The Changing Tongues of Chinua Achebe:

Language as a Developing Theme in

Things Fall Apart, A Man of the People, and *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the development of three language strategies--modes of narration, pidgin English, and African proverbs--used by the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, in three of his novels: *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). The study is different from other examinations of Achebe's language strategies, many made before the publication of Achebe's most recent novels. Such examinations are limited to the notion that Achebe's use of these devices adds African colouration to an imperialist language. This study, in contrast, shows the different functions ascribed by Achebe to these language strategies in the three novels just mentioned.

After introducing the reader to the heated and ongoing dispute over language choice in postcolonial literature, the study explores how each of Achebe's language strategies is used creatively by the author to reflect credibly and effectively the changing realities of West Africa--from the colonial era to the post-independence period and its complex problems. It concludes that with the aid of the three language strategies, Achebe not only "Africanizes" the English language but also explores in depth such important issues as the struggle over the right to narrate West African stories in distinct historical contexts, a struggle which shifts from one between the European colonizers and the Igbo people in the colonial period to one between politicians and working-class West African people in the post-independence era. Achebe's successful manipulation of the three language devices shows him to be both a political critic and a writer striving to construct a believable past; in both roles, he strongly believes that English, an imperialist language, can be used by African writers to depict African experiences.

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Introduction

The Language Controversy in Postcolonial Literature

The language of Chinua Achebe's novels is perhaps the most frequently discussed aspect of the works of this Nigerian writer, partly because the language of postcolonial writers is itself a hotly disputed subject. Despite the opposition of many critics and writers to the use of European languages in postcolonial works, Achebe has successfully demonstrated in the five novels he has published to date that English can be appropriated to communicate African experiences. This study investigates how Achebe does this by examining three strategies and their development--modes of narration, proverbs, and pidgin English--in three of his novels: *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).

Each section of the study examines one of the three language strategies in Achebe's novels. Chapter One discusses Achebe's various modes of narration. After justifying the inclusion of modes of narration as a linguistic strategy, this chapter focuses on Achebe's use of narrative techniques as a means of conveying messages and bringing African colouration to his novels. Achebe's narrative modes are reflected in the kinds of narrators he adopts in the three novels. The adoption of various kinds of narrators itself reflects and pointedly serves the themes of his novels. Chapter Two examines Achebe's use of pidgin English, itself a result of appropriating the imperialist language, which is used carefully by Achebe to reflect the changing social realities in Nigerian history. Achebe does this by showing the functions pidgin English can take on in different historical periods. Chapter Three discusses Achebe's use of proverbs. He uses proverbs as an important language strategy which allows English to communicate African themes.

Like the modes of narration and pidgin English, proverbs used by Achebe in his novels also undergo changes to reflect the changing outlook of the Nigerian people.

The significance of the study lies partly in its distinctive approach. Many critics have examined the linguistic devices Achebe adopts in his novels; however, because most of the studies were completed before Achebe's more recent novels were published, they are limited to the notion that Achebe's language strategies add African "flavour" to English. For example, critics find that Achebe's modes of narration allow his novels to communicate an oral sensibility (McCarthy; Nnolim; Roy; Kirpal), and that his use of proverbs reflects traditional Igbo culture and philosophy (Nwachukwu-Agbada; Shelton; Uwajeh). What most of them fail to point out is that Achebe's effective adoption of various strategies is not static; rather, he manipulates them in such a way that they are made to suit the distinct historic periods he focuses on in various novels. In other words, Achebe's language devices undergo development and are made appropriate to the ever-changing West African realities depicted. My study focuses on this development, and thus provides a new way of examining an issue which has been discussed by many critics.

In order to understand the importance of Achebe's language strategies in his novels, a brief survey of the language issue in postcolonial studies is necessary. The choice of language in literary texts has become a topic of lively debate among postcolonial writers and scholars. The debate results from the important role that language plays in literature in general, and the intriguing implication it has for postcolonial literature in particular. Literature is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "the body of writings produced in a particular country or period," while language is defined as "words and the methods of combining them for the expression of

thought." The close connection between the two was formerly thought to be of little consequence, but Monroe Beardsly categorically states that it is important: "Since a literary work is a discourse, its parts are segments of language" (283). This statement is true because literature cannot be reduced to a mere categorizing of language. It is also true that literature would not be possible dissociated from the means of communication provided by language. The relationship between literature and language, according to Abiola Irele, is "somewhat equivalent to that between content and form" (43). Thus the two are actually inseparable.

Postcolonial studies have paid particular attention to the relationship between language and literature. One of the results of colonialism is that the languages of the former colonizers often remain the primary instrument of communication for the people of the former colonies, even after several decades after the death of colonialism. Although people in formerly colonized countries use their indigenous languages for communication, European languages also serve as common languages for many of them. For example, English is still the official language of Nigeria several decades after Nigerian independence.

Clearly, postcolonial writers are in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, their mission, stated or unstated, is to challenge the oppression of empire, and to restore pre-colonial dignity. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin assert in *The Empire Writes Back*, in an attempt to define postcolonial literature,

> What each of these literatures [from the former European colonies] has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial

> power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center. It is this which makes them distinctively postcolonial. (2)

On the other hand, in order to carry out their mission, postcolonial writers often find that they are obliged to use the imperialist languages, the very languages which were used by colonizers to degrade African cultures.

This ambivalence can be better understood if we examine briefly the interrelationship between language and discourse, the latter also being an important concept in a postcolonial context. Although this study does not attempt to use any single literary theory to guide the analyses of all three aspects of Achebe's language strategies, Michel Foucault's discourse theory is very helpful to our understanding of the relationship between language and discourse. One of Foucault's most frequently quoted comments on discourse is that discourse is "a violence which we do to things" (67). According to Stephen Slemon's elaboration, what Foucault means by this is that "discourse . . . is the name for that language by which dominant groups within society constitute the fields of 'truth' through the imposition of specific knowledge, disciplines, and values" (6). In other words, discourse is a system of rules which regulates the meaning of reality. Among other things, it determines such standards as the inclusion of certain authors in a literary canon and the exclusion of others, the definition of one language variety as "language" and others as "dialects," and the construction of a mapping system.

It is obvious that discourse is very relevant to the postcolonial context in that it plays a vital part in the process of decolonization, just as it did in the process of colonization. Decolonization, according to Helen Tiffin, has "involved a radical

dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses" (17). That is, decolonization is a struggle between colonial discourse and postcolonial counter-discourse. On the one hand, the colonizers have been imposing and naturalizing imperialist power structures, assuming the privilege of being the only generators of truth. The formerly colonized people, as Tiffin claims, question and subvert colonial discourse. They thus challenge the imperialist hierarchy as inevitable, and deny colonial discourse its role in generating truth.

Based on this analysis, it seems that the process of decolonization is actually a struggle of power over truth. As Foucault points out in "The Order of Things,"

> in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (52)

This is where language plays a vital role in this struggle of power over truth. It is the vehicle through which truth is expressed and power sustained. To quote Ashcroft again, "power is invested in the language because it provides the term in which truth itself is constituted" (167-68).

Although the relationship between language and discourse is very close, it does not necessarily follow that English, which serves the imperialist discourse, should be unanimously rejected by postcolonial writers. In fact, there has been an on-going debate between the proponents and opponents of literature written in European languages in formerly colonized societies. The two antagonistic groups both acknowledge that language is a carrier and reflection of culture and ideology; their different attitudes

towards writing in European languages lie in the roles they think writers can play in this relationship.

The debate began as early as 1962 at the Makerere Conference of African Writers in Kampala. The participants in this language debate may be classified into two groups: those who reject the idea of African literature in English, and those who see English as a valid medium for African literature. The former group, which is referred to by Gabriel Okara as the "Rejectionists" (12), strongly opposes African writers' use of English. "Rejectionists" hold that only when African writers use their native languages can their works be considered "African." The latter group, the so-called "Evolutionists/Experimentists" (Okara 11), supports the notion of African literature written in English. However, as their name suggests, they do not attempt to, nor do they believe they should, write in English the same way a native, English-speaking writer does. Instead, they aim at Africanizing the English language by investing it with African ideas and "flavours". By so doing, they hope that the language of the former colonizers can evolve into a medium for African literature.

Obiajunwa Wali, a Nigerian critic, is one of the most influential early Rejectionists. His article, "The Dead End of African Literature?" published in *Transition* in 1963, is "the first major theoretical questioning of the appropriateness of European languages in African literature" (Desai 4). Wali's article is, to some extent, his negative opinion of the achievements of the Makerere Conference mentioned above. Wali pronounces his disappointment about the Conference at the beginning of his article: "Perhaps the most important achievement of the last Conference of African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere College, Kampala in June 1962, is that African

literature as now defined and understood, leads to nowhere" (13). Wali's disappointment and frustration resulted from the fact that African writers use European languages instead of their own native languages. He sees in this phenomenon the danger of the extinction of African literature:

> The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African language, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration. (14)

Wali's negative view concerning African writers' use of English is based on his implied conviction that "African literature" is literature in African languages. Therefore, he believes that African writers in English are not doing service to African literature; instead, they are leading it to a dead-end.

Wali's position in the language debate on African literature was later taken up by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer and critic. If Wali launched the first major attack on the notion of African literature in English, Ngugi reinforced this attack with carefully prepared theoretical grounding. Ngugi bases his argument on the relationship between language and ideology which, he argues, are inseparable.

Although Ngugi has been questioning the use of English in African literature since the 1960s, his book entitled *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* establishes his role as the major opponent of English as a medium for African literature. Ngugi enthusiastically attempts to dissuade African writers from using European languages. Passionately, he asks:

> Why . . . should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our language? How can we "prey" on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggle of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own? (8)

Ngugi justifies his position by analyzing the nature of language. He suggests that language has a dual character--a means of communication and a carrier of culture--and that the two aspects of language are interrelated. He asserts that the ultimate aim of colonialism is to control the wealth of colonized people. To achieve this, the colonizers use military power to enforce political dictatorship. However, there is a more powerful area of domination--the domination of people's mental universe, which is accomplished through the imposition of the colonizer's language, which transfers the colonizing culture and ideology to the colonized people: "The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (9). Ngugi's conclusion is therefore clear: Since language is inseparable from culture, African writers who write in the imperialist languages are actually paying their homage, either consciously or unconsciously, to the very culture that was used to eliminate and replace that of the colonized. Since language is the most powerful weapon for mental colonization, African writers who use European languages are actually the accomplices of neocolonial power in former colonies.

Ngugi is also a practitioner of his own beliefs. In 1977, he stopped using English in his fictions--plays, novels, and short stories; in 1986, in "A Statement" in his book mentioned above, he declares that "This book, *Decolonizing the Mind*, is my farewell to

English for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way" (xiv).

Ngugi's stance is challenged by many African writers who do use English. Some of them hold that Ngugi's proposal to write in indigenous languages, although it prevents the exclusion of the vast majority of Africans from the reading public, will limit the worldwide circulation of African literature. For example, Gabriel Okara states in "Towards the Evolution of an African Language for African Literature" that

> The problem with writing in African languages is that such works are only known and appreciated in the localities where the languages are spoken. They become localised in a few pockets of the continent. This obviously falls short of the Pan-Africanist vision of a continental literature written in a continental language. (15)

Other writers oppose Ngugi's position with the arguments that his decision is the luxury of a person already secure with world fame, a luxury which most African writers cannot afford (Reed 224; Bisong 131).

Although the above-mentioned critical comments are valid criticisms of Ngugi's position on the language issue, a more powerful and convincing opposition cannot be achieved without analyzing and undermining the very linguistic grounding of Ngugi's theory. Based on Ngugi's illustration of the relationship between language and culture, he can be safely labeled as a champion of what has been called "linguistic determinism" (Yule 197). Like the linguists of this school, Ngugi seems to believe that there is a definite connection between the way one's language is organized and the way one perceives the world. That is, language determines thought; one can only think in the way one's language allows one to think. In *The Study of Language*, George Yule gives an excellent example to show the reasoning of this school of thought: the number of words

the Inuit have for "snow." While an English speaker (perhaps also speakers of many other languages) sees only one white entity in winter which they call "snow," the Inuit, looking at the same scene, would see several different entities; hence they have several names for what the English speakers see as only one subject. That the Inuit view the same scene differently, according to the linguistic determinists, is due to the fact that their language makes it possible to do so (Yule 198). However, as Yule points out, when he later returns to this example, although an English speaker does not have more than one term for different kinds of snow, he can create such expressions by putting different adjectives before the word "snow." Therefore, he would have "wet snow," "dry snow," or "powdery snow" (197). Based on this example, Yule then implies that the relationship between language and thought is not as definite and close as the linguistic determinists have suggested. Human beings also have an active role in this relationship:

> The notion that language determines thought may be partially correct, in some extremely limited way, but it fails to take into account the fact that users of a language do not inherit a fixed set of patterns to use. They inherit the ability to manipulate and create with a language, in order to express their perceptions. . . . The human manipulates the language, not the other way round. (197-98)

The flaw in Ngugi's reasoning is similar to that in the linguistic determinists'. Ngugi overemphasizes the relationship between language and culture, and neglects the postcolonial writer's role in manipulating the colonizer's languages. Consequently, Ngugi's view of language and culture can also be seen as justification for those African writers who use English. As mentioned above, African writers attempt to use English creatively, that is, to manipulate it and add African "flavour" to it. As a result, the imperialist language used by African writers is different from that used by native

speakers. Since, as Ngugi contends, "language carries culture, and culture carries . . . the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngugi 15-16), English, used creatively by African writers, is made to carry African values and is therefore a valid medium for African literature.

What Ngugi and other Rejectionists fail to see in their opposition to African literature written in English is what has been accomplished by the Evolutionists/ Experimentists. This group of writers and critics strongly supports the notion of writing African works in English, and believes that African writers should appropriate the imperialist language and make it record African experiences. Chinua Achebe, the prominent Nigerian writer, is the most noted representative of this theory.

Achebe holds that it is both desirable for African writers to write in the imperialist language, and possible for them to do so while still maintaining the integrity of African experience. It is desirable, because in the case of Achebe and many other African writers, English is the language that they have inherited and therefore is the language they choose to use in their writings. Achebe expresses this idea explicitly when he talks about the English language and African writers:

> The real question is not whether Africans could write in English but whether they ought to. 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 this language and I intend to use it. (*Morning* 102)

Achebe's dilemma respecting language inheritance is also the predicament of Africa as a whole. Nigeria certainly illustrates this reality. According to Joseph Bisong, Nigeria can best be described as a multilingual and multicultural country; its ninety million people speak some 450 different languages, the main ones being Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba.

English was imposed on the Nigerian people by colonial missionaries, and even after the independence of the country in 1960, it remains the official language. It is spoken with various degrees of competence throughout the nation's thirty-one states, unlike the three main indigenous languages, which have a more limited circulation (123).

Thus, it is not difficult to see that English, though a colonial product for Nigerian people, plays a very important part in uniting a country such as Nigeria which has very diversified and complex linguistic characteristics. Again, referring to the linguistic complexities in Nigeria, Achebe states:

> Of course there are areas of Africa where colonialism divided up a single ethnic group among two or even three powers. But on the whole, it did bring together many people that had hitherto gone their several ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue for singing. There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. (*Morning* 95)

It is also because of the privileged position of English in Nigeria that Achebe claims: "The National literature [for Nigeria], as I see it, is the literature written in English; and the ethnic literatures are in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo, Ijaw, etc., etc." (*Morning* 93).

Moreover, the Evolutionists/Experimentists insist that the English they use should be different from the one that a native English speaker uses, and that they should try to communicate an African identity through an imperialist language. By so doing, they are actually taking on a challenge: to make English--an imperialist language which was used by colonizers to eliminate African cultures--a conveyor of the African culture and ideologies. In "The African Writer and the English language," Achebe concisely describes how African writers should use English:

> The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of literary exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. (*Morning* 100)

If language is a reflection and carrier of culture, then English, used in the way described by Achebe, would be a language whose foreign values are replaced by African values and African identities.

The Evolutionists/Experimentists use the English language as an important tool in the process of decolonization. It has been noted that the contemporary world, especially formerly colonized societies, has been profoundly affected by European imperialism. To eliminate completely the influences that colonialism has had on the former colonies and to restore a pre-colonial purity are impossible. To abandon the English language as a literary medium for postcolonial writings would leave the outdated colonial ideology carried by this language intact, while by using English, and in the process, altering it to make it convey African ideas and African thoughts, postcolonial writers are able to interrogate this imperialist language and the hostilities associated with it. By so doing, African writers are turning a disadvantage into an advantage. In discussing the Caliban-Prospero paradigm in postcolonial literature, Chantal Zabus avers:

> Indeed, the twin result [sic] of the irreversible process of colonization is that the colonized speaks the language of the colonizer and, by the same token, becomes his rival in literary sophistication. This language is considered by most New World writers not only as part of Prospero's legacy to Caliban but also as the latter's means "to curse" the colonizer. . . . (37-38)

Achebe not only theorizes the possibility for African writers to use imperial languages, but, more importantly, he successfully demonstrates this possibility in his

novels. Achebe wrote his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in the 1950s, and it became a best-seller immediately. Since then he has written four more novels. Their settings vary from the pre-colonial period to the post-independence era of Nigeria. In all his novels, Achebe has been deliberate in appropriating the English language. By careful use of language strategies, he succeeds in making his novels a combination of the English language and African/Nigerian experiences. All reveal how the Evolutionists/ Experimentists think the English language should be used.

Moreover, since Achebe's novels set out to reflect the African experiences, and since these experiences change with the passage of time, Achebe's language strategies also change. Since it would be too ambitious to discuss all the language devices Achebe applies in all the novels he has written so far, this study focuses on the development of three language strategies--modes of narration, the use of proverbs and the use of pidgin English--in three of his five novels: *Things Fall Apart*, (1958), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

Chapter One

The Changing Faces of Achebe's Narrative Strategies

Achebe has been very conscious of the important role storytelling plays in society in general and in West African communities in particular. On more than one occasion, he expresses this consciousness through his characters. For example, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, an Abazon elder passionately says:

> The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbors. (124)

The author's intention is to equate the art of storytelling, highly regarded in Igbo society, with a position of power and individuality. This view is further reinforced in Achebe's interview with Bill Moyers, in which Achebe says: "It's the storyteller, in fact, who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have--otherwise their surviving would have no meaning" (Moyers 333). In his novels, Achebe's various modes of narration are appropriate for the distinct messages he wishes to convey to his readers.

Before analyzing Achebe's modes of narration, it is necessary to examine why narrative techniques can be regarded as linguistic strategies. Structuralist analysis of narrative is very helpful in understanding the linguistic character of narration. Structuralist methodology compares literature with a system analogous to language, yet while linguistics takes the sentence as its ultimate object of investigation, structuralists go one step further; they see a text as expanded sentences and analyze a text as a linguist does a sentence. This is illustrated by Roland Barthes in his *Image/Music/Text*:

> As we know, linguistics stops at the sentence, the last unit which it considers to fall within its scope. . . . From the point of view of linguistics, there is nothing in discourse that is not to be found in the sentence. . . . Hence there can be no question of linguistics setting itself an object superior to the sentence, since beyond the sentence there are only more sentences--having described the flower, the botanist is not to get involved in describing the bouquet.
>
> And yet it is evident that discourse itself (as a set of sentences) is organized and that, through this organization, it can be seen as the message of another language, one operating at a higher level than the language of the linguistics. Discourse has its units, its "grammar" beyond the sentence, and though consisting solely of sentences, it must naturally form the object of a second linguistics. (82-83)

As linguistics uses grammar to analyze sentences, structuralists attempt to find a "grammar" for their object, the text, which consists of a set of sentences. Mode of narration, as one element used for analyzing text, can in this sense be considered part of this grammar.

In literature, modes of narration affect how the message of a text is conveyed to the reader. Emmanual Ngara, in *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel*, shows how a writer's choice of ways of writing can assist him or her in arousing the desired feeling in the reader. He begins his argument by analyzing language as a means of communication:

> There are many different functions of language. They range from basic forms of communication, such as the cry of a hungry child, and more complex ones, such as political control, to self-expression: when a speaker or writer expressed himself in "this form, these words and this order," simply to satisfy himself and to relieve himself of a burden of emotion within him. (10)

He continues by saying:

> A work of art, on the other hand, contains the expressive and the effective. The writer expresses his own emotions, releases the tension in him, satisfies himself by expressing "this thing in this form and these words," while at the same time he hopes to affect the reader, to evoke a

> certain kind of feeling in him or to persuade him either to take action or to see life in a new light. (11)

What Ngara implies, but fails to point out in the above passages, is the binarism of an ideally complete and omniscient account of what actually happened, and what is actually put in language. This binarism is expressed in different forms by various narratologists.[1] S. Chatman, for example, makes a distinction between "story" and "discourse" by showing that "story" refers to what actually happened in "real" time, and "discourse" what is actually written in the text. Since an absolutely complete, objective, and omniscient record of "story" is only theoretically possible, "discourse" betrays the author's modification of the events presented. Mode of narration, one of the means of this modification, affects how the "story" is presented and what kinds of feelings a text evokes in its readers.

The binarism of story and discourse is an especially important concept for postcolonial writing. For the colonizers, narrative is the very means by which they denied the colonized people their own history and culture. The colonized people, whose own stories were presented in the colonizer's narrative, were thus deprived of the right of narrating their own experiences to their following generations and to the outside world. On the other hand, in postcolonial literature, narrative is used by the writers of the former colonies as a counter-discursive strategy of "writing back"--of regaining their own dignity distorted by, and lost in, the colonizer's narratives.

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[1] "Narrative," according to Gerald Prince, can be defined as "the representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence" (*Narratology 1*) while "narratology," again as defined by Prince, is "the study of the form and functioning of narrative (*Narratology 4*). Therefore, "narratologists" are those who engage themselves in the studies of "the form and functioning" of narrative.

The changing narrative strategies in Chinua Achebe's novels help to convey African experiences effectively and in a credible manner. Reading his novels, which are set in different historical periods of West Africa, we can hardly miss the fact that his narrative strategies are constantly changing according to the time and message. In fact, Achebe uses narrative strategies so effectively in his novels that they are sometimes regarded as more important than the content. As Gikandi points out:

> In every novel Achebe has written to date, what we know about Igbo or Nigerian culture is less important than how we know it; Achebe's narratives seek to create the initial situation in which the African problematic developed and to express the conditions in which knowledge about phenomena is produced. (11)

An analysis of Achebe's narrative techniques, primarily his use of different narrators, is necessary to show how they make Achebe's narrative more effective. The purpose is to show that the narrator occupies a unique position in the study of narratives. As Mieke Bal states in *Narratology*, "The narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts. The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character" (120). Bal's statement seems to be a very proper illustration of Achebe's choice of narrators. From *Things Fall Apart* to *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe's narrators lend African colouration to English. As a result, that choice not only facilitates the conveyance of his messages but also successfully compensates for the inconvenience of writing in an imperialist language.

Things Fall Apart, Achebe's first novel, is set at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the present century. It depicts Igbo society as an ordered society, based on the hierarchy of gods and goddesses, the ancestors, elders, and

families. Nurtured by their own rich and colorful culture and history, the Igbo people arrange their agricultural lives according to the change of the seasons, celebrate their festivals with traditional ceremonies which are characterized by dancing and singing, and settle their disputes in their own complex but effective ways. However, to this society come the European colonizers, bringing Christianity and European education. Gradually, they penetrate Igbo society and try to impose their own systems on what they think is a primitive society waiting to be enlightened by Western civilization. Igbo society becomes vulnerable as a result of its flexibility in accepting new ideas. Under pressure of the outside power, it disintegrates, its people confused and divided. One of the greatest sons of the Igbo people, Okonkwo, hangs himself after killing an officer of the District Commissioner. The District Commissioner, who witnesses the event, decides to include this episode in his book entitled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (148).

The title of the District Commissioner's book shows Achebe's bitter satire of the European colonizer's simplistic and biased perception of the Igbo people. In the colonizer's narrative, Africans are presented as what David Carroll calls "a landscape without figures, an Africa without Africans" (16). To the District Commissioner, as to the European colonizers in general, "The African has no character because he or she exists solely as a projection of European desire." They cannot present themselves, nor can they be presented, because they do not have a sense of history and culture (Gikandi 27). Achebe's pronounced mission in writing *Things Fall Apart* is to challenge and reverse the European colonizer's distorted view of his people, and thus to restore the dignity denied by European narratives. On more than one occasion, Achebe

emphasizes that a writer should serve as a teacher of the people. What he sets out to teach, in this case both his own people and non-African readers, is that "We in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans" (Achebe, *African Writers Talking* 7).

In *Things Fall Apart,* the omniscient narrator who, in David Carroll's words, resembles "a wise and sympathetic elder of the tribe who has witnessed time and again the cycle of the seasons and the accompanying rituals in the village" (37), helps Achebe to achieve his goal of teaching. Achebe's choice of an omniscient narrator assigns authority to his narrative. In *Narratology,* Mieke Bal makes a distinction between a character-bound focalizer or narrator and an external focalizer or narrator.[2] The former is a character in the events he or she narrates and through whose eyes readers are led to observe. The problem with this kind of narrator, according to Bal, is that "Such a character-bound focalizer . . . brings about ***bias*** and ***limitation***" (104. Emphasis added). In contrast, an external focalizer or narrator does not participate in the events he or she narrates and can be more objective (Bal 105). The narrator in *Things Fall Apart* is not a character in the novel. Compared with a character-bound narrator, he[3] is more unbiased about the events he narrates and therefore more trustworthy.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the narrator assumes authority by constantly distancing himself from the people he is narrating. Although, as Carroll points out above, the narrator sounds like an elder of the community, the way he addresses the characters in

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[2] Or, "homodiegitic" narrator and "heterodiegic" narrator in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's distinction. (Rimmon-Kenan 95).

the novel gives the reader the feeling that he painstakingly tries to keep himself from being identified with them. For example, whenever the narrator refers to the Igbo people, he uses "these people," "Ibo people," or "they." The following are two examples:

> "Among *the Ibo* the art of conversation is regarded very highly."
>
> "Fortunately, among *these people* a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father."
>
> (Achebe, *Things* 5-6. Emphasis added.)

Also, the narrator makes the narrative more authoritative by omitting his own views. B. Eugene McCarthy notices that "For the most part the narrator reveals only what was done or said by others" (245):

> "It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which *the old men agreed* was one of the fiercest.
>
> And *it was said that* when he sleeps, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe.
>
> (Achebe, *Things* 3. Emphasis added.)
>
> "*The elders said* locusts came once in a generation.
>
> (Achebe, *Things* 38. Emphasis added.)

By distancing the narrating self from the narrated objects, and by appearing to give only an objective account of what others have said, the narrator in this novel takes on authority and credibility. Readers are led to believe and agree with what he says. This might be what Achebe would like us to do, because in what is a counter-narrative to the colonizer's perspectives of the Igbo people, even slight suspicions of the narrator would definitely weaken the points the narrator is trying to make.

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[3] Rural elders in Achebe's novels are generally male characters and the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* is an elder.

Once the narrator's authority is established, the narrator then leads us into an Igbo world through his narrative, characterized by his careful and conscious adopting of properties belonging to oral literature. The first characteristic of the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* which makes it similar to a folktale is the circular or repetitive structure. In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong summarizes a few characteristics which distinguish oral expressions from written ones. Oral expressions are "additive rather than subordinative," "aggregative rather than analytical," "redundant or 'copious,' " the last meaning "repeating what is just said" (37-40). Ong explains the necessity for the folklore literature to be "repetitive":

> Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a line of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. . . . In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keep both speaker and hearer surely on the track. (39-40)[4]

The additive and redundant elements of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* include the repetition of certain motifs or events. For example, the wrestling with "Amalinze the Cat" through which Okonkwo establishes his fame is referred to in several places as "one of the fiercest" events, or "the greatest contest within living memory" (3). Likewise, Okonkwo's bad luck in the year he plans to cultivate his own yam field is

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[4] Although Ong's analysis of oral and written literature in *Orality and Literacy* may sometimes sound colonialist, his generalization of the characteristics of oral literature is helpful in analyzing the oral nature of the narrative of *Things Fall Apart*. By quoting Ong, no attempt is made to assume the superiority of one kind of literature to another. For another insightful analysis of the characteristics of oral literature, see Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. London: Oxford UP, 1970.

also stated more than once (16-17). Even minor details are repeated. For example, the beauty of Okonkwo's second wife Ekwefi is mentioned in the description of one village wrestling contest: "Many years ago when she was the village beauty, Okonkwo had won her heart by throwing the Cat in the greatest contest within living memory" (29). The same point is brought up again three pages later when the narrator mentions Ezinma, Ekwefi's daughter: "She looked very much like her mother, who was once the village beauty" (32).

While the repetition and redundancy make Achebe's first novel read like a folktale, the simplicity of the sentence structure in this novel also helps to achieve the same effect. A. R. JanMohamed, in "Sophisticated Primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Mode in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," states that Achebe refuses to "[consolidate] the short, single sentences and [to subordinate] some of them as modifying clauses" (28). Though examples of this are abundant in the novel, the opening paragraph seems an appropriate illustration of this point:

> Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. (3)

It would be possible to consolidate the first two sentences in the above passage into one, and the remaining two sentences into one sentence. However, Achebe does not make this consolidation, because "syntactic subordination is more characteristic of chirographic representation than of oral speech" (JanMohamed 28).

Achebe's adoption of a narrator who resembles a community elder and of a narrative which is similar to that of a folktale, successfully highlights *Things Fall Apart*

as a narrative written against the prejudiced representations of the African people by European colonizers. The omniscient narrator reveals the Igbo people's view about what happened in their land, a view which readers would not find in the District Commissioner's book. The folklore narrative also demonstrates Achebe's challenge to the binary opposition between chirographic and oral literature--namely, that the former is civilized, rational and scientific, while the latter is savage, irrational and mythic. Together, these two strategies allow Achebe to take full advantage of the imperialist language and bring out the narrative of the colonized powerfully and effectively.

Achebe does not stop at simply countering imperialist narratives with an Igbo narrator and a folklore narrative. He is conscious of the change of time and realities and adapts his narratives accordingly to take greater advantage of the English language. Achebe's *A Man of the People* depicts Nigeria in the 1960s, when colonial rule has ended and Nigeria has gained political independence. The Nigerians are faced with new perplexities. They find that colonial atrocities are now replaced by evils of the local politicians. In Gikandi's words, they are "trapped in a political impasse, caught between a colonial culture [they] thought independence would transcend, and a new political culture which seems to magnify the worst of the colonial inheritance" (103). Consequently, we find that Achebe assumes a new mission as writer. While in *Things Fall Apart* he attempts to restore history and dignity to his people, in *A Man of the People* he sets out to depict the suspicion and disappointment following independence. His mode of narration in this novel also shows a subtle departure from *Things Fall Apart* to reflect the new and troubled social conditions.

In *A Man of the People*, instead of using an omniscient narrator as he does in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses Odili Samalu, one of the characters in the novel, as the first-person narrator. Odili is a member of the European-educated élite. At the beginning of the novel, he is completely disillusioned with the political affairs in his country. From a detached position, he condemns the corruption and political immorality in his country. Later on, after Chief Nanga, the Minister of Culture who was very much admired by Odili, seduces Odili's girlfriend Elsie, Odili is involved in politics as a means of taking revenge on Nanga, now his sexual rival. He is defeated in his electoral campaign against Nanga. The novel ends in a military coup, with Nanga attempting to escape disguised as a fisherman but getting arrested.

The language of this novel is drastically different from that of *Things Fall Apart*. Both the vocabulary and the sentence structure in *A Man of the People* are more sophisticated. Consider the following remarks made by the narrator on one of the numerous occasions in which he comments on Nanga:

> This is of course a formidable weapon which is always guaranteed to save its wielder from the normal consequences of misconduct as well as from the humiliation and embarrassment of ignorance. For how else could you account for the fact that a Minister of Culture announced in public that he had never heard of his country's most famous novel and received applause--as indeed he received again later when he prophesied that before long our great country would produce great writers like Shakespeare, Dickens, Jane Austin, Bernard Shaw and--raising his eyes off the script--Michael West and Dudley Stamp! (73)

Words such as "formidable," "wielder," "misconduct," "embarrassment," and others do not appear in *Things Fall Apart*. Besides, the second sentence, which is not only lengthy but also grammatically-complex, if it appeared in *Things Fall Apart*, would at least be divided into two or three shorter sentences. Complex vocabulary and sentence

structure are very appropriate for *A Man of the People*, for the narrator has received an advanced Western education and he enjoys what he thinks is sophisticated reasoning.

Another distinction between *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People* is that while in the former Achebe tries to establish the narrator as authoritative and objective, in the latter, he is consciously allowing the story to be narrated by an unreliable first-person narrator. Different from the omniscient narrator in *Things Fall Apart* who enjoys great narrative authority, the first-person narrator in *A Man of the People* entails a built-in bias and limitation. This bias and limitation, according to Gérard Genette, result from the dissociation of the narrating self from the experiencing self. As Genette says:

> Use of the "first person," or better yet, oneness of person of the narrator and the hero, does not at all imply that the narrative is focalized through the hero. . . . The only focalization that he has to respect is defined in connection with his present information as narrator and not in connection with his past information as hero. . . . [T]he narrator, in order to limit himself to the information held by the hero at the moment of the action, has to suppress all the information he acquired later, information which very often is vital. (198-99)

In other words, the unreliability of the first-person narrator results from his peculiar position. The narrating self is more knowledgeable concerning past experiences than the experiencing self, yet he has to pretend that knowledge is not available at the time of narrating.

The unreliability of Odili as a narrator can first be demonstrated by examining those doubtful values he holds. One of these values concerns Odili's attitude to his own people. At the beginning of the novel, when Odili watches with detachment the villagers waiting for the Culture Minister to show up for a lecture, he comments,

> As I stood in one corner of that vast tumult waiting for the arrival of the Minister I felt intense bitterness welling up in my mouth. Here are *silly, ignorant villagers* dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow off their gun powder in honour of one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation. I wished for a miracle, for a voice of thunder, to hush *this ridiculous festival* and tell *the poor contemptible* one or two truths. (22. Emphasis added.)

It is difficult for readers to trust Odili as a narrator when he so readily assumes a self-important superiority over his own people and describes them in such derogatory terms as "silly," "ignorant," "ridiculous," and "contemptible."

Odili's attitude towards woman is also questionable. Right at the beginning of the novel, Odili claims that "personally I don't care too much for our women's dancing" (1), but he does not explain his aversion to it. We are led to question whether he does not care for women's dancing or women in general. This question seems to be answered later on by Odili when he recalls how he met Elsie, his girlfriend. He relates with slightly disguised excitement that "Elsie was, and for that matter still is, the only girl I met and slept with the same day--in fact within an hour" (27). Besides, he barely conceals his cynical attitude regarding love and marriage. As he says, "Despite this rather precipitous beginning Elsie and I became very good and steady friends. I can't pretend that I ever thought of marriage. . . . Elsie was such a beautiful happy girl and she made no demands whatever" (28).

That Odili is an unreliable narrator can also be seen from the lack of stable values in his life. At the beginning of the novel, as can be seen from his attitude towards the villagers awaiting Nanga, he is contemptuous of politicians, including Nanga. He appears indifferent to Nanga even before it is his turn to shake hands with him: "Now it was my turn. I held out my hand somewhat stiffly. I did not have the

slightest fear that he might remember me and had no intention of reminding him" (8). When, to Odili's surprise, Nanga does recognize him, he can hardly conceal his excitement, and he seems to have forgotten his contempt of politicians; his answer to Nanga's question "Why did you not tell me when you left the university?" seems nothing less than flattery: "I know how busy a minister [is]" (9). Odili's lack of constant values can also be seen from his involvement in politics. He makes it very clear to the reader that he is disillusioned with the politics in his country, but he is later involved in the CPC (Common People's Convention) and launches his election campaign against Nanga as a personal revenge for Nanga's seducing his girlfriend. These and other incidents disqualify Odili as a trustworthy narrator.

Given Chatman's distinction between "story" and "discourse," and the structuralist postulation that discourse can modify the events (that is, the "story") it presents (Bonnycastle 129-39), it is not difficult to understand that the unreliable first-person narrator in *A Man of the People* is appropriate for the new message Achebe intends to convey in this novel. The new nation which has risen from the ruins of colonialism is expected to resolve those problems left by the imperialists. However, when the new nation represses a person's identity, and to some extent repeats colonial practices, it disillusions people who have been hopeful about a new and progressive future for their country, a future which they believed would come with independence. The reader's cynicism regarding Odili, the first-person narrator, parallels Nigerian people's disillusionment and subsequent reluctance to trust authorities after independence in 1960.

Anthills of the Savannah, Achebe's most recent novel, depicts Africa in the 1980s. The central question concerning the narrative in this novel is: who has the right to tell African stories? Are the European educated élite, who assume more comprehensive knowledge of the country, entitled to speak for all Africans? Are those who are in power qualified as authoritative spokespersons of the people whom they govern? By letting his characters relate their past experiences, Achebe demonstrates that none of the characters who narrates his or her story is a qualified speaker for the rest of the people.

The setting of this novel is a fictional African state named Kangan, which is believed by critics to be a "very thinly disguised Nigeria" (Innes 152). His Excellency, Sam, came to power after a military coup. His unintelligent employment of his power results in the tragedy of Christopher Oriko, the Commissioner of Information, and Ikem Osodi, the Editor of the *National Gazette*. Their tragedies also greatly affect Beatrice Okoh, a senior secretary in the Ministry of Finance, who is Chris's girlfriend and Ikem's sisterly friend. The social attitudes which characterize the historical background of this novel differ from those in *A Man of the People*. In Innes's words, "the easy optimism and the more vulnerably youthful cynicism which characterized those early years of independence have been replaced by awareness of a deeply diseased society and a more profound determination to understand and cure the illness" (151).

To examine Nigerian people's more complex attitudes to the social conditions, Achebe adopts a more sophisticated mode of narration. This novel is narrated neither by an omniscient narrator, nor by an unreliable first-person narrator, but by a group of narrators who are also the main characters of the novel and an omniscient narrator who

largely takes over the narration in the second part of the novel. The first chapter, entitled "First witness--Christopher Oriko," is narrated by Chris. In the two subsequent chapters, however, Chris's narration is superceded by an omniscient narrating voice. In Chapter Four, Ikem Osodi takes over from the omniscient narrator and gives his own testimony. Then his narrative voice is again superceded by Chris in Chapter Five. Beatrice narrates Chapter Six. After that, the voice is exclusively the omniscient narrator's.

The complexity of the narrative voice in *Anthills of the Savannah* reflects Achebe's growing concerns about narrative. Robin Ikegami notes that "Although each of Achebe's five novels reveals his view of the complex and often problematic relation between power and storytelling, nowhere does Achebe more minutely examine the nature of that relation than in his last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*" (493). Similarly, Gikandi claims that how narrative "recreates history and memory, and how this recreation gives meaning to moments of crisis and then transcends them to point out new vistas for the future" are "crucial theme[s]" in *Anthills of the Savannah* (127).

Achebe conveys his central message, that "the African space [is] heterogeneous and multiple, defined by differences and contradictions, not homogenized into a single national voice" (Gikandi 128), by showing each of his three main characters in this novel to be unreliable. Each of the three first-person narrators has his or her own weaknesses which keep him or her from being a qualified spokesperson for the African people. Chris, the first "witness," is characterized by his coolness and detachment which remind us of Odili in *A Man of the People*. He takes a detached clinical interest in state affairs, and in other things around him. It seems that he always sees his role as

an observer, instead of a participant. He remains "cool" when and after Sam, the President, asks Beatrice, Chris's girlfriend, to a banquet, even though he knows the possibility exists that Beatrice might end up in Sam's bed. When talking about the relationship between himself, Sam, and Ikem in the second chapter, he says "I have always been in the middle. Neither as bright as Ikem and not such a social success as Sam" (66). He is always in the middle not only in intelligence and social success, but also in personal perspective, because he seldom subscribes to anyone's point of view. This coolness and reasonableness, which would qualify him as a trustworthy narrator in a Western context, shows his incompleteness as a mature character, and as a narrator, in a Western African novel. As Robin Ikegami points out, "Such an attitude, and such a position are luxuries that the current [West African] society cannot afford or allow. There is no such a thing as an impartial storyteller in this society" (499).

The next "witness," Ikem, is also a problematic narrator because, like Chris, he also has the tendency to dissociate himself from what he talks about. On the one hand, in his passionate contemplation, he claims to be a defender of the poor and the oppressed (40). On the other hand, he is twice in conflict with taxi drivers, once when he waves a taxi to send his mistress home and again when he is stuck in the traffic. Sometimes, his attitude to the poor is patronizing, suggested by his comment to the people in the Gelegele market: "I was really amazed at their perceptiveness" (47). At other times, he keeps himself away from trouble, when, according to his self-assumed position as the defender of the down-trodden, he is supposed to offer his help to them. For example, when a young trader is bullied by a soldier who yells "If kill you I kill dog," his first instinct is to tell the soldier that he should not have said that, but he holds

back his words. When recalling this incident, he comments: "I am glad I didn't in the end, because there are things which an observer can only see if he resists the temptation to jump into the fray and become an actor himself" (48).

The last of the three first-person narrators, Beatrice, seems to possess more authority than Chris and Ikem as a storyteller, but she is also disqualified as a trustful narrator. She has special status as a narrator because she survives the other two and is able to tell the story after the deaths of Chris and Ikem. Her authority also lies in her ability to foretell the future. For example, on one occasion she warns Chris and Ikem "I can see plenty of trouble ahead for the two of you" (65). Moreover, she is also given the privilege of commenting on the other three main characters--Chris, Ikem, and Sam. At one point she criticizes their self-assumed importance in storytelling: "Well, you fellows, all three of you, are incredibly conceited. The story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you" (66). Here, in Beatrice's judgment, we can almost hear the voice of Achebe. However, Beatrice is not without her own weaknesses. She cannot be a trustworthy storyteller, because of her lack of self knowledge. As Gikandi states,

> Beatrice's knowledge and success as a student and government official has been achieved through the repression of the traditions and legends of her people. She is educated in schools which had no place for her bearers and the divinities with whom they had evolved. So she comes to barely knowing who she was. (132)

If she is uprooted from her own tradition and culture, she cannot be expected to be a qualified storyteller for her own people.

Achebe also adopts an omniscient narrator in this novel; however, this narrator also fails to be an authoritative one. As discussed earlier, the omniscient narrator in

Things Fall Apart establishes himself as a trustworthy narrator by constantly distancing himself from the events he narrates. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, however, the omniscient narrator constantly merges his or her voice with that of the main characters. Consider the omniscient narrator's description of Ikem's conflict with a taxi-driver in Chapter Three:

> In all known encounters in the past between taxi and private drivers the taxi always won, its decisive weapon the certainty that the owner-driver will sooner concede his place than risk a dent on his smooth, precious carapace. But today, for the first time in the traffic history of this land, a taxi driver had met more than his match. This crazy owner-driver adversary failed altogether to live by the norms of his kind. (29)

Here, although it is the omniscient narrator who is relating the event, the event is obviously focalized through Ikem. Similarly, in Chapter Eight, another chapter narrated by the omniscient narrator, the narrator's voice also overlaps with that of the character:

> She [Beatrice] heard far away the crowing of a cock. Strange. She had not before heard a cock crow in this Government Reserved Area. Surely nobody here has been reduced to keeping poultry like common villagers. Perhaps some cook or steward or gardener had knocked together an illegal structure outside his room in the Boys' Quarters for a chicken-house. (107)

In this episode, the use of the third-person pronouns indicates that it is the omniscient narrator who is narrating. However, the narrator's voice fuses with that of Beatrice. Of the five sentences quoted above, all except the first are actually direct records of what is going on in Beatrice's mind. In other words, it is difficult to distinguish the voice of the narrator from that of the character. Since the omniscient character makes no effort in distancing himself from the characters, the narrative authority is largely undermined.

Thus, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe questions the idea of a single voice in narrating stories of a nation. He allows the stories to be told by several narrators and shows their own weaknesses as well as their progress in self-knowledge.

By examining the narrative strategies in these three novels, we find that they help to convey African realities which are constantly changing. In *Things Fall Apart*, the omniscient narrator has the ultimate authority to relate the African experiences of being colonized. This omniscient narrative also attests Achebe's conviction that narration is a means of achieving the liberation of the nation. In *A Man of the People*, a novel set in a time frame shortly after Nigerian independence, we encounter a first-person narrator whose value we suspect. Our suspicion of the narrator and the narrator's unstable values mirror the confusion and disenchantment following the independence of the nation. The multiple first-person narration in *Anthills of the Savannah* shows Achebe's conscious exploration of a new narrative mode which is appropriate for a nation where its people's attitude towards new social realities are more and more complex. All three modes of narration, which are proper for the specific historic periods the three novels depict, demonstrate Achebe's ability to manipulate the English language. They prove, from a stylistic point of view, that it is possible for African writers to appropriate the English language and make it a vehicle of reflecting African realities credibly and effectively. Achebe explores this possibility again by his careful use of pidgin English and proverbs, which will be discussed in the following two chapters.

Chapter Two

Pidgin English: Barometer of Social Change

Commenting on the ways in which African writers should use the English language, Achebe claims that English should be "still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (*Morning* 103). He has found that the use of pidgin English can be effective in achieving this aim. Coming into being as a result of the European colonizers' penetration of the African continent, Nigerian pidgin English becomes, in Achebe's novels, a genuine reflector of that history. Moreover, he does not discard this linguistic phenomenon in his novels which focus on the post-independent era. Rather, in his later novels, he explores further the potential of pidgin English to deal with new social and historical realities. Thus Achebe successfully uses pidgin English as an effective strategy in depicting the ever-changing West African realities. As a prelude to understanding his special interest in this *lingua franca*, an examination of the origin of Nigerian pidgin English and of the different connotations it takes on in different historical periods appears useful.

Social-linguists have encountered difficulties in explaining the origin of pidgin. To date, scholars have failed to come to a commonly accepted theory as to when and how this linguistic phenomenon came into being. They propose four hypotheses: the "baby talk theory," the "nautical jargon theory," the "monogenesis and relexification theory," and the "independent parallel development theory." The "baby talk theory" compares pidgin English with a baby's speech, both of which are simplifications of the source language. The "nautical jargon theory," as its name implies, suggests that many pidgins developed under the influence of the nautical jargons used by sailors who generally spoke

many different languages, and who therefore had to come up with their own way of communicating. According to the "monogenesis and relexification theory," all European-language-based pidgins developed from a fifteenth century Portuguese pidgin (Todd 31). In contrast, the scholars of the "independent parallel development theory" believe that the world's pidgins have different origins and developed independently along parallel lines. Plainly, these four theories emphasize different aspects of the pidgin English, each with problematic viewpoints. Since the "baby talk theory" is most relevant to the present study, a further examination of it is necessary.

As mentioned above, the proponents of the "baby talk theory" emphasize the similarity between pidgin and baby talk; hence they postulate that pidgin is a result of the slaves' imperfect imitation of their masters' language. The two names that are often connected with the "baby talk theory" are L. Bloomfield and H. Schuchardt. Schuchardt holds that pidgin came into being as a result of the slaves' mimicry of the masters' simplified version of the target language:

> For the master and the slave it was simply a matter of mutual comprehension. The master stripped off from the European language everything that was peculiar to it, the slave suppressed everything in it that was distinctive. They met on a middle ground . . . [but] to a lesser extent at the very beginning. The white man was the master of the black man. At first the black man mimicked him. (91-92)

Schuchardt erroneously implies in the above quotation that since the black slaves did not have the ability to acquire fully their masters' language, the white masters simplified their own language and let the slaves imitate the reduced version. The racist and ethnocentric connotation of Schuchardt's statement is disturbingly clear.

L. Bloomfield is among the first linguists to use the term "baby talk" when discussing the origin of pidgin. He puts forward the idea that pidgin came into being as a result of a recursive imitation. More specifically, he states that a conventionalized jargon such as pidgin is the result of the slaves imitating the masters' imitation of the slaves' reduced version of the source language. He hypothesizes this point in *Language*, saying:

> Speakers of a lower language may make so little progress in learning the dominant speech, that the master, in communicating with them, resorts to "baby-talk." This "baby-talk" is the masters' imitation of the subjects' incorrect speech. . . . The subjects, in turn, deprived of the correct model, can do no better now than to acquire the simplified "baby-talk" version of the upper language. . . . The basis of [pidgin languages] is the foreigner's desperate attempt at English. Then comes the English-speaker's contemptuous imitation of this, which he tries in the hope of making himself understood. The third layer of imitation is due to the foreigner's imperfect reproduction of the English speaker's simplified talk. (472-73)

The racist notion so explicit in Schuchardt's statement is also prevalent in the above passage of Bloomfield's. The only difference between their points of view is that while Schuchardt implies the master's voluntary simplification of his language, Bloomfield sees that the simplification of the "upper" language is the master's involuntary choice, resulting from the slave's inability to master the "upper" language. In both cases, the "baby talk theory" puts the speakers of pidgin English in an inferior position. It caters to the imperialist's desire to see the colonized people as a mirror of their own dark past. As revealed by the following discussion, the fallacy of this theory is overwhelmingly attested by Achebe's creative use of pidgin English.

One important notion which has been missed by the above-mentioned theories of pidgin is its pragmatic and economic colouration. The term "pidgin" is commonly

believed to be the Chinese corruption of the English word "business." C. W. Collinson vividly illustrates the etymology of "pidgin" in *Cannibals and Coconuts*:

> Pidgin English! Now in the first place the word "pidgin" has nothing to do with pigeons. It comes from China, and represents John Chinaman's best attempt to pronounce our word "business." So Pidgin English simply means business English--the queer sort of language used between white men and natives which enables them to understand each other and do business together. (20)

Collinson's remark points out the pragmatic motivation behind the colonizers' use of pidgin English as their means of communicating with the colonized. It is very clear that the European colonizers did not use this *lingua franca* to facilitate cultural exchanges. Rather, they did this to assist their economic exploitation of the colonized. It is worth mentioning that Collinson's etymology echoes the opinion of the proponents of the "baby talk theory" that the slaves or the colonized people were not able fully to acquire the colonizers' language. Besides, Collinson deliberately obscures the nature of economic transaction between the Europeans and Chinese by saying that they were simply doing "business together." After all, it was not Chinese or Africans who initiated the contacts, and more importantly, those transactions were definitely not of an equal nature.

Linguistic theories, in dealing with the origin of pidgin English, may vary, but an overlapping notion in all four theories is that pidgin English came into being as a result of the interaction of different cultures. As Anna Barbag-Stoll asserts in *Social and Linguistic History of Nigerian Pidgin English*:

> The process of pidginization should be viewed as one of the products of acculturation, that is, the approximation of two or more social groups in culture by contact, or cultural diffusion, which is a universal mechanism of cultural change and affects a wide range of phenomena: education, art, religion, music, language, the accepted scale of values, etc. (37)

West African pidgin English, for example, appeared hand in hand with the Europeans' exploration of the West African coastline. Among these early European explorers of the African continent, the Portuguese were the earliest. Their sugar plantations became very prosperous by the early 16th century. Following the Portuguese came the English and French colonizers who entered the slave trade in the 17th century. In Portuguese, English, and French explorations, language mixing between the native people and the outsiders was inevitable. It reached its zenith after the British introduced Christianity, commerce and colonization to West Africa as a result of the abolition of slavery. Since then, language mixing, which was present only along the West African coastline, extended to the more remote parts of the continent.

Another common aspect of the theories concerning the origin of pidgin English, as discussed above, is the low status these theories assigned to this *lingua franca*. Pidgin English has long been regarded as inferior, a corruption of the source language. In fact, as recently as a few decades ago, social linguists still referred to it in derogatory terms. Some held that pidgin English was "inferior, haphazard, broken, bastardized versions of older, longer established languages" (Todd, 1). Others simply associated it with "low places" where it was first used. Hence it was referred to as "kitchen English," "factory English," "market English," and the like. In *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, Dell Hymes gives a concise summary of the derogatory views on pidgin English:

> These languages [pidgins and creoles] have been considered, not creative adaptations, but degenerations; not systems in their own right, but deviations from other systems. Their origins have been explained, not by historical and social focus, but by inherent ignorance, indolence, and inferiority. Not the least of the crimes of colonialism has been to persuade

> the colonialized that they, or ways in which they differ, are inferior--to convince the stigmatized that the stigma is deserved. (3)

Some linguists do not even regard pidgin English as an independent language. David Smith, for example, proposes three criteria by which he judges whether a language variety can be regarded as a language. According to him, a language should possess three functions, and a lack of any one of them will disqualify that language variety as a language. The first function is communicative, which lies in the "conveying of information between social identities." The second is integrative, which shows itself through marking and even articulating social identities and linking people to the social system. The third function, its expressive function, provides "a ready-made device for meeting certain psychological needs of people" (48-49). Smith states further that the function of pidgin English is limited to the communicative level:

> The structures of pidgins are reduced in specifiable areas and their function is always restricted to that of communication, i. e. of conveying basically denotative information between social identities. . . . What is lacking in pidgins are the particular formal features which make language useful as markers of social identity. (50)

Judged by Smith's theory, pidgin fails to be an independent language.

While some linguists hold very low opinions of pidgin English, others propose that it should be regarded as an independent language. Barbag-Stoll, for example, defends the language status of pidgin English by using the paradigm of Smith. She argues that Smith's conclusion that pidgin English possesses only the communicative function but not the integrative and the expressive functions is doubtful. She shows that the integrative function and the expressive function can also be observed in pidgin English. The integrative function, according to her, can be proven by the fact that

Nigerian students studying in England often use pidgin English among themselves even though they can speak "correct" English. The expressive function is supported by the fact that in pidgin-speaking societies, skillful use of Nigerian pidgin English is "highly appreciated" and is regarded as evidence of the speaker's eloquence (47).

It is against the social and linguistic backgrounds of pidgin English, as outlined above, that Achebe's skilful use of pidgin in his novels should be examined. Like Dell Hymes, Achebe regards the linguists' derogatory view of pidgin English as an inferior language as mirroring the colonizers' attempts to prove the inferiority of the colonized. Therefore, his adoption of pidgin English in all his novels may be seen as his attempt to reverse the prejudice against pidgin English, and to prove that pidgin English, which was given a low status by Eurocentric theorists, can be used positively by postcolonial writers in their works as an anticolonial strategy. While Barbag-Stoll theoretically defends the linguistic status of pidgin English, Achebe does the same thing with his literary works. In the three novels under discussion, Achebe convincingly demonstrates how pidgin English gradually takes on more and more functions as a language in the Nigerian context. Consequently, he shows not only that pidgin English should be regarded as an independent language, but also how it can be used by African writers as a positive and effective strategy to appropriate the imperial language and to present African realities.

Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, shows little use of pidgin English. The language here is virtually standard English. The only departure from the imperialist language are the Igbo words Achebe introduces when there are no English equivalents to convey the same ideas, or when he intends to insert Igbo coloration in English. Examples

of this include *chi* (personal god), *egwugwu* (a masquerade impersonating the ancestral spirits), and *Osu* (an outcast who has been consecrated as a god).

The scarcity of pidgin English in *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates Achebe's care in applying language strategies and his desire to be true to reality. *Things Fall Apart* depicts the Igbo society at the turn of the twentieth century. Of the twenty-five chapters of the book, thirteen depict, in David Carroll's words, a society "in its full vigor of traditional way of life, unperplexed by the present and without nostalgia for the past" (36). As at least half of the novel is set before the coming of the Western colonizers to the Igbo world, and before pidgin English began to circulate in that world, it is very appropriate for Achebe not to use any pidgin words in the speech of his characters.

However, pidgin English is not completely absent in this novel; it begins to appear in the second part, when Western missionaries come into the Igbo society, and when church school and Western justice and administrative systems begin to be established. Achebe uses a few pidgin words to reflect the historical reality. For example, when the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* introduces the name of Jesus Christ, he does not use the standard English spelling, but "Jesu Christi" instead. This word might be the pidginized version of the English or of the Latin equivalent. Other pidgin words include "kotman" (23) (that is, "courtman"), "palavers" (136), which means "conferences," and a few others.

The pidgin words that appear in *Things Fall Apart* have two main functions. First, as is in the case of "Jesu Christi" and "kotman," they are used by Achebe as subtle evidence of the coming of a foreign culture or, to be more specific, the appearance of Western Christianity and judicial system in the Igbo world. Secondly, as the word

"palaver" illustrates, pidgin English also serves a communicative function, which is the first function of language in Smith's paradigm. According to Robert M. Wren, "palaver" is a very old pidgin word, evolving from the Portuguese word "*palavra*" (xxii) meaning conference. The District Commissioner uses "palaver" instead of "conference" probably out of the conviction that Igbo people, his audience, might not understand the standard English word. Thus in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses a few pidgin words to record the beginning of the interaction between Igbo culture and the Western invaders, and also to introduce the most fundamental function of pidgin English--communication.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe exploits pidgin English to its full potential. He has almost every one of his characters speak pidgin English, each for different reasons. By examining the circumstances in which pidgin English is spoken by these characters, we find that pidgin English in this novel has the three functions prescribed by David M. Smith, yet it is not limited to them. Through his skillful manipulation of pidgin English, Achebe shows that pidgin should be regarded not only as an independent language, but also as an effective means by which African writers can adopt and then alter the English language to make it their own. He also shows that pidgin English has a very rich potential to take on more functions with the progress of time.

If Achebe resorts only briefly to the communicative function of pidgin English in *Things Fall Apart*, he does this more comprehensively in *A Man of the People*. On many occasions in this novel, pidgin is spoken as a *lingua franca*; it is used when people from distinct ethnic groups try to communicate with each other. Mrs. Eleanor John, for example, a trader and a close friend of Nanga, the Cultural Minister, speaks pidgin to people who attend the Minister's party. Odili, the narrator, introduces Mrs. John's

background right after she speaks pidgin for the first time. We are told that "she had come all the way from Plkoma, three hundred and fifty miles away." We also know from Odili that she did not get a good education: "She was the 'merchant princess' *par excellence*. Poor beginning--an orphan, I believe--no school education, . . . beginning as a street hawker, rising to a small trader, and then to a big one" (17). Since she does not belong to the same area of the people she is talking to, and since she has little education and thus unable to speak standard English when communicating with people of a different area, it is proper for her to depend on pidgin English.

For the same reason, Nanga's cook speaks pidgin with his master. The cook might have come from a different ethnic group, and, judged by his occupation, he cannot speak standard English. When Nanga accuses him of poisoning his coffee, he desperately defends himself in pidgin English:

> "Me? Put poison for master? Nevertheless!" . . .
> "Why I go kill my master? . . . Abi my head no correct? And even if to say I de craze why I no go go jump for inside lagoon instead to kill my master?" (39)

Here although the cook tries to use sophisticated words like "nevertheless," his language is without doubt pidgin. For the same communication purpose, Nanga speaks pidgin with the cook too, because this is the only language both understand.

Clearly, pidgin English, as a means of communication between people of different linguistic backgrounds in *A Man of the People*, is also used as a means of class identification. The pidgin English spoken by Mrs. John and Nanga's cook shows itself as a language for the lower classes. In "The Social and Functional Power of Nigerian English," Edmund O. Bamiro draws a connection between language code and social class

in Nigerian society. He points out that "The linguistic polarization between the dominant and dominated groups . . . will reflect the social polarization between the powerful and powerless social classes in Nigeria" (276). The "powerless class," to which he refers, includes traders, cooks, clerks, labourers, policemen, peasants, among others. In *A Man of the People*, they are the people who almost always speak pidgin English.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe also uses pidgin English as an index of identification in yet another sense: by the élite to gain social acceptance or intimacy with each other. Chantal Zabus at one point comments on this function of pidgin:

> The use of NP [Nigerian Pidgin] among educated characters of the same ethnic and language group is often prompted by a panoply of human emotions and "act of identity "ranging from solidarity to small talk. Speaking NP can thus mean more than just speaking "over the fence"; it can be a way of reaching out across boundaries other than social ones. (81)

Although those highly educated people in *A Man of the People* can speak standard English very well, they sometimes prefer pidgin English, because pidgin, as an "informal" language, gives them the impression that it can shorten the distance between each other and create a kind of intimate, private and informal atmosphere. For instance, Odili and Nanga, though able to speak standard English, choose to converse in pidgin when they are discussing intimate topics such as women:

> "E fool pass garri," said Chief Nanga. "Which person tell you am na bobby them de take to do the thing? Nonsense." "But that woman na waa," I said. "Who put that kind sense for im head?"
> "Woman?" rhapsodized Chief Nanga. "Any person wey tell you say woman no get sense just de talk pure jargon. When woman no want do something e go lef am, but make you no fool yourself say e lef the thing because e no get sense for do am." (67)

Similarly, Odili also speaks pidgin English with Elsie, his girlfriend who is able to speak standard English (65).

That pidgin English is used by educated people in an attempt to gain good rapport is most vividly illustrated by the conversation between Nanga and Elsie. Nanga, attempting to be better acquainted with Elsie, whom he later seduces, chooses to speak in pidgin though he knows Elsie speaks English and though he is not quite familiar with her: "If somebody wan make you minister, . . . make you no gree. No be good life" (68). Elsie, on the other hand, not very familiar with the Minister, replies with standard English: "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown" (68). Elsie, by choosing to speak English, is trying to keep an appropriate distance from the cultural minister. This is illustrated when she switches to pidgin when speaking to Odili, her boyfriend, on the same occasion, while Nanga is still present.

The social boundaries, indicated by the use of standard English and pidgin by people of different classes, are transgressed when Chief Nanga speaks pidgin in order to establish rapport with the masses. For example, when Chief Koko, the Minister of Overseas Training, invites Chief Nanga for coffee, the latter finds the best opportunity to advertise his immunity to Western influences and his closeness to the masses: "I no follow you black white-me for drink tea and coffee in the hot afternoon. . ." (37). Though Chief Koko is also an intimate friend of Chief Nanga, the Cultural Minister's use of pidgin English in response to the former's invitation should not be viewed as his attempt to establish intimacy with a friend. Rather, owing to the content of his response, his code switching should be seen as a strategy of identifying with the masses. According to Bamiro, this shows how "the codes of the dominated groups become the vehicle by which

they are further subjugated" (282). The Cultural Minister will condescend to identify himself with the masses and speak their language, because he needs their votes to keep himself in power.

Thus, in *A Man of the People*, Achebe uses pidgin English according to the circumstances with which he is dealing. Clearly, the role of pidgin English develops when the realities change. Used in *A Man of the People*, pidgin English has evolved from a *lingua franca* to a means of identification, either for people from the same ethnic group or for those belonging to different social positions. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe continues his exploitation of pidgin English, but assigns it more meanings in a more troubled period in West African history.

A few functions of pidgin English used by characters in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe's latest novel, overlap with those in *A Man of the People*. One of these is that in *Anthills of the Savannah*, pidgin is also used by the characters to facilitate communication. Beatrice, the female protagonist in this novel, who has received a European education and is therefore able to speak standard English, uses pidgin when communicating with her cook, Mr. Sylvanus (64). Likewise, she has to use pidgin whenever she speaks to Elewa, who is Ikem's girlfriend and who has little education (174-175). The second function serves to mark class differences. While English is the language for those educated people who switch to pidgin English only momentarily, pidgin English is the language for those taxi drivers, housemaids, cooks, office secretaries, and police, whose social status is supposed to be lower than that of the educated.

It is also true that in *Anthills of the Savannah*, pidgin English is used to foster close relationships, especially in intimate and private conversations. Consider the following conversation between Ikem Osodi, the editor of the *National Gazette*, and Elewa, Ikem's girlfriend, in which the latter asks why Ikem asks her to go back home at midnight. The conversation starts with Ikem speaking standard English and Elewa pidgin:

> Ikem: "You know very well, Elewa, that there are no more armed robbers in Bassa."
> Elewa: "The woman dem massacre for motor park last week na you killam."
> Ikem: "I can't take you home because my battery is down. I have told you that twenty times already."
> Elewa: "Your battery is down. Why your battery no down for afternoon when you pick me." (35)

From this dialogue, we may conclude that Elewa, though unable to speak standard English, does not have any problem in understanding it. However, when Ikem becomes more and more desperate to convince Elewa that he does not want her to leave because another woman is coming, he switches to pidgin English:

> I said totally and deliberately over her head, "the reason is really quite simple. I no want make you join all the loos women for Bassa who no de sleep for house." She stared at me with her mouth wide open, quite speechless. (35-36)

Obviously, Ikem switches to pidgin towards the end of his conversation with Elewa because subconsciously he wants to shorten the psychological distance between himself and Elewa, and to influence the latter to believe what he says. Similarly, pidgin English is used between Beatrice and Chris, and Beatrice and Ikem when the topics are very intimate in nature (69, 90).

Although there are similarities between the functions of pidgin English used in *Anthills of the Savannah* and those in *A Man of the People*, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, pidgin English does take on new functions. While in *A Man of the People* pidgin English is used by people of the upper classes, for example, Chief Nanga, to further exploit people from the dominated groups, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, it is used by those of the "dominated" groups to exploit those of the "dominating" groups. In other words, on certain occasions, people of the lower classes, in conflict with the members of the upper class, assume superiority when they address the latter in pidgin English. By so doing, the dominated class reverses the inferior connotation connected with pidgin English. Two examples of this phenomenon may be considered. The first occurs when professor Okong is "barked" at by the President's orderly after he is humiliated by His Excellency:

> He [professor Okong] began to move again although three-quarters of his mind stayed on the crushing manner of his dismissal and particularly on the fact that His Excellency had called him mister. He stopped walking again. "I am in disgrace," he said aloud. "God, I am in disgrace. What did I do wrong?"
>
> "You still de there?" barked the orderly from behind him, and professor Okong sprang into life again. (20)

Under normal circumstances, professor Okong, who is a member of the upper class, enjoys more privileges than the orderly, who is much lower than professor Okong in social status. However, the above encounter between them shows that the latter feels superior to the former. This, according to Bamiro, "is often the case in Nigeria during a military interregnum," when "even an ordinary 'recruit' soldier enjoys more power" (283).

This inverted social relationship shows up again in Chris's conflict with a police sergeant who is bullying a young lady. Chris wants to stop the sergeant:

> Chris bounded forward and held the man's hand and ordered him to release the girl at once. As if that was not enough, he said, " I will make a report about this to the Inspector-General of Police."
>
> "You go report me for where? You de craze! No be you de ask about President just now? If you no commot for my front now I go blow your head to Jericho, crazee-man!" (215)

Chris's warning to the policeman, which is uttered in standard English, appears weak compared to the latter's response in pidgin English. Chris's conflict with the police sergeant, similar to professor Okong's encounter with the orderly, vividly shows the chaotic social order in the military regime in which the soldiers and policemen, who are generally regarded as members of lower classes, enjoy more power than most of those from the upper classes. This also shows that in a society falling deeply into anarchy, social boundaries are only relative concepts.

If we put pidgin English in the context of its function in the transaction between the colonizer and the colonized, we find an ironic shift concerning the role of pidgin English. It is clear from the discussion of the origin of pidgin English and its use in *Things Fall Apart* that it was the European colonizers who introduced pidgin as a means of communicating with the colonized. However, in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, as shown by the new functions this *lingua franca* takes on, Europeans, who, as implied in the "baby talk theory," are the initiators of pidgin, are obviously excluded from it. In these two later novels, on most occasions, pidgin is not used as a *lingua franca*. Rather, it is used by people who share a common language as a means to deal with the subtle relationships among themselves. The Europeans are excluded when Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People* speaks pidgin to his audience whose votes he desperately needs, or when Ikem Osodi in *Anthills of the Savannah* tries to persuade, in

pidgin English, his girlfriend to go back to her home at night. Even when pidgin is used as a means of facilitating communication in the two later novels, it is used among African people, instead of between Africans and Europeans. Thus in pidgin English, we see a good example of how the imperialist heritage, of which language is a very important part, can be appropriated by the formerly colonized people and used creatively and powerfully as a counter-discursive strategy in a postcolonial context.

The conclusion of this survey is that the functions that Achebe assigns to pidgin English undergo development in his novels which deal with different periods in Nigerian history. In *Things Fall Apart*, though pidgin English is little used, Achebe does employ a few pidgin words to show the gradual penetration of the European forces of the traditional Igbo land. In *A Man of the People*, a novel dealing with a society exposed to more than a half century of interaction with European culture and which is now facing local evils after getting rid of colonial atrocities, Achebe investigates more potential of pidgin in reflecting this different social reality. In this novel, pidgin English is a means of communication, an index of identification, separating one social class from another--and shows the intimacy between members of the higher classes. Besides, it is also used by politicians and other members of the upper class to gain popularity with the masses, and thus to further subjugate the lower classes. In the case of *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe uses pidgin English to reflect new social realities. Pidgin English is also used by the lower class members to oppress those from the upper classes in an anarchic military regime.

Achebe's exploitation of pidgin English as a linguistic strategy reflects his acute consciousness in using language as a barometer for social changes in the Nigerian

context. It also betrays his genuine craftsmanship in manipulating English, an imperialist language, to mirror African realities. His success in this adds a good footnote to the expressive function of pidgin English.

Chapter Three

African Proverbs: A Linguistic Style in Achebe's Novels

In addition to the literary devices discussed in the two preceding chapters, Achebe employs African proverbs with marked effectiveness to get his meaning across to his readers. Critics have frequently commented on this aspect of Achebe's writing, especially in relation to his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. But whereas in the earlier novels he wants to introduce the rich culture of his people to his readers, in his later novels, he uses African proverbs to expose new post-independence realities in Africa. Although he relates African experiences in an imperialist language, by using West African proverbs, Achebe counters the colonizers' attempts to degrade African cultures.

It might be helpful to preface the discussion of Achebe's use of African proverbs with an examination of the so-called "neo-glattophagia theory," proposed by Chantal Zabus. Zabus bases her theory on *Linguistique et Colonialisme*, a work by the French Marxist linguist, Louis-Jean Calvet. Similar to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Calvet sees linguistic imperialism as the most powerful means of colonization. He compares the European colonizers with cannibals who eat not human beings but words. In Calvet's words, "Le premier anthropaphage est venu d'Europe. Il a dévoré le colonisé . . . il a dévoré ses langues; *glottophage* donc"[1] (Quoted in Zabus, "Logos-Eater" 19). "Glottophagia," as

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[1] "The first cannibal came from Europe. He devoured the colonized [people]. . . . He devoured their languages; so is a *glottophage* [i.e. tongue eater]." Translation kindly assisted by Dr. Nick Ruddick, English Department, University of Regina.

Zabus tells us, thus refers to the fact that "many African languages were 'devoured' by the colonizing powers and supplanted by the European languages" ("Logos-Eater" 19).

Based on Calvet's concept of glottophagia, Zabus proposes her "neo-glottophagia" theory in "The Logos-Eater: the Igbo Ethno-Text." This theory focuses on an extended linguistic glottophagia which results partly from the process of indigenization. While in linguistic glottophagia, African words are devoured by European colonizers through linguistic imperialism, in Zabus's new theory, African tongues are further devoured, not by the Europeans, but by those African writers who adopt the imperialist languages as their means of literary expression. Zabus contends that in those African works which convey African experiences via a European medium, the African tongues "[fall] prey to a textual glottophagia by which English devours the African etymons and morphemes which now function as the linguistic debris of a nearly-extinct language." As a result, "By exhibiting the dominant language's protean possibilities of adaptation, indigenization . . . can thus help revitalize and recirculate the target language[English] in a perversely neo-colonial fashion at the expense of the source language [the indigenous language]" ("Logos-Eater" 20). Zabus sees her contention most effectively testified by the use of African proverbs in English works of postcolonial writers. She implies that since a proverb is an oral form, transposing it in writing, especially in an imperialist language such as English, foreshadows its death (26).

Zabus's article presents a valid and thought-provoking discussion of the drawbacks of portraying African realities in English; however, for African literature to

obtain more popularity, these drawbacks are necessary sacrifices. Moreover, we can appropriate Zabus's contention and propose that the use of indigenous elements, such as the proverbs used by Achebe, is a very effective means of devouring the imperial language. Since these proverbs are very important embodiers of African values, by using African proverbs, Achebe thus expands the capacity of English and makes it capable of conveying these values. We can also name this creative use of English as "neo-glottophagia," but in this case, the African languages are agents, not victims, in linguistic cannibalism.

An exact definition of proverbs is not easily obtained; however, by examining two of the definitions provided by critics, we can identify some commonly accepted elements as the basic characteristics of proverbs. Charles E. Nnolim, in "The Form and Function of the Folk Tradition in Achebe's Novels," defines a proverb as "a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognized truth or shrewd observation about practical life and which has been preserved by oral tradition" (36). Similarly, Emmanuel Obiechina, in *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, defines proverbs as "the kernels which contain the wisdom of the traditional people," "philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words," and "a mnemonic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory" (156). By Obiechina's and Nnolim's definitions, we find that two features are

basic to a proverb. First, a proverb is a product of oral tradition[2], marked by its brevity in expression. Secondly, a proverb contains moral and philosophical truths observed by people of former generations. They are the unwritten laws in an oral society which govern and judge people's behaviour; they also serve as moral guides to people who encounter difficulties and frustrations in everyday life.

These two fundamental characteristics of proverbs can help us understand the roles that proverbs play in Achebe's works. That the proverbs belong to the oral tradition provides Achebe with a handy device by which he can fashion a new English for African writers. According to Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, an African writer is "to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its values as a medium of international exchange will be lost" (100). Here, rather than warning African writers not to alter that language too much, Achebe is reminding them of the great extent to which the imperialist language can be adapted. By using African proverbs in his novels, Achebe is expanding the territories of English, making the language of the former colonizers a carrier of African wisdom, and

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[2] Nnolim and Obiechina's definitions of proverb emphasize the oral nature. However, literate societies also produce proverbs, and as such, proverbs cannot be safely said to be transmitted exclusively through oral traditions. Cameron Louis, in "The Concept of the Proverb in Middle English," addresses this issue by dividing proverbs into two categories--"folk proverb," which "has come down to us through generations of oral and written transmission," and "learned proverb," which "has a definite written source" (174). Therefore, the definitions quoted above are very restricted and applicable only to orally transmitted folk proverbs. Since it is outside the scope of this study to distinguish between the West African folk proverbs transmitted orally and those transmitted in written form, in this study, proverbs of rural origins are generally regarded as transmitted orally.

blending the novel, which is originally a Western literary form, with African oral traditions. Achebe is a literary cannibal who takes revenge by gnawing at the very language which was used by the colonialists to devour African cultures.

The second character of the proverbs as a reservoir of moral and philosophical truth invites more detailed examination. As we will find, although the proverbs in all the three novels under discussion carry traditional African values, they are also used in the two later novels to reflect changes that the societies described have experienced in different historical periods in West Africa.

As a coalescence of experiences, the proverbs used in Achebe's novels cover a great range of the day-to-day life of the West African people, and reflect the importance of proverbs in the lives of African people. In *Mother Is Gold*, Adrian A. Roscoe contends that "It is perhaps too much to claim that a West African's life can be simply regarded as a movement from one proverb to the next; but the range of human experience covered by the proverb is certainly vast. No situation appears too unusual for it, no aspect of social behaviour lies beyond its reach" (124). As the present study does not seek to examine all aspects of African life covered by the proverbs, three categories of African values will be discussed: community consciousness, status and achievement, and flexibility and duality. These three categories of values are highlighted because they are more closely related to the main issues Achebe examines in his novels, and are also more frequently commented on by the proverbs in Achebe's novels than are other West African values.

Many of the proverbs in Achebe's novels reflect community consciousness in

African societies. Different from the emphasis placed on individualism in Western societies, in Achebe's novels, traditional African societies in general and Igbo in particular encourage a strong sense of communalism. *Things Fall Apart* contains many proverbs dealing with the importance of the sense of a community. To the Igbo people, community is what differentiates human beings from animals. At the end of his seven years of exile in Mbanta, his mother's hometown, Okonkwo the protagonist hosts a feast to express his gratitude for the great care his kinsmen gave him during those most difficult years of his life. In the feast, Uchendu, who is Okonkwo's uncle and the oldest member of Okonkwo's family, prays for him after the kolanut is broken. In his prayer, the old man places the value of kinsmanship above all things, including wealth: "We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. *An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him*" (*Things* 117. Emphasis added).

Indeed, community is so important in the lives of African people that in Achebe's novels, individuals construct their identities through their interrelationship with other members of the community; thus a person's glory or shame is not his or her own affair, but rather the business of the whole community. This belief is expressed by several proverbs in Achebe's novels. In *Things Fall Apart,* for example, the narrator relates to the Igbo elders' belief that "If one finger brought soil it messed up the others" (87). This proverb is repeated by Professor Okong in *Anthills of the Savannah* in a slightly different

way: "One finger gets soiled with grease and spreads it to the other four" (19). The same point is driven home by Odili's father in *A Man of the People*, who vividly says, "When a man walks naked, it is his kinsmen who feel shame, not himself" (132).

Since community is the precondition for the existence of individuals, people are expected to offer their help to each other to strengthen common ties. An individualistic person such as Okonkwo is also aware of this. As he says: "An Umuofia man does not refuse a call" (*Things* 136), implying that an individual is the property of the whole community. This point is best illustrated by the Abazon elder in *Anthills of the Savannah* when he tries to persuade those who accompany him not to expect Ikem Osodi, from Abazon and now the editor of the *National Gazette*, to show up at their meeting. His reason is that "The cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but his voice belongs to the neighborhood" (122), which means that Ikem Osodi has more important things to deal with owing to his prominent role in state affairs. Here we notice that in West African communalism, individual interests are closely tied to those of the community; moreover, the interests of a small community should be subordinated to the overall interests of a larger community.

The second category of values that is conveyed through proverbs in Achebe's novels are West African people's worldviews concerning personal status and achievement as related to spirituality. This aspect of traditional belief is most vividly conveyed by proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* though it is also touched upon by the two later novels. The relationship between man and gods is a very important one in the traditional

Igbo society. As J. S. Mbiti asserts, "God is no stranger to African peoples, and in traditional life, there are no atheists" (29). In order to live in peace and achieve personal goals, a person is not supposed to be in conflict with God or with his ancestors. This is what the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills, tells Unoka, Okonkwo's father, when he goes to seek her advice. The priestess advises Unoka that "When a man is at peace with his gods and ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm" (*Things* 13).

The priestess's advice covers two of the three categories of Igbo traditional spiritual belief: the third, *chi*, or the personal god, is also referred to in several proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*. David Carroll explains the importance of *chi* in a person's success and achievements in the Igbo society:

> Each person is believed to be granted by *Chukwu* [supreme God] at the moment of conception a *chi*, a soul or spiritual double, to which his fortunes and abilities are ascribed. The *chi* fulfills the destiny which the Creator has determined and at the moment of reincarnation bargains with him on behalf of the individual for improved status in the next life. (297)

In other words, similar to gods and ancestors, *chi* is not intended to limit one's success. A man has great freedom in pursuing his own goals in life: "if a man says yes his *chi* says yes also" (*Things* 19). However, as shown in the discussion that follows, a man is not supposed to be in conflict with his *chi*.

The third characteristic of West African society reflected in Achebe's use of West African proverbs is its emphasis on flexibility and its acceptance of duality. This

emphasis, in the case of the Igbo people, may result from their lack of a centralized power system together with their disbelief in authority. J. O. J. Nwachukwo-Agbada, on the other hand, attributes this emphasis to the necessity to survive in a harsh environment:

> Man's environment at that time was particularly harsh, frightening and risky in its immensity as well as incomprehensibility. . . . This reality in turn fostered a keener sense of caution and the psychology to suspect any phenomenon that was new or unknown. It also gave rise to a certain willingness to adapt in order to be able to grapple with the changing circumstances. (225)

Achebe's use of proverbs shows that his people are aware of the fact that all people might not be the same; therefore there is no absolute truth. In *Things Fall Apart,* when Obierika, Okonkwo's best friend, mentions to Uchendo, Okonkwo's uncle, people's suspicion about the story that white men have made powerful guns and come from overseas to capture slaves, Uchendu comments, "There is no story that is not true. . . . The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others" (99). As a result of their disbelief in absolute truth and their open-mindedness towards new phenomena, the Igbo people are willing to make changes in order to adapt to the ever-changing world. A proverb in *Things Fall Apart* that very well conveys Igbo people's willingness to change is "Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching." This proverb is first mentioned by Nwakibie when the young Okonkwo goes to him to borrow yam seeds (16). It is used again by Okika, one of the six people who are imprisoned by the white men, when he talks about how to deal with the penetration of the white power into Igbo land (144). It is worth

mentioning that even in the two later novels, there are also proverbs concerning this consciousness of adapting to changes. In *A Man of the People*, for example, a trade-unionist uses one Igbo proverb to explain why he went to Russia--"If you look only in one direction your neck will become stiff" (90). Similarly, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, when stating why he and his people did not give their approval to His Excellency's life-Presidency, the Abazon elder uses a proverb: " Even when a man marries a woman he does not marry her for ever" (126).

The flexibility which is so characteristic of the Igbo also explains one very intriguing phenomenon concerning the proverbs in Achebe's novels--namely, that sometimes proverbs express contradictory views regarding one fact. This point has also been noted by a number of critics: Bernth Linfors in "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's words are Eaten" (9), Chikneuma Okoye in "Achebe: the Literary Function of Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings" (48), J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada in "Chinua Achebe's Literary Proverbs as Reflections of Igbo Cultural and Philosophical Tenets" (230-33), and by several other critics. Linfors notices that there are several proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* which describe a father's influence on his son and that they contradict each other sometimes. Some proverbs contend that a son always takes after his father. For example, when commenting on the smartness of Obierika's son. Obierika's brother says to him. "You were very much like that yourself. . . . As your people say, 'when mother-crow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth'" (*Things* 49). However, other proverbs seem to reveal that a man's achievements in his life may not be limited by the parents'

success or failure, because "A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches" (*Things* 46). On some occasions, a proverbial saying, though not challenged by an opposite one, is proved invalid by reality. For example, the Igbo proverb that "When a man says yes his *chi* says yes also" (*Things* 19) attests to this. This proverb implies that a man's personal achievements are determined by how strong his will is. Yet Okonkwo's story shows that this proverb does not always necessarily reflect truth. When Okonkwo is sent into exile as a punishment for accidentally killing a kinsman, the narrator comments: "A man can not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true--that if a man says yea his *chi* also affirms. Here is a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmations" (*Things* 92). Okonkwo's downfall in *Things Fall Apart* does not show that the elders' saying is wrong. Rather, it demonstrates one value which is very important in the Igbo society but which is not possessed by Okonkwo--flexibility and moderation. Okonkwo has been trying to do something beyond his power; he is wrestling with his *chi*. This is one reason for his tragedy, because elsewhere we are told that a necessary condition for a man's success is his respect for his gods and ancestors (*Things* 3).

Critics have failed to notice that the relationship of individual and community is also highlighted by contradictory proverbs. The proverbs discussed earlier portray Igbo society as one in which personal interests are subordinated to community needs. However, there are also proverbs which show Igbo society's great respect for individualism. Although the voice of a cock "is the property of the neighborhood"

(*Anthills* 122), we are also told that "a man who answers every summons by the town-crier will not plant corn in his field" (*Anthills* 122), and that "Every man has what is his; do not bypass him to enter his compound" (*Anthills* 123). Again, the existence of contradictory proverbs concerning individual interests and collective demands does not simply mean that one is right and the other is wrong; rather, it shows the Igbo people's flexibility and their appreciation of duality.

As most of the proverbs mentioned above are from *Things Fall Apart*, it is necessary at this point to summarize the functions of the proverbs in this, Achebe's first novel. First, Achebe uses proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* to express the rich culture of his people. Proverbs are much more frequently used in *Things Fall Apart* than in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. This is an example of Achebe's acute consciousness of being true to reality. As the proverb is part of the oral tradition, it is appropriate for Achebe to use more proverbs in a novel which depicts a society that is still primarily oral. The oral nature of Igbo society does not mean that traditional Igbo people do not possess culture. On the contrary, as Achebe shows his reader through his people's use of traditional proverbs, they enjoyed a rich culture before their encounter with Western civilization. The proverbs used by almost all his characters in *Things Fall Apart* support this idea.

The second function of the proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*, briefly mentioned above, is to help illustrate the theme of the novel; in other words, they help us to understand the tragedy of Okonkwo, the protagonist. Okonkwo's life is driven by his

strong determination and desire to succeed, to prove his manhood and his differences from his father who is regarded as a failure by his people. This seems to be in accordance with the Igbo people's strong emphasis on personal achievements and status, but Okonkwo carries this principle to extremes. While the Igbo proverbs can accommodate contradicting claims, Okonkwo sees no compromise and flexibility in his world. When the Oracle of the Hills orders that Ikemefuna, the boy who was captured from another clan and was under Okonkwo's guidance for many years, be killed, Okonkwo's inner drive to prove his manhood leads him to be the executor of the poor boy, even though he loves him very much. His lack of ability for reconciliation is pointed out by Obierika, his best friend, who says to him after the boy is killed that "if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (*Things* 47). Okonkwo cannot see that the order of the Oracle can still be carried out without his participating in the killing of his surrogate son, just as he strongly believes that "if a man says yes his *chi* says yes also" but does not know that he cannot challenge his *chi* and attempt to achieve things beyond his destiny.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the proverbs used by Achebe provide non-Igbo readers with a means by which they can appreciate the traditional Igbo culture and understand the tragedy of the protagonist. In *A Man of the People*, the proverbs, however, are used to reflect changes that Nigerian people have experienced from the presence of the colonizers to the coming of their independence. As the historical reality changes, so do the proverbs. Proverbs in this novel take on values which are absent from *Things Fall Apart*. Western

proverbs and maxims are used by the Western educated élite, and pidginized proverbs also begin to appear.

Since the central point of this novel is concerned with the corruption and greed of politicians in post-independence Nigeria, many of the proverbs deal with taking advantage of opportunities and acquiring material wealth. This is again fully discussed by Linfors who finds that several proverbs in this novel suggest that people take advantage of opportunities in pursuing personal interests. For example, one should not miss the best opportunity because "if you fail to take away a strong man's sword when he is on the ground will you do it when he gets up. . .?" (*Man* 103). Besides, once the opportunity is seized, one should not let it go easily, for "a sensible man" would not "spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth" (2). Moreover, it is worthwhile to make investment for one's own lucky days, as Nanga reminds Odili, "I don't care if you respect me or not . . . but our people have a saying that if you respect today's king others will respect you when your turn comes" (70).

In the last example mentioned above, Nanga is deliberately misinterpreting an Igbo proverb by putting it in a wrong context. If used in a traditional society, this proverb is only another example of the importance of gods and spirits and ancestors in Igbo culture. From the proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* we know that respect for spirituality and ancestry is necessary for a person's success. However, the way Nanga uses this proverb implies that Nanga is seeing himself as the "king" in the proverb. He is giving a hint to Odili and other young people also present, that if they maintain a good relationship with

him, someday they will enjoy what he is enjoying now.

This is not the only occasion when Nanga misuses Igbo traditional proverbs and /or values. On another occasion, he tells his tribesmen, "Our people must press for their fair share of the national cake" (13). It is clear that Nanga is proving his loyalty to his people by cashing in on the traditional Igbo people's emphasis on community. But once again, he is deliberately misinterpreting the traditional value. In a traditional Igbo society, people are encouraged to share public responsibilities and to assist others in times of difficulty, while Nanga's quasi maxim emphasizes the individual's claim on public resources. Nanga, among others, is a good speaker and a cunning politician, as Odili, the narrator, observes: "Chief Nanga was a born politician; he could get away with almost anything he said or did. And as long as men are swayed by their hearts and stomachs and not their heads the Chief Nanga of this world will continue to get away with anything" (73). Indeed, when he speaks of his "national-cake" metaphor, he is greeted with applause, and one listener admirably calls him "Owner of Books!" (13). No one notices, or cares to notice, the deliberate distortion of Igbo values in Nanga's speech.

The above analysis of Nanga's misuse of traditional proverbs shows that in *A Man of the People* proverbs are used by this corrupt politician as a means of gaining support from the rural people. Nanga realizes that in order to do just that, he has to establish a sense of intimacy with those people and make them feel that the man in power is actually a member of their group. Thus proverbs, which are so prevalent in the speech of rural people, prove to be one of the best means for Nanga to identify himself with his potential

voters. As in his use of pidgin English, Nanga's use of proverbs is an effective way by which politicians further exploit the ordinary rural people.

There is another development in Achebe's use of proverbs in *A Man of the People*. In this novel, the Western-educated characters frequently use Western proverbs and maxims, or "learned proverbs" according to Louis's classification (174), in their speeches to highlight class differences in post-independence Nigeria. Such Western proverbs can be found in speeches by Nanga, Odili, and Elsie, Odili's girlfriend. A member of the highly educated élite, Odili frequently borrows Western proverbs in his narrative. Proverbs and proverbial sayings as "one stone to kill two birds" (152), "attack . . . is the best defense" (162) used by Odili and "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown" used by Elsie (68) cannot be found in speeches by people from rural areas. By using Western proverbs and sayings, all three of the above-mentioned main characters in *A Man of the People* distance themselves from people of rural areas and therefore highlight the different classes to which they and those rural people belong.

Moreover, these Western proverbs or learned proverbs used in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* also mirror the power struggle between the Western-educated élite and the rural people. Again, as Louis suggests, the emergence of the learned proverbs was a result of the attempt of the clerical authority to control the power of the folk proverbs largely used by rural people:

> In the Middle Ages there apparently was an awareness of the power of the folk proverb by the clerical establishment, and a consequent attempt by it to harness that power through the dissemination of the learned proverb . . . . The goal, of course, was to combat the ambiguous, potentially

> subversive content of the folk proverb with dogma that was more certainly expressed and more serviceable to its interests. (179)

While Louis's statement focuses on the Middle Ages in England, it also applies to West Africa after the end of colonial powers. The Western-educated intellectuals in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, although they possess more mundane power than the ordinary rural people, realize the political power possessed by the proverbs used by rural people. Their use of learned proverbs borrowed from Western culture can thus be regarded as their attempts to compete with, and ultimately control, this power.

It is worth mentioning that Western proverbs are used by Nanga to serve his political interests. Nanga's ability to use Western sayings identifies him with educated people and makes him a person equally eloquent in Western and traditional proverbial sayings. Therefore, it helps him to obtain support from the élite class just as his eloquence in traditional proverbs helps him to obtain support from the rural people. Nanga is fond of Western proverbs. They are impressive because they contain values and messages that are novel and different from traditional values that his audience, especially those rural people, are accustomed to. For example, such Western sayings as "Not what I have but what I do is my kingdom" (3), "Do the right and shame the devil" (12), and "No one is perfect except God" (75) that Nanga uses in his speeches convey a strong sense of individualism. This individualism is highly valued in Western culture and is gradually replacing traditional West African society's emphasis on communalism as a dominant value in the post-independence Nigeria. To Nanga's audience, Nanga's ability to use

Western proverbs is an evidence of his native command of the white man's language. What they fail to realize, however, is that more importantly, Nanga is using those Western proverbs to justify his greedy and unscrupulous behaviour. Nanga's use and misuse of Western sayings, together with his misinterpretation of African proverbs, in Linfors's words, "exposes not only his own insincerity and irresponsibility but the moral chaos in which he lives" ("Palm Oil" 16).

The urban appropriation of some of the rural proverbs also shows the development of the proverbs used in *A Man of the People*. Though there are only a few cases of this form of adaptation of traditional proverbs, they offer us an insight into the kind of society that Achebe is depicting. For example, in Chief Nanga's party, Mrs. Johnson, the "merchant princess," coming from a different indigenous group, introduces a pidginized proverb of her people--"When poor man done see with him own eye how to make big man e go beg make e carry him poverty de go je-je" (16). That a traditional proverb is expressed in pidgin English reveals the social transition that the Nigerian experiences, during which Western and tradition cultures co-exist and influence each other. It also shows, in Zabus's words, "how the urban Igbo speaker is alienated from the traditional art of conversation and the proper use of proverbs ("Logos-Eater" 24).

Again, the alienation of the urban people from rural traditions is explored by Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* but on a fuller scale. He consciously makes a contrast between the language of His Excellency and his cabinet members, and that of the people from the rural areas. The greatest difference between their speeches is underlined by the

existence and non-existence of traditional proverbs. The President of Kangan, the fictional African state in which this novel is set, and his followers, have been educated in Britain; as a result, their speech is characterized by language which reveals values of the West, and bear no relevance to the reality of the rural areas of the country. Consider the President's monologue after he dismisses Professor Okong, Commissioner for Home Affairs, who gossips about Ikem, the editor of *National Gazette*:

> What exactly does the fellow mean, His Excellency wondered. I handled him pretty well though. I certainly won't stand for my commissioners sneaking up to me with vague accusations against their colleagues. It's not cricket! No sense of loyalty, no *esprit de corps*, nothing! (21)

His Excellency's soliloquy is characterized by its harshness in tone and its stiffness in diction. The French phrase *esprit de corps*, and distinctive English words used and misused by him and his followers, together with an almost total absence of traditional proverbs, connote, in Omar Sougou's words, "a linguistic deficiency which is indicative of the Cabinet's mediocrity, and correlate with the dearth and harshness that run through *Anthills of the Savannah*" ("Intertexuality" 43).

The rarity of African proverbs in the language of the Kangan rulers shows Achebe's efforts of being true to reality. The President and his cabinet members are all Western-educated, and they admire European culture much more than they do their own national culture. More importantly, unlike Chief Nanga who tries to make himself at home with the rural people in order to solicit their support, His Excellency, who came to power through a military coup, is the dictator in the newly independent country. As long

as he does not feel the threat of being dethroned, he does not see the need for making a deliberate effort in establishing an intimate relationship with his constituency and subjects. Professor Okong, his cabinet member, once uses a few proverbs to flatter His Excellency. To show his humility in front of the President, he compares himself and his colleagues to "children who [wash] only their bellies . . . when they pray" (18). To apologize to His Excellency on behalf of his fellow cabinet members, he quotes two other proverbs: "One finger gets soiled with grease and spreads it to the other four" and "a man must not swallow his cough because he fears to disturb others" (19). It is truly disturbing to see these traditional proverbs that highlight the respect of gods and the value of communal consciousness being used by a mediocre politician to flatter a cruel and equally incapable dictator. Professor Okong's flattery is untimely and is brushed off impatiently by the President who sees no place for proverbs in his world: "Please cut out the proverbs if you don't mind" (19).

In contrast, the speeches made by people from rural areas, especially those by the nameless Abazon elder, are permeated with traditional proverbs and metaphorical sayings. In a gathering of the Abazon delegation in the Harmony Hotel, the elder rises up and comments on the master of ceremony's complaints about Ikem Osodi, also an Abazonian, who is unable to attend monthly meetings and other social gatherings of the Abazon people. The Abazon elder's speech on this issue is so lively that it deserves to be quoted in full:

> I have heard what you said about this young man, Osodi, whose doings are known everywhere and fill our heart with pride. Going to meetings and

> weddings and naming ceremonies of one's people is good. But don't forget that our wise men have said also that a man who answers every summons by the town-crier will not plant corn in his field. So my advice to you is this. Go on with your meetings and marriages and naming ceremonies because it is good to do so. But leave this young man alone to do what he is doing for Abazon and for the whole of Kangan; the cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but his voice is the property of the neighborhood. You should be proud that this bright cockerel that wakes the whole village comes from your compound. (122)

The elder's speech proves to be magical, owing largely to his appropriate and frequent use of traditional proverbs and proverbial sayings. The rest of the elder's speech focuses on other affairs, and runs on for six pages in the novel; however, the reading of it makes for a very pleasant experience, just as the listening to it is for his audience. His speech presents a strong contrast with the sterile and dry speeches made by His Excellency and his cabinet members.

The stark contrast between the deficiency of the language of those politicians and the magical power of those made by the rural people help to bring out Achebe's main concerns in his last novel. As mentioned earlier in the examination of his narrative techniques in *Anthills of the Savannah*, this concern revolves around who is entitled to, and more capable of, telling the national story. Through this Abazon elder, Achebe clearly asserts the value of the storytellers in the construction of a nation and a national identity. As the old man says in the same speech:

> So why do I say that the story is chief among his fellows? The same reason I think that our people sometimes will give the name Nkolika to their daughters--Recalling-Is-Great. Why? Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into

the spikes of the cactus fence. (124)

Good storytellers, as we may infer from Achebe, are those who can draw on the traditional African tenets, so often condensed in proverbs, which are one of the best means to recall the wisdom of the ancestors. The real embodiment and the most precious wealth of a nation, as Achebe also implies, are not those who despise traditions and blindly worship foreign cultures, but the faithful inheritors and disseminators of traditional cultures and values.

The conclusion is that Achebe creatively uses proverbs as a powerful means to convey different messages in his novels. Traditional proverbs in all the three novels mentioned, especially those in *Things Fall Apart*, offer the reader an effective way to understand traditional African/Igbo culture, and thus reinforce the statement he made elsewhere that "We in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans" (*African Writers Talking* 7). In *A Man of the People*, through misused proverbs by politicians such as Nanga, Achebe vividly unfolds for the readers a picture of a society which has been corrupted by Western materialism and those greedy politicians who shamelessly appropriate traditional proverbs to justify and defend their own greed. The Western sayings and maxims used by the élite in this novel also help to mark the class differences in post-independence Nigeria. The proverbs used in the last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, help to make a major contrast between the powerful ordinary people who are the real representatives and spokespersons of the nation, and the incapable and sterile politicians--those who possess more mundane power than their subjects. Through his

masterful use of proverbs as a linguistic strategy, Achebe shows the possibility for African languages and culture to feed on the imperialist language. By so doing, he shows again, to his colleagues and his readers, the possibility as well as the necessity for African writers to use the language of the former colonizers.

Conclusion

This study examines three novels by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). It examines closely the literary techniques Achebe employs to communicate his message to African and non-African readers. Achebe's recourse to certain language strategies seems warranted by the historical periods with which he is dealing and the messages, political and cultural, he wants to convey. Certain conclusions have emerged from the study and may be highlighted.

First, the three language strategies--narrative techniques, pidgin English, and proverbs--are used creatively by Achebe to help underscore the distinctive and developing themes in his novels. Since these linguistic devices are the products of history and tradition, by adopting them in his writings, Achebe familiarizes his readers with the worlds to which he is introducing them. Besides, by manipulating the use of these language strategies on different occasions and by different characters, he successfully conveys his main concerns to his readers. Moreover, what has made him a significant figure in African literature is not only his practice of drawing on the rich Igbo cultures and traditions, but also his ability to make them relevant to his novels which focus on distinctive periods of West African history.

In his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, set in the pre-colonial period, Achebe's purpose is to show to his readers that African people possessed rich and sophisticated cultures before the penetration of the country by European colonizers. He thus counters the imperialists' fantasy that Africa was a "dark continent" inhabited by people without a past. Achebe's use of these three language devices appears appropriate for this purpose.

His adoption of an omniscient narrator whose voice is characterized by Igbo folklore-style provides his readers with the Igbo version of their culture and tradition. This version contrasts greatly with *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (148), a book that the British District Commissioner, mentioned in the novel, is about to write. Although only the title of the Commissioner's book is mentioned in the novel, this title is sufficient to suggest the content of the book. Achebe's inclusion of Igbo proverbs in his first novel also helps to achieve the theme of *Things Fall Apart*. From Okonkwo, the protagonist, to many nameless characters, almost every Igbo character in this novel frequently uses proverbs in their speeches. Since proverbs are carriers of cultures, by showing his characters' eloquence in this traditional verbal art, Achebe convincingly demonstrates to all his readers, Igbo and non-Igbo alike, that Igbo culture existed before the coming of the Europeans, and was also deeply rooted in the everyday life of his people. In the case of pidgin English, although it does not serve Achebe's central concern in *Things Fall Apart* as explicitly as the narrative and proverbs do, it does add realistic touches to the novel in that it clearly indicates the coming of an alien culture and the subtle changes this culture is bringing to Igbo people's life. Although pidgin English is not used very frequently, the appearance of it prepares the reader for Achebe's full exploitation of this language phenomenon in the two later novels.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe aims to explore and expose the cynicism following Nigerian independence--the cynicism resulting from the shameless and unscrupulous usurpation and manipulation of national power by the politicians of the post-independence government. Achebe's creative use of the three language devices is effective in helping the author to voice his concerns. Different from *Things Fall Apart*, in

which Achebe adopts an omniscient narrator, *A Man of the People* is narrated in the first person by Odili Samalu, who is a disillusioned and cynical member of the Western-educated élite. Odili's disillusionment with national independence in general and corrupted politicians in particular, together with his unreliability as a narrator, mirrors the cynicism of the Nigerian people after their independence. Similarly, Achebe effectively conveys his central message in this novel with his masterful use of pidgin English and proverbs. By showing the politicians' appropriation of these two language phenomena, which are characteristic of the speech of ordinary people, Achebe painstakingly reflects the exploitation of Nigerian people by the very government which they expect to eliminate colonial power.

Anthills of the Savannah, Achebe's most recent novel, explores storytelling in contemporary Nigeria/Africa and tries to answer the question: who has the authority to narrate the national stories? His manipulation of language strategies, especially narrative mode and African proverbs, shows his conviction that it is the ordinary people, the embodiment of traditional values and cultures, who are largely entitled to tell African stories. His adoption of multiple first-person narrative is symbolic in that it denies the post-independence government, composed of the British-educated élite, the only voice of the nation. Achebe permits several of his main characters in this novel, all government officials who have received Western education, to give their own versions of what is happening in their country. Through their narration, the reader realizes that all these narrators have their own deficiencies, and none of them can be fully trusted as an authoritative narrator. Achebe's use of traditional African proverbs leads us to identify the real storyteller of the nation. He does not assign any of the rural people, represented

by the Abazon elder, the status of a narrator; however, through their speeches which draw on the strength of the traditional proverbs, Achebe shows that they are the true inheritors of African tradition and therefore are the most authoritative storytellers.

The second conclusion of this study is that in the three novels discussed, and with the aid of the three language devices mentioned, Achebe has been consciously exploring the question of who has the right to tell the African story. Although, as mentioned above, Achebe examines the theme of storytelling in *Anthills of the Savannah*, this is not the only novel in which he does this. He sees storytelling as a site of political struggle, and the opponents in this struggle for voice are distinct in the various historical periods he deals with. In *Things Fall Apart*, the struggle takes place between the Igbo people and the colonizers. The African story has long been narrated by European explorers and European colonizers. In their narratives, the rich history and cultures of the African people are ignored. They describe African people as primitive and savage, waiting to be pacified. This typical imperialist perception of Africa and African people is represented by the book that the British District Commissioner is about to write. Achebe's use of an omniscient narrator and Igbo proverbs provides his readers with the Igbo version of the Igbo story. The omniscient narrator in this novel assumes ultimate authority by consciously distancing himself from his stories. The reader is led to believe the objectivity of his narrative, and to see the bias and incompleteness of the colonizers' version of the Igbo/African story. The proverbs used in this novel support the authority of the story told by the omniscient narrator by providing evidence of the existence of rich cultures and traditions in Africa before the coming of the colonizer.

The struggle over the right of African storytelling in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* shifts from one between the Igbo/African people and the European colonizers to one between the ordinary Nigerian/African people and Western educated government officials and politicians. While in the first novel Achebe uses an omniscient narrator to give the Igbo version of the story, in the two later novels, he adopts unreliable first person narrations to reflect the insufficiency of any single voice in telling the national stories. His use of pidgin English and African proverbs is meant to counter the politicians' self-assumed authority in narrating the story of the nation.

The third conclusion is that through the effective use of the three language strategies, Achebe convincingly shows that not only is it possible, but also desirable for African writers to use English, an imperial language, as their medium of literary representation. It is possible, because as Achebe attests, English can be manipulated to convey the African experience genuinely and effectively. Achebe's adoption of different narrative voices and his repeated use of pidgin English and African proverbs add African colouration to his narrative, and are effective in giving English the capacity of reflecting change in West African realities in different historical periods. It is desirable because English, blended with Achebe's language devices, is a very powerful means for African writers to counter the colonizer's attempt to deny the existence of African culture before European colonization. The narrative mode, especially the folklore-style narrative in *Things Fall Apart*, together with the rich collection of proverbs used by Achebe in all three novels, clearly shows that the colonizer's attempt to deny the existence of an African culture is futile. Achebe's constant use of pidgin English in his novels, especially in the two later ones, also serves this end. Pidgin English has long been regarded as an

inferior language by European scholars, if it is given a language status at all. The "inferiority" of pidgin English is constantly used by colonialists as an evidence of the "inferiority" of the African people. By exposing the rich potential of pidgin English in assisting African literary expression, Achebe refutes the negative connotation of pidgin English assigned by the colonizers, and in doing this, questions and condemns the negative views of the colonizers regarding African peoples and culture as a whole.

The final conclusion is that Achebe's use of the three language strategies in three of his novels proves him to be both a political critic and a writer who is concerned with creating believable depictions of past societies. He does not employ the above-discussed three language devices just for the sake of using them or simply to satisfy the non-African reader's curiosity about what to them is an exotic culture. Rather, he uses these stylistic techniques in both a powerful and restrained manner and thus succeeds in making them appear credible. The way a rural character narrates a story or delivers a speech is never the same as that of a colonial officer, a Western educated intellectual, or a government official. Similarly, although pidgin English and proverbs are very effective devices in sounding the themes of his works, his use of them is also selective. Pidgin English is largely used in the post-independence eras by urban people of low social status, while proverbs most frequently appear in speeches of the rural people who are less affected by European and urban culture. Achebe's employment of these language strategies certainly shows him to be a realist writer.

Again, Achebe's manipulation of the three linguistic strategies helps us to understand him as a political critic. He uses these language devices most successfully to convey his political stance concerning different political and historical periods in his land.

Through different narrative modes, he counters the colonizer's attempts to negate African culture and denies any single voice, in post-independence West Africa, the authority of speaking for the whole nation. Similarly, through the use of pidgin English and proverbs, especially those in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, he shows how these two language devices, typical of the powerless and down-trodden ordinary people, are appropriated by politicians to attain their political goals. By so doing, Achebe expresses implicitly his strong aversion to the unscrupulous post-independence government bureaucrats.

The examination of Achebe's use of the three language strategies can help us to understand, and therefore to take our own position in, the language dispute in African literature. Achebe does not only theorize the importance and possibility for African writers to use English. His exploration and manipulation of linguistic devices also successfully shows us the rich potential of English in expressing African realities.

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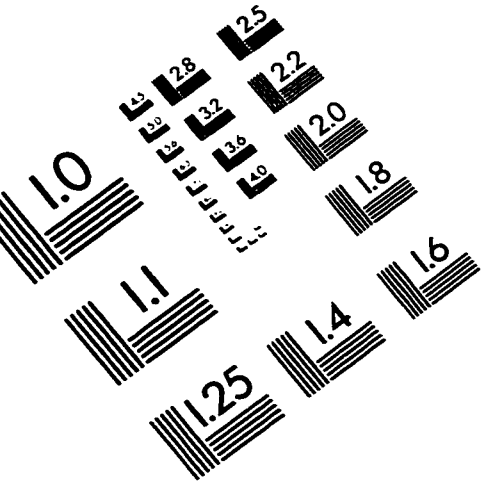

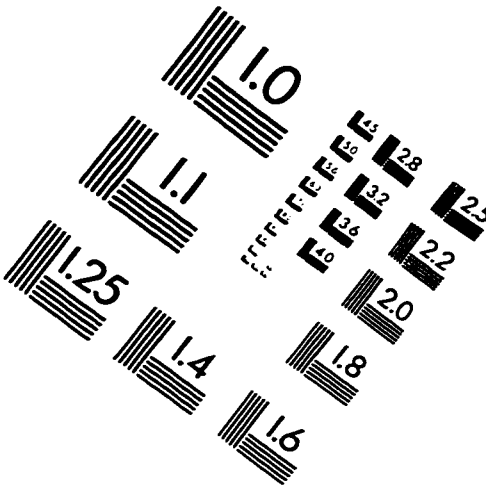

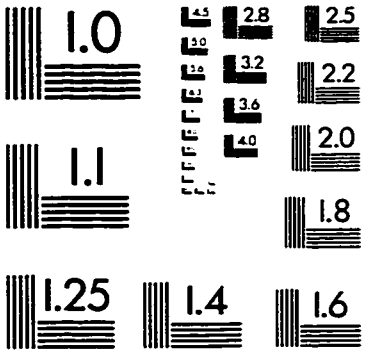

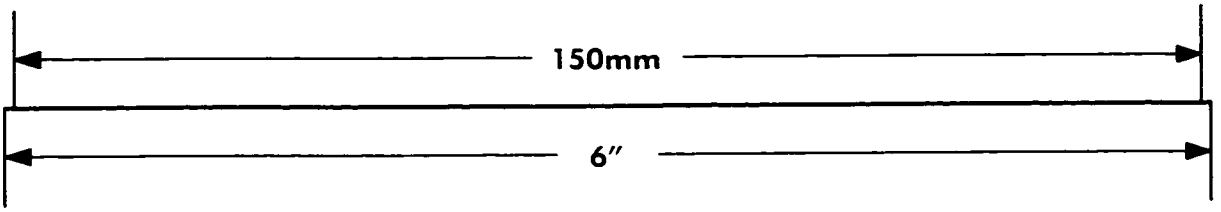

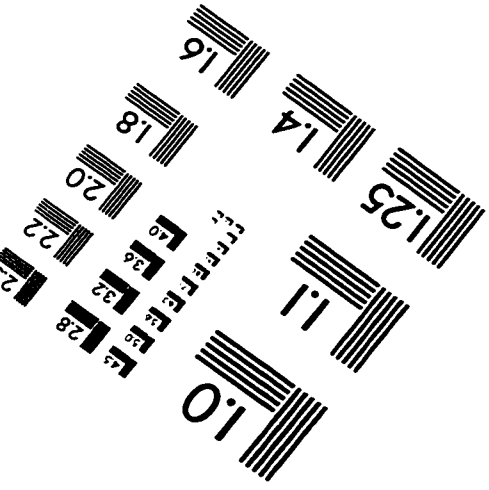

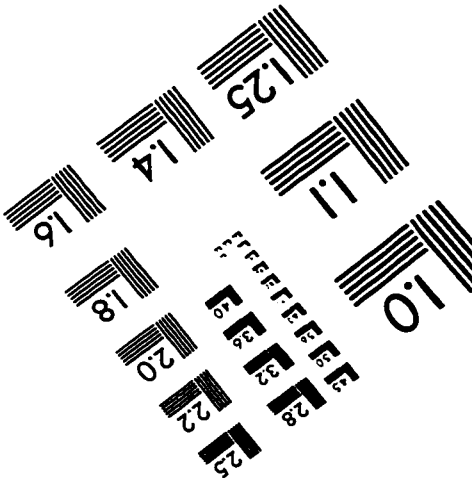

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