

The Influence of Igbo Metaphysics on the Writings of Chinua Achebe

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Preamble

So far, the world of Chinua Achebe's novels is unapologetically Igbo. Not only do the events of his *oeuvre* take place on Igbo soil, the thought pattern, cultural ethos, and the communal and individual character stance are essentially Igbo in conception, meaning, and significance. The writer himself has never hidden his Igbo origins or the Igbo sources of what he has so far written about. Achebe's works, according to him, are essentially centered on "the life I lived and the life that was lived around me, supported by what I heard in conversation—I was keen on listening to old people—and what I learned from my father, so it was all sort of picked up here and there" (*African Writers Talking*, 15). Many years after the interview wherein he uttered those words, our author had to insist during another face-to-face conversation that "the Igbo tradition . . . can claim 90%" of what he writes because that is the tradition that created the framework in which this sort of thing can happen" (*Conversation*, 122).

The relationship between the writer and his/her cultural milieu is akin to that between a baby and its mother's breast. The baby not only clings to its mother's milk because of its nourishing value, it finds in its action an assurance of acceptance, warmth, confidence, and relevance. In the case of a writer, his/her immediate milieu supplies the intimate life impressions, compels him/her to live with these impressions by using them to formulate the appropriate attitude to, and philosophy of, life for the whole of his/her lifetime. Yet as Achebe once said, these notions are neither obtrusive nor do their occasional contradictions constitute a source of worry to those who have been brought up in them. As he puts it, "Well, as a little boy it didn't worry me at all. I took most of these things for granted . . . even though I was brought up a Christian, the life of the village was there for you to see—it was only later that I began to evaluate, so to speak" (*African Writers Talking*, 5). Thus, it is safe to say that at the background of Achebe's works is Igbo philosophy and thought, Igbo *weltanschauung*.

The Notion of Igbo Metaphysics

Metaphysics, remarks Henry Alpern, is “the study of reality, of that which does not appear to our senses, of truth in the absolute sense, is the groundwork of any theory concerning all phases of human behaviour” (Onyewuenyi, 30). Placid Tempels, a European with vast research credentials in African philosophy, would quickly remark that there exists a specific difference between Western metaphysics and the African variety. According to him,

Christian thought in the West having adopted the terminology of Greek philosophy and, perhaps under its influence, has defined this reality common to all beings, or, as one should perhaps say, being as such: ‘the reality that is,’ ‘what is’. Its metaphysics has most generally been based upon a fundamentally *static* conception of being (Tempels, 50).

He states further: “Herein is to be seen the fundamental difference between Western thought and that of Bantu and other primitive people . . . we hold a *static* conception of ‘being’, they, a *dynamic*” (Tempels, 51).

Thus for the Igbo, reality consists of the physical, the spiritual, and the abstract (Nwoga, 17). The three planes of reality influence their perception of their environment. Whereas the physical is often taken for granted by the people, the intangible, comprising the spiritual and the abstract, is given an even greater focus. The Igbo nurture “certain basic beliefs and conceptions about the universe, life and existence generally, such that constitute a world-view and which is related to the social and natural environment in which a people are historically situated” (Nwala, 7). It is true that Igbo philosophy, of which metaphysics is a part, though unwritten and unsystematized, lacking the “complex and abstract logical and mathematical exposition of facts and issues” (Nwala, 106), nonetheless was “pragmatic, meant to solve practical problems of food, security, peace and the general welfare of the community” (Nwala, 7). To solve the metaphysical problems of life, the Igbo utilize *amamihe* (knowledge), *izu* (wisdom), *ako* (shrewd intuition), *uche* (thought), *omenala* (custom), and *mmeje-mmeje* (tradition). These facets of human symbols and actions, in varying combination, dictate the philosophical stance of the Igbo.

To zero in specifically on Igbo metaphysics, one is invoking the Igbo view of cosmology, ontology, and theodicy. Cosmology focuses on the origin, structure, and space-time relations of the universe; ontology seeks to know the fact of propositions and numbers; while theodicy relates to the philosophy of religion in such questions as: Does anything exist necessarily? Why is there something rather than nothing? (Edeh, 69). Thus, metaphysics is a search for ultimate meaning, and therefore “a description and identification of the intelligible nature, structure and characteristic qualities of reality” (Edeh, 143). The Igbo have had to resolve the confusion arising from these mysteries by teasing out their metaphysics from their language, culture, and socio-religious heritage. Central to Igbo metaphysics are such concepts as “being”, “God”, “causality”, “death”, “reincarnation” (or Onyewuenyi’s “vital

influence” or “living-perpetuation”, etc.), “soul-body unity”, “good” and “evil”, the seasons, and the concepts of time, space, and number, as well as social, ritualistic, and artistic symbols. The list is quite a corpus. Having pursued this matter thus far, it should not be forgotten that this paper is primarily concerned with the cyclic motif in Igbo metaphysics as depicted in the works of a world novelist of Igbo origin. We shall then refer to one or two of these depictions of the cyclic archetype as observed in some of Achebe's stories.

Reincarnation and the Igbo Cyclic Construct

At an interview with Achebe in 1985, the present writer asked him if the systematic failures in varying degrees of Unoka, Okonkwo Unoka, Isaac Nwoye Okonkwo, and Obi Okonkwo—offshoots of the same genealogical tree—had anything to do with an aspect of the Igbo world-view on family inheritance or ancestral curse. His response:

I wasn't thinking about that. No. No, I was not thinking of that. Although, mark you, the cyclic metaphor in Igbo thought is never very far from one's mind if one is reared in the Igbo culture. The cyclic thought is that if something happened before, it will happen again; if one dies, one will return (*An Interview*, 136).

A. O. Anya, an Igbo scholar, has observed that “most African societies, including the Nigerian society, operate on a cosmological framework in which time is conceived as cyclical and space is organized in three compactments—the heavens above, the earth below it and the underworld beneath the earth—all conceived as contiguous and continuous, once more in a cyclical continuum . . .” (*Animalu*, 10). Ogbu Kalu, another Igbo intellectual, holds the view that the cyclical notion of time in the Igbo world is derived from the cyclical agricultural seasons. As he puts it, “the seasons of the year repeat in an eternal cycle. Non-complex societies perceive in the movements of these natural phenomena the eternal order which governs the universe” (Kalu, 40). Even if this cyclical paradigm of metaphysics is not limited to the Igbo or even the African world, what is of essence is that a notion like this may have informed the Igbo claims about reincarnation.

The concept of reincarnation is an accepted one in Igbo philosophic thought. What Onyewuenyi suggests in its stead is a “language of accommodation,” such that “other terminologies, such as ‘vital influence’, ‘life-strengthening’, ‘personal ray’, ‘vital participation’ . . . be used in place of reincarnation” (Onyewuenyi, 44). However, this suggestion does not vitiate the Igbo claim to the influence of the past in terms of those who had loved us or we had loved, and who had taken the path to eternity. The point needs to be made that the background to the belief in the “eternal return” is the logical fall-out from the deep-seated Igbo endearment to their ancestors. Every Igbo man or woman cherishes the thought of his/her dead relatives, particularly for love commonly shared while the deceased ones were alive. But perhaps more importantly, in Igbo religious thought,

. . . man does not die. Life does not end with death. An individual only 'goes home' from whence he came back when his shopping is done, to begin afresh his continuous cycle of birth, death, reincarnation on a similar, higher or lower level of existence depending on how he had lived his previous life (Chinwe Achebe, 17).

So crucial is reincarnation in Igbo traditional thought, that an ancestor can simultaneously retain his place as an ancestor, be the incarnation of the ancestor in one or more living persons, and hope to be reincarnated in one or more persons yet unborn (Okafor, 23; Aguwa, 34). In other words, the ancestor operates in "three worlds"—the worlds of the dead, the living, and the unborn—in what the Igbo regard as *ilo-uwa*, returning to the world. Reincarnation is for the Igbo the proof of the immortality of the soul while the soul's transmigration ensures that certain people would have to return upon their death to accomplish the original mission they failed to fulfill on their previous attempts at existence.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), there seems to be a replay of tragic outcomes in a way that suggests a cyclic pattern of coming and going in which there does not seem to be a redeeming feature. We are informed in *Things* that Unoka, Okonkwo's father, is an existential failure. He is said to have had "a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave or rather to his death, for he had no grave" (*Things*, 13). Unoka loses the respect of both his wife and his only son (Okonkwo) on account of his improvident and careless disposition to life. Consequently, Okonkwo grows up without inheriting a barn from his father, as is the custom in Igboland, because "there was no barn to inherit" (*Things*, 12). Before Unoka's death, "he was heavily in debt," shunned the idea of a serious farming engagement, loathed the sight of blood or anything demanding sweat, and instead developed a special attachment to his flute. Toward the end of his life, talking becomes his second nature. He offers an unsolicited piece of advice to his son who has no regard for him. For instance, when Okonkwo loses many of his seed yams as a result of an unexpected drought, Unoka turns himself into an adviser of sorts: "Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride" (*Things*, 18). This is an ironic comment, coming from someone who had invested in nothing and could not have known what it was to despair. The priestess despises him: "You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your matchet and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms; you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil" (*Things*, 13).

Faced with a failed father as it were, Okonkwo decides to tread a different path in life. He resolves to make a clean break with his father's poverty, and so avoids dying a lonely, wretched death. He throws himself at farm work, borrowing seed yams from great farmers like Nwakibie. In spite of the unfriendly disposition of nature and the elements the year he borrows to plant on his land, we are told that what the drought consumes are Okonkwo's 400 seed yams, not the 800 he

had borrowed from Nwakibie or the 400 from his father's friend. With these yams he cultivates a sufficient number to fall back to reckoning as a rich farmer. Such is his passion for success in life that he "wanted his son (Nwoye) to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him" (*Things*, 23-24).

With respect to Nwoye, Okonkwo does not fail to observe the swiftness and ready acts of intelligence possessed by Ikemefuna, a boy given to Umuofia in recompense for a daughter of hers killed by Mbaino people. Very early on, Okonkwo had sought to set Nwoye on the path to manly success. Apparently, though, the little boy was not so keen, in spite of Ikemefuna's presence in his life, a presence which had pulled the boy from the brink of laziness: "Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna" (*Things*, 37).

In spite of Ikemefuna's affectionate attachment to the Okonkwo household, Okonkwo is keen to effect the orders of the goddess with respect to the lad. When the goddess of the Hills and Caves demands that Ikemefuna be killed, rather than steer clear, Okonkwo's knife-cut is in fact the real blow that seals the fate of the adolescent. We are told that "as soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow" (*Things*, 43). With the harrowing death of Ikemefuna, Nwoye seems to have regressed once more into his slow, somewhat deliberate unmanly manners. "I am worried about Nwoye," Okonkwo complains to Obierika, his bosom friend, "a bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match" (*Things*, 46). We are told that when Okonkwo proclaims that "there is too much of his mother" in Nwoye, Obierika thought instead that there is "too much of his grandfather" (*Things*, 46). Toward the end of the story, Nwoye breaks off from his household and goes to live with the missionaries. His sense of form has been breached by the cold, inexplicable murder of Ikemefuna, as well as by his people's illogical and inhuman disposal of twins in the forest.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Nwoye, now baptized Isaac Okonkwo, also has an only son, called Obi Okonkwo. Here the cyclic constant seems to be at work. That is, Okonkwo, Isaac, and Obi are the only sons of their fathers. Since we are not informed that Unoka has a brother, we might as well infer that he was probably an only son, too. By the time the story gets to Obi Okonkwo, there is a new milieu, the colonial environment. Modernity has set in. Isaac Okonkwo is a catechist who has no real material achievement to show for it except that he has a son who has returned from overseas, where he had gone to earn a degree in English. His people in Lagos are surprised that their son, the first to acquire an education from abroad, can only address them in the English of "is" and "was," rather than speak in the bombastic language for which highly educated people at the time were known. Having returned to the land armed with a good education, Obi obtains a "senior service" job in Lagos. So much is materially expected from him, yet his salary cannot bear the burden of those expectations in a modern market economy.

Among the villagers of Umuofia, Isaac Okonkwo is neither materially successful nor even ordinarily popular. Rather, he is loathed for his arrogance and his unusual display of Christian fanaticism. He will not allow fellow villagers to

break the traditional Igbo kolanut in his house, as is the custom when a guest visits an Igbo home. For him, it is unchristian and heathenish to do so. "Kolanut is not eaten here" (*No Longer*, 46), he warns his visitors on the occasion of Obi's return from England. That day, rain threatened to disperse the joyous crowd. However, "many people half wished it would rain heavily so as to show Isaac Okonkwo that Christianity had made him blind. He was the only man who failed to see that on an occasion such as this, he should take palm-wine, a cock and a little money to the chief rain-maker in Umuofia" (*No Longer*, 43-44). The villagers chide Isaac for being a fundamentalist Christian. One of them in exasperation remarks that "he is not the only Christian we have seen . . . But it is like the palm-wine we drink. Some people can drink it and remain wise. Others lose all their senses" (*No Longer*, 44).

As for Obi himself, he is not a particularly successful civil servant. In spite of his senior service position, he is regularly insolvent. About two chapters to the end of the story, we are told that Obi's "most immediate problem was how to raise thirty pounds before two o'clock the next day" (*No Longer*, 133). This is in addition to the debt of 50 pounds he owes Clara, the girl he neither has the will to marry nor to jettison. He fails to approach the President of the Umuofia Progressive Union for financial help because the man "would want to know why a young man in the senior service should want to borrow money from a man of family on less than half his salary" (*No Longer*, 134). Thus, Obi perpetually lives under financial pressure and seeks a way out which does not exist for him, except for the choice of bribe-taking. The day of Obi's reception in Umuofia is in itself remarkable. It is the day on which a fellow Umuofian called Odogwu publicly links Obi to his grandfather (Okonkwo) in an irony-laden remark. Odogwu says: "He is the grandson of Ogbuefi Okonkwo who faced the white man single-handed and died in the fight. Stand up!" (*No Longer*, 48) While Obi is standing, Odogwu resumes: "Remark him . . . He is Ogbuefi Okonkwo come back. He is Okonkwo *kpomkwem*, exact, perfect" (*No Longer*, 49). Although Isaac protests, saying that "dead men do not come back," Odogwu insists: "I tell you this is Okonkwo. As it was in the beginning so it will be in the end. That is what your religion tells us" (*No Longer*, 49).

Odogwu's comment is ironic, indeed, because without being conscious of the full force of his utterance, Obi later ends unsuccessfully, as did his grandfather, who had taken on the white man in a lone fight and in the end died a type of death which merited a funeral at which only strangers could bury his body. With regard to Okonkwo's grandson, he can only put on a false bravado, he being an educated man occupying a top civil service position. His fellow Umuofians in Lagos have no real respect for him, particularly because he had failed to attend his mother's burial. An older member of the Umuofia Progressive Union in Lagos observes that Obi Okonkwo's general behavior accords well with his ancestral record of comportment:

You see this thing called blood. There is nothing like it. That is why when you plant a yam it produces another yam, and if you plant an orange it bears oranges. I have seen many things in my

life, but I have never seen a banana tree yield a coco yam. Why do I say this? . . . This boy that we are talking about, what has he done? He was told that his mother died and he did not care. It is a strange and surprising thing, but I can tell you that I have seen it before. His father did it (*No Longer*, 145).

It can then be observed that cycles of material and spiritual failure based on the concept of "eternal return" seem to have been established in which Isaac Okonkwo, then Nwoye, with "so much of his grandfather" in him, sires Obi who is said to be "Okonkwo *kpom-kwem*." In spite of his hard work and penchant for earthly success, Okonkwo's corpse, like his father's, does not deserve a decent burial, for "only strangers" (*No Longer*, 147) can bury him. One who used to be diligent, up-and-doing, a titled man, and a man of means by local standards ends as miserably and piteously as his father, Unoka, who had made no effort to be wealthy, had taken no title, and had no barns of yams. The entire scenario is explainable in the Igbo traditional metaphysical term of *eburputa-uwa*, a stamp-mark of someone or a family trait carried over from the other world. This is usually ascribed to the sins of the fathers, which have become implanted in the family destiny and have now taken on a life of their own.

The Curvilinear Form in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

Circular or spiral forms and movements in *Arrow of God* have been recognized for their semiotic signification first by Willy Umezina, joined later by A. O. E. Animalu. Later still, the two collaborated on a monograph venture which they sponsored in 1988 under the title, *From African Symbols to Physics: The Meaning of the Snake Symbol in African Novels and the Implications for Modern Physics*. Surprisingly, one author is a professor in the Arts, the other, a professor in the Sciences. Curvilinear forms, they insist, have been instigated by human and animal actions meant for battling unsavory nature, and thus instigated for their survival. According to the duo,

in traditional societies of the (African) novelists, the curve and the circle are exploited in architectural design. One of the first noticeable consequences of human efforts in these novels is the emergence of circular huts as recurrent motifs from the sub-Saharan region of West Africa to the South African cape (*From African Symbols*, 28).

They insist that this pattern of African housing style is not in any way happening by chance; instead it represents "man's intuitive dialogue with nature" (*From African Symbols*, 29). The co-writers single out for mention the "one-to-one resemblance between the breast, the womb and the hut" with "the apex of the hut [covered] with a cooking pot" (*From African Symbols*, 29). They go on to remark that "the pot by itself connotes domestication of Nature. It also connotes nourishment for

man in the same way as the nipple is the source of feeding for the baby and the navel . . . the source of nourishment for the foetus" (*From African Symbols*, 29).

Two figures—one cast in wood—and a dance event in *Arrow of God* shall constitute the hub of our demonstration of the significance of the cyclic essence as located in Achebe's craft. In the novel, the python is a critical object in the Umuaro world-view. A song like the one below repeated in *Arrow of God* is instructive:

Look! A python! python
 Look! A python!
 Yes it lies across the way (*Arrow*, 81, 221).

For the people, the snake makes a circle when it recoils at rest or a curve or spiral when it is in motion. The snake's shape is often a contrast to the Western rectangular form the European culture seems to prefer. Whereas the typical African housing style is curvilinear, the European church made reference to in the novel is rectangular in shape. In Achebe's *oeuvre* the snake is regenerative. Even in a work like *No Longer at Ease*, we are told that Obi Okonkwo asks himself why he is "feeling like a brand-new snake just emerged from its slough" (*No Longer*, 150). However, in *Arrow*, when a python is imprisoned in Oduche's rectangular box, the symbol of ethnic authority and family genealogy seems to have been locked up by the symbol of a foreign and intruding power.

In a later essay solely written by Umezina and presented at the 1990 *Eagle on Iroko* symposium in honor of Chinua Achebe at 60, he identified as bearing "the curve of survival" the wooden cast of *ikenga*, the Igbo symbol of a man's strength and drive for enterprise and achievement (Ifemesia, 34). In *Arrow*, a white character, Captain Winterbottom, gives his own definition of *ikenga* as "the most important fetish in the Igbo man's arsenal, so to speak. It represents his ancestors to whom he must make a daily sacrifice. When he dies it is split in two; one half is buried with him and the other half is thrown away" (*Arrow*, 37). According to Umezina, "as a matter of fact, *ikenga* is a plastic synthesis on dynamic movement or the desire of man to survive through individual creativity and personal growth. Its aesthetic definition is the modulation of rectilinearity with curvilinearity in order to prove that growth is the nature of man endowed with vertical attitude" (*Vector*, 131). The *ikenga* has "aggressive upthrust with curvilinear horns." These curved horns signify "strength, defiance and self-reliance." Umezina further states that "*ikenga* is a modulated radius of an existential circle in which man stands at the centre while exercising a controlling influence" (*Vector*, 131). Ezeulu's *ikenga* is described as being "about as tall as a man's forearm, its animal horn as long as the rest of its human body" (*Arrow*, 6). It is not only "the affirmation of man's vertical erection in space but also a plastic declaration on the importance of work symbolized by the arm" (*Vector*, 133). The effort exerted so far to describe *ikenga* is not only to underline its curvilinear structure, but also to underscore the extent of Akualia's indiscretion when he rushes "after Ebo, went into the *obi*, took the *ikenga* from his shrine, rushed outside again and, while everyone stood aghast, split it in two" (*Arrow*, 24). Of course, the offender paid for his act of folly with his life.

The Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves is a dramatized ritual dance meant to cleanse the land every year. This dance, which takes place at the center of the market place, is conducted by Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu. The ceremony demands that the Chief Priest get to the various points of the big circle drawn around the market either by running to each point or dancing to it. We are informed that after Ezeulu had "completed the full circle of the market place, [he] ran on with increasing speed into the sanctuary of his shrine, his messengers at his heels" (*Arrow*, 72). As for the women who had accompanied the Chief Priest as he led them in the "triumphant" race round the market square, they "broke out from the circle and began to run round the market place, stamping their feet heavily." After the Umunneora women had completed their round of feet stamping, those of "Umuagu burst through from every part of the huge circle to begin their own run" (*Arrow*, 73).

During this Feast, Ugoye—one of the wives of the Chief Priest—prays for a bumper harvest after the land cleansing by waving "the small bunch in a circle round her head and flung it with all her power at the Chief Priest as he ran past her" (*Arrow*, 72). Similarly, "at every New Yam feast the coming together of the villages was re-enacted and every grown man in Umuaro took a good-sized seed-yam to the shrine of Ulu and placed it in the heap from his village after circling it round his head . . ." (*Arrow*, 202). At the *Akwu nro* Festival with its "little ritual," it being "a memorial offering by widows to their departed husbands," the social relevance of a circle is again enacted. We are informed that "women and girls, young men and boys had already formed a big ring on the *ilo*; as more and more people poured in from every quarter the ring became thicker and the noise greater. There were no young men with whips trying to keep the crowd clear of the centre; this would take care of itself as soon as the Mask arrived" (*Arrow*, 196).

Circularity: Achebe's Preferred Historical Model

Based on the mode of historical pursuit in his novels, there is no doubt that Achebe's preferred vision of history is the cyclic framework. Other historical models which he occasionally deploys in his *oeuvre* include history as progression, history as eternal recurrence, and history as sheer recapitulation. However, history as circularity seems to serve his artistic purpose best, since as a writer of tragedy, the cyclic theory of the past which is essentially melancholic, full of weal and woe, accords well with Achebe's notion of verisimilitude (*Chinua Achebe*: 17). And as it can be observed, so far the tragic mode seems to enjoy a favored place in his authorial craftsmanship. In short, all his novels for now, and to a large extent his short stories, belong to the tragic afflation of prose. Perhaps if he were to be asked why he is always returning to the spiral notion of history, his answer may not stray too far from the one he gave in response to the genealogical failures of Unoka and his descendants, namely, that the culture in which he had been brought up may have left him with little choice.

Achebe's epigraph to *Things Fall Apart*, and indeed the novel's title, are derived from Yeats' "The Second Coming," a poem in which its persona speaks of "turning and turning in a widening gyre/ . . . Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

For W. B. Yeats, history is like a wicket dance in circles. To quote A. G. Stock,

no civilization can either remain static or evolve forever towards a more inclusive perfection. It must collapse from within and be overwhelmed from without, and what replaces it will appear most opposite to itself, being built from all that is overlooked or undervalued (*Yeats and Achebe*, 86).

Yeats suggests a 2,000-year span as probably the maturation period for every civilization to pass away, supplanted by a more superior and buoyant historical epoch. At any rate, some "worlds" of Achebe do disintegrate without waiting to attain the Yeatsian model!

It is important to note that certain conditions provoke a debacle or the decline of a gilded polity. In the world of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe records dimensions of its "ceremony of innocence" and its "imperfections" about which he had once hinted. Some of these include the inhabitants' complacent nature, which explains, for instance, why they consider the first white men they see in shoes as "lepers" being toeless and the bicycle as an "iron horse." Once one of the early white men who get into Umuofia is murdered, his bicycle is hung on a tree so that it will not run to report the villagers' action! Another imperfection of the past is the killing of the twins and the cold-blooded murder of Ikemefuna at the behest of a goddess. These two events make Nwoye—later baptized Isaac—rebel against his father, and indeed against Igbo culture and tradition, and to engender his consequent total embrace of Christianity.

Other imperfections in the universe of *Things Fall Apart* include the polarization of Umuofia society along the lines of the free-borns and the outcasts, along the masculine and the effeminate valuations of character traits and material pursuits. Thus, the social outcasts, never-do-wells, and economic failures become the instant clientele of the new religion, while the masculine-effeminate dilemma puts the Umuofia society under constant pressure. There is also the absolute belief in the efficacy of the gods and the god-heads. Rather than drive away the first white founders of Christianity in the clan, they offer them the Evil Forest in the hope that the gods will fight their own battle better. However, ironically, rather than diminish in importance as the locals had expected, the Church in Umuofia increases in number and militancy to the point of constituting a security risk.

In *Arrow*, the author seems to be saying that change is permanent, that the weaker, anachronistic social system must make way for a stronger one in the Darwinian construct. This seems to be in line with the view of the French adherents of the cyclical mode of history who see history as akin to a kaleidoscope with a changing configuration of the same materials in which "everything disappears and is replaced; but nothing perishes." The change that comes to Umuaro is one which the community needs for the purpose of adjustment. Achebe seems to be one with his chief character here, who he had once described in an interview as "an intellectual" who sits back unlike Okonkwo to think "about why things happen . . . , the roots of things." Furthermore, Ezeulu, Achebe insists, "sees the value of change

and therefore his reaction to Europe is different, completely different, from Okonkwo's. He's ready to come to terms with the new—up to a point—except where his dignity is involved" (*African Writers Talking*, 16–17). Thus, Ezeulu's complex nature—the knowable and the unknowable, one half of whom is human, the other one spirit—singles him out as the character likely to be employed by some hidden forces to facilitate the passing away of the Yeatsian era.

In order to hasten the tragic trajectory in *Arrow*, Achebe deploys a character like Ezeulu to serve as a catalytic quantum around which historical forces of centripetal (uniting) and centrifugal (dividing/pulling apart) nature operate. We may then identify as centripetal those incidents like the amalgamation effort by the Umuaro people in the past, the stream into which one amalgamation-fetish was thrown, and the market place where the other was buried. In these two places—the stream and the market—the ritual and cyclic essence of the amalgamation is always renewed. There are also the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves (to which reference has earlier been made), which brings the community together, the shared local myths and legends, the age-grade systems, as well as the shrine of Ulu to which all sacrifices are directed. On the other hand, there are the centrifugal forces, which are exemplified by the lack of order in Ezeulu's household, the perpetual quarrel between Ezeulu and Nwaka and their respective towns, the powerful advance of Christianity, the long and unending rivalry between Umuaro and Okperi, etc.

It is instructive that Ezeulu is practically involved in all these incidents and movements. Part of his complex nature is that the same Ezeulu who has provided the white man all the clues with which he decides the Umuaro-Okperi land case is the very Ezeulu who would not accept the white man's chieftaincy award for his brazen truthful outspokenness even against his own Umuaro people. In like manner, he brazenly declines to take up the white man's offer, saying that "Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief except Ulu" (*Arrow*, 175). Nevertheless, he accepts mutability as a constant, inevitable historical absolute which no wise person should challenge or fail to reckon with. It is on account of this stance that he sends Oduche to school, saying: "If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time" (*Arrow*, 189). He had earlier told this same son of his: "the world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place" (*Arrow*, 46).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to establish that Achebe's choice of the cyclic and the circular in his literary artifice and artifact is not by any means fortuitous. The fact is that there is a consistent pattern of specific metaphysical events and actions in his novels which ought not be ignored. If we neglect these hints and hunches in his works, we deny ourselves the semiotic bounties which are derivable from them. Fortunately, Charles Jenks has warned us to the effect that,

Meaning in the environment is inescapable, even for those who would deny or deplore it. Everything that can be seen or thought

about takes on meaning, or position within a signifying system, even the recurrent attempts to escape from this omnipresent signification. 'All' is meaningful even in Nihilism, and what is worse, semiologists have staked out this 'all' as their proper territory . . .
(*From African Symbols*, 28).

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