

# Making Meaning of the Colonial Experience: Reading *Things Fall Apart* through the Prism of Alfred Schutz's Phenomenology

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## *Abstract*

This essay offers a Schutzian reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, arguing that the so-called critical ambivalence in Chinua Achebe's hermeneutic of the colonial experience makes sense if situated within his lived experiences in colonial Nigeria. Grounding its interpretation of Achebe's meaning-making of the colonial experience in Schutz's phenomenology, the essay begins with a close reading of the novel itself, highlighting significant areas of ambivalence. Next, it explicates Schutz's (1967) constructs of intersubjectivity and phenomenology of literature. In the next section in which Achebe's biography is examined, an attempt is made to show how a Schutzian reading of Achebe's social relationships can help us understand his account of the colonial experience as represented in his first novel. Ultimately, the paper concludes by noting that the ambivalence that characterizes *Things Fall Apart* reflects the author's realism and investment in both the African and European cultures he sought to critique.

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## *Introduction*

Published in 1958 at a time when Nigeria was still a British colony, Achebe's epoch-making novel seeks to tell the story of the African colonial experience from the inside. *Things Fall Apart*, then, was what Achebe (2000, p. 79) conceived as part of "the process of 're-storying' people who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession." Writing his first story was part of Achebe's grand design to remind his people of their glorious past and to counter the dominant colonial narrative that denied the reality of African culture and civilization. As he

tells Odinga (2005, p. 32) in an interview,

... the white man was still around when I was growing up. The white man says: this is your story, this is your history. This is the story of your civilization. Your civilization is empty. When you hear that, something tells you that this man is wrong, because that's not my experience. My experience is different. My experience tells me that this is very deep and profound.

A counter-narrative, then, *Things Fall Apart* contests the European "image of Africa as a historical-cultural tabula rasa waiting to be inscribed with European creations by Christian missionaries and colonial adventures" (Ogundele, 2002, p. 134). Far from being "helpless primitives and delinquent adults," Africans have always had rich cultures and a sophisticated view of the world (Ogundele, 2002, p. 134; see Rhoads, 1993, p. 63). Indeed, as the novel reveals, before European colonialism made its inglorious entrance into the African world, Africans had well-established cultural and social systems, ones that addressed Africans' every need: democracy, legal system, institution of marriage, economy, and religion, among others (see Osei-Nyame, 1999, p. 156; Rhoads, 1993, p. 64). Achebe (1964) himself powerfully articulates this view thus:

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity." Africans, therefore, had no need of Europeans. (p. 157)

Considering these strong views, one finds it surprising that the picture of both the African and European cultures that emerge out of the pages of *Things Fall Apart* are neither a straightforward eulogization of the one nor an outright condemnation of the other; rather, both cultures are portrayed as very organic but inherent with contradictions, espousing both the good and the bad. This picture of nebulosity and inherent contradictions has rightly led scholars to judge Achebe to be ambivalent in his cultural critique. Quayson (2003), for instance, offers a hermeneutic of ambivalence as the overarching posture adopted by Achebe, stressing,

reading culture out of a novel is valuable but inadequate, and that this needs awareness that *Things Fall Apart* ... possesses a richly ambivalent attitude toward its culture that can only be

discovered by paying attention both to the reality processed and to the larger discursive strategies employed. (p. 244)

For Osei-Nyame, (1999) in “Achebe[’s] appropriation of ethnographic modes of representation to prove that the communities of his African past were neither ‘primitive’ nor ‘without history’” (p. 148), one observes conflicting worldviews filtered through the different voices in the narration as evident in the inconsistent representations of gender issues and Igbo cultural practices, Osei-Nyame argues (1999). Snyder (2008) also argues that the manner in which the narrative voice presents events is quite ambivalent: he simultaneously comes across as an “insider” and “outsider” (p. 154). He contends, “neither the author nor the narrative voice of *Things Fall Apart* can be aligned simply with a monological African (or even West African, Nigerian, or nineteenth-century Igbo) perspective despite the persistent critical tendency to do so” (p. 154). Indeed, Snyder (2008) is emphatic “that Achebe’s perspective at the ‘cultural crossroads’ is manifest in the narrative voice of *Things Fall Apart*, which moves along a continuum of proximity and distance in relation to the culture it sympathetically describes” (154). From Achebe’s vivid description of Ibo culture, his use of the English language, and his interlacing the narrative with Igbo words, to his objective portrayal of Ibo metaphysics, Snyder (2008) encounters a consuming presence of ambivalence.

Clearly, there can be no doubt that the above-referenced scholars are justified in their judging Achebe to be ambivalent in his cultural critique. Yet, what these scholars fail to do is to provide a compelling argument for this apparent inconsistency in the narrative. In this essay, I purpose to provide a Schutzian reading of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, arguing that the so-called critical ambivalence in Achebe’s hermeneutic of the colonial experience makes sense if situated within his lived experiences in colonial Nigeria. Grounding my reading of Achebe’s meaning-making of the colonial experience in Schutz’s phenomenology, I begin with a close reading of the novel itself, highlighting significant areas of ambivalence. Next, I explicate Schutz’s (1967) concept of intersubjectivity and phenomenology of literature. In the next section in which Achebe’s biography is examined, an attempt is made to show how a Schutzian reading of Achebe’s social relationships can help us understand his account of the colonial experience as represented in his first novel.

*Representation of Ibo and European Cultures in Things Fall Apart*

As noted above, ambiguity and ambivalence characterize Achebe's cultural critique of the Ibo of Nigeria and the British colonizers in his debut novel *Things Fall Apart*, as he presents both the ugly and beautiful sides of the two cultures at the same time. One cultural institution presented with ambiguity is marriage. In one instance, Achebe seems to suggest that, among the Ibo, marriage involves a complex process of negotiations between families of prospective couples, but in another instance, he presents a completely different image of marriage. In the account of the marriage involving Obierika's daughter, for example, the narrative voice tells the reader that marriage among the Ibo is a social event, characterized by an elaborate ceremony culminating in a communal meal. The significance of each stage of the ceremony is underscored by the vividness with which it is described by the voice. For instance, Obierika's relatives count the number of pots of wine the girl's suitor brings to the wedding ceremony and expresses satisfaction:

Young men and boys in single file, each carrying a pot of wine, came first. Obierika's relatives counted the pots as they came. Twenty, twenty-five. There was a long break, and hosts looked at each other as if to say, 'I told you.' Then more pots came. Thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five. The hosts nodded in approval and seemed to say, 'Now they are behaving like men.' Altogether there were fifty pots of wine. (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 82)

This beautiful picture of celebratory communal life is quickly undermined by the manner of Okonkwo and Ekwefi's marriage. According to the narrative voice, the marriage between Ekwefi and Okonkwo, a titled man and defender of traditional values, takes place under intriguing circumstances:

Many years ago when she was the village beauty Okonkwo had won her heart by throwing the Cat in the greatest contest within living memory. She did not marry him because he was too poor to pay her bride-price. But a few years later she ran away from her husband and came to live with Okonkwo. (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 28)

Achebe's implicit critique here is that although Ibo culture privileges the communality of the institution of marriage, it does not sanction powerful

members of the society that use their position to steal other people's wives.

Achebe is also critical of the way Ibo husbands treat their spouses. Okonkwo, for example, is presented as one who rules his wives and children with iron fists, beating Ekwefi, his favorite wife, on the Week of Peace. This animal behavior is subtly condemned through the narrative voice's account of another wife-beating incident. Here, the narrative voice recounts that, in retaliation for Uzowulu's beating Mgbafo, his wife, her brothers descend upon him, soundly beating him, and taking away their sister. To get his wife and children back, Uzowulu appeals to the egwugwu, the ancestral spirits. The society's disgust at wife-beating is clearly conveyed in the threat of Odukwe to castrate Uzowulu for any future repetition of his animal behavior: "If, on the other hand, Uzowulu should recover from his madness and come in the proper way to beg his wife to return, she will do so on the understanding that if he ever beats her again, we shall cut off his genitals for him" (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 65). More important, the final verdict of the egwugwu undercuts the chauvinistic ideals dominant in Ibo society: "Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 66). Such a statement is an indictment of men like Okonkwo who find fulfillment in unjustifiable wife-battering: they are beasts and mad men.

Moreover, Achebe casts doubt on the existence and potency of traditional gods by detailing episodes in which they are portrayed as powerless. For instance, the narrative voice tells the reader of the transfiguration of Chielo when she is possessed by the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. Yet, as Ekwefi follows her around in the dark on the occasion when Chielo is commanded by the oracle to bring Ezinma to the shrine, she cannot identify the one following her. In fact, her words sound as if she were an ordinary mortal and not the embodiment of the powerful Oracle of the Hills and Caves: "Somebody is walking behind me! She said. Whether you are spirit or man, may Agbala shave your head with a blunt razor! May he twist your neck until you see your heels!" (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 74). Surely, the spiritual being possessing Chielo should not have any difficulty identifying the tracker? Besides, Ibo traditional deities are presented as lacking the power to punish offenders in the face of Christian intrusion into their sacred space. According to the narrative voice, when the Christian missionaries come to Mbanta, they are allotted a portion of the Evil Forest where they could build their church. The

traditionalists actually expect the Christians to die when they go to live in the Evil Forest. However, the Christians live, leading even the traditionalists to admit the possibility of the Christians' having a much more powerful God.

The account of Ibo funerals as exemplified in the case of Ezeudu also problematizes Achebe's attitude toward his traditional culture. As the narrative voice describes the funeral celebration, it highlights the apparent reverence accorded the egwugwu among the Ibo:

Now and again an ancestral spirit or egwugwu appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. Some of them were very violent, and there had been a mad rush for shelter earlier in the day when one appeared with a sharp machet and was only prevented from doing serious harm by two men who restrained him with the help of a strong rope tied round his waist. Sometimes he turned round and chased those men, and they ran for their lives. But they always returned to the long rope trailing behind. He sang, in a terrifying voice, that Ekwenzu, or Evil Spirit, had entered his eye (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 86).

In this episode, the respect and reverence accorded the ancestral spirits is subtly undermined by the suggestion that some of them are violent and have to be restrained by mere mortals. Obviously, the idea that ancestors pose a danger to public safety is inconsistent with their traditional role of protecting the tribe and enforcing morality. If such revered spirits could act insane and violent, and have to be restrained, then probably the egwugwu are no different from ordinary men. Implicitly, there is no justification for the reverence society accords them. The power of the egwugwu is further undercut even by the narrative voice's observation that not all the egwugwu are violent: "But some of the egwugwu are quite harmless. One of them was so old and infirm that he leaned heavily on a stick. He walked unsteadily to the place where the corpse was laid, gazed at it a while and went again – to the underworld" (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 86). Again, the narrative voice's portrait of a spiritual being as infirm undercuts the popular notion that ancestral spirits are powerful and agile. Obviously, the "ancestral spirit" depicted here is, in reality, a very old man, probably as old as the dead revered Ezeudu.

Furthermore, the narrative voice questions the wisdom in carrying guns

at funeral celebrations by recounting the inadvertent killing of Ezeudu's son by Okonkwo. Implicit in the account is the suggestion that the gun is the last weapon to carry on such occasions where people lose their bearing in the heat of the moment:

The drums and the dancing began again and reached fever-heat. Darkness was around the corner, and the burial was near. Guns fired the last salute and the cannon rent the sky. And then from the centre of the delirious fury came a cry and shouts of horror. It was as if a spell had been cast. All was silent. In the centre of the crowd a boy lay in pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell dance to their father. Okonkwo's gun exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart. (Achebe, 1958/1996, pp. 87-88)

The narrative voice in depicting the tragic scene dispassionately seems to be questioning the wisdom in carrying deadly weapons. The darkness and the emotionally charged atmosphere should have warned the *egwugwu* of possible danger on the horizon. The gross display of reckless irresponsibility, together with the society's inflexibility in its application of justice on this occasion, deconstructs any idea of perfect culture.

Yet, Ibo culture has a number of redeeming qualities. It is a culture that promotes democracy, as no one person can impose his or her will on the collective; every decision that had to be made for the good of the community had to be openly debated before a consensus is reached. Similarly, inter-tribal diplomacy is privileged among the Ibos for whom war with other ethnic groups was always the last option. They would not go to war unless every other available option had been exhausted (see Scafe, 2002, p 127; Rhoads, 1993).

As he does in the case of his Ibo culture, Achebe treats its European counterpart as destructive yet productive. A case in point is the killing of the royal python, the emanation of the god of water, by one of the Christian converts at Mbanta. The narrator's sympathy for traditional religion is evident from the way he subtly contrasts the attitudes of the two religious groups in the Ibo society toward sacred objects:

The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as 'Our Father,' and

was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds. It ate rats in the house and sometimes swallowed hens' eggs. If a clansman killed a royal python accidentally, he made sacrifices of atonement and performed an expensive burial ceremony such as was done for a great man. No punishment was prescribed for a man who killed the python knowingly. Nobody thought that such a thing could ever happen. (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 112)

The profound respect traditional Ibo society accords the royal python is obvious in the narrator's account. The converts, however, have no such reverence! In fact, even before the killing of the python, the new Christian converts taunt the traditionalists, dismissing their religion as empty (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 110). This Christian intolerance reaches its climax when Enoch, a convert, publicly unmask one of the revered ancestral spirits, making a confrontation between the two religious groups inevitable. According to the narrative voice, Enoch's action is unprecedented and a threat to the very survival of the Ibo clan. Later in the evening, the narrative voice sympathetically captures the somber mood of the clan in the wake of the spiritual "killing" of the egwugwu thus:

That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death. (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 132; see Ogbu and Achebe, 1981, p. 3)

The mourning is not just for the desecration of the egwugwu, but also for the total eclipse of traditional culture by its European counterpart. Undoubtedly, Achebe judges Christianity, a foreign religion, as destructive, disrespectful, and confrontational.

Still, the Ibo people themselves cannot be exonerated from the evisceration of their culture by the Other's culture. The fact is that, for Achebe, Europe's success in colonizing Africa was partly due to the complicity of Africans themselves. In *Things Fall Apart*, some Africans are portrayed as active collaborators with the enemy. Religiously, Africans, not Europeans, are the ones who instigate Christianity's confrontation with traditional culture, ultimately hastening its disruption (Ogbu and Achebe, 1981, p. 3). Politically, too, Africans serve as the white

man's soldiers, messengers, and clerks. In the destruction of Abame, for example, the large colonial army consists of only three whites, and the rest, all Africans. The irony in Africans' participation in the destruction of their own culture is powerfully conveyed in Obierika's account of the Abame tragedy:

For a long time nothing happened. The rains had come and yams had been sown. The iron was still tied to the sacred silk-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 else happened. They have a big market in Abame on every other Afo day, 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 the market. (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 98).

Achebe blames Africans for the European invasion of their continent. Similarly, in the final confrontation, which results in the tragedy of Okonkwo, the African complicity stands out in clear relief. Firstly, it is Enoch, a new Christian convert, who sparks the conflict by unmasking one of the egwugwu in public. Then, it is other Africans who help get six of Umuofia's elders behind bars. More disgustingly, it is the same blacks, not whites, who manhandle the revered elders even when these blacks are ordered to treat them with respect. And as if that was not enough, they take advantage of the plight of the elders by asking for 250,000 cowries instead of 200,000, which is the fine imposed on them by the illegitimate foreign authorities. Ultimately, though, Europe must take blame for the corruption of Africans, for without the rude intrusion of the European culture into the African social world, there was no way they would betray their continent (Scafe, 2002).

In spite of its destructive tendencies, the European culture depicted in the novel also has some redeeming qualities, which, even the locals recognize. For example, the missionaries, backed by the colonial administration, introduce formal education and, with it, new forms of employment, as

well as money economy: “The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also brought a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and palm kernel became things of great price and much money followed into Umuofia” (Achebe, 1958/1996, p. 126). Clearly, the new cultural system is an enigma wrapped in a puzzle. While on the one hand, like a virus, it seeks to destroy its host, on the other hand, it brings about socio-economic improvements the locals find appealing.

So why can Achebe not take a clear stand against the cultures he critiques? Why is he critical and complementary of both cultures at the same time? Why the ambivalence? To answer these questions, one must ground Achebe’s cultural critique in the Schutzian theories of intersubjectivity and literary criticism.

### *Schutz’s Concept of Intersubjectivity*

According to Schutz (1967), the world of experience is a social world in which the subjective-self, endowed with a stream of consciousness, lives with other selves (or the Other/alter ego/Thou) also endowed with a stream of consciousness. Thus, the facticity of the sociality of the natural world of experience, a world in which conscious beings share their experiences with each other, makes intersubjectivity the foundation of human existence (Schutz, 1967; see also Ho, 2008, p. 328; Dreher, 2003, p. 147; Augier, 1999, p. 148; Lewis, 1993; Perinbanayagam, 1975; Zaner, 1967). As Reich (2010) explains, intersubjectivity refers to “a situation in which two or more persons share knowledge reflexively, that is, all know X and know that all others know this, too” (p. 41).

In this social world, the subjective-self experiences the alter ego as being conscious of him or her and vice versa in simultaneity, a phenomenon Schutz (1967) describes as “*growing old together*” (p. 10; emphasis in original). Yet, although there exists between the subjective-self and alter ego perspective reciprocity, the two differ from each other. Schutz (1967) explains:

You and I differ from each other not merely with respect to how much of each other’s lived experience we can observe. We also differ in this: When I become aware of a segment of your lived experience, I arrange what I see within my own meaning-context. But meanwhile you have arranged it in yours. Thus I am always

interpreting your lived experiences from my own standpoint...if I look at my whole stock of knowledge of your lived experiences and ask about the structure of this knowledge, one thing becomes clear: *This is that everything I know about your conscious life is really based on my knowledge of my own experiences.* (p. 106)

Biography is thus key in the interpretation of the Other's acts, acts that are always intentional and hence meaningful (Schutz, 1967, pp. 100-102; Tibbetts, 1980, p. 359).

These intentional acts engaged in by both the subjective-self and the alter ego have two kinds of motives: "the because-motive" and "the in-order-to motive" (Schutz, 1967, p. 91; see also Reich, 2010). While the former refers to reasons related to past experiences, the latter has to do with reasons that anticipate the future: "The difference, then, between the two kinds of motive...is that in-order-to motive explains the act in terms of the project, while the genuine because-motive explains the project in terms of the actor's past experiences." In other words, as Zaner (1961) points out, while the in-order-to motive refers to an ongoing action, the because-motive refers to an act already completed (pp. 74-75). The meaning of intentional acts must always, therefore, be located at the nexus of the because-motive and the in-order-to motive, a view Lewis and Weigert (1993) agree with: "Meaning construction involves reflecting on past actions and projecting future action. ...The extent to which meaning is the focus of attention is affected by the efficaciousness of socially typified and biographically relevant pragmatic motives" (p. 84). To typifications and biography must be added reflexivity and social contexts (Schutz, 1967; Lewis & Weigert, 1993, p. 84; see also Watson, 1976).

Schutz (1967) distinguishes between three kinds of our social world of experience or intersubjectivity: the social world of contemporaries; social world of predecessors; and the social world of successors (Schutz, 1967, pp. 142-143). "The social world of contemporaries coexists with me and is simultaneous with my duration," Schutz (1967, p. 142) explains. Yet, although existing with other selves in the social world of contemporaries, the subjective-self does not have direct experience with all of them. Those that the subjective-self has direct experience with, Schutz (1967, p. 143) characterizes as "consociates," while those he or she has only indirect experience with he refers to as "contemporaries" (p. 143). Unlike the social world of contemporaries, the social world of predecessors existed before the subjective-self was born and hence can only be observed

from afar by the self (p. 143). As for the social world of successors, it refers to that which will exist and be inhabited after the passing of the subjective-self (p. 143). Schutz (1967) goes on to explain that one way or the other, the subjective-self experiences these social worlds at different levels of intensity: the world of predecessors through history, the world of successors through what will be bequeathed to them, and the world of contemporaries, through both the direct experience with consociates and indirect experience with contemporaries.

The highest form of intersubjective relationship, according to Schutz (1967), takes place within the context of face-to-face interactions between the subjective-self and the Other, a context in which the subjective-self and the alter ego establish a “we-relationship” (Schutz, 1967, pp. 163-173; Zaner, 1961). This we-relationship consists in both the subjective-self and the Other being aware of each other and mutually “tuning-in” to the each other, taking the other’s perspective and subjectivizing it to make meaning of it (Schutz, 1951/1977, p. 115). Schutz (1951/1977) explains: “This sharing of the other’s flux of experiences in inner time, this living through a living present in common constitutes...the mutual tuning-in relationship, the experience of the ‘We,’ which is at the foundation of all possible communication” (p. 115). In other words, the intersubjective relationship between the subjective-self and the Thou consists in both caring for each other and seeing the world from each other’s subjectivized existential perspective. Schutz (1967) expresses this relationship in the first person thus:

When interacting with you within this realm [i.e., the realm of we-relationship] I witness how you react to my behavior, how you interpret my meaning, how my in-order-to motives trigger corresponding because-motives of your behavior. In between my expectation of your reaction and that reaction itself I have ‘grown older and perhaps wiser, taking into account the realities of the situation, as well as my own hopes of what you would do. (p. 172)

Hence, to know another person well enough, one must be ready to enter into a deeper intersubjective relationship with that person.

### *Schutz’s Theory of the Novel*

Schutz’s views on literary works are extensions of his phenomenology of

the social world. Accordingly, Schutz (1967) notes that the perspective that an author brings to his or her work is influenced by his or her biography. He points out, “For the speaker, the act of positioning meaning is typical. Through it, he executes the subjectivation of the word” (Schutz, 2013, p. 154). Yet, because the novelist does not have an I-Thou relationship with his or her reader, he or she conveys meaning to the latter from an objective point of view. As Prendergast (2004) explains, “the novelist uses only objective meanings to communicate with readers—the type of meaning readers exercise everyday in their relations with anonymous others” (p. 459). Having been communicated to in an objective fashion, the reader or listener, nevertheless, interprets what is heard according to the rules of the language of his or her society. Thus, as Schutz (2013) explains, the reader

relates to the objective material of the language which has been communicated to him. This means that, first, he executes a process of meaning interpretation according to the scheme of language which he has attitudinally adopted and which is familiar to him. (p. 154)

The success of this endeavor, Schutz (2013) points out, depends on how successful the speaker was “in establishing the ‘right’ connection between the objective meaning context of the language and the elements which he selected, on the one hand, and between these ‘appropriated’ and ‘communicated’ elements, on the other” (p. 154). The meaning of literary work is, therefore, subjective, largely contingent on the writer, whose subjectivity in meaning-making the interpreter must be attentive to. As well articulated by Schutz (2013),

only when the speaker spoke ‘correctly’ (and posited the correct meaning context) and the listener heard correctly (and correctly interpreted the meaning context which was set by the speaker), there exists a chance that that which was meant will be subjectively interpreted by the listener as thus and nothing else. (pp. 154-155)

Thus in the view of Schutz, both writer and reader play different roles in the construction of meaning.

As the originator of the written text, the writer posits subjective meaning; however, the reader or listener interprets this subjective meaning by situating the text within the objective meaning contexts of the social

world:

The positing of meaning on the part of the listener which occurs in the act of meaning interpretation, is completely different from the positing of meaning by the speaker which occurs in the act of positing meaning. The listener does mean nothing; he does not want to provide a new meaning. Thus, he is not aware that his meaning interpretation implicitly comprises subjectification, because only from the point of view of the third observer—this is essential for the whole investigation which follows—is the act of listening a subjectification of the objective meaning context of language. For the listener himself, the word heard is and remains an objective meaning which is integrated into the objective meaning context of language, and vice versa. Not the listener, only the speaker *means* something with the word; not the speaker, only the listener interprets it. However, the listener interprets it at first as he would interpret it if it had not been spoken by the speaker, namely, the speaker in this context. For the third observer, this kind of understanding may also represent a subjective positing of meaning on the part of the listener. For him, the listener, the word keeps its objective meaning, that is: a meaning not to be posited but to be interpreted by him. (Schutz, 2013, p. 155)

If the interpreter's work depends on what is spoken by the speaker, a text mediated by the lived experience of the latter, then no meaning of any literary work can be said to be adequate if it ignores the biography of the writer. Moreover, because meaning is borne out of the confluence of subjective intentionality and objective interpretivity, "understanding remains an approximation, between subjective and objective meaning, between intended and interpreted meaning" (Schutz, 2013, p. 155).

As far as the novel is concerned, there is no direct relationship between the writer and the reader (Schutz, 2013, p. 159). The writer only "directs himself to a listener whose existence he presupposes as much as the chance to be understood by him. But he does not expect social conduct from his listener. His story is not purposive-rational; he does not 'want' to achieve an immediate effect through it—except the aesthetic effect produced by any work of art" (Schutz, 2013, p. 161). Precisely because the novel is not purposive-rational, its addressee lacks specific identity. For Schutz (2013) then, the novel's distinctive character is one of "representation" (p. 161), a concept explained by Bensman and Lilienfeld

(1968) as referring to an artist's attempt "to create an image of a world in such a way that it can be experienced directly, intuitively, emotionally, and naively" (p. 358).

Finally, because of the anonymity of the novel's addressee, the writer has the freedom to make artistic choices in terms of story content (Schutz, 2013, p. 161; Ruthrof, 1974, p. 87). Schutz (2013) articulates this point thus:

He alone selects from all possible contents those which appear to him worthwhile to be told. The person of the listener does not influence the decision. Therefore, the unity of the narration is consistently preserved: The narrator always pays attention to the existence of the listener but never to his orientation. (p. 161)

Such a view makes the writer of the novel and his or her lived experience crucial in any hermeneutic endeavor directed toward his or her work.

### *Achebe's Biography: A Confluence of Two Cultures*

As noted above, the choices a novelist has to make in the presentation of his or her story are grounded in his or her lived experience. Hence, the meaning he or she intends is always subjective, mediated by his or her biography. Thus, one cannot appreciate Achebe's ambivalence without recourse to his life story. From his own utterances, he seems to suggest that any analysis of his cultural critique must be situated within the context of his lived experience. He himself makes the following statement:

I was brought up in a village where the old ways were still active and alive, so I could see the remains of our tradition actually operating. At the same time I brought a certain amount of detachment to it too, because my father was Christian missionary, and we were not fully part of the 'heathen' life of the village. (as cited. in Snyder, "Possibilities and pitfalls")

Unquestionably, Achebe grew up with his heart torn between the two cultures.

As his biographer Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1997) reports, Achebe would visit the houses of neighbors to share their food with them during festivals

(p. 9). He also admitted to Odinga (2005) in an interview that it was his interest in finding out what goes on in traditional society that makes him appreciate it in spite of his Christian upbringing:

The story of my life is really the story of the village, Ogidi, to which my parents brought us, the children, at the end of their career as evangelists. My father retired having put in thirty years in the Anglican Church, the Church of England, spreading the gospel in our part of Igboland. And I was able to see some of the things that made the lives of Igbos distinct from the lives of other people. As well as things that were similar, I was able to ask why we went to church every Sunday, why we read the Bible morning and night in our home and some of my friends in the village did not. So these two lives that had been created by the European presence in Africa were played out in front of me without my awareness of what was going on. It was just life and I was not resistant. I was simply curious. There were some things that I wished I had been allowed to do; some aspects of the culture like becoming initiated into the cult of the masquerade, the cult of the mask, which is a symbol of Igbo religion. But as Christians we were not supposed to touch that. Sometimes there were festivals that Christians could not celebrate. We celebrated Christmas, Easter ... but these others were more mysterious and we were not supposed to touch them at all. Even though I did rebelliously embrace them at a certain distance. As a child with my younger sister, I would cross to my neighbors, and even eat their food, which we were told was dangerous because it had been offered to idols. (p. 40)

Thus, though African, Achebe initially encounters the Ibo culture as the Other. In fact, he confesses that while growing up he and his fellow Christians used “to look down on the *others*,” referring to them as “the heathen or even the people of nothing” (Achebe, 1975, p. 115; emphasis added). But as he enters into a deeper intersubjective relationship with this esoteric culture, he is able to tune in to it, thereby subjectivizing the existential reality of this African culture. He is able therefore to represent it in a holistic manner in his narrativity. His biography clearly illustrates that, as he matured through college, Achebe would see the lie in the distorted account of Africa by Europeans and gradually gravitate toward his own Ibo culture. Then to demonstrate his pride in his African heritage, he would drop his Christian name, Albert, but keep his African Chinualumogu Achebe.

Nonetheless, Achebe could not alter the English mentality his colonial education foisted on him. The facility with which he employs both the Ibo and English languages is proof of his dual personality, that is, half-Igbo and half-English. In an interview with Bostein and Morrison, for instance, Achebe in answer to why he writes his novels in English, tells them that having used the language throughout his life, he both loves it and finds it natural to use it (Bostein, Achebe, & Morrison, 2001). He goes on to explain: "Of course, nothing is ever as simple as that. In learning English for most of my life, I also fell in love with it. You see language is not an enemy—language is a tool. And I discovered that what I was doing was bringing the Igbo language into communication with English" (Bostein, Achebe, Morrison, 2001, p. 152). Thus conscious that the English language is an integral part of his existential reality, denouncing it as an imperialist imposition is not a proposition Achebe would entertain. Moreover, Achebe (1997) recognizes the political significance of the English language in unifying the disparate ethnic groupings of Africa into nation-states: "Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before. Nigeria had hundreds of autonomous communities. ... Today, it is one country" (p. 344).

A Christian and Western-educated, Achebe is too much a part of the colonial establishment. Both in the course of his academic career and later as a broadcaster, Achebe intersubjectivizes with the European, making it impossible for him to not have a much more complex view of the European Other than most African scholars. A son of a Christian catechist, Achebe had the best of colonial education from grade school to college (Achebe, 2009). Understandably, he speaks fondly of his religious studies professor James Welch, who tried unsuccessfully to get him to do his master's degree at Trinity College, Cambridge. According to Ezenwa (1997), Achebe left his job as a teacher at Merchant of Light School at Oba when he had the opportunity to work with the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS), a propaganda tool of the colonial administration (pp. 52-56). As a broadcaster, Achebe developed a very warm working relationship with his British bosses, resulting in his meteoric rise through the ranks. The relationship, indeed, helped complicate his perception of the colonial enterprise. The fact was that, as a beneficiary of the selective generosity of the repressive colonial hegemony, Achebe was under considerable pressure to balance his portrait of European cultural hegemony in his first novel. As Ezenwa (1997) has noted, without the support of his colonial masters, Achebe could

not publish his first novel, which quickly brought him into the literary limelight.

According to Ezenwa (1997), Achebe went to London in 1956 to attend the British Broadcasting Staff School. While in London, he gave the manuscript of *Things Fall Apart* to Gilbert Phelps, a British novelist and literary critic, who at the time was teaching at the BBC school. Phelps immediately recognized the unique quality of the novel and recommended it for publication, but Achebe would not agree because he had not quite reached the finishing point. At the time, the manuscript carried the combined stories of Okonkwo, his son Nwoye, and grandson Obi Okonkwo. When he returned to Nigeria, Achebe began the revision of the manuscript in earnest. He excised the second and third parts from the first, the story of Okonkwo, restructuring it and adding new chapters and fresh details until he obtained what he considered a respectable novel. Later, he sent the manuscript to a London-based typing agency, which had advertised in an issue of London's *Spectator* that was lying in his office. Although he paid for the work, he never heard back from the company for several months. Therefore, when his British boss Angela Beatie was going to London on her annual leave, Achebe asked her to ascertain the fate of the manuscript for him. In London, Ms. Beatie found to her utter consternation that the agency had left the script to gather dust in a corner of their office. Her intervention led to the agency's typing the script and mailing it back to Achebe in Lagos (Ezenwa, 1997, p. 63).

On receiving the typescript, Achebe sent it to the literary agent Gilbert Phelps in 1958 in hopes that he would get an interested publisher for the novel. After some initial hitches, the script finally reached William Heinemann's desk. Heinemann gave it to James Michie, who in turn showed it to Allan Hill, "a publishing innovator" (Ezenwa, 1997, p. 65). Initially, Allan Hill doubted the economic viability of a novel by an unknown author from Africa, but, following the recommendation of Professor Donald MacRee who had then just returned from a tour of West Africa, he decided to take a chance with it. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* was born with an initial print run of 2,000 copies (Ezenwa, 1997, p. 65).

### *Conclusion*

From his biography, then, one could identify four key phases that

resulted in deep intersubjective relationships between Achebe and his consociates in the social world of colonial Nigeria, a situation which explains the ambivalence in his cultural critique, namely, his life at Ogidi, his academic career, his professional career, and the story behind the publication of *Things Fall Apart*. Living at Ogidi where he interacted with people who practiced African traditional culture, Achebe had the chance to see the world from their perspective. Then, in the course of his education, he encountered European culture both in the texts he read and in his social interactions with his White teachers. Through education, therefore, Achebe entered into an intersubjective relationship with the European other, resulting in his empathizing with his or her perspective. The European worldview his education foists on him is further deepened when he is employed by the NBS, where he becomes part of the colonial establishment.

Moreover, the role played by the European other gives him a whole new understanding of the European other. As pointed out above, without such white people as Angela Beatie, Gilbert Phelps, and the owners of Heinemann Publishing Company, there was no way Achebe could publish that early so effortlessly. Indeed, Achebe himself admitted that he did not have to struggle as much as most people about to launch their writing careers usually do. He told Ezenwa (1997) that but for the timely intervention of his boss Ms. Beatie, he could not publish *Things Fall Apart* at the time he did. Indeed, his warm relationship with his boss most probably influenced his balanced portrayal of colonialism in his novel. This claim becomes more plausible when one considers the fact that Achebe did the final revision of his manuscript upon his return from England, where he had enjoyed British generosity and hospitality. Considering the fact that at the time of the writing the novel Nigerians were agitating for independence, the natural thing for Achebe would have been to denounce Western colonialist imperialism as completely evil. Yet, Achebe does not do that because his own personal experiences in the social world were different. A beneficiary of British generosity and hospitality, Achebe had subjectivized the European worldview leading to his representing it with ambivalence and ambiguity in his debut novel.

Certainly, Achebe does not deny the arrogance and greed of the colonialists. Mincing no words, he charges that Africa “has been the most insulted continent in the world. African’s very claim to humanity has been questioned at various times, their persons abused, their intelligence insulted,” (1975, p. 138). Still, he is realistic enough to acknowledge that Africa made significant gains when she collided with Europe. Having

been brought up as a Christian and yet being a person who takes pride in his African heritage, he owes it to his sense of fairness to paint in his novel what he knows to be the true image of Africa when it came into contact with Europe by giving a balanced account. In the process, he appears more conflicted than he cares to admit. He insists, however, that “One thing which is not permissible is to stereotype and dehumanize your fellows. That is not permissible in our art. You celebrate them, their good and their bad. You celebrate even rascals, because they abound in the world and are part of its richness” (Rowell, 1990, p. 88). This interpretation becomes clear once the novel is viewed through the prism of Schutz’s phenomenology.

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