



Title: Narrative proverbs in the African novel. (Special Issue in Memory of Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda)  
**Research in African Literatures**  
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### **Abstract:**

'Things Fall Apart' by Chinua Achebe exemplifies the use of narrative proverbs in the African novel, reflecting the synthesis of oral and written traditions. Narrative proverbs are stories or other forms derived from the oral tradition which are embedded within the novels and perform the function of proverbs. Achebe's novel incorporates nine embedded narratives, seven of which are folktales or myths. Narratives discussed in relation to the novel include the quarrel between Earth and Sky, the locust myth, Ikemefuna's song, the mosquito myth, the tale of the tortoise and the birds, the Abame story and the kite myth.

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### I. Interplay of Orality and Literacy in African Literature

To begin with a theoretical question, what happens to the development of literature when a relatively new cultural system based on the written word is superimposed upon an ancient oral traditional culture? The first discovery is that the oral culture does not immediately disappear by the mere fact of its being in contact with writing, nor does the literature of the oral society disappear because of the introduction of written literature.(2) Rather, a synthesis takes place in which characteristics of the oral culture survive and are absorbed, assimilated, extended, and even re-organized within a new cultural experience. Also, vital aspects of the oral literature are absorbed into an emerging written literature of greatly invigorated forms infused with vernacular energy through metaphors, images and symbols, more complex plots, and diversified structures of meaning. Such a happy synthesis is possible insofar as a number of conditions is present at the meeting point of the oral and written traditions, including the extent to which the synthesizing artist, that is, the story-teller or poet, is well rooted in the oral rhetorical forms or narrative traditions, the extent of the familiarity the artist assumes the audience to have with the oral rhetorical or narrative conventions, the extent to which

the artist expects the audience to be composed of readers or listeners, and the extent of the artist's skill in controlling the literary form to be capable of assimilating into it an experience produced in a non-literate tradition or a formal style that originally belonged to the oral traditional society.(3)

The situation in modern Africa amply illustrates the point about the merging of the worlds of orality and literacy. The superimposition of alphabetic writing upon the oral cultures of Africa in the nineteenth century did not extinguish the oral traditions upon which African cultures and literatures had long been established. The immediate result was that African indigenous languages were written down and brought into the mainstream of the world repertoire of literate languages,(4) and, additionally, a substantial body of Africa's oral literatures - from epics and extended forms to unicellular tales and verbal art - was written down, recorded, and archived. But beyond activities related to literary and cultural retrieval and preservation are the challenges and stimuli which the interface of oral and written traditions provides to creative artists practicing in the region. A large volume of written works built on synthesis of the two traditions has emerged in Africa to which critics have given considerable attention. The conditioning of this literature by the African oral tradition has been discussed in several critical works. (5) In recent times, critics continue to explore the deep structures of the texts optimally forcing them to yield up their meanings and insights. It is no longer possible to undertake a meaningful critical discourse of African literature, whether written in the indigenous languages or in the languages of the former colonial powers, without seriously adverting to its oral traditional constituents in the matrix of composite forms and contents. Nor indeed is it expedient to ignore the tensions arising from the old/new, traditional/modern, oral/written and indigenous/foreign configurations which characterize the texts and contexts of the new literature of Africa.

The novel as a representative "literary" form provides a good example of this assimilation and synthesization of the two traditions in that it more demonstrably illustrates the transformations which occur when the pressures of social and formal realism make such assimilation inevitable. For example, it is impossible to ignore orality in a form that prides itself on a life-like portrayal of reality when exploring the life and experience of people more than seventy per cent of whom at any given moment live within traditional oral societies throughout the varied contexts of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history, who have continued to sustain traditional solidarities and to espouse values, beliefs, and attitudes conditioned and nourished by the oral tradition. Even those of them caught up in the modern, urban, industrial-technological sector are

not infrequently in contact with their traditional and rural roots and thus are not totally divorced from a sense of their own traditions. The oral traditional impulse is therefore strong in the modern African novel, which embodies these experiences, especially because the writers themselves are a product of both the oral tradition and literate education.(6)

Furthermore, a return to the roots movement in African literature as a means of giving maximum authenticity to the writing made the writers look to their indigenous poetics to create works that will endure by drawing upon their living oral tradition to enrich forms, techniques, and styles received through literate education.(7) One major-aspect of this interplay of the oral and literary traditions in the African novel is the phenomenon of the story-within-the-story or the narrative proverb - as we shall more insistently refer to it in this discussion. The novelists reflecting a habit of orality in life and literature introduce oral stories - myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads, song-tales, etc. - within the narrative matrices of their works, in the development of their plots and themes and the formulation of their artistic and formal principles. These embedded stories are referred to as narrative proverbs, because they perform organic and structural functions of proverbs in oral speech and in creative literature. The choice of narrative proverbs as a focus of this discussion is not arbitrary. In no aspect of its form is the African novel more "oral" and "traditional" than in its use of proverbs, and this has been acknowledged by critics in essays and monographs.(8) The same concentrated attention has yet to be extended to these self-contained stories embedded within the novels, even though they do the work of proverbs in an extended manner within the novels.(9) The story itself is a primary form of the oral tradition, primary as a mode of conveying culture, experience, and values and as a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes in oral societies. The story embedded within the narrative matrix of a novel, therefore, provides an exceptionally lucid example of the interplay of orality and literacy which demands serious critical attention.

## II. Narrative Proverbs and the African Novel

Narrative proverbs are autonomous stories that appear in different genres and narrative registers within different structural linguistic plans and are embedded inside larger, more inclusive narratives. They function as images, metaphors, and symbols and advance the meanings and formal qualities of the narratives in which they occur. They are extensively used in the works of African novelists, in the novels of female and male African novelists, in those of older and newer writers, in works produced in the different regions of Africa south of the Sahara, and they extend across broad ideological and

generic divides. Because narrative proverbs in African novels cut across gender, genres, ideologies, regions, and generations, it is legitimate to assume that their use is an essential feature of the poetics of the African novel, a feature which derives from the interplay of creative principles of oral and literary traditions.

Obviously, the rigid distinction which some critics aspire to establish between the story as a product of orality and the novel as a product of literacy breaks down when applied to the African novel. It breaks down because it does not accommodate the poetics of narrative synthesis in which oral and literate narrative forms and styles interfuse. For example, the sort of formal distance which Walter Benjamin assumes when he says, "What differentiates the novel from other forms of prose literature - the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella - is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it"(10) would be of little validity when applied to the African novel. In Benjamin's view, "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others ... the novelist has isolated himself" (87). In the African novel, the embedding of the story produces a totally different narrative and epistemological situation. The African novel is not a sole product of an individual consciousness (even though the novelist is a conscious individual artist), but is mediated by communal consciousness and impulses arising from group sensibility. The story when used as a proverb is drawing upon group habits of speech and narration as a means of giving shape to experience, drawing upon what could be called the populist impulse in art and life.

Like the use of proverbs proper, the embedding of stories in the novels is based upon two main principles of the African oral tradition - authority and association - by which an idea is given validity by being placed side by side with another idea that bears the stamp of communal approval and by its being linked to the storehouse of collective wisdom. Similarly, a story is made to supply illustrative, authoritative support to an idea, a point of view, a perception, or perspective in conversation or oral discourse and is thus vested with much greater significance than is the case in a non-traditional context. The mutual exchangeability of proverb and story is possible because both are the common stock of orality and are strongly built into the structures of meaning, feeling, thought, and expression of an oral people. The tendency to validate individual positions by placing them within the objectifying matrices of stories and proverbs has been adopted by African novelists in their attempt to marry creative impulses from their oral tradition with those within the written tradition. Having been first nurtured within their oral tradition before being exposed to literate education, African writers are fully aware of the uses of the story as a communal form that transcends the narrow limits of pure

aestheticism and entertainment to encompass broad social and ethical purposes. They not only stress the importance of the story in their discursive and social-philosophical writings but also in their creative works. Thus, Leopold Sedar Senghor, the doyen of African letters in French-speaking Africa, comments as follows in his preface to Birago Diop's *New Tales of Amadou Koumba*:

The traditional African narrative is woven out of everyday events. In this it is a question neither of anecdotes nor of things taken from life. All the events become images, and so acquire paradigmatic value and point beyond the moment. (qtd. in Jahn 211)

It is not surprising, therefore, that stories function as proverbs in conversation and oral discourse in African traditional societies and are so readily assimilated within an extended written narrative form like the novel which explores life in terms of its functional and ethical values. Chinua Achebe, the foremost African novelist, is just as emphatic in identifying the social and ethical significance of the story through one of his vernacular characters in his latest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*. He extols the story above other creative forms:

So why do I say the story is chief among his fellows?... 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 others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.(11)

This central position given to the story in oral tradition and recognized by African writers in the shaping of their literary world and works further justifies its being made to loom so large in the context of "oral-written" interactions such as we find in the narrative proverbs within African novels.

A typical oral narrative has a structure built around the narrator, the actors, a story or sequence of events, and an audience; often an element of performance is also present. Each story is a complete unit, self-contained and adequate within its genre but functioning, in an attributive context, as an extension of some essential aspect of the plot of the larger narrative; each functions as a proverb and is thus in an ancillary status to the mainline narrative, feeding into it some insight and adding cumulatively to the complexification of the plot. Each narrative proverb is a vital tributary to the main flow of the narrative, or to use a botanical metaphor, a substantial branch on the main stem of the giant tree.

The critical factor in the successful use of narrative proverbs in African novels is that the novelists are adequately inducted into the oral and written traditions and are thus able to handle the interplay of the two traditions. They are able to combine the facilities of an oral narrator with those of a modern novelist. In the one context dealing with the oral component of experience, they have to exercise the facilities of the oral narrative performer, to live the material imaginatively (as a narrative performance) before converting it into written form, in accordance with the generic logic which the novel imposes as a fully developed written narrative. Part of the demand of orality is, of course, the effect of memory for triggering these stories in the context of oral cultures that are still living and breathing today's air. To be able to use the stories, especially those that have been extrapolated from the oral traditional repertoire, requires that the novelists be well grounded in the tradition of oral storytelling. But it ought to be stated that knowledge of specific traditional stories is not an absolute pre-condition to the use of narrative proverbs. The absolute condition is an awareness of the technique of narrative embedding, since what matters here is not that the story be traditional but that it be well and adequately prepared for embedding in the function of a proverb. Many of the novelists invent their own stories but trim them to the proper forms in which they are embedded.

On the other hand, the written nature of the novel imposes considerable constraints on the performance characteristics of the oral stories. In the first place, the paralinguistic features, such as gestures, body movements, voice pitches, and so on, are necessarily reduced, if not eliminated altogether, in the oral texts featured in the novels. In the second place, the novel's formal qualities, especially the demands of plot, characterization, setting, and narrative viewpoint, impose further curbs on the scope of oral traditional material capable of being assimilated. A consideration of the emerging synthesis would, therefore, focus attention not only on the form and content absorbed but also on the modifications which they have to undergo to

prepare them for assimilation. Thirdly, the embedding of narratives requires the embedding of contexts, because the link between the embedded story and the mainline narrative is based on contextual affinity, since the practice of embedding itself arises from the tradition of proverbialization which in turn thrives on analogy and association. Fourthly, the embedding of a story necessarily affects the plot structure of a novel in which it occurs. Instead of the usual linear plot structure which follows the Aristotelian principle evidenced in most conventional novels, there are in African novels movements forward and backward along symbol-referent trajectories that radically influence their

plots.(12) Fifthly, the embedding of the narrative proverbs necessarily reduces the tempo of narrative, since the reader is constantly compelled to slow down in order to absorb the full import of a newly embedded story, to decipher it as a symbol or image, to relate symbol/image to its referent, and to relate them (story, symbol/image and referent) to the structure of the novel's total meaning. And, finally, as a result of these characteristics of African novels with embedded stories, the only effective way to extract from them their highest value, meanings, visions, and insights is through close reading of the texts. These general remarks will be concretized when related to specific texts.

### III. The Example of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*(13)

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the best example of the use of narrative proverbs to express the distinctive quality of the African fiction. Many African novelists use the technique of narrative embedding, but in *Things Fall Apart* we have the most elaborate and the most successful use of this technique for diverse formal, thematic, and aesthetic purposes. In this novel there are nine embedded narratives, of which seven are folktales and mythic stories, one a pseudo-history, and one an anecdote. Each embedded story brings something to the total meaning of the novel, some insight to clarify the action, to sharpen characterization, to elaborate themes and enrich the setting and environment of action. Most importantly, the narrative proverbs help to define the epistemological order within the novel. The reader is made aware that the world of *Things Fall Apart* is traditional, that within it knowledge is attained through analogy, allusion, and metaphoric extension, with each embedded narrative representing one or another aspect of the many-sided action of the novel and used to define life and communally shared values.

The subject matter of *Things Fall Apart* is the encounter of European and African worlds at the beginning of British colonization of Igboland in the southeastern part of what is today known as Nigeria. The action could be located in the 1880s. The hero of the novel is Okonkwo Unoka, a powerful wrestler and warrior of the Umuofia clan, who leads the resistance against British imperialism and Christian missionary incursion into his society. He is a rash, impetuous man in addition to being a strong man. In the end, his character weaknesses and the overwhelming force of the enemy combine to defeat him and the cause for which he struggled. Okonkwo's world is entirely traditional, subsisting within an oral culture with its intimate face-to-face social configurations and a worldview and value system that have been handed down from great antiquity. The use of narrative proverbs in the structuring of the action of the novel is a major constructional strategy in the expression of the oral traditional impulse in the lives of the characters and in

defining their vernacular sensibility. Orality is in this novel more than an intrusion of an exterior style; it is a means of achieving the poetics of verisimilitude and a life-like portrayal of the experience.

### Cosmic Quarrel Between Earth and Sky

The first embedded narrative is the cosmic myth of the quarrel between Earth and Sky. It is embedded in the context of the crisis of confidence between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye, a sensitive teenager who is afraid of his father. His father wants to bring him up in the warrior tradition by telling him "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed," while Nwoye prefers "the stories that his mother used to tell," which include the cosmic myth of the primeval quarrel of Earth and Sky:

He remembered the story she often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth. At last Vulture was sent to plead with Sky, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of the sons of men.

Whenever Nwoye's mother sang this song he felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, Earth's emissary, sang for mercy. At last Sky was moved to pity, and he gave to Vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam. But as he flew home his long talon pierced the leaves and the rain fell as it had never fallen before. And so heavily did it rain on Vulture that he did not return to deliver his message but flew to a distant land, from where he had espied a fire. And when he got there he found it was a man making a sacrifice. He warmed himself in the fire and ate the entrails. (38)

The myth is narrated - not performed, as would be the case in a true oral context within which it would be performed as well as narrated. The paralinguistic features are absent, though by way of enhancing our response to it, the narrator informs us that whenever Nwoye's mother sang the song with which Vulture softened the heart of Sky, Nwoye "felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky." The song text itself is not included, nor is the singing of the song. However, the main narrative sequences or what Scheub calls the core-cliches of the myth are present:

- (i) quarrel of Earth and Sky-cause is a struggle for supremacy
- (ii) Sky asserts supremacy by withholding rain
- (iii) suffering comes to Earth: crops wither; the dead cannot be buried...
- (iv) Vulture is sent as emissary to sue for peace

- (v) Vulture's song softens the heart of Sky
- (vi) Sky relents, gives rain wrapped in coco-yam leaves
- (vii) Vulture's talon pierces leaves and water escapes as rain
- (viii) Vulture is drenched, flies to a distant land where he espies fire
- (ix) Vulture warms himself in sacrificial fire; eats the entrails

The narrative sequences are complete except for the etiological tail which is missing. Conventionally, the myth should end with the explanation that the myth shows why whenever sacrifices are being offered vultures are to be seen hovering in the sky and often descend to eat the substance of the sacrifice. The absence of etiology is understandable; it is not structurally relevant to the themes of Things Fall Apart. As a metaphor, the myth serves a number of structural, thematic, and ideological purposes in the novel. First, it brings into sharp focus the unequal relationship between Okonkwo and Nwoye. Okonkwo is pictured as an archetypal masculine figure who rules his household with a heavy hand and keeps his wives and children down and in mortal terror of him. Nwoye is crushed by his father's violence. On the microcosmic level of action, the myth throws light on the internal situation of Okonkwo's life and his immediate concerns, revealing the alienating relationship which exists between him and his oldest son and which builds up systematically until total rupture, when son abandons father and the traditional world to join the Christians and the new forces of triumphant imperialism. The conflict between father and son, analogous to the quarrel between Sky and Earth, is built on their being so different in character: Okonkwo condemns stories and storytelling (unless they are heroic), which he regards as a symptom of effeminacy and degeneracy, while Nwoye relishes stories other than those of war and bloodshed. Paradoxically, the myth endorses the triumph of imagination over power in that the cosmic quarrel is resolved not through overt demonstration of masculinity and power but through conciliation and affectivity and the agency of song. By extension, therefore, the myth underwrites the feminine principle of creativity over sheer masculinity. Nwoye's espousal of the feminine principle and Okonkwo's dedication to the masculine create an unbridgeable impasse that ends in total alienation. The story thus sharpens the focus on characterization.

The myth provides another level of analogy. Both Okonkwo and Vulture are flawed messengers. Earlier in Things Fall Apart, Okonkwo is dispatched as an emissary to Mbaino to present an ultimatum and exert redress on behalf of Umuofia clan for the

Umuofia woman murdered there. Okonkwo brings back Ikemefuna, a young sacrificial hostage. Unlike Vulture who accomplishes his mission with song, Okonkwo appears at Mbaino "as the proud and imperious emissary of war" (9). But Okonkwo's mission does not end with bringing back Ikemefuna, just as Vulture's does not end with bringing rain; he is yet to deliver his message. Okonkwo is given custody of Ikemefuna until he is demanded by the elders. His extended mission does not end, until he has transacted this final mandate. Like Vulture, however, he fails to round off his mission. Contrary to the counsel of his oldest kinsman, he follows the train of the sacrificial crew and quite unnaturally cuts down the boy who calls him "father."

This myth also functions as a macrocosmic paradigm in that it broadly represents the historical confrontation of Europe and Africa, the main stem of nineteenth-century imperialism with its totalizing cultural, political, ideological, ethico-philosophical, and institutional oppositions and as an analogy to the conflicts. It foreshadows the triumph of imperialism and the defeat so poetically evoked in the title of the novel. Imperialism is symbolized by Sky and the Umuofia clan by Earth. In their conflict, imperialism, like Sky, wins predictably.

#### The Locust Myth

In the same Chapter Seven of the novel in which the myth of the cosmic quarrel between Earth and Sky appears, we have two other embedded pieces, the Locust Myth and Ikemefuna's Song. In the third year of Ikemefuna's arrival into Okonkwo's household and on the eve of his tragic death, a locust swarm descends on Umuofia. The event triggers the telling of the locust myth:

The elders said locusts came once in a generation, reappeared every year for seven years and then disappeared for another lifetime. They went back to their caves in a distant land, where they were guarded by a race of stunted men. And then after another lifetime these men opened the caves again and the locusts came to Umuofia. (38)

This myth provides a handle to a phenomenon which is outside the immediate focus of everyday experience. The locusts, according to the myth, appear once in a lifetime and stop over for seven years in a row before disappearing for another lifetime. Ancestral wisdom provides an insight into a distanced, inaccessible but not inconsequential experience. Even though locusts are eaten with gusto by Umuofia people, their coming is no mean ecological disaster and so attains a place in the epistemological framework in the manner of a myth. The mythopoeic reality is in the novel balanced with empirical reality, the evidence of the senses: "~Locusts are descending,' was joyfully chanted and

men, women and children left their work or their play and ran into the open to see the unfamiliar sight" (39). The full impact of the myth and the realistic reporting of the coming of the locusts is only partially felt at this stage. Within the microcosmic scope of the action, it is an event filled with portent and omen as the full strength of the invasion is felt:

At first, a fairly small swarm came. They were harbingers sent to survey the land. And then appeared on the horizon a slowly-moving mass like a boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umuofia. Soon it covered half the sky, and the solid mass was now broken by tiny eyes of light like shining star-dust. It was a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty. (39)

As Okonkwo, his son Nwoye, and Ikemefuna sit "crunching happily" and "drinking palm-wine copiously," Ezeudu, "the oldest man in this quarter of Umuofia," pays Okonkwo a visit, takes him outside earshot of the children, and tells him two things: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" and informs him further: "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it" (40). The juxtaposition of the coming of the locusts and this major moral upheaval is important. The locust myth prepares the ground for this radicalization of events in the narrative. It is as if by opening the mythic "caves" from which the locusts emerge, the "stunted men," the Igbo equivalent of the fates of the Greek mythology, also open up a pestilential phase of events that would consume the hero and quicken the tempo of the fall of the old dispensation.

On the macrocosmic plane, the locust myth prepares us imaginatively, epistemologically, to deal with the phase of European imperialism in this part of Africa. History is elucidated through mythology as locust invasion prefigures imperialist invasion. This aspect of the myth will be explored fully later in the cluster of embedded narratives in the fifteenth chapter of *Things Fall Apart*.

#### Ikemefuna's Song

This is not a full folktale text but a song extrapolated from a folktale.(14) The full tale is the story of a perverse, headstrong king who breaks a taboo by eating roast yam offered in sacrifice to the gods. The song is an attempt by the people to dissuade the king from an action that would compromise both himself and his high office:

Eze elina, elina! Sala Eze ilikwa ya Ikwaba akwa oligholi Ebe Danda nechi eze

Ebe Uzuzu nete egwu

## Sala

King, do not eat [it], do not eat! Sala King, if you eat it You will weep for the abomination  
Where Danda [white ant] installs king Where Uzuzu [Dust] dances to the drums Sala

The song is based on the oral practice of call and response. In the novel, the body of the narrative is omitted and the song has been telescoped. There are only two responses to five calls, two "Salas" to five lines of verse, whereas in the oral traditional text, there is a "Sala"-response after each line of call. There is no immediate pressure to reproduce the full tale or the full song-text here. The condensing of the oral component within the written form is a reordering of the experience in a compromise strategy that judiciously determines how much of the oral material is admissible to secure a balance between the oral and written impulses.

The singer of this ditty is Ikemefuna, the child hostage ostensibly on his way back to his original home but who in reality is on his way to being sacrificed by the Umuofia people for the murder of their kinswoman by Ikemefuna's people. The embedded song brings complex ironic twists into the narrative at this stage. Ikemefuna is singing the song in his mind and walking to its rhythm to divine whether his mother whom he last saw three years before is still alive. The first irony is that it is he Ikemefuna who is at risk and not his mother. He will be cut down a few moments after humming the ditty. Then, the full import of both the tale and the song apply more appropriately to Okonkwo Unoka who had been his guardian in Umuofia and whom the old man had warned not to take a hand in Ikemefuna's murder. Okonkwo does not heed the advice and it is actually his hand that cuts Ikemefuna down in the fatal bush. The reversal in Okonkwo's fortunes seems to begin with this brutal assault on the traditional moral order. The abbreviated folktale here functions as a moral gauge that determines how low the hero has fallen on the moral scale. He has made mistakes before, and some of these have been quite serious, but none up to this point has been as serious as the murder of a child who called him "father." His best friend Obierika, who is also a major center of consciousness in the novel, reproaches him roundly for this moral failure: "If I were you I would have stayed home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (46).

The web of irony becomes even more tangled when it is remembered that Okonkwo's descent into the abyss of defeat begins with the unintentional murder of Ezeudu's son, which necessitates his mandatory exile for seven years and which, in turn, leads to his loss of his place in the clan, an event which hurts him psychologically. Ezeudu is the old

man who had warned Okonkwo to take no hand in Ikemefuna's death because the boy called him "father." It is as if the gods have decided to use the old man's son to punish the errant hero. Ikemefuna's song is a means of tying up a strong emotional nexus from the different strands of ironies and ironic intersections in the narrative. The "king" has been warned, and since he has heedlessly broken taboo, the song foreshadows his fall down the tragic precipice. His death is predicted in the song by the lines "Where Danda [White Ant] installs a king" and "Where Uzuzu [Dust] dances to the-drums." The hero's death by suicide ensures his final annihilation in the situation in which only white ants and the dust will claim him; he is not permitted the comfort of a reunion with his ancestors and his clan.

### The Mosquito Myth

This myth is narrated soon after Ikemefuna's death. Okonkwo's conscience is beginning to recover its serenity after three days of great internal turmoil. On the third night, he falls deeply asleep but is tormented by mosquitoes. His mind recalls the mosquito story told him by his mother when he was a child:

Mosquito ... had asked Ear to marry him, whereupon Ear fell on the floor in uncontrollable laughter. "How much longer do you think you will live?" she asked. "You are already a skeleton." Mosquito went away humiliated, and any time he passed her way he told Ear that he was still alive. (53)

An etiological myth, this story answers Okonkwo's question, "Why do they [mosquitoes] always go for one's ears?" But the myth is important for many reasons. First, the story reveals that Okonkwo has had the same exposure to the humanizing mother's story sessions as any other normal child. Up to this point, the reader has not had any real evidence that the hero has had the advantage of normal maternal care. We know that because his father was such a colossal failure and could not provide him with those opportunities fathers normally gave their sons under the traditional system, Okonkwo came to hate everything his father loved, including the life of the imagination, for his father was a poet and musician in addition to being improvident and a laggard. But if his father let him down, the context of this myth shows that his mother didn't. The effect of the revelation is to transfer to Okonkwo greater responsibility for his actions, especially those acts of brutality that seem to arise from his gender imbalance. Mother's stories, which Okonkwo despises as "silly," are actually the means to sensitizing young people to the values and social attitudes that prepare them to participate constructively in the life of the community. By cutting himself off from wholesome feminine influences in favor

of overcompensating masculinity, the hero set the stage for a life that is to be filled with crises and pain, in spite of its great potentialities and achievements.

The myth serves to stress the strength of conscience. After killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is trying very hard to smother his conscience, to relieve himself of the responsibility of his fall. But conscience is a hardy thing; it is not easily killed. The mosquito myth is the authorial metaphor that underlines that fact.

Like all metaphors and images, the mosquito myth is open to wide interpretations. On the macrocosmic plane on which the novel also moves, the myth could be seen as a paradigm of anticolonial struggle in which all who make their gesture of defiance to the foreign conqueror will be keeping alive the everlasting and indomitable spirit of freedom. In that broadened parameter of dialectal oppositions between worlds and systems, between colonialist Europe and colonized Africa, Okonkwo Unoka and the people of Umuofia become part of a historical movement of resistance against imperialism, disturbing its self-assurance and its will to dominate. In that context also, *Things Fall Apart* can be regarded as an anti-colonial discourse.

#### The Tortoise and the Birds

This is a trickster tale in which the trickster is caught in his own web of intrigue. It is the fullest text of a traditional folktale in *Things Fall Apart*. Since it is three pages long, the narrative sequences that constitute the tale will suffice here:

- (i) Birds are invited to a feast in the sky
- (ii) Tortoise decides to join the birds, but he cannot fly
- (iii) Tortoise borrows feathers from the birds
- (iv) Tortoise hatches a ruse: each guest to have a new name to party
- (v) Tortoise assumes the name "All-of-You"
- (vi) Sky-hosts present food to "All-of-You," meaning the birds
- (vii) Tortoise ("All-of-You") eats the best food and meat
- (viii) Birds, angry with Tortoise, strip him of their feathers
- (ix) Tortoise decides to risk a free fall from the sky
- (x) Tortoise sends Parrot to request wife to mass "all the soft things"
- (xi) Parrot spitefully asks her to bring out "all the hard things"

(xii) Tortoise falls on hard things and his shell is broken up

(xiii) Medicine man patches up the shell

(xiv) "That is why Tortoise's shell is not smooth"

We are constantly informed as part of the domestic setting of *Things Fall Apart* that folktales are told to children by their mothers. Here is an actual domestic scene at which a mother (Ekwefi) tells her story to Ezinma her only child. The story is merged into the broad narrative and the widest scope is given to the representation of the actual words of mother who tells the story and daughter who is the audience. The outline of the structure of the folktale is preserved through the use of quotation marks. Some conventions of folktale narration are also preserved, including the "once-upon-a-time" formula at the beginning and the etiological explanation at the end. The actual words of the characters (Tortoise and the Birds) are reproduced. The third-person narrator of the novel assumes the role of recorder, though occasionally he merges, when appropriate, with the folktale narrator. Paralinguistic aspects of performance are of course absent, but as much of other features as could be accommodated in written form are enclosed. For example, the one-person audience is active and participant. She makes comments and asks questions and demands that a story with a song be told. The story is both etiological and moral. It explains why tortoise shell is rough, hard, and uneven, but interesting though this incidental information may be, it is not the main reason why this elaborate tale is included as a subtext. The more substantial reason is moral; it dramatizes the evil of extreme egocentrism. As a typical trickster tale, "Tortoise and the Birds" serves numerous purposes in the novel. The hero is an individualist whose relationship to his community has many points of ambivalence. Just as in pursuit of individualistically determined obsessions the trickster comes into conflict with society, so Okonkwo shares the tendency towards an overwhelming sense of the ego which brings him into conflict with the group. The fate of Tortoise the egoist prefigures Okonkwo's fall in *Things Fall Apart*. Even though Okonkwo does not enjoy the mental agility and quickness of wit of Tortoise, he possesses the effrontery, drive, and existential energy with which Tortoise is generously endowed in this narrative proverb. It is this propensity to be individualistic that Tortoise shares with the hero of *Things Fall Apart* and that makes the tale something of a paradigm in relation to the novel. Okonkwo offends his society numerous times and is seriously punished on every occasion. Analogously, just as Tortoise falls to pieces at the end of the folktale, Okonkwo Unoka commits suicide in his moment of defeat. The folktale world has built into it the mechanisms, magical and otherwise, for restoring errant characters, but such

facilities are absent in real life and realistic literature in which it is easy for the defeated to attain damnation.

Okonkwo Unoka's overwhelming weakness is his hubris, including his overassertiveness of individual passions and obsessions. And he is capable and an achiever, but he cannot be "All-of-You," he cannot fill the place of the Umuofia clan. He cannot impose his will on it. His glory is secure and well-based in those actions in which he is in full accord with the will of the group, but when his actions are at odds and discordant to the will of the group, he risks isolation and ultimate defeat. This is particularly the case in the final episode of Okonkwo's tragic life. While the clan is deeply involved in the search for a fitting response to the threat of imperialism hanging over it, Okonkwo kills a court-messenger, hoping by so doing to precipitate a war. But the clan has not come to a decision and so Okonkwo is isolated and true to his character decides on suicide thereby cutting himself off further from his people.

Interestingly, the folktale is told by Ekwefi to Ezinma, the two people in *Things Fall Apart* with whom there is discernible emotional linkage with the sardonic hero. They come closest to evincing feelings of affection from him. Their story is linked to a major strand of the nexus of themes found in the novel - the question of Okonkwo's disruptive individualism and his final rupture with his people which has always intrigued readers. The tale of "Tortoise and the Birds" should clarify the dilemma of why the champion of tradition should be abandoned by the very people he is trying to save. Such a question suggests that the people of Umuofia are careless of their deeper interests by not standing by their bold leader at a critical point in which their survival is precariously balanced. On the other hand, a different set of questions could be posed, such as: How much of Okonkwo's actions stem from inner personal drives and how much from communal consensus? How much from the impulse to set up Okonkwo Unoka, to restore his place in the clan after his exile and to reestablish his interrupted ambition to become "one of the lords of the clan"? The story of "Tortoise and the Birds" helps to explain the apparent dilemma. When Okonkwo assumes the role of "All-of-You," he alienates himself from a world he so passionately attempts to sustain.

### The Abame Story

Even though a historical or pseudo-historical narrative, the Abame story assumes an aspect of a cautionary tale presented as an oral performance. In context, it is the first demonstration of the power of imperialism, a power based upon force and coercion. While Okonkwo is in exile in his motherland of Aninta, his friend Obierika in the

company of two other Umuofia men pays him a visit. They are received by Okonkwo and his maternal uncle Uchendu and entertained with palmwine. Their conversation revolves around travels and Uchendu enumerates the clans he had visited in his youth. The mention of Abame among them triggers the memory of the recent tragedy which has befallen that clan and its people and Obierika tells the story of its destruction. He dramatizes his story, giving it the form of an oral performance complete with audience-performer interactions, judicious pauses, repetitions, oral patterns of speech, verbal nuancing, tentative statements, corroborations, shifting emphases, speaking voices, etc. (15) The narrator meticulously interpolates oral features in the actual telling of the story, while the author supplies some other features in comments that frequently read like stage directions. Indeed, this particular narrative proverb can be neatly segmented into its dramatic units by closely following the authorial comments (which function as stage directions) and the speech-acts of the teller of the story. The Abame Story is a narrative performance in three parts: Part I: [Narrative Opens]

(i) Narrator makes affirmative statement followed by comment: "Abame has been wiped out.... It is a strange and terrible story."

(ii) Narrator adduces sensory evidence: "If I had not seen the few survivors with my own eyes and heard their story with my own ears, I would not have believed."

(iii) Narrator seeks corroboration from companions: "Was it not on an Eke day that they fled into Umuofia?" Stage Direction: (Companions nod their heads.)

(iv) Narrator repeats statement, now in greater detail and more emphatically: "Three moons ago ... on an Eke market-day a little band of fugitives came into our town. Most of them were sons of our land whose mothers had been buried with us...." Stage Direction: (There is a pause here. Narrator drinks his palm-wine and Okonkwo refills his horn [End of Part I] Part II: [Part II Begins]

(v) Narrator makes another affirmative statement: "During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan." Audience Participation: Okonkwo intervenes with the suggestion that the white man must be "an albino."

(vi) Narrator dismisses suggestion and continues: "He was not an albino. He

was quite different." Stage Direction: (Narrator pauses to sip his palm-wine)

(vii) Narrator continues to give information: "The white man was riding an iron horse. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them." Stage Direction: (Pause. Obierika again drinks a little of his wine)

(viii) Narrator continues giving information: "And so they killed the white and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends."

(ix) Narrator adds a new layer of information triggered by the memory: "I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so they killed him." Audience Participation: Another audience intervention:

"What did the white man say before they killed him?" asked Uchendu.

"He said nothing," answered one of Obierika's companions.

"He said something, only they did not understand him," said Obierika.

"He seemed to speak through his nose."

"One of the men told me," said Obierika's other companion, "that he repeated over and over again a word that resembled Mbaino. Perhaps he had been going to Mbaino and had lost his way."

### Part III

(x) The audience intervention over for the time being, Obierika resumes his story: "Anyway,...they killed him and tied up his iron horse. This was before the planting season began. For a long time nothing happened. The rains had come and yams had been sown. The iron horse was still tied to the sacred cotton tree. And then one morning three white men led by a band of ordinary men like us

came to the clan. They saw the iron horse and went away again. Most of the men and women of Abame had gone to their farms. Only a few of them saw these white men and their followers. For many market weeks nothing happened. They have a big market in Abame on every other Afo day and, as you know, the whole clan gathers there. That was the day it happened. The three white men and a very large number of other men surrounded the market. They must have used a powerful medicine to make themselves invisible until the market was full. And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose chi were wide awake and brought them out of that market."

Stage Direction: (There is another pause)

(xi) Narrator concludes: "Their clan is now completely empty. Even the sacred fish in their mysterious lake have fled and the lake has turned the color of blood. A great evil has come upon their land as the Oracle had warned."

Stage Direction: (A long silence. Uchendu ground his teeth together audibly.)

Then he burst out: "Never kill a man who says nothing. Those men of Abame were fools."

The Abame story is a typical oral narrative which as Lord tells us is composed in performance (see Lord 13). All the main parts of an oral narrative performance are present: the narrator, an audience, a story or a sequence of events, and the element of a performance. The narrator is in close contact with his audience, drawing upon shared knowledge and values, seeking corroboration of collectively shared intelligence, and the audience in its turn participating, intervening when necessary, proffering comments, correcting impressions, and adding details. The speaking voice is audible with its oral rhythm of judicious pauses in the control of the flow of information. There are repetitions of key incidents or words. For example, "iron horse" is repeated five times in the story and the killing of the white man as many times - these are the key material facts of the story on which other things are hinged; repetition is a mode of deploying emphases in oral narrative and performance. The pauses are made more dramatic by the introduction of palm-wine, an indispensable beverage at West African social gatherings.

The climax of the interaction of narrator and audience is Uchendu's response to the Abame story in the nature of his own story of the Kite, the Duckling and the Chicken, which becomes a sort of narrative coda to the Abame Story. Again, this narrative response is triggered forth by the remembrance of a well-known story that has direct bearing on the situation just dramatized.

#### The Kite Myth (Uchendu's Story)

Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling. "You have done very well," said Mother Kite to her daughter, "but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?" "It said nothing," replied the young kite. "It just walked away." "You must return the duckling," said Mother Kite. "There is something ominous behind the silence." And so Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. "What did the mother of this chick do?" asked the old kite. "It cried and raved and cursed me," said the young kite. "Then we can eat the chick," said her mother. "There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts."

Those men of Abame were fools.

Ordinarily an etiological myth which explains why kites eat chickens but not ducklings, the myth goes beyond etiology in this context; it is an extended response to the Abame Story. Uchendu, the teller of the myth, had intervened while Obierika was telling the Abame story to know what the white man said before the Abame people killed him. He is, as it were, following up on that intervention and proffering ethical comment on the murder of a lone traveller who offers no provocation and whose silence is therefore ominous for the perpetrators of crime. Ensuring the safety of travellers is one of the best held ethical-religious values of traditional African societies, for travellers are under the special protection of some of the most tenacious deities. The myth therefore supplies a moral coda to a story which in turn provides a major sign-post on the thematic structuring of the larger narrative. The myth thus functions as an explanation within an explanation. Coming at the end of the highly dramatic telling of the Abame story, it is told simply, in simple dialogue, within a simple narrative rhythm and is very tersely controlled. The effect is sobering; the lowering of the narrative register makes it easier to absorb the full impact of the terrible events which are forcing themselves on the

consciousness and being given expression in story. One might even say that these stories are a means of coming to grips with events which are shaking the foundations of the stability of the old world and filling the people's lives with anxieties and strange forebodings. The Abame Story with its mythic coda exemplifies the best technique of narrative embedding in the African novel. The critical issue which the novel has to confront is how to bridge the epistemological gap between the known world of the traditional people and the as yet nebulous world of the Europeans threatening the inner stabilities of the traditional world. These embedded stories attempt to provide a bridge. Here one must re-introduce the Locust Myth, because it brings an important dimension into this attempt to reconstruct the mode of knowing and absorbing a new threatening experience.

At the beginning of *Things Fall Apart*, the spatio-temporal dimension of experience is defined by Umuofia and its neighborhood the "nine villages and even beyond" (3) mentioned in the opening sentence of the novel. Okonkwo's fame is said to be known within that compass. And this limited world is also defined by Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu who is reputed to be a widely travelled man. The scope of his mobility, physical and social, is still very much limited to a handful of clans within easy reach of one another. The world of nineteenth-century European imperialism is yet unknown, and so also the full scope of the threat of Christian evangelism to this non-Christian land. The intrusion of these forces introduces a radical new dimension requiring new knowledge, a new epistemological chart to aid the navigation of the bewildering events that are causing great anxiety and emotional upheaval. As an initial response, the people draw upon their regular sources of knowledge, upon their myths and proverbs and from the authority of their oracles, elders and ancestors, as well as on the resources of memory and the evidence of their own senses.

In the Abame story, the people consult their oracle who predicts as closely as possible what is going to happen. The lone white man would destroy their clan. Next, the lone white man is only a harbinger of others already under way. And, finally, the white men are "locusts." What is under way is imperialist invasion. Within the traditional mind-set and imagination the mythic scaffolding and the concrete image take shape and build a perception of the mighty threat. To appreciate this perception, the reader of *Things Fall Apart* is expected to travel back along the track of memory from Chapter Fifteen to Chapter Seven, where the locust myth and the locust invasion are described. In the process, myth transforms to metaphor and metaphor transforms reality, vesting it with clarity. Myth, metaphor, history, and reality interfuse in a mode that operates largely

through association. On the microcosmic level of experience, we have a particularized event of the murder of a solitary white man riding an iron horse and the terrible reprisals against a doomed clan. On the macrocosmic plane, however, we have the parabolic extension of the event that encompasses the global scope of imperialism, with the locust invasion symbolizing imperialist invasion with its attendant devastations and destructions.

The linguistic register draws the two events together and establishes the vital links. Of the locusts in Umuofia we are told that "At first, a fairly small swarm came" and that "they were the harbingers sent to survey the land" (39). Of the coming of the white men, the Abame oracle informs us as follows: "Other white men were on their way, They were locusts...and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain" (97-98). The connection is deliberate. The locust myth bridges the gulf of cognition; it establishes the link between the known and the unknown. The oracle could draw upon the locust paradigm to explain the threat posed by imperialism. The people already know about locusts, the myth attaching to them, and their threat of ecological and economic disaster. The people do not know about the white people and the threat of imperialism, but the oracle does. The oracle draws upon the locust phenomenon to explain the phenomenon of imperialism. No wonder the people of Abame attempt to nip the threat of imperialism by getting rid of the lone white man who is described as a "harbinger" of imperialism which is likened to an invasion by locusts. Everything hangs together. It should be noted that in both the locust myth and the threat of imperialism the people attain their knowledge through a recourse to authority. The elders are the authority behind the locust myth, while the oracle provides the insight with regard to the threatened imperialist invasion; both provide sustainable sources of knowledge.

The Abame story, the Kite Myth, and the Locust metaphor are strategically aired while Okonkwo is in exile, as if for his distinct advantage, to alert him to the changed and changing circumstances of life since he went into exile. In that context, the Abame story would be seen as a cautionary tale that illustrates the power of imperialism, the style of the new administration and its reliance on coercive violence. Unfortunately, the lesson is lost on the hero. While his uncle responds with the Kite Myth, Okonkwo responds in a manner totally in character: "They [people of Abame] were fools.... They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and their matchets when they went to market" (99), a warrior's response which misses the fine points of the cautionary tale. When Okonkwo ultimately returns to Umuofia, it

soon becomes clear that he lacks the flexibility and sensitivity necessary for survival at a very difficult and dangerous time.

Two other narratives, the Snake-Lizard Myth (59) and the anecdote of the Expert Thieves of Umuike Market (74), are not as organically integrated to the development of form and content in *Things Fall Apart* as the seven described above. It is quite clear that the embedded narratives constitute a network of metaphors and images which enrich the setting and narrative texture of the novel as well as sharpen characterization, deepen thematic discourse, and clarify vision and the novel's overall meaning. They help to control the moral direction of the action in *Things Fall Apart*.

In conclusion, it should again be emphasized that the embedding of narrative proverbs is a very small aspect of the representation of the oral tradition in the novel of Africa, in texts that bear the full weight of African experience and embody African realities. In the broadest sense, every aspect of the oral tradition is present, from narratives of epical style to myths and mythopoeic recitations, songs for all occasions, proverbs and figures of speech, folktales and fables, chants and incantations, names and naming styles, ideophonic and onomatopoeic expressions, the worldview, ceremonies, language, and imagery rooted in the traditional cultures of Africa. And all these are assimilated to the form and give it distinctive qualities of its own, penetrating and transforming its structure and extending its scope and making it a dynamic vehicle for exploring historical, social, cultural, political, personal, and psychological themes, for articulating human problems and dilemmas and for raising and integrating consciousness.

## NOTES

(1) A fuller version of this article first appeared in *Oral Tradition* 7.2 (1992) and is reprinted with permission. (2) The relationship of orality and literacy is discussed in all its complex ramifications by Ong, according to whom, "...writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it" (9). (3) These criteria are taken from Foley (14). From their autobiographies and gleanings from interview accounts, it is obvious that African writers have been well exposed to the oral and literary traditions and are thus able to synthesize the two in their works. (4) For a detailed discussion, see the chapter titled "Growth of Written Literature in English Speaking West Africa" in Obiechina, *Language and Theme* 1-20, and also Gerard. (5) Reference could be made to Lindfors, *Folklore*, as well as to Iyasere, Schmidt, and Echeruo. (6) Iyasere is right in his observation that "the modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind" (107). (7)

What we have here is a process akin to that identified by Illich as de-schooling, whereby writers return to their oral sources for ideas, subject matter, values, forms of thought, and styles in a move that counteracts the narrow conditioning from formal, school education. It assured a return to the idiom of African languages and the roots of African oral tradition. (8) Reference should be made to the discussion of proverbs in African novels in "The Palm-Oil With Which Achebe's Words Are Eaten" in Lindfors, *Folklore* 73-93; Obiechina, *Culture* 155-82; and Shelton. (9) The only examples of such studies I know are Lindfors, *Folklore*; Lewis; and Traore. (10) See Benjamin. It should be noted that even though this view is widely held of the Western novel, a growing body of opinion differs from that expressed by Benjamin. For example, Mikhail Bakhtin in "Epic and Novel" argues that "the novel's roots must ultimately be sought in folklore" (qtd. in Holquist and Emerson 38). (11) See Achebe, *Anthius* (124). It is interesting to compare this exigent view of the story with the epigraph to *Lestie Marmon Silko* which contains these sentiments: "I will tell you something about stories.... They aren't just entertainment.... They are all we have...to fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have the stories." The significance of the story in oral and oral-based culture has been well established in native American novels of return not only in the work of Silko but also in the novels of McNickle, Momaday, and Welch. (12) Obviously, such a plot structure is often misunderstood by critics who do not realize the underlying structural relationship between the embedded stories and the mainstream narratives. Thus, Larson sees one of the plot structures of a great many African novels as the "loose narration of separate events, stories, and tales" (18), without at the same time being cognizant of the integrative principle which links the separate stories to the mainline narratives. (13) Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958. It underwent several reprints, and by 1990 it had sold five and a half million copies in its English editions and been translated into forty-six languages. (14) According to Msimang, songs are among the prominent features of the folktales most frequently assimilated to the Zulu novel. Of the nine novels which form the subject of his study, seven contain songs which are embedded into the plots (193). (15) We could conveniently relate this performance to Tedlock's comment on Zuni narratives as drama: "My own consideration of the paralinguistic features of Zuni narratives, including voice quality, loudness, and pausing, has led me to treat these narratives not only as drama but as poetry, with each pause indicated by a line change as in written poetry and other oral features noted in parentheses at the lefthand margin as in a play" ("*Pueblo Literature*" 221). (16) This follows the general oral principle identified by Tedlock:

"Among the Quiche... stories occur to people only when conversation or chance events bring them to mind" (Spoken Word 14).

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