

Using Literature as a Strategy for Nation Building: A Case Study from Nigeria

Abstract: What my article attempts to articulate is the role of literature in constructing, «inventing» national identities that are the base for the claims of a nation's existence. To achieve this, I first provide a short definition of the concepts of nation-building and national identity. I argue that literature is an important tool in the process of building a nation and creating a national identity. I further focus on the writings of Chinua Achebe, a 20th Century Nigerian author, in an attempt to exemplify the theory of literature as tool in nation building. I argue that, through the use of legends, mythic histories, and folklore, literature succeeds in creating patterns of meaning and in contextualizing the issues of national identity. These patterns and contexts enable and undergird the cultural values that enable the reconstruction of national identity.

Achebe's writings are part of a large sphere of practices meant to recover and reconstruct a Nigerian national identity and through this, build a nation.

1. Theoretical Framework

The issue of nation building has preoccupied scholars in a wide range of fields of study, from the social and political sciences to cultural studies and literature. This fact should not come as a great surprise, since the process itself of nation building subsumes the approaches of those involved on all levels of life, from field workers to intellectuals.

One of the main issues that concerns those preoccupied with nation building involves the concepts of national identity, ethnic identity, and other closely related to concepts. This is one of the main concerns because it is undeniable that, in the process of constructing a nation, there is one subjective element that more often than not is missing from even thorough investigations. This element is identity, whether national, cultural, or ethnic identity. Every nation has its own identity, every culture has its own

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KEY WORDS:

nation, national identity, Nigeria, literature, nation building, Chinua Achebe

identity, and every ethnic group has its own identity.

Defining identity is not an easy task. Thousands of pages have been written on identity, and thousands more will be written. Answering the question, «Who am I?» presupposes interpretative approaches to the study of self in social and psychological terms. The generally accepted framework for answering this question assumes that an individual is defined in relation to society and through the need to belong to a group. From here the main concern about «Who am I?» translates into «Who are we?» either as a group or as a nation.

The main constitutive elements that help distinguish one group from another are those related to historical continuity and difference. Continuity is important with respect to claims of existence in a specific territory. It lays the foundation for a sense of community of the group transmitted from time past and offers perspectives for the future. Difference is what distinguishes one group from another, what sets the boundaries between «insiders» and «outsiders.» A group that claims strong cultural ties handed down from generation to generation can argue for a specific cultural meaning understandable only to «insiders.»

At the political level, issues of continuity and differentiation give way to claims for rights of self-determination, self-government, and control of a specific territory. With the breakup of the great colonial powers, the former colonies have been given the right to self-determination and self-government. In political terms, this means that they have been given the status of sovereign states. The problem is, how-

ever, that they have been given the right to self-determination within pre-existing territorial boundaries. For this reason, many states lack internal legitimacy in the eyes of its population, even though they enjoy external legitimacy, internationally recognized statehood. Such is the case in Nigeria, where the state was formed within the old colonial boundaries but includes several hundred ethnic groups that struggle for supremacy in governing the territory. In this context, the issues of continuity and difference become highly inflammatory problems, as most groups claim supremacy through recourse to historical arguments about their own continuity and cultural difference.

A nation, by definition, requires a certain political and cultural identity that would ensure and justify the existence of the state. In the former colonies the process of nation building has not gone through the natural stages that most European countries have experienced, beginning with the French Revolution. Most Europeans have built their nations and their states on pre-existing groups sharing a more or less common identity, and therefore having internal legitimacy as well as external.

With the colonies the matters are different. They have been granted external legitimacy by recognition of their sovereignty, but they lack an internal cohesive factor that would give a state its own identity. The reason for this is not hard to see. The colonial enterprise flourished on the subjugation and undermining of the colonized people's cultures. In many cases entire cultures have been eradicated by the imperial project. It is not hard to understand why cultural identity now has to be fabricated. The process

of textualizing the «Other» rendered the natives simplified objects of analysis in historical and frequently fictional narratives. In this way, any attempt on the part of natives to try and define something even remotely resembling an identity was rendered futile.

One of the fundamental works on national identity is Anthony D. Smith's *National Identity*, where he treats this concept as a collective cultural phenomenon and links questions of national identity to those of ethnic identity and community. One might argue that national identity is nothing more than ethnic identity writ large, but the truth couldn't be further from this. Ethnic identity is indeed a constitutive part of national identity, but it is also a particular and sometimes separate form of expressing the self. National identity has other constituent elements. Those outlined by Smith are: individual identity, gender, space/territory, social class, religious identity, and language. According to Smith, a nation is a «named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members» (Smith 1991:14). Here, too, can be recognized the importance of historical continuity and expression of cultural difference, as well as external and internal legitimacy. This becomes important in the discussion of Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, since there we can discern narrative strategies designed to emphasize continuity and difference.

Smith also points out two distinct patterns of conceptualizing the nation. One pattern is shaped by Western terminology, with an emphasis on spatial conceptions of people and land. The homeland, the

repository of historic past linked to myths the meaning of which can be deciphered only by nationals, becomes defined economically in terms of the resources available on the land. This Western model proposes the idea of «patria,» a community of laws and institutions with a single political will. For all this to be possible, nations must have a measure of common culture and an understanding of civic ideologies, of sentiments and ideas in the homeland.

The non-Western model, on the other hand, places emphasis not on cultural communities united by «jus soli» (the law of land), but on membership based on descent, «jus sanguinis» (the law of blood). This is the ethnic conception of the nation, its distinguishing feature being the emphasis on a community of birth and native culture. While in the Western model one has a choice in changing nations, by moving and becoming a citizen of a different nation-state, in the non-Western model such change is not possible. In these terms a nation is a closed community of common descent.

In the light of these arguments abstracted from Smith's work, it is not difficult to understand the predicament of hybridization that the post-colonial states are facing. One problem is that, while under colonial rule, these formations have been subject to Western patterns of thinking. Little did it matter to Westerners that their ideology was in sharp contrast with the natives' way of thinking, and that they were eradicating entire patterns and modes of thinking and living. The ethnic element of the natives' mode of being was suppressed by the Western ideology of state and nation. Thus on the one hand the natives have partly assimilated the Western model, a fact evi-

dent in the current struggles to define nation-states in Africa, while on the other hand they have preserved some of the native modes and structures of living.

One of the arguments that Smith makes is that all nations, be they Western or not, are formed around one ethnic core, the strongest *ethnie*, that gives the nation its identity. The dilemma faced by the former colonies is that states there have been formed across *ethnies*, therefore, there is a lack of a strong ethnic core to give unity to the inhabitants of the state. It seems that it would be easier to create a state on Western models, on pure territorial claims and civic nationalism, but matters are hardly so easy. The states formed after the collapse of the colonial empires are basically a maelstrom of ethnic communities united by mere physical boundaries. The struggle to create some sort of unity must resort ultimately to a reconstruction of the pre-modern ethnic ties that could serve as an ethnic core for any nation. As Smith puts it, «the need to forge out of whatever cultural components were available a coherent mythology and symbolism of a community of history and culture became everywhere paramount as a condition of national survival and unity. Without some ethnic lineage the nation-to-be could fall apart» (1991:42).

The movement to keep a community together under a political system is called nationalism. Smith defines nationalism as «an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential 'nation'» (1991:73). We noted that nations have a spe-

cific mode of being and coming into existence. Similarly, nationalisms are patterned according to the model of the nation. A distinction can be made between what might be characterized as rational Western nationalism and organic, mystical Eastern nationalism. Following this line, Smith distinguishes between:

1. Territorial nationalisms, with the following historical reference points:
 - a. pre-independence movements; anti-colonial nationalism;
 - b. post-independence movements; integration nationalism;
2. Ethnic nationalisms, with the following historical reference points:
 - a. pre-independence movements; secession and diaspora nationalism;
 - b. post-independence; irredentist and «pan» nationalism.

This is not to say that these are the only types of nationalism that exist, or that these are necessarily pure types of nationalism. Upon closer examination one can find elements of ethnic nationalism strongly rooted in an anti-colonial, territorial nationalism.

Anti-colonial nationalism begins as a movement directed against colonial rule, attempting to replace colonial rule with a new state-nation. The concept of the nation is first defined in civic and territorial terms, opposing the foreign rule. Later on, as in the case of Nigeria, this nationalism transforms into ethnic nationalism on account of the numerous different ethnic groups struggling for political and economic supremacy. One attempt that Smith mentions as occurring in Nigeria is the creation of a supra-eth-

nic «political culture.» There being no recognized dominant *ethnie*, the construction of a Nigerian cultural and political identity is an extremely difficult task. The severely competitive relations between ethnic groups in Nigeria leaves Smith little hope for the creation of a Nigerian identity via political means. So where, then, can one look for a solution to the problem of Nigerian identity?

As I have been trying to emphasize, national identity and nationalism are not purely political, but contain to a large number of cultural aspects and cultural modes of conceptualization. Therefore it is no great surprise that increases in nationalism go hand in hand with an increasing cultural awareness among intellectuals.

Recognizing the tremendous role that the educated have in disseminating nationalist ideals among the common people, Miroslav Hroch distinguished three main phases of any nationalist movement according to the character and role of the persons involved. Phase A is characterized by the work of activists in scholarly inquiry into and dissemination of an awareness of cultural, social, and sometimes historical attributes of the non-dominant group – but without specifically formulating any national claims and demands. The second period, phase B, is characterized by the emergence of a new type of activist who carries on the struggle for cultural awareness within the ethnic group to which they belonged. The aim of this type of activist is to gather as many supporters as possible for the creation of the new nation. It is in this stage that cultural awareness comes to be translated into national awareness. The last period, phase C, represents the mass movement set in motion by

the emergent national consciousness that has been created (Geoff Elley 1996:63).

There is no point, I believe, in reemphasizing here the role that intellectuals have in the preceding phases of national movements, phases without which no movement could develop. However, it is interesting to ask how exactly the intellectuals manage to instill in the masses the nationalist ideals. Again the answer comes to us through the work of A. D. Smith.

First of all, Smith distinguishes between obvious attributes that carry nationalist symbolisms – flags, anthems, parades, coinage, capital cities, folk costumes, war memorials, passports, frontiers – and hidden attributes that constitute the subjective ground for national identities – the countryside, popular heroes, fairy tales, forms of etiquette, architecture, arts and crafts, military codes, «all those distinctive customs, mores, styles and ways of acting and feeling that are shared by the members of a community of historical culture» (1991:77). These attributes are taken up by the activists and incorporated in a specific nationalist narrative that appeals to the subjective nature of human beings. The hidden attributes especially constitute a rich field for constructing and imagining identities. This fact has not gone unnoticed by Smith, who asks, «Who, more than poets, musicians, painters, and sculptors, could bring the national ideal to life and disseminate it among people?» (1991:92).

This imagining of a narrative is not so difficult for nations that have a well-documented history. However, when dealing with former colonies, the situation changes dramatically, because their histories

have been diluted by the colonial enterprise and in some cases wiped out almost entirely. The task then remains for these people to reconstruct their identity from the little they have left, to rethink their past, reinterpret it and rewrite it in their own terms. Smith calls this process of rewriting «mapping,» because they are creating new cognitive maps for the community, setting forth its destiny and place among nations. There are two ways in which Smith sees these processes carried out. First and foremost is a return to nature as poetic space, creating and recreating the link of the people with their «homeland» through literary enterprises (among other things) and strengthening the myth of the land's significance. Secondly, national history can be recreated by using writing as a political tool, through the use of historical events in narratives, especially events about a distant and more glorious past that would serve as an ethical base and inspiration for the younger generations (1991:65-67).

How does all of this relate to the situation in Nigeria?

2. The Case of Nigeria

The «Library of Congress – A Country Study» gives a number of important facts about Nigeria as a union of states and as a nation. Ethnically, Nigeria is divided into 250 to 400 groups, many having subgroups with considerable social and political importance. The most influential groups are Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and Fulani. One category that Smith listed under cohesion giving factors in national identity was

language. Nevertheless, there are cases where native languages cannot, by any means, stand as base for unity of identity, and this is the case in Nigeria. The number of estimated languages is from 350 to 400, the most important being Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The language problem is central to the creation of a national literature. We shall see this later in the discussion of the use of English in African literature. Religion is also not a strong indicator of a possible strengthening of national identity, since about 47% of the population is Muslim, about 35% is Christian, and more than 18% of the population adheres to indigenous religions. Under these circumstances it is hard to see what could provide cohesiveness to Nigeria as a nation. Even administratively, Nigeria is divided into 36 states and one capital territory.

The same source also states that the emergence of nationalism in Nigeria started first as an assertion of ethnic (especially Igbo and Yoruba) rather than national consciousness. Their central line was to critique the West for its failure to appreciate the native ethnic cultures. In the course of history there were several types of associations that were formed in urban areas, such as the Nigerian Union of Teachers, other associations based on ethnic lineages such as the Igbo Federal Union and Egbe Omo Oduduwa (a Yoruba cultural movement). Additionally, there were the youth and student organization as vehicles for intellectuals and professionals to express their ideas. As with most national movements, the emphasis was placed first and foremost on the improvement of education. Nevertheless, in all these efforts, sentiments were divided into regional spheres of influence based on ethnic ties that would not easily yield

to the formation of a common identity. These details evidence the facts mentioned previously concerning the role of the educated in disseminating and spreading the ideals of nation and nationalism through writing.

If there is little hope in the political shaping of a unitary Nigerian identity, where can one turn to find answers? Culturally, what can be done?

3. «It is part of my business as a writer to teach»

At least one important observation can be made in relation to what has already been said here: Nigerian society is deeply divided on ethnic lines that seems to hold no reconciliatory factors. Nevertheless, one possible solution can be found in the cultural sphere and cultural construction of identities.

Taking Hroch's phases into consideration, we can argue that, in the Nigerian context, with the writings of Chinua Achebe we are witnessing the emergence of phase B of nationalism, the spread of ideals and thoughts through the medium of writing. What is important to point out is that the nationalist themes in the novels are not explicit, as one would expect, but are veiled under props that subjectively shape an idea of the nation.

On one level, nationalism can be promoted by theoretical writings and expressions of creeds of writers. This strategy is implemented by Achebe, who sees himself as an educator of his people. Who can have a stronger impact on the audience at large,

than those educated people who dedicate their work to the enlightenment of the masses? What other themes can be more relevant to a national revival, or rather national birth, than history, ethnic ties, and allegiances to land?

The focus of this part of the essay is on Achebe and his definition of a writer in the African context. By analyzing Achebe's writings one could claim that he is not writing for an African audience at large but simply for the Igbo audience. One could claim this because of Achebe's narrow reference to stories, folk tales, legends and sayings particular to his own Igbo culture. However, the truth is that Achebe writes to a large audience, to a specifically African audience, although he writes about what he knows best. The use of his ethnic past has a specific purpose in Achebe's larger project. As he himself says: «I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach [...] that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry» (1982:44). His use of his own ethnic past as subject for literature should not be mistaken for an attempt to emphasize an Igbo superiority over the other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Writing about Igbo culture is a process of purging the African soul of «years of denigration» (1982:44). By holding it up as an example of recovery from the obliterated past, Achebe hopes to bring about a similar process of change in the cultures of the other ethnic groups. «Here then is an adequate revolution to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education» (1982:44).

Simon Gikandi's analysis of Achebe's overall work testifies to these same lines of thought. With a keen awareness of African realities, Gikandi expresses that which is at the core of the novelist project to which Achebe dedicated his career. Achebe's merit is to have realized, as Gikandi says, «that the novel provided a new way of reorganizing African cultures, especially in the crucial juncture of transition from colonialism to national independence» and that its usefulness does not merely related to a mode of representing reality but «one which had limitless possibilities of inventing a new national community» (1991:3). Achebe is indeed an activist from Phase B of the nationalist movement. The task with which such an activist is endowed is to create a framework within which national ideals will take root and develop. This framework is what constitutes what Achebe has called «the props» that can help the nation get on its feet again (1982:44).

One strategy that narratives use in the attempt to awaken a certain national feeling and consciousness is the presentation, or better said re-presentation, of an event extracted from the past. Extraction in itself, though, is not adequate to this task, and therefore the author must emphasize its symbolic meaning and add to its significance. This type of narrative is commonly called «commemorative narrative.» At a closer examination it is not too difficult to observe that Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* shares some of the characteristics of such commemorative narratives. The exposition of the tragedy of colonization to the natives represents a moment of rupture in the continuity of the nation. Even if, in the novel, this moment of rupture makes up only a small part of

the book, it remains key in that only through this single event does the meaning of the narrative come into existence and gain its rich symbolism. By reading the narrative sequences against their denouement, the novel exposes the one historical moment that disrupted the nation's natural development.

The constant return to moments from the past, the constant preference for historical themes in novels, testifies to the need to come to terms with and regain control over a lost past and at the same time provide evidence of cultural continuity. The underlying assumption is that through such narratives, the African people can recreate their lost identity and draw up cognitive maps for furnishing a future to their nation. It is in this light that the novel *Things Fall Apart* is a political one.

The problem of reconstructing the past is, nevertheless, highly ambiguous, since there is no possible way of determining how much of the past traditions can be retrieved unaltered by colonial influences. It is well known that culture - as an ever moving, unfinished process - is always open to influences, be those through impositions or not. So prolonged has been the central dominance, that, gradually, the periphery has shifted from a specific way of cultural expression towards borrowing and adaptation. Furthermore, it is not only to cultures that this applies.

Achebe was the son of a Christian churchman, a missionary. Nevertheless, as he himself acknowledged, he did not miss out on an education based on the values of his traditional Igbo culture. At the same time, his origin makes him somewhat special and gives him a special standing among the natives. It gives a new perspective on the tradition that he

has made such an effort to recover. In a 1967 interview with Robert Seramuga, Achebe declared: «On looking back, if I had an advantage, it was that my father was a retired missionary when I was growing up; we were Christians and in our village you had two sides - the 'people of the Church' ... and the 'people of the world'. Although we were in the same village there was a certain distance which I think made it possible for me *not* to take things for granted.» He was thus able, as he confesses, to take a step back and observe his community, and the nation at large, from a certain distance that would allow him to switch back and forth between perspectives without being caught up into the mainstream of any single side.

Yet as objective as Achebe's observations may seem based on the distance that he was able to put between himself and his society, his position poses a serious question about the possibility of recovering a true traditional past. The difficulty lies in the fact that this recovery is done first through a narrative that by definition is partly fictitious, and second, through re-presentation of that tradition by the author, who himself is what postcolonial critics call a «hybrid.» The discussions centered upon this concept offer a slim chance for a final solution and a definite answer to the problem.

Let us briefly consider Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article, «Can the Subaltern Speak?» (Ashcroft: 1999). One of the points that she makes in the article is the fact that the native society, the «subaltern subject,» was irretrievably heterogeneous, that it was split up into social groups forming elites and spaces «in between,» hybrid groups. For this rea-

son, she adapts the grid designed by Ranajit Guha, whom she also quotes. Guha's grid is as follows:

1. Dominant foreign groups;
2. Dominant indigenous groups;
3. Dominant indigenous groups at the local and regional level;
4. The term «people» and «subaltern classes».

Spivak's concern is with the third group, which she sees as a space of intermediaries. Her question is whether this group is capable of speaking for itself, or is simply rendered aporically as the subject of representation through the voices of others. The conclusion is somewhat distressing in Achebe's context, since the article ends in «the subaltern has no history and cannot speak» (1995:24-28).

One can identify here an example of resistance to colonial rule through the process of assimilation of Western practices. I shall discuss this aspect in relation to Achebe a later in this paper. The main concern here is whether there can be an option for a true cultural identity to emerge and whether it would have the possibility of being transformed into a national identity.

Bhabha, on the other hand, talks about shifting relationships between the colonizer and the colonized. These relations are based, as he argues, not on fixed meanings, but on fluid ones, and on dialectic positioning (Moore-Gilbert: 1997). In this sense, the colonized becomes partly the colonizer, through a partial assumption of its practices. At the same time it also remains partially colonized, preserving parts of its own identity (which is nevertheless difficult to define). In light of this, there remains the question of how one can identify the borderline

that separates the parts. Can one actually talk about such a borderline?

There are no easily identifiable arguments for this in Bhabha's writing. The process of relating to the colonizer was one that can be described through three words: adopt, adapt and adept. First, the colonizer's practices are mimicked or imitated. Then these practices, transposed into a native context, inevitably gain other connotations, values, and valences foreign to the original Western concept. They are thus «adapted» to the new environment. The final stage is when these practices become a standard for the natives and are, so to speak, institutionalized. This is one way of viewing the process of «hybridization.»

Achebe is one of the intellectuals working for the creation of a national identity. He is, if we use the above-mentioned grid, in a place of in-betweenness, between different social groups. At this level, he is a hybrid. By upbringing and education, he is in a place of liminality, between two distinct religions, between two different modes of conceptualizing the world, the Christian mode and the native Igbo. The tool that he uses in attempting to shape a national identity, something that is in essence a Western concept, is the literary form most specific to Western culture: the novel. Yet, this novel does away with the Western novelistic conventions. It blends African oral traditions with a specific and definite narrative rhythm and it exposes the African belief that art ultimately and always has a purpose and a meaning, contrary to the famous «art for art's sake.» What Achebe does is adopt the Western practice of writing

novels, but he also adapts it to the needs of the African context.

Some questions still remain unanswered. Can one truly say that the essence of the native tradition can be recovered purely, without alterations, when the «extractor,» the «archaeologist,» is a liminal person? Can this be asserted when the tool that he uses for his cultural, archaeological excavation is an adapted Western tool? Is it true when the excavated artifacts are first filtered through the consciousness of the archaeologist?

By using the novel in its new context, with a specifically endowed purpose, with the aim of enriching the field with other similar writings by other authors, Achebe becomes an «adept» of this process, an adept of the Western thought «translated» into its native context. This is not an ultimate betrayal of the native tradition. Nor is the use of the English language for writing a betrayal of that tradition. Achebe rightfully recognizes that the Nigerian nation has been the project of British colonial power, but at the same time the people comprising the nation have not been invented by the British.

Let us give the devil his due: colonialism disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small things, scattered ones before. Nigeria had hundreds of autonomous communities... Today it is one country... Those writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecs with an eye on the main chance – outside their own countries. They

are by-products of the same process that made the new nation states of Africa... 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 international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his particular experience. (1982: 55-62)

About his use of the English language in writing his novels, for which he had been accused of betrayal, he declares:

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. (1982:62)

Hybridization is not something that limits itself to people and their situations. As I have tried to point out, Nigeria has experienced a high degree of political hybridization by adopting (by the force of circumstances) and adapting what Smith has termed «an alien executive instrument of a culturally different political community.» This inevitably leads to cultural hybridization, and the post-colonial cases stand as living examples of this. Achebe is a case in point.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that from such liminal experiences there cannot emerge a strong

cultural identity, and more importantly, a strong national identity. As Smith has pointed out, it is here that the task of the ethnic intelligentsia lies: to mobilize a community into forming a nation around the new historical culture that it has rediscovered (1992:64). The problematic aspect here is the process of «rediscovery,» as I have also mentioned earlier.

One can find several examples similar to the Nigerian case in the more recent history of nation building. One important feature common to all such processes was and is the extensive use of a rich (to varying degrees) traditional culture, including folk tales and folklore. It is this, more than anything else, which had and has the ability to reach back into a forgotten history and bring back heroes, events, and motives specific to each culture. Furthermore, it is this that had and still has the ability to be a mobilizing factor, through the apparent simplicity of the way in which it can appeal to all the people of a given culture.

How then, or in what light, can one read the novel *Things Fall Apart*?

4. Recovering the Nation from Fallen Things

In the preface to the 1996 Heinemann expanded edition of *Things Fall Apart*, Simon Gikandi observes the main purpose of the novel in the larger context of the Nigerian literary tradition. He states that «the history of this novel... is about how works

of fiction create their own traditions, cultural contexts, and reading communities.» What the critic does here is precisely identify the aims towards which the novel is directed, aims that have been mentioned in the previous part of this essay. The reading community is, without a doubt, the nation. Achebe's own confession was the recognition of the fact that he didn't have to write having in mind an audience other than the African one. His targeted reading community was specifically African and therefore the traditions that the novel deals with had to be African. For him to be able to carry out his project, the novel could not deal with any other aspects than African ones. Having established the reading community at large as the entire African nation delimited in geographical terms, under the careful maneuvering of the author the work of fiction moves forward in creating its traditions and its cultural contexts as props for re-establishing a lost identity, and on this basis creating a new one.

The prospect of cultural retrieval, as I have argued before, is highly problematic. It is not just a matter of subjectivism on the part of the one who does the retrieving. It is also a question of the purity of the «artifacts» retrieved, the authenticity of the traditions re-inscribed in the cultural life of the nation. From this point of view, one can argue the existence of several readings of the novel.

One reading would be structured around the assumption that, through historical excavations, a nation's past can be fully recovered, thus giving justification to claims of national superiority. Such a reading would ultimately and decisively reject any suggestions about the possibility of there being

confluences between cultures, and therefore would emphasize the fact that the Nigerian culture, as it is re-presented and re-constructed in the novel, is a reflection of the Igbo society before colonization. Such an extreme reading would be an unconvincing approach to the narrative, and it is not necessary to present further arguments against it. This is not to say, however, that politically it is an inconsequential view. A list of similar political and nationalist strategies that go beyond reason in making claims about territorial continuity and ethnic superiority would be very long indeed. Nevertheless, in the light of all of Achebe's fiction and non-fiction writings it becomes evident fairly quickly that this is not the reading that the author himself intends for this novel.

A second approach would claim that everything that comes out of the process of historical retrieval is merely an inverted mirror image of the Western imagination. Readers preferring this approach would point out the fact that Achebe had been largely educated within the Western frame of thought, and would argue that because of this there is no possibility of him having an unadulterated and objective image of the native traditions. Right from the beginnings, Achebe's perception of these traditions has been altered and infected with Western ideology. I would evaluate this as an extreme position that one can take regarding the novel.

What I want to argue is that there is a third possible reading of this novel, and that it is this third reading that Achebe himself advocates. This approach is highly complex and at first may even seem paradoxical. It stems from both of the previously mentioned readings. The novel in a sense recognizes

a partial possibility for a recovery of the pure traditions, and at the same time embraces the concept of hybridity. It assumes the inevitable hybridization of the colonized culture, while at the same time carrying out the historical retrieval with the tacit assumption of the tradition being intact. It is not hard to recognize here some of Homi Bhabha's theoretical perspectives on post-colonial narratives. The combination of the first two readings indicates a dialectical relationship of the colonizer with the colonized.

Referring to hybrid forms, Elleke Boehmer rightfully argued in her thorough analysis of colonial and postcolonial literatures that «cultural authenticity, writers tacitly accept, is in any case not on offer in their mixed, heterogeneous world» (1995:209). But this, however, cannot and does not stop writers from carrying out their projects in the name of a unified nation and a national identity. Exposing his mixed nature in his essays, on the one hand, and working to restore the Igbo traditions in the novel, on the other hand, Achebe becomes one of those actors in the national field that should vary much be taken seriously.

In the first part of this essay I discussed the significance of myths in Smith's theoretical framework, and the increasing role that literature has in perpetuating these myths of continuity and descent. One assessment of Achebe's novel is along the following lines: «it is important to note that we are here dealing with not pure historical facts...but with fact transformed into myth» (1981:31). It is through these myths that literature succeeds in creating patterns of meaning. It is also through these myths that

literature succeeds in setting up cognitive props of cultural values for reconstruction.

In this particular case, there are particular features that make this novel a tool of dissemination. The novel employs several strategic devices that play on the reader's consciousness and cultural attachments. I have mentioned previously that one feature that all such «building» literatures have in common is the use of folklore, sayings, and folk wisdom integrated in the body of the literary work. By using such a device, the author is able to link the collective memory of the readers with an ancestral past, thus creating a mentally perceived continuity where physically continuity had been disrupted by colonialism.

Many of the legends and stories tell of events that happened in an a-historical time, a time when the ancestors ruled and were heroes. The wittiness of these stories suggests the wittiness of the ancestors. This suggestion of worthiness of the ancestors is strategically useful because identifying a line of descent from these ancestors would show the people of Africa that they themselves should be no less worthy. One passage speaks clearly of the importance of kinship and continuity that, the novels argues, must be re-established, «But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice» (1980: 118).

Legends play a very similar role. What is more important in connection with legends is the fact that they are stories of liminality, stories at the border of a historical time, a time lost in the mist of a-history. Legends also stress the importance of conti-

nuity within a group and of handing down wisdom from generation to generation. These stories are the intermediaries as much between the ancestors and the characters in the novel as between the ancestors and the readers of the novel.

One other strategic device used is the projection of the past onto the hero, Okonkwo. This is a means through which the central character becomes endowed with the ability to metaphysically transcend temporal borders and bring into the reader's present the ancient times of the past. It is no accident that Okonkwo's ability to wrestle is compared to the ability of the founders of the town who «engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights» (1980:3). This comparison marks the hero's character as a pioneer and a founder of laws and sets him up as an example of strength and endurance to the reader. By extension, the novel itself becomes a novel of foundations, a brick in the building of a nation. It justifies a certain continuity of the African spirit that is essential for a national identity.

Also intended to underline the existence of continuity between the «lost» traditions and the present, Achebe chooses to describe in great detail the practices and rituals of the Igbo society. This is especially true of the *egwugwu* celebration, which has a certain centrality for the novel. The presentation of this particular ritual fulfills several different legitimizing functions. First, as any ritual, it establishes a link with the past. There is a difference here, in comparison to proverbs and legends, in that these practices are performative. The act itself of performing the ritual transcends temporality and creates a dimension where, unbounded by history, all ties with the

past can be recovered. Performing rituals is a re-enactment of the past through the present.

Secondly, this particular ritual represents a political and a judicial practice in the life of the community, since the role of the *engwugwu* is that of a judge. The practice emphasizes the political and leadership skills of the natives. It proves that after regaining control of their own past, they are not void of capabilities for ruling themselves.

Thirdly, rituals have often been accepted as strengthening the sense of belonging-ness of those partaking in them. Not by accident is Okonkwo one of the *engwugwu*.

If all these elements are part of the subjective symbols that Achebe uses, there is one other element, an objective one, that is probably the most important. It is the symbolism of the land, the constant reference to the concept of motherland. Cultivating the land is a process the function of which can be compared to the one of rituals. It is, in fact, a ritual of the land. The cultivation of yam and coco-yam is a family matter. It not only unites family members in work, but also serves as a symbol of wealth and status.

The consciousness of forming a community is tied to the issues of land both physically as well as spiritually. For, if a community needs a geographical area for establishment, it also needs ties to that area in order to justify the claims on that territory. The novel conceptually maps out the lands of the several different Nigerian communities through kinship ties defined by belonging to a motherland. This aspect, more than any other, places a strong emphasis on the fact that members of different ethnic groups are,

nevertheless, united territorially, and not just by the arbitrary outer borders drawn out by decolonization, but also by cross-ethnic marriages and kinship ties. For although Okonkwo was born and lived in Umuofia, and had established his family and economy there, he nevertheless belonged to his mother's tribe and his mother's land in Mbanta. This network of relations establishes the first solid ground for national unity.

All the strategic devices described above serve as props for recovery and are used with symbolic function. I have in the first part of this essay discussed the existence of both objective and subjective symbols for a nation, and I have now shown some of the narrative features of the novel with symbolic functions. What is important to note here is the fact that the role of the symbols is to distinguish between outsiders and insiders of a group, between ones who belong and ones who don't belong to the group. These symbols are meant to be read by an African audience who can relate culturally to their meanings and can respond to them with heightened awareness. The ability to read into the symbols and understand them delineates the subjective borders of the African nation.

What is essential in order for nationalism and national identity to be kept alive is the openness of the symbols and the possibility for them to be recontextualized. This is what Achebe succeeds in doing throughout his novel. He takes the old symbols from the folk traditions and recontextualizes them in the new political and cultural context of Nigeria as a nation state.

One final important thing must be mentioned. If in general the practices of nationalist writers tend to be a representation of the past in a highly romanticized fashion, this is where Achebe breaks with this type of narrative. He is not part of the nationalist extreme that would at any cost desire to see the emergence of a superior tribe. Achebe shows evidence of reasoned nationalist ideals based on well thought out and rational claims. The novel does not present the past in a romanticized way, and in fact does not blame the destruction of the Igbo society on colonialism alone. The novel recognizes that there were other factors at work that brought about the fall of the society, including the tendency to solidify traditions, the refusal to accept any kind of change, whether external or internal. Just as the symbols for nationalism have to be open to recontextualization, in the same way must traditions be open to change as well.

Achebe's great merit is his ability to set out to work on a project like this without overemphasizing nationalist elements, without romanticizing and lamenting the lost past in the novel, but pointing out both strengths as well as faults of the native society. He thus avoids being accused of extreme nationalism precisely while carrying out the process of national revival, though without any negative connotations.

One reviewer praised Achebe's novel with the following statement, «Thus his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, has made a deeper impression upon the literary sensibility of Africa than all the valued labours of historians and archaeologists put together» (1981:32). Ultimately, it is the sensibility of

people that stands at the core of any identity. Appealing to this sensibility, one appeals also to national sentiments. Whether based upon pure traditions or on culturally borrowed ones, national identity is essential to a nation state. This is Achebe's project: to imagine and educate through his novels, to prove that what is most important is ultimately not a matter of purity of traditions but a matter of putting those traditions at work to construct a political and cultural unit, such as the units described by A. D. Smith.

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