. Among the choices these writers faced is the question of languages: whether it is better as a post-colonial African writer to write in English, the language of the oppressor, or to reclaim one of the traditional languages, even though this may drastically limit prospective readership. Both Achebe and Soyinka have chosen the former method. They write in English, despite or perhaps because, it reflects their former colonization. Ultimately, the way these two writers discuss the use of English and manipulate the syntax of the language itself becomes an assertion of power and a continued form of resistance.

The leader of the opposition to the use of English by African writers is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o from Kenya. After beginning his career writing novels in English, Ngugi resolved to shift into writing in his native language, Gikuyu. He explains his reasons

for the switch in his 1981 book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. In his introduction he writes that the loss of one's language is one of the most devastating effects of a "cultural bomb." He argues that the language of the colonizer is an imperialist weapon whose effects include "to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their language, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (Ngugi 3). He asserts that the continued use of English even after decolonization is an aftershock of this assault. His book makes many excellent points. He thinks that writing in native languages could be the first step towards a "renaissance in African cultures," that it could lead to a more active and engaged participation. He challenges his fellow writers,

...to do for our languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all other areas of human creative endeavors. (29)

This sort of call to arms is energetic and has a certain unassailable logic, but it ignores some logistical challenges, not the least of which is that writing in indigenous languages limits the ability of Ngugi's works to be read on a wider, global, or even African scale.<sup>22</sup> The limitations of writing in an African language are

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<sup>22</sup> Olakunle George actually draws a connection between Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi in his essay "The National and the Transnational." He claims that, while all three writers reflect their personal ethnic backgrounds, the themes of their writing are applicable on a larger scale to Africa. He writes, "take three of the most recognized African writers as our examples: Soyinka writes as someone of Yoruba ethnicity, Achebe of Igbo ethnicity, Ngugi of Gikuyu ethnicity. But the ethnic specificity does double duty as metonym for, as the case may be, Nigeria or Kenya, in particular, and Africa in general. The rhetoric of cultural nationalism as we encounter it in these writers is thus inevitably transnational, by which I mean continental and racialized." (George 291). I agree with his view of the continental significance of these writers but I find it intriguing that George thinks of Ngugi as having an important pan-African influence. In this passage George must be referring to Ngugi's work in English.

visible even on a local scale. In Ngugi's case, the official languages of Kenya are English and Kiswahili while Gikuyu is one of the numerous other un-official indigenous languages spoken by different groups (CIA- The World Factbook).<sup>23</sup> Writing in African languages probably does, as he claims, strengthen community engagement on literary and other topics, but it limits the ability of the larger world to understand disparate African perspectives, an essential if African nations are to engage with their former metropolises on a more equal footing.

In addition, this argument necessarily either ignores or minimizes the fact that written literature itself is, in some sense, a legacy of colonialism. Many of the languages that Ngugi encourages writers to reclaim did not have a system of writing in pre-colonial times. English, as the language of education in British colonies, was the vehicle of introduction to modern literature. The novel itself is a western literary form: to use it at all is evidence of continual colonial impact. It seems fair to claim that writing novels in Gikuyu is a form of resistance; a way to conquer and remake a colonial derivative, but the same principle can apply to the post-colonial writers' adaptations of English to the African context. By using English, writers like Achebe and Soyinka reshape it in ways that assert their own independence.

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The transnational themes of his Gikuyu work are hidden from the larger world by the rarified nature of the language that they are written in.

<sup>23</sup> Irele, though critical of the use of English by African writers—he claims that that “ We [Africans] cannot feel that we are in full possession of this literature so long as it is elaborated in a language that does not belong to us in an immediate and original way” –admits that writing in indigenous languages restricts its accessibility. He writes, “ ... there is no indigenous literature at the moment that we can call ‘African’ in a wide continental sense, and in the modern perspective of our contemporary existence. What we have is a diversity of literatures expressed in various languages native to Africa, and each one bound to the specific peoples and cultures using those languages. Moreover, the vast majority of these literatures are still in the oral stage and this constitutes a serious limitation to their diffusion and to the role they are able to play in a modern culture” (Irele 45).

Though Ngugi acknowledges the talent of both Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in *Decolonizing the Mind*, he denies that their works qualify as African literature. Instead he calls them “another hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature” (Ngugi 26-27). Ngugi continues to mention Soyinka and makes numerous references to Achebe elsewhere in his book. He cites Achebe’s speech from 1964 entitled “The African Writer and the English Language” where Achebe addressed the issue of language. Ngugi quotes the speech:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it. (qtd in Ngugi 7)

Achebe expands on this conundrum in his collection of personal and critical essays *Hopes and Impediments*. In one essay in particular, entitled “Named for Victoria, Queen of England,” Achebe explains that, for him, the use of English is not “a dreadful betrayal” because English is, to him, as much a native language as Igbo. He explains by recounting his upbringing. He was brought up Christian and baptized Albert Chinualumogu. He jokes that “if anyone asks you what Her Britannic Majesty Queen Victoria had in common with Chinua Achebe the answer is: They both lost their Albert!” (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 500-517). He explains that, though the divide between Christianity and traditional beliefs was more clearly defined in his village during his childhood than it would be now, non-Christian aspects of his community permeated his consciousness at an early age creating the beginnings of a syncretic identity.

He moves on to address the question of language directly. Achebe explains that he learned English when he was eight. He expands on the evolution of his linguistic identity.

I don't know for certain, but I have probably spoken more words in Igbo than in English but I have definitely written more words in English than in Igbo. Which I think makes me perfectly bilingual. Some people have suggested that I should be better off writing in Igbo. Sometimes they seek to drive the point home by asking me in which language I dream. When I reply that I dream in both languages they seem not to believe it. (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 508-517)

Achebe's tone in this essay is lighthearted and good-natured, but the core of this explanation definitively refutes one of Ngugi's main arguments. Ngugi claims that he writes in Gikuyu because it is *his* language and, as a result, is the superior vehicle for his story, but Achebe feels deep connections to both Igbo and English. From his perspective, story writing in English does not obliterate his African-ness. If anything, it makes his writing convey a more honest assessment of his reality. Achebe writes stories of Igbo people, in the distant and not-so-distant past and for better or worse, English has become a part of their story. Like Ngugi, Achebe feels very strongly that "the story we [Africans] had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned' (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 568-77), but he also feels that his story is "perfectly bilingual" just as he is.

Achebe's definition of "perfectly bilingual," however, glosses over the important differences between spoken and written language. In his essay, he asserts that the combination of speaking Igbo and writing English comprises his linguistic identity but he fails to stress the differences between speaking and writing and how this distinction complicates it. Because of colonization, English was the language of

formal education: both Achebe and Soyinka were introduced to modern literature through English and it has been their means of communicating with larger, pan-African and international audiences. In both cases it is fair to associate their use of English with the act of writing. It seems that being “perfectly bilingual” does not mean writing and speaking in both languages equally well; it refers instead to some combination of two languages with the various forms of communication. For Achebe, each language has its specific uses.

Soyinka traces the development of a similar syncretic relationship to language in his memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood*. Like Achebe, Soyinka was born into a Christian family: his father was the headmaster of the local school and his mother is actually referred to throughout the memoir as Wild Christian. Soyinka’s memories center on the complications of a dual identity and young Wole’s attempts to disentangle the different aspects of his upbringing and his community. One relevant incident that involves the question of language occurs when Wole is still quite small. After hearing the story of the *egungun*—the mystical spirit that inspires the offensive costumes of the British official’s family in *Death and the King’s Horseman*—Wole, an uncontrollably curious child, has a few questions. His concerns illustrate his syncretic upbringing:

‘Can I comeback as an *egungun* if I die? I asked Osiki.  
‘I don’t think so’ he said. ‘I’ve never heard of any Christian becoming an *egungun*.  
‘Do they speak English in the *egungun* world?’ I now wanted to know.  
Osiki shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Our own *egungun* doesn’t speak English.  
It seemed important to find out. (Soyinka, *Aké* 32)

This interaction demonstrates that, as a small child, Soyinka could not easily distinguish between the parts of his identity that were English and those that were



Yoruba. Though they are distinct enough to raise the question of which language goes with what belief, Wole does not see the two sets of beliefs as mutually exclusive. In his mind it can be possible to be a Christian and then become an *egungun* when you die. In his imagination, it is possible that the *egungun* speak English. English is not, to him, a foreign language.

The child ventures to the Christian church to investigate his question. There, he convinces himself that the photographs of Christian figures in white robes are pictures of this mystical *egungun* and he thinks his question is answered. “You see. Now I can speak to those *egungun* in the church window whenever they come. I am sure they only speak English” (Soyinka, *Aké* 33). In his mind Yoruba monsters speak English, the language of imperialism, and because of this he can communicate with them. This logic is childlike—the picture that he is referring to is of St. Peter who is not very likely to visit *Aké* or any other contemporary place. But in this moment Wole taps into a fundamental truth about his hybrid colonial identity. Before he was old enough to give the origin of the language any thought, Soyinka unquestioningly adopted English and Yoruba and both languages became part of his identity. English and the ability to speak it play a central role in his development as a person and a writer. Regardless of its origins, it seems fitting, not submissive, that Soyinka uses it to tell his story.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Irele would assert, I think correctly, that both writers’ level of comfort with English is a consequence of their elite upbringings and education. He writes, “The essential ambiguity of the situation [African use of English] is thus conveniently masked by the undisciplined use of such terms as ‘English-speaking Africa’ and ‘Francophone Africa—terms which have a meaning only with respect to the tiny minority of the educated elites which employ them and which bear no relation whatsoever to the truth of the matter” (Irele 49). Regardless of its origins or its rarity, I find their associations with English to be authentic.

The relationship between spoken and written language is even more ambiguous in Soyinka's work than in Achebe's. This reflects a difference in the two writers' upbringings: although Achebe learned English at an early age, when he was eight, he remembers learning it consciously (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 507-15), whereas Soyinka seems to have learned the two languages more or less concurrently. Because Soyinka is primarily a playwright, by definition much of what he writes is meant to be spoken aloud, therefore the way that he distinguishes between different languages is necessarily complicated. For him English is not only the language of writing.

The importance of English in African writing is evident in both authors' creative writing. In his books, Achebe uses English to trace colonization in a straightforward way, immortalizing the destruction that British incursion into his home country brought. With clear and direct language and narration, Achebe captures the consequences of the "cultural bombs" that Ngugi mentions, using one of the tools colonizers used to create these weapons.<sup>25</sup> This co-opting of the English language to immortalize the cruelty and injustice of colonialism is a prime example of English working as a form of resistance. In *Arrow of God* this history of linguistic conquest is told, both in the story and through the language. Though the novel is written in English, with the exception of a few key words that are left un-translated, the divergence between English and Igbo is visible in the text of *Arrow of God*. The story carries two distinct though intersecting narratives: that of Ezeulu and his

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<sup>25</sup> Kole Omotoso agrees with this point, in a general sense. In the introduction to his book *Achebe or Soyinka?*, he writes that "Chinua Achebe, we are told, confronts Europe by demonstrating the clash of African culture with European culture and brings out for all to see the debilitating effect of Europe on African lives (Omotoso xvii).

family in their village and that of the Colonial officials in the area. As a result the characters in the novel ostensibly use both languages. This results in an intriguing contrast between the novel's two narrations.

Because the languages themselves are not perfectly interchangeable, Achebe's presentation of Igbo in English is complicated. Achebe demonstrates this when he uses Igbo words in his writing. Easily explained as a way to incorporate concepts that have no English counterpart, the use of Igbo words in Achebe's English texts also have a larger symbolic meaning. The effect of reading these untranslated terms inside blocks of English writing places distance between a non-Igbo speaking reader and the story of the novel. In Achebe, who is famous for the clarity of his writing, these moments are jarring. For example, in *Arrow of God*, Nwaka, Ezeulu's main rival, tells a story in the guise of his mask, Ogalanya, in which Achebe uses a combination of translation and insertion of Igbo words with interesting results. He writes:

'Folk assembled, listen and hear my words. There is a place, Beyond Knowing, where no man or spirit ventures unless he holds in his right hand his kith and in his left hand his kin. But I, Ogalanya, Evil Dog that Warms His Body through the Head, I took neither kith nor kin and yet went to this place.'

'The flute called him Ogalanya Ajo Mmo, and the big drum replied.

'When I got there the first friend I made turned out to be a wizard. I made another friend and found he was a poisoner. I made a third friend and he was a leper. I, Ogalanya, who cuts *kpom* and pulls *waa*, I made friends with a leper from whom even a poisoner flees.' (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 48)

By noticing the moments in this passage when Achebe translates certain customs from Igbo into English and comparing them with the concepts that he chooses to leave in Igbo, readers can see the variety in Achebe's use of translation. To begin, the

capitalization of the place “Beyond Knowing” seems to assert that this phrase is the translation of the location’s proper name. Achebe, who commonly leaves names of all sorts un-translated, clearly thought that the meaning of this name was essential and wanted to communicate it to his English readers as well as to readers who also speak Igbo. The necessity of making a choice between the two languages demonstrates the inevitability of loss through translation.

In contrast, he repeatedly uses the phrase “kith and kin,” which is old English in origin. In this case, instead of translating an Igbo idiom, Achebe has transplanted an archaic English one, perhaps conjuring pastoral England in his traditional Igbo moment. Finally, the Igbo name Ogalanya is modified in the first speech by the English epithet “Evil dog that warms his body through the head.” This description seems like a definite translation from Igbo, which evokes a vivid picture of Ogalanya. In the second speech, however, this descriptor is changed to “who cuts *kpom* and pulls *waa*.” These words, which seem likely to be a type of crop, are italicized and left un-translated, perhaps because there was no real English equivalent. But the presence of these unexplained terms also serves to remind foreign readers that they are reading about a foreign land, a place that they cannot fully understand by reading about it in an English novel.

In addition to the imprint of translation, a formality of speech and a strangeness in sentence structure reflect Achebe’s attempt to insert the personality of the Igbo language into English. This phenomenon is best encapsulated by the use of seemingly pre-formulated phrases and proverbs. For example, the first words of dialogue in the novel are:

'Moon,' said the senior wife, Matefi, 'may your face meeting mine bring good fortune.'

'Where is it?' asked Ugoye, the younger wife. 'I don't see it. Or am I blind?'

'Don't you see beyond the top of the ukwa tree? Not there. Follow my finger.'

'Oho, I see it. Moon, may your face meeting mine bring good fortune. But how is it sitting? I don't like its posture.'

'Why?' asked Matefi.

'I think it sits awkwardly—like an evil moon.'

'No,' said Matefi, 'A bad moon does not leave anyone in doubt.' (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 2)

This interaction seems like a simple ritual, possibly a nightly event where these two sister wives look up at the night sky and show respect to the moon. They begin with the customary greeting. The phrase itself has a strange construction that is not recognizably borrowed from English: "Moon, may your face meeting mine bring good fortune." It seems likely to be a word-for-word translation of an Igbo greeting. There are formulaic aspects to the scene, which corroborate this point. For example, Ugoye, the second wife, waits until she sees the moon herself to greet it—it seems to be necessary to look directly into the face of the moon before asking for "good fortune." The moon in this context seems to be personified: it is a celestial entity with a face that you can solicit good wishes from. The face of this being, however, is difficult to read; the two wives disagree on whether this particular moon is good or bad suggesting that it is open to interpretation. After performing this ritual greeting, the two women turn to their children, teasing them about the power of the moon. The poeticism and spirituality of this simple ritual and its integration into normal family life demonstrate how integral the richness of language and ritual are to Igbo culture.

The moon greeting contrasts remarkably with the first words of dialogue spoken by a British character, the District Officer T.K. Winterbottom. As his servant

John prepares the house for a rapidly approaching storm, Winterbottom looks out on a group of “native children” playing in his front yard.

‘What are they saying?’ he asked John, who was now carrying in the deck-chairs.

‘Dem talk say make rain come quick quick.’

Four other children ran in from the direction of the Boy’s quarters to join the rest on Winterbottom’s lawn which was the only space big enough for their play.

‘Are all these your pickin, John?’ There was something like envy in his voice.

‘No, sir,’ said John, putting down the chair and pointing. ‘My pickin na dat two wey de run yonder and dat yellow gal. Di oder two na Cook im pickin. Di oder one yonder na Gardener him brodder pickin.’ (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 37)

A number of aspects in this interaction are remarkable. To begin with, it is a comparatively benevolent exchange—nothing like the dramatic scene between the road workers and the colonial authority that was addressed in Chapter I.

Winterbottom envies the freedom of the native children and he envies John for having children; he does not mind their presence on his property. Even his questions to John seem benign—he wants to be included in the conversation even though he cannot understand it.

John’s responses, however, demonstrate the flip side of this consideration. John’s pidgin English has none of the poeticism or spirituality of Igbo, and for that matter, neither does Winterbottom’s more fluent version. Achebe’s transcription of pidgin is phonetically constructed—the *th* in words like *them* becomes a *d*, *way* becomes *wey* and *other* and *brother* become *oder* and *brodder* respectively. When spoken aloud, these words sound more like the language of a child, not a grown man with children of his own. They show that speaking in pidgin is in itself always a subservient task with an infantilizing effect, which is emphasized by his title of *houseboy*. Pidgin also has its own vocabulary, for example the word *pickin* seems to

mean child.<sup>26</sup> *Pickin*, as a word, is no more complex than the word child, but Winterbottom uses it when he asks about John's children. The existence of this semantic divide suggests that despite Winterbottom's mildness in this moment African and European children are by definition different species in his eyes. This point is corroborated by the lack of possessive words in John's dialogue, which suggests that not even his children are his own. The very existence of pidgin, a form of English that has been modified to be less developed, shows this prejudice—Nigerians, in the colonial view, do not need their own language and they only need to understand enough about English to answer questions and take orders.

The juxtaposition of this conversation with Ezeulu's wives' greeting to the moon puts the accuracy of John's translation of the children's speech in doubt. Given the apparent commonality of the moon ritual, it seems likely that the children's pronouncement about the rain, a familiar enough weather event, had a similar proverbial formulation when spoken in Igbo. When related in pidgin it becomes "Dem talk say make rain come quick quick." Any richness of language or reverence for the weather—perhaps thankfulness for the rain that will help their crops to grow—is lost in the translation. This moment poignantly registers the consequences of linguistic colonization: even in comparatively benevolent conversations, the limitations are costly and seemingly irrevocable.

The lasting consequences of this linguistic colonization are captured best in Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, which depicts the state of language in Nigeria a few generations after the action of *Arrow of God*. Obi Okonkwo decides to study English

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<sup>26</sup> Its similarity to the American term *pickaninny*, which refers to black children, corroborates this interpretation.

literature while he is abroad in London but he is never fully comfortable with this choice. After he returns home he describes his feelings on the subject in more detail.

Four years in England had filled Obi with a longing to be back in Umuofia. This feeling was sometimes so strong that he found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree. He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus. (Achebe, *No Longer At Ease* 49)

Part of Obi's increased attachment to Igbo when he is in England has to do with a universal and understandable homesickness; it is a common experience to feel a stronger connection to your home culture when abroad than when you are actually immersed in it. But the accompanying shame he feels for his choice of subject matter adds another dimension to his emotion. Perhaps Obi feels as though his choice symbolizes a larger trend in his life and the lives of his fellow Nigerians: to let go of their heritage in favor of their colonizers'. Obi does not see his study of English as an academic investigation; he sees it as surrender. The reasons he chose this course in the first place, however, are never clearly articulated, suggesting that these feelings of shame are one of the many contradictions that make Obi such a frustrating character. In this passage the distinction between spoken and written language becomes relevant again—Obi may long for moments to speak in Igbo, but his academic life is necessarily in English. This demonstrates how, regardless of his discomfort, Obi needs both languages to conduct his life.

As Obi continues, he ties his feelings more tightly to spoken language, and the role it plays in his national identity:

But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud



owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. (Achebe, *No Longer At Ease* 49)

In this passage Obi discloses another source of linguistic shame: the fact that, because of the plurality of tribes and languages in Nigeria, he cannot always converse with his fellow Nigerians in his own language. Instead he uses English, a "foreign language," to communicate. Obi's worry that speaking to his "countrymen" in English will make people "assume one had no language of one's own" is well founded: Nigeria's official language is English which is, to Obi, "foreign."<sup>27</sup> But his desire for a pan-Nigerian language has no historical basis. When the British solidified the borders of their colony they pushed innumerable ethnic and linguistic groups together and called them "countrymen." As a result the element that unites these divergent cultures is their shared legacy of colonialism. This reality highlights the fact that the entire concept of Nigeria as a nation state was imposed by the British. Prior to colonization a pan-Nigerian identity did not exist: instead different regions were settled and ruled by various tribes, such as the Igbo and the Yoruba. Obi's wish for a Nigerian version of a national language results from his adoption of the British imposed concept of nationhood.

Despite their lack of historical validity, Obi's feelings are familiar. His understanding of the language question when he is in England is in many ways similar to Ngugi 's in *Decolonizing the Mind*. But when he returns to Nigeria, Obi's ambivalence towards English becomes a liability. The Union who funded his studies expected him to return speaking clear and intellectual English as a symbol of his

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<sup>27</sup> English is the official language of independent Nigeria although five hundred indigenous languages, including Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, and Fulani are also spoken (CIA-The World Factbook).

membership in the elite. He fails to meet their expectations. During an event held in his honor, Obi's speech is contrasted with that of the Union secretary. Their two speeches are described:

Needless to say, this address was repeatedly interrupted by cheers and the clapping of hands. What a sharp young man their secretary was, all said. He deserved to go to England himself. He wrote the kind of English they admired if not understood: the kind that filled the mouth like the proverbial dry meat.

Obi's English, on the other hand, was most unimpressive. He spoke 'is' and 'was.' He told them about the value of education. 'Education for service, not for white-collar jobs and comfortable salaries. With our great country on the threshold of independence, we need men who are prepared to serve her well and truly.'

When he sat down the audience clapped from politeness. (Achebe, *No Longer At Ease* 32-33)

The secretary speaks to impress. To him the content of his message is secondary to his ability to speak eloquently and descriptively. In contrast, the audience feels that the simplicity of Obi's speech does not properly reflect the loftiness of his education. His message, of service to the nation over personal advancement, seems both foreign and disappointing to the Union who second-guess the choice of him as the scholarship recipient as a result. Their feelings toward English seem to be aspirational, not resentful like Obi's. His lack of agreement on this point is an important example of the lack of ease that plagues him throughout the novel. By writing about both sets of feelings and describing the corresponding contradictions in English, Achebe exposes the rest of the English-speaking world to this phenomenon. Achebe uses English to criticize what Obi calls "the proud owners of that language": the English. He takes control of English, which his ancestors were forced to accept as their language, and uses it to reclaim his story.

Soyinka uses English in a different, but no less powerful way. The setting of his play *Death and the King's Horseman* necessitates that his characters speak in an English that represents both English and Yoruba in different scenes. While scenes involving colonial characters are meant to be in English, the language used during scenes with only Yoruba characters, though still in English, is constructed to represent Yoruba. Like Achebe, Soyinka uses proverbs in *Death and the King's Horseman* perhaps even more heavily. Because the depiction of the Yoruba community itself is far less thorough than Achebe's corresponding details of the Igbo, the proverbs seem less like common adages that are fully integrated into pedestrian conversation. In the play, these sayings are primarily employed by Elesin but they are also incorporated into a sort of call and response between Elesin, the Praise Singer, and the women of the village lead by Iyaloja. For example:

ELESIN: The world I know is good.

WOMEN: We know you'll leave it so.

ELESIN: The world I know is bounty

Of hives after bees have swarmed.

No goodness teems with such open hands

Even in the dreams of deities.

WOMEN: And we know you'll leave it so.

ELESIN: I was born to keep it so. A hive

Is never known to wander. An anthill

Does not desert its roots. We cannot see

The still great womb of the world—

No man beholds his mother's womb—

Yet who denies it's there? Coiled

To the navel of the world is that

Endless cord that links us all

To the great origin. If I lose my way

The trailing cord will bring me to the roots.

WOMEN: The world is in your hands. (Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* 13)

This scene in the marketplace that prepares Elesin for his sacrifice is half conversation half verse. Instead of trying, as Achebe does, to directly transpose the language, Soyinka tries to reflect its ambience with a more poetic translation. While what he says seems to be important, how he says it, the formulation of the words, seems to carry at least equal weight. Elesin begins by describing the world he is about to leave, claiming that its “bounty” surpasses even “the dreams of deities.” Through their refrain of “We know you’ll leave it so,” the chorus of women express a united sense of confidence in Elesin’s ability to perform his task: they all believe he will willingly leave the world while it is still good. He agrees with them, using proverbs to explain his destiny: “A hive/ is never known to wander. An anthill does not desert its roots.” The use of natural imagery of things that are rooted to the ground shows that Elesin sees his position as immovable and integral to the fabric of society. This exchange seems pre-formulated, which reminds the viewer of the long tradition of the King’s Horseman’s ceremony. He continues by conjuring an image of a body whose umbilical chord will guide him if he loses his way. The women respond by reminding him of the importance of his duty almost as if they are warning him not to lose his way: “The world is in your hands.” In this passage Elesin commits to his duty and recognizes its importance. The women act as the voice of the larger community; they encourage him and remind him how important his duty is.

Elesin bends these ceremonial proverbs to suit his desires, demonstrating that he is aware of his position in the community and has no problem using it to gain what he wants. For example, he uses proverbs to justify his sexual desire and his

marriage to the young woman, which seems to be a departure from tradition. He tells them,

Pleasure palls. Our acts should have meaning.  
The sap of the plaintain never dries.  
You have seen the young shoot swelling  
Even as the parent stalk begins to wither.  
Women, let my going be likened to  
The twilight hour of the plantain. (Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* 16)

Delivered with his trademark pomposity, these proverbs are used by Elesin as part of his final teachings in this market scene. He explains that, regardless of his age his “sap never dries” and that his final day should be spent satisfying his carnal desires. The women, however, respond to this collection of proverbs by saying. “What does he mean Iyaloja? This language is the language of our elders, we do not fully grasp it” (Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* 16). Though what exactly is unclear about Elesin's speech is never explained, their response seems to indicate that they do not recognize the context that Elesin has put these proverbs into. They seem to have lost the some of the familiarity that they had in the time of *Arrow of God* and, as a result, Elesin feels comfortable remolding them to suit his needs, regardless of their relationship to tradition.

Like Achebe, Soyinka contrasts the poeticism of translated Yoruba with the clipped and undeveloped cadence of pidgin. Amusa, the Muslim police officer, speaks in a sort of pidgin: when he sees the Pilkings in their *egungun* costumes he says “Mista Prinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belongs to dead cult, not for human being” (Soyinka *Death and the King's Horseman* 19). Like John in *Arrow of God*, Amusa's dialogue is rendered in phonetic spelling, in the

words *Mista* and *Prinkin*, and some of the verbs are missing or conjugated incorrectly. Though the modification is less drastic than John's, Amusa's dialogue fails to approach anything like the complexity of expression achieved both by the Pilkings in English and Elesin and the market women in translated Yoruba.

After succinctly demonstrating this phenomenon, Soyinka makes the language barrier irrelevant in the play's final scene. After failing to kill himself, Elesin is taken to prison and while he is there he speaks with Pilkings. During this moment, and for the rest of the play, the English and Yoruba characters speak to each other without evidence of any linguistic obstacle. It is ambiguous what language they are supposed to be speaking. In a theater, the actors speak in English, but there is no explanation of why Elesin, who never studied in England, or Iyaloja, a local market woman, can speak in perfect English without a trace of pidgin conventions. The Yoruba characters use complete and complex language and sentence structure and Pilkings understands their explanations. It seems that, in this scene where full communication of cultural difference is so essential, a mystical intervention makes alphabets and diction irrelevant. Both sides are able to say exactly what they think and feel about the tradition of the king's horseman to each other:

ELESIN: The night is not at peace, ghostly one. The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world for ever. There is no sleep in the world tonight.

PILKINGS: It is still a good bargain if the world should lose one night's sleep as the price of saving a man's life.

ELESIN: You did not save my life, District Officer. You destroyed it.

PILKINGS: Now come on...

ELESIN: And not merely my life but the lives of many. The end of the night's work is not over. Neither this year nor the next will see it. If I wished you

well, I would pray that you do not stay long enough on our land to see the disaster you have brought upon us.

PILKINGS: Well, I did my duty as I saw it. I have no regrets.

ELESIN: No. The regrets of life always come later. (Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* 50-51)

In this interaction, Elesin and Pilkings both understand what the other says, but their communication does not change either man's mind. Pilkings feels that he did his duty and Elesin thinks that he has been prevented from performing his with disastrous results. The play ends with all the surviving characters stuck at an impasse even though they are able to speak to each other. Perhaps this is Soyinka's way of suggesting that traditions can remain distinct regardless of communication, and that the English language alone cannot conquer opinions and beliefs.

The difficulties of translating cultural beliefs into another language are modeled in more detail in *The Interpreters*, where Soyinka depicts a group of young intellectuals who have complete command of the English language. These young professionals, though they face many difficulties, never doubt their right to use the English language. They create new identities with this "borrowed language." Though none of them are creative writers—Sagoe is a journalist and it seems safe to assume that he writes in English—the way they live their lives, and develop their own myths through art, philosophy and love testifies to their control of English. It is a part of all that they create. Their new myths reflect their status as post-colonial Nigerians by incorporating pieces of the old and the new. Sagoe's "Voidancy" manifesto is written in English; Kola's painting refits Yoruba gods with modern faces, and Egbo tries to replace both Christian and Yoruba religions with a secular religion based on love. "The Interpreters" begin the process of trying to overcome

the consequences of colonization by combining what they have inherited with what they have acquired to fill in the gaps of what they lost.

Perhaps the best example of using English to fashion new myths is not one of the characters in the book, but the book itself. In *The Interpreters* Soyinka stretches the boundaries of what constitutes a novel. The combination of the disjointed story line and Soyinka's mystical language creates a vision that does not follow anything close to the recognizable trajectory of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution.<sup>28</sup> Instead of a central character or over-arching plot, Soyinka blends influences of western modernism as well as Yoruba mythology with his own brand of mysticism. For example, in a passage towards the end of the novel, Soyinka creates what can best be described as a literary painting. Using words, he evokes the images that Kola uses to construct his pantheon of gods. His single sentence leaves little doubt that English is his language and that he has made it his own. He writes:

And of these floods of the beginning, of the fevered fogs of the beginning, of the first messenger, the thimble of earth, a fowl and an ear of corn, seeking the spot where a scratch would become a peopled island; of the first apostate rolling the boulder down the back of the unsuspecting deity—for they must learn the first stab in the back and keep inferiors harmless within sight—and shattering him in fragments, which were picked up and pieced together with devotion; shell of the tortoise around divine breath; of the endless chain for the summons of the god and the phallus of unorigin pointed at the sky-hole past divination; of the lover of purity, the unblemished one whose large compassion embraced the cripples and the dumb, the dwarf, the epileptic – and why not, indeed, for they were creations of his drunken hand and what does it avail, the eternal penance of favoritism and abstinence? Of the lover of gore, invincible in battle, insatiable in love and carnage, the explorer, path-finder, protector of the forge and the creative hands, companion of the gourd whose crimsonmisted sight of debauchery set him upon his own and he

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<sup>28</sup> According to Ngugi, Soyinka “almost dispenses with plot” (Ngugi, *Decolonizing the Mind* 75). I would argue that Soyinka does not dispense with plot, but instead moves away from the idea that plot has to have a center or a resolution and replaces it with a number of small plots that do not neatly resolve.



butchered them until the bitter cry pierced his fog of wine, staid his hand and hung the sword, foolish like his dropped jaw; of the ones who hanged and did not hang, who ascended on the Ilana to sky vaults and mastered the snake-tongued lightening and the stone of incandescence, long arms of the divine sling playing the random game of children, plucking houses trees and children like the unripe mango; of the bi-sexed one that split himself into the river; of the parting of the fog and the retreat of the beginning, and the eternal war of the diving eyes, of the hundred in one eyes of lore, for-and-after vision, of the eternal war, of the first procedure, with the long sickle head of chance, eternally mocking the pretensions, of the bowl of plan, mocking lines of order in the ring of chaos; of the repulsive Scourge riding purulent on noontides of silent heat selective of victims, the avaricious one; of the one who stayed to tend the first fruits of the ginger of earth with passages of the wind around him and of the heat and the rain, and the marks of the moulting seasons... (Soyinka, *The Interpreters* 224-225)

This passage is presented as a transition, an introduction to the chapter but, on initial reading, it is close to impenetrable. Questionable grammar, a lack of verbs and subjects make it difficult to find any significance beyond that of a list of interesting phrases. The objective of this torrent of words is obscured until the scene shifts to Kola's studio after the ellipses. This context reveals that this passage attempts to accomplish what the physical painting in the novel attempts but fails to do: create an updated version of the pantheon of Yoruba gods. In a way, it evokes the stream of consciousness style employed by William Faulkner and other modernists, but its foreign subject matter makes it even more difficult to penetrate. But, when the passage is read aloud the phrases that Soyinka selects seem to unwind.<sup>29</sup> Instead of a cluster of seemingly incoherent fragments, this section becomes a litany of powerful and unearthly beings identified by their deeds and abilities woven together with stories of creation and innovation.

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<sup>29</sup> In an attempt to unlock this passage, I asked my mother, who is a performer, to read it out loud so that I could transcribe it more easily. When I listened to her read, I found that Soyinka's language was rhythmic, descriptive and also meaningful. It occurred to me that language like this was perhaps intended to be spoken aloud or maybe even chanted.

Soyinka begins with a story of creation.

And of these floods of the beginning, of the fevered fogs of the beginning, of the first messenger, the thimble of earth, a fowl and an ear of corn, seeking the spot where a scratch would become a peopled island

These words situate this image in a time before people, when the world was made of “fevered fogs.” He explains that “the first messenger” searched for the spot to begin his colony in the “thimble of the earth.” This story introduces the word *of*, which is used throughout the rest of the text to indicate transitions. It also serves to remind the reader that this list of terms is meant to evoke the essence *of* what they describe; Kola’s painting is meant to be made *of* all these things. From creation, Soyinka moves into the story of an important lesson “of the first apostate rolling the boulder down the back of the unsuspecting deity.” This story, of an upstart apostate trespassing against a god, tells an important lesson about the preservation of hierarchy “for they must learn the first stab in the back and keep inferiors harmless within sight.”

Soyinka moves from myths and parables to more straightforward descriptions of the Yoruba gods but, instead of describing how they look as Kola does through his painting, he lists aspects of their personalities and brief retellings of their deeds.

Of the lover of gore, invincible in battle, insatiable in love and carnage, the explorer, path-finder, protector of the forge and the creative hands, companion of the gourd whose crimsonmisted sight of debauchery set him upon his own and he butchered them until the bitter cry pierced his fog of wine, staid his hand and hung the sword, foolish like his dropped jaw

Without a thorough knowledge of Yoruba mythology it is difficult to definitively tie Soyinka’s descriptions to specific Gods, although, in this instance, this description seems to ally itself with Ogun, the warrior God portrayed by Egbo in Kola’s painting.

The story Soyinka hints at –of this drunken deity butchering a group of his own people for their “debauchery” until their cries brought him to his senses— and the slough of modifiers that this figure is given, from “insatiable in love” to “protector of the forge and the creative hands” tell readers much more about this deity than the index of gods in the back of the book, the description of the painting or the implications of Kola choosing Egbo as his model.

The phrase closest to a name in this description, “lover of gore” seems almost like a Homeric epithet, the equivalent of Ares, the Greek god of war, being referred to as “sacker of cities” or Odysseus as “wise.” This similarity again brings up the importance of distinguishing written from spoken language. These gods, worshiped in an oral tradition in pre-colonial times, were not originally represented through writing. The use of epithets, personality descriptors and lists of important deeds would all be useful for remembering stories and places without writing them down. Their resurrection here conjures the legacy of this oral tradition. This passage, which is difficult when read on the page, becomes far more accessible when spoken aloud. Soyinka, who is primarily a playwright, perhaps meant to capitalize on both the theatrical and oral traditions of his culture in this moment.

The combination of all these elements, from the subject matter, which is the core of Yoruba tradition, to the phrasing, which combines elements of spoken word with aspects of modernism, creates an updated version of these gods, one that fits into the context of post-independence Nigeria<sup>30</sup>. Through work like this, Soyinka

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<sup>30</sup> Omotoso asserts that this innovation in Soyinka has been largely interpreted as intentional obscurity. He explains, “As far as some Nigerian critics are concerned, Soyinka is not in fact attempting to say anything to anyone. Rather he is out to demonstrate that he is able to manipulate

solidifies his mastery of English—he makes it his own and uses it to tell whatever story he deems important. His success, like Achebe’s, helped to turn the tables of linguistic colonization. Though Achebe’s work is unquestionably more popular, I have encountered both writers in British and American classrooms on the high school and university levels. Their books, the manifestations of their resistance, now have the power to influence people all around the world.

Perhaps their common use of the English language is a way to reconcile these two authors and their, at times, divergent approaches to the task of writing the post-colonial Nigerian story. Achebe’s writing is straightforward, at times almost documentarian. He uses English as a mirror to hold up a revised image of Africa to the colonizers and imperialists as well as African readers. Soyinka more freely changes English and, in reflecting mythology through poetry, makes it his own. Both men use the English language as a form of resistance against continuing colonial dominance of their nation. The point is not that writing in English is superior to writing in a native African language—Ngugi’s assertion that writing in Gikuyu, his own language, feels natural to him, is unimpeachable. The core of this opposition to his book is that, after colonization and all of its effects—linguistic, educational, religious and otherwise—English has become an authentic part of the post-colonial Nigerian identity and if these writers feel that it is the best vehicle for their stories then they should be able to write in it without losing any perception of authenticity. Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka differ in various ways, from their origins within

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the English language far better than the owners of the language, the English in England, and also to demonstrate his cleverness” (Omotoso xv). This point is not entirely untrue, Soyinka seems to take pleasure in the complexity of his writing, but the ways that he manipulates English also have symbolic importance.

Nigeria to the style of their writing, but ultimately they both share the task of creating a Nigerian literature that reflects their perceptions of the post colonial identity. This task involves addressing, if not reconciling with, the past (in *Arrow of God* and *Death and the King's Horseman*) and trying to understand the difficulties of the present (in *No Longer at Ease* and *The Interpreters*). Collectively, these two authors build a foundation for a future of literary expression in Nigeria and a vehicle to bring these experiences and realities across the many cultural and linguistic divides in Africa and into the consciousness of the rest of the world.

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