Beyond Authenticity and Creolization: Reading Achebe Writing Culture

NEIL TEN KORTENAAR, as-
sistant professor of English at
Concordia University, Sir George
Williams Campus, is the author
of articles on Achebe in En-
glish Studies in Canada *(1991)*
and in Research in African Lit-
eratures *(1993).*

T HE DISCUSSION OF CULTURE in postcolonial literary criti-
cism revolves around the twin poles of authenticity and hy-
bridization. One response to the experience of colonialism and the con-
comitant denigration of cultural identities has been to call for a return to
precolonial authenticity. In current debates the standard of fidelity to
origins is often Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's rejection of English in favor of
Gĩkũyũ for the language of his novels. Such authenticity contrasts with
the acceptance by other writers of some measure of interfertilization (or
creolization or mongrelization or *métissage*). In the French Caribbean,
for instance, the negritude of Aimé Césaire stands against the *créolité*
celebrated by Patrick Chamoiseau. Advocates of creolization denounce
colonialism but believe that it is irreversible. That position does not
leave the former colonized without a culture: they have a hybrid or cre-
ole culture that has borrowed from the metropolitan culture and in the
process subverted and indigenized it. Creolization celebrates the exu-
berant mutual contamination of styles that is characteristic of Salman
Rushdie's and Wilson Harris's writings.

Advocates of creolization often argue that authenticity is quixotic,
that, as Françoise Lionnet writes, "[c]ross- or transcultural exchange
has always been 'an absolute fact' of life everywhere" (104). When
conceived as a peculiarly postcolonial condition, however, creolization
is open to the same objection that is levied against authenticity: that cul-
tures have always been characterized by fluidity and exchange. Hy-
bridization, like authenticity, is unintelligible without a notion of
cultural purity. Both authenticity and creolization ascribe the signifi-
cance of cultural elements to national provenance: where a thing is from
is what it means.[1]

If, as Walter Benn Michaels writes, there "are no anti-essentialist ac-
counts of identity" (684n39), reifications of culture (including not only

authenticity but also creolization) are rhetorical in intention: they manipulate shared symbols in order to win consent for political action. Although purporting to describe what people are and what they do, authenticity and creolization actually challenge people to identify with a certain image of themselves and so to adopt a certain identity. These constructions are what Anthony Cohen calls attempts "to represent the person or group in terms of a reified and/or emblematized culture" (195). To accept the validity of either authenticity or creolization as a description of oneself is to accept certain modes of dressing, speaking, and writing as belonging properly to oneself and to reject other styles as false. Such definitions of identity create a world not only of members and nonmembers but also of loyalists and traitors. Implicit in such a world is the assumption that there are people who have lost their identity.[2]

To say that authenticity and creolization serve rhetorical purposes is not to say that these constructs are false. They are the metaphors by which a communal identity is fashioned; identities have always been constructed by such means. People give reasons for what they do, invest what they do with meaning, and identify what they do as belonging properly to themselves; by this ascription of meaning to actions people declare who they are. Communities are constituted not by the possession of a shared culture that shapes the individual and makes him or her a replicate in miniature of the whole but rather by the ongoing debate over what the shared culture is, how members should behave, and what children should be taught (see Cohen 195–96). Like Cohen, I presume that culture "does not exist apart from what people *do*, and therefore what people do cannot be explained as its product" (207). People fashion their identity by identifying with cultural symbols and by narrating a place in the world. Of course, a community's narratives are shaped according to conventions, and narrative conventions change from age to age and differ from clime to clime. Narratives and symbols are social institutions that outlast the lives of individuals, and cultural agents must construct their lives within these inherited parameters. But individuals do not therefore merely replicate their inheritance. Culture, Jean-Loup Amselle argues, is not a pre-scriptive grammar but rather a reservoir of often contradictory potential practices that social actors can make use of when communal identity is being renegotiated, as it always is (10).

David Laitin rightly distinguishes between two faces of culture. The first face, which Laitin relates to the social systems theory of Clifford Geertz, is a symbolic system that establishes values and horizons of common sense. The second, associated with the positivist anthropology of Abner Cohen, locates the significance of cultural symbols not so much in their meaning, about which there is always disagreement, as in the fact that they are shared and can be used to summon a community to collective action. This face is shown when, as with authenticity and creolization, "[c]ultural identity becomes a political resource" (Laitin 11).

The first face establishes the limits of the thinkable, whereas people self-consciously shape the second. Laitin suggests how these two faces can be reconciled. The second face acknowledges that symbols serve the political and rhetorical ends of cultural agents; it cannot predict, however, what those ends will be. For an understanding of ends, the first face of culture needs to be considered—as well as the narrative conventions available within a community at any particular juncture. The inherited symbolic system does not determine who will win in any given conflict, but it directs community members to "what is worth fighting about" (Laitin 174).

This essay examines how the two faces of culture are related in Chinua Achebe's novel *Arrow of God*, which depicts the cultural crisis that accompanied the consolidation of British colonialism in Igboland in the early 1920s. Achebe's depiction of cultural redefinition at the time of the colonial encounter facilitates understanding of contemporary postcolonial communities. Achebe represents culture in Africa as Paulin Hountondji argues that it should be represented: as something invented and in constant need of reinvention (233).

I

Arrow of God, Achebe's third novel and many would say his best, was published in 1964, six years after *Things Fall Apart*, and revised in 1974.

The novel depicts a fictional community of Igbo speakers grouped in six villages collectively known as Umuaro, which falls within the larger colonial territory baptized Nigeria, where the colonial administrative and military apparatus and the missionary presence are only beginning to make themselves felt. Achebe presents a community that defines itself by shared symbols (local deities and established rituals, as well as a proverbial wisdom) and by symbolic boundaries. Individuals invest shared symbols with various meanings, about which there is disagreement. The British intrusion forces Umuaro to redefine itself, but its culture has always been subject to redefinition. Umuaro did not have a homeostatic, holistic culture that fell apart when the Europeans came. The villages invented the god Ulu to unite them when they were threatened by Abam slave-raiders (15). If ever things were in danger of falling apart, it was then; instead a new identity was constructed and given religious legitimacy. Umuaro is best understood through the will of its members to narrate a collective identity.

The presence of the colonizers occasions an internal debate in Umuaro. The crisis in the novel is a contest between rival interpretations that are also rival strategic responses to the historical moment. Umuaro illustrates what Amselle has argued, that debate on the values of a community is what constitutes the community:

> Pour qu'il y ait identité, société, culture ou ethnie, il n'est pas nécéssaire que les agents se mettent d'accord sur ce qui définit cette culture: il suffit qu'ils s'entendent pour débattre ou négocier sur les termes de l'identité, sur ce qui la fonde comme problème. En d'autres termes, on peut avancer que l'identité c'est l'accord sur l'objet même du désaccord.   (65)

> For there to be an identity, society, culture, or ethnicity, it is not necessary for the members to agree on what defines that culture: it is enough that they agree to debate or negotiate the terms of that identity. In other words, identity is an agreement about the object of disagreement.   (trans. mine)

The terms of the debate resemble the poles of tradition and change, as the novel's critics have often said. The novel shows, however, that tradition and change are not absolute positions but the rhetorical means whereby a community fashions itself. All rivals in the debate make use of proverbs and appeal to the ancestors; the winner is neither the one who is closest to the opinion of the ancestors nor the one who is closest to objective reality but the one who can persuade the audience.

Ezeulu, the priest of the patron deity Ulu, assumes the mantle of upholder of tradition, but the novel makes clear that Ezeulu invents the tradition that he upholds. His devotion to Ulu is not the culture of Umuaro waiting to be interpreted and judged; it is already Ezeulu's own interpretation of Umuaro culture, with a judgment inscribed within it. Authenticity is a rallying cry in the community's internal debate. My reading here differs from that of Simon Gikandi, who emphasizes the crisis in traditional authority provoked by colonialism and the gap that colonialism opened in Igbo culture.[3] Gikandi considers two examples of this gap: the headstrong young Akukalia's destruction of another man's *ikenga*, the symbolic manifestation of a person's life and strength, in a burst of unreasoning temper and the imprisonment of the sacred python in a box by Ezeulu's son Oduche. These two examples of sacrilege are certainly parallel, but the novel contrasts them. Achebe signals the difference between the two incidents by setting Akukalia's breaking of the *ikenga* in the past, five years before the narrative opens, and Oduche's imprisonment of the python in the narrative present. When the *ikenga* is broken, the elders can still debate communal strategy without taking the British into account. Akukalia's act is symptomatic not of a newly opened gap but of gaps that have always existed. The imprisonment of the python, however, is a sacrilege that would have been inconceivable before the coming of the missionaries, one that marks a change in the order of debate.

Five years before the events in the novel's present, Umuaro debates going to war with its neighbor Okperi over a land dispute. At stake is communal identity: specifically, whether or not Umuaro's relation to Okperi is a filial one. The boundary between Umuaro and Okperi does not separate those who are known from strangers who are not but divides two symmetrically constituted communities. The category of stranger does not operate; there is

instead either alliance and intermarriage or hostility. But Umuaro and Okperi's parallel relation does not make the boundary between them any less necessary. Those who straddle the boundary are regarded as potential traitors to Umuaro—Nwaka is quick to hint that Ezeulu opposes the war because Ezeulu's mother was from Okperi—and the boundary dispute is serious enough that people are willing to go to war over it.

Akukalia is sent to Okperi with the sensitive assignment of offering the choice of war or peace. He has been specifically warned against losing his temper—the elder who warns him recognizes anger as an inevitable temptation for a young man full of the importance of his mission. The elder's fears are realized, for temper moves Akukalia to do what he recognizes as sacrilegious: he breaks another man's *ikenga* because he believes that it is sacred. The transgression implies acknowledgment of the boundary between the sacred and the profane. Sacrilege is not always foreign.

The British colonial administration puts an end to the fighting that breaks out between Umuaro and Okperi and then sits in judgment on the rivals in the land dispute. Captain Winterbottom is proud of the title "Breaker of Guns" that he has earned in establishing the Pax Britannica in this corner of the world. Of course, the presence of an outside arbiter changes the significance of the war for all concerned: the British intervention draws attention to a previously unconsidered external boundary that Umuaro and Okperi share. Winterbottom's account of the war to his newly arrived subordinate Tony Clarke shows that however much Winterbottom understands the facts, he does not understand the significance of the war. Winterbottom is sure that there must exist an absolute border that the two communities know but that they are lying about, because he assumes that African identities are fixed and absolute. He does not recognize the war's ritual function as a means of establishing identity. From the British perspective, the war is only a marker of a generalized African or Igbo identity: Africans are always fighting among themselves *because* they are Africans, and they require the British presence to maintain peace.

The British want fixed, easily understood identities for their colonial subjects, and Winterbottom

values Ezeulu as the one such subject who will not prevaricate. But even those colonizers who are concerned about "respecting" local cultural conditions cannot agree what those conditions are and how they are to be respected. Winterbottom has been passed over for promotion precisely because he disagrees with the precepts of indirect rule as they are being applied in Igboland. Indirect rule was intended to preserve indigenous frameworks of control, but the model developed in northern Nigeria was inappropriate in Igboland, where the British had to invent "traditional" rulers because there were no absolute chiefs to assume local authority. Colonialism was riven with such contradictions. On the one hand, indirect rule imposed an unnatural stabilizing of identities among the colonized (see Young 79); on the other, the missionaries who accompanied the colonizers worked to destabilize those identities. John Goodcountry, the missionary in Umuaro, is dedicated to erasing traditional identities, abolishing pagan practices, and converting Umuaro to Christianity.[4]

Goodcountry has a disciple in Oduche, the son whom Ezeulu sends to be his eyes and ears at the mission school. Oduche imprisons a python to show that the sacred python has no power over Christians or at least to test its power. He acknowledges the symbolic boundary between the sacred and the profane, but his transgression is also a would-be redrawing of that boundary. The transgression provokes a crisis because any attempt to redraw the boundary requires that the boundary indeed be redrawn, even if only to be restored.

An explicit prohibition against interfering with the python exists, so it must always have been possible to imagine a transgression. What is new is that Oduche's transgression of the boundary between the sacred and the profane also challenges the boundary between the self and the other. The line that Oduche seeks to draw does not distinguish separate selves that are symmetrically constituted; it defines a new self, radically different from and completely opposed to an old self, which it also defines. The significance of Oduche's sacrilege is not that it contravenes an established set of values—all sacrilege does so, though without necessarily provoking a crisis—but that it shifts the debate and draws attention to new points of concern.

The process of collective self-redefinition is only partly influenced by the hegemonic definitions imposed by the British; it largely follows a dynamic within the community, a dynamic determined by available cultural resources. The sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes three common symbolic distinctions that delineate a social identity (71–75) and that can be observed in the structure of Umuaro. The Umuarans illustrate the first distinction, between moral objects and real programs, when they raise yams for subsistence but tell themselves that they do so to comply with the will of Ulu. What they must do to survive also fulfills the higher end of uniting them in a community. Wuthnow draws a second distinction between the self and the roles that the self must play. There is no essential self that is the repository of authenticity, but symbolic distinctions bring the self into being by demarcating what is self and what are the roles that are not the self but that the self must perform. Even though Ezeulu's name suggests an absolute identification with his role, his family and his neighbors distinguish between the man and the priest of Ulu. Wuthnow's third distinction is between intentionality and inevitability. The members of a social structure are given the sense that they are free to act, but moral responsibility is hemmed in by a sense of inevitability, which allows absolution for failure. In Umuaro, where the realm of freedom encompasses even mortality, a dying man is asked what he has done to deserve to die and is urged to refuse the spirit forces that seek his death (114). At the same time human freedom is limited by the intractability that characterizes the world and the human body. Akukalia's sacrilege can be attributed to his temper, a part of himself beyond his control, or to "Ekwensu, the bringer of evil" (24). In this way final responsibility for the sacrilege is removed from human hands.

When Ezeulu defends an authentic identity based on the worship of Ulu, the "tradition" that he upholds blurs the consensual internal distinctions between moral order and real programs, self and roles, intentionality and inevitability. Ezeulu wants to punish his fellow villagers for having insisted that he obey a white man's summons and travel to Okperi even though they know that the priest of Ulu is never to leave Umuaro. Ezeulu refuses to eat the sacred yams that as priest of Ulu he is supposed to eat at each new moon and that he has failed to eat during the thirty-two days that he has been detained by the British for refusing their offer of a warrant chieftaincy. Since the eating of the last of the yams is the signal that the time has come to harvest, Ezeulu's obstinate adherence to the letter of the law calls famine down on the community. The distinction between moral objects and real programs is thereby dissolved: the object of complying with the will of Ulu conflicts with the community's program of raising yams for subsistence. Ezeulu's totalizing impulse also provokes the collapse of the distinction between intentionality and inevitability, between freedom and necessity, as the priest identifies his own will with the god Ulu's. Ezeulu imagines himself to be an arrow of God and erases the realm of freedom. He also identifies his self too absolutely with one of its roles: he forgets the man and allows the priest to subsume his whole identity.

Ezeulu's dogmatic defense of the cult of Ulu is not the response of a whole, integrated world to the violence of a hegemonic alien culture but a redefinition of the world of Umuaro that erases other internal distinctions. The British impose contradictory definitions on the colonized: the administrators seek conformity to fixed definitions that the missionaries in turn condemn. The response of the colonized is also conflicted: Ezeulu does away with internal symbolic distinctions and makes identity fixed and unchanging.[5]

II

Both the Umuarans and the British are more concerned about internal distinctions than about the external boundary between the two peoples: Ezeulu regards Nwaka as a greater personal threat than Winterbottom is, the god Ulu is engaged in a wrestling match with Idemili rather than with the Christian God, and Winterbottom worries more about proving something to his superiors than about the control of Umuaro. The novel illustrates the idea that when faced with a threat to its external boundaries, a community shores up its internal boundaries and seeks greater certainty about the

status, loyalties, and values of its own members (Wuthnow 117).

Readers of Achebe's postcolonial novel, however, are most interested in the external boundary between the colonizers and the colonized. The boundary dividing the Igbo of Umuaro from the British is an internal division in the world of the novel, which contains both groups. At first colonizer and colonized are allocated separate chapters, but even that segregation breaks down. Although the differences between the groups are never minimized, the text evokes a world larger than the microworld of either one. Readers are invited to sympathize with the Umuarans, while the British are drawn with bolder strokes and are mildly satirized—the people of Umuaro have a story, while the British are relegated to a somewhat static background, a reversal of the strategy of imperialist texts. Nevertheless, the simultaneous presentation suggests that the two groups are located on a sociocultural continuum and that only confrontation makes them appear internally coherent and irreconcilably different.[6]

Both the colonized and the colonizers observe formal rituals: the lieutenant governor's dinner party (33–34) is as rigidly ruled by convention as is the breaking of kola nuts among the Igbo. Members of both groups jockey for status in a hierarchy that exists only in the eyes of others within the cultural community. Like the Umuarans, the British are defined by symbolic distinctions. But the distinction that the British make between the sacred and the profane inevitably comes into conflict with that made by the Umuarans, and Assistant Superintendent Wade finds it blasphemous that an English florin with the head of George V is part of a local sacrifice intended to ward off malevolent powers (161). An implicit distinction also exists between moral objects and real programs: Tony Clarke, who imprisons the "witch-doctor" Ezeulu for having embarrassed the administration, suffers from a guilty conscience until he can find a "reasonable explanation" for the detention, one that he can put down in his log (178). So, too, the British distinguish between the self and roles that the self must play: Clarke and Wright mock Winterbottom the captain for his pomposity but pity Winterbottom the man, whose wife has deserted him (102–03).

Distinctions are also drawn between intentionality and inevitability. The experience of imperialism encourages the British to exaggerate the arena in which they are free to act: an imperialist text that Clarke finds a little too smug celebrates "those who can deal with men as others deal with material, who can grasp great situations, coax events, shape destinies and ride on the crest of the wave of time" (33). At the same time stalled careers and other failures must be attributed to an intractability beyond human control. Africa's resistance to imperialist control is figured in terms of heat and discomfort and measured by morbidity rates. The British response to the intractability of Africa is to stress self-discipline and moderation; for example, Winterbottom would prefer cold baths but believes that he must take hot ones, since "Africa never spared those who did what they liked instead of what they had to do" (29). As Philip D. Curtin explains, the British in Africa found that "rules of conduct, whether sensible or not, were psychologically necessary. Where death was both common and mysterious, it was essential to lay out an area of personal responsibility, so that each could consider 'all men mortal but himself'" (354).

If Wuthnow's categories make possible a comparison between the Umuarans and the British, the differences between the two communities are significant. They go beyond the use of symbols and the drawing of boundaries to differences in the possession and exercise of power. The authority of the British has its basis in violence, as is made manifest when Wright the road builder strikes Ezeulu's son Obika and when Ezeulu is detained for refusing to cooperate with the administration. Umuaro, in contrast, is democratic. Indeed, the community accords with Mazi Elechukwu Nnadibuagha Njaka's depiction of Igbo political culture as "parademocratic": no individual wields uncontested authority in the public forum, and the most anyone can hope for is to influence decision making (59). Ezeulu's desire to command the obedience of others can be fulfilled only in his own compound; there, however, he tyrannizes his wives and sons. The colonizers regard Nigeria much as Ezeulu regards his compound; they claim to determine the place of Umuaro and Okperi within a larger order that only they, the British, can perceive.

The redefinition of identities in Achebe's Umuaro and by extension in Igboland is a response to British power. The powerful other inevitably frames the terms in which debates about identity are conducted. The community of Umuaro seems more concerned, however, about establishing internal loyalties than about marshaling external resistance, partly because the British never had as much power in West Africa as they thought they had. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has written, the West African situation differed from the New World or the southern African situation in that "the experience of the vast majority of these citizens of Europe's African colonies was one of essentially shallow penetration by the colonizer" (7). The Umuarans' relative indifference to the British can also be explained by the assertion that colonial authorities set the grounds for the debate but could not take away the villagers' capacity to tell their own story. Political imperialism should be differentiated from cultural imperialism.

III

How did the British acquire power over Africans? A common Weberian explanation attributes European ascendancy to peculiar cultural qualities. If culture and identity are constantly being invented through a process of negotiation, the most successful negotiators are those who can make unforeseen circumstances and even foreign ideological structures fit their own narratives. Stephen Greenblatt describes improvisation as the dual ability "to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (227). Greenblatt argues that improvisation is a skill that is not valued everywhere and that came into its own during the European Renaissance. The second British Empire, which included Nigeria, was explicitly founded on improvisation in Greenblatt's sense. The policy of indirect rule presumed that the British could enter into African political and psychic structures and use those structures to rule Africans.

Greenblatt's notion of improvisation assumes both a structural homology between the improviser and the improviser's other, such as the one that exists between the cultures of the British and the Umuarans, and an absence of reciprocity: the

British study the Igbo and fit them into a British narrative, not the other way around. Achebe makes clear, however, that the psychic structures of Africans are not fixed and that both the British and the Africans attempt to fit the other into a self-serving narrative. The problem Winterbottom encounters in his attempts to manipulate Igbo culture is that the "natives . . . are great liars" (38).[7] How can one enter into another's psychic structures if the other will not stand still long enough for those structures to be defined? Winterbottom recognizes that the system of warrant chiefs, the linchpin of British improvisation in Igboland, is a terrible failure, for the appointed men exploit the British power structures for their own ends. One chief, James Ikedi, threatens to demolish compounds to make way for new roads in order to extract bribes from wealthy villagers (57). He even uses his British-awarded title to have himself declared king among a people who have always abominated kings (58).

Inserting oneself into the consciousness of another, which is part of Greenblatt's definition of improvisation, is not the sole preserve of the colonizer. Ezeulu recognizes the need to enter into British structures; thus the defender of the worship of Ulu sends his son Oduche to the missionary school. The colonized who fulfills British expectations for natives and the colonized who imitates British codes both play roles, and sometimes the same person plays both roles. This role-playing may take the form of selfish manipulation, as with James Ikedi, and it may also serve larger, political purposes. Moses Unachukwu, who has lived for ten years among the whites in Onitsha before his return to Umuaro to take up the role of translator, knows how to address different audiences. At the end of the novel, Unachukwu gets a clerk in Okperi to write a letter on behalf of the priest of Idemili to the bishop on the Niger: "Being the work of one of the knowledgeable clerks on Government Hill the petition made allusions to such potent words as law and order and the King's peace" (214).

Like Greenblatt's improviser, the British and the Umuarans fit the unforeseen, the apparently random, and the meaningless into their own narratives. In *Arrow of God* the unforeseeable is figured by

sudden illness and death. The people of Umuaro interpret sickness as a wrestling match between the patient and the forces that seek to do the patient harm. The British think of sickness as the product of an imbalance, the result of intemperance. When Winterbottom is struck down by fever after having Ezeulu arrested, there are rival interpretations: "Perhaps it was Captain Winterbottom's rage and frenzy that brought it on; perhaps his steward was right about its cause [and the fever was Ezeulu's revenge]" (149). Achebe's narrative dwells less on whether the fever is the result of personal immoderation or an enemy's magical power than on the fever's function as an unforeseen event that tests the characters' ability to fit the world into their own narrative. The person closest to Winterbottom, the missionary doctor Mary Savage, breaks down in tears and panic, but others respond strategically. Winterbottom's incapacity thrusts Tony Clarke into a position of authority and aggravates an existing crisis in Umuaro. Ezeulu is able to turn his prolonged incarceration to his own account: he fits the British into his own narrative of divine retribution for Umuaro.

At the end of the novel Ezeulu's son Obika dies suddenly and unexpectedly while carrying the mask of the *ogbazulobodo*. Those closest to Obika do not know how to react: Ezeulu despairs, believing that the death presages "the collapse and ruin of all things" (229). The rest of Umuaro sees in Obika's death the abandonment of the stubborn priest by his god. The death is clearly overdetermined. Shortly before his death, Obika challenges the power of a feared medicine man, lifting him up and throwing him into the bush in front of a great crowd gathered for a festival (198). The festival is subsequently marred by a bad omen when a ram offered in sacrifice is not killed with the first blow (201). There is, however, another possible explanation. Obika agrees to carry the mask despite a fever, goaded by the thought that the villagers will blame him if he does not (224): the suggestion is that the fever kills him. The significance of an unforeseen event such as Obika's death is precisely that it can be fitted into rival narratives.

Ezeulu is unable to respond to Obika's death, for it comes at a moment of great stress—"At any other time Ezeulu would have been more than a match to

his grief. He would have been equal to any pain not compounded with humiliation" (229)—and he is driven mad. In Achebe's novel madness can be defined as the incapacity to insert oneself into the consciousness of others: Ezeulu ends his days isolated from others and from the world. Ezeulu's demise is open to multiple interpretations, however: "Perhaps it was the constant, futile throbbing of these thoughts that finally left a crack in Ezeulu's mind. Or perhaps his implacable assailant . . . stepped on him as on an insect and crushed him under the heel in the dust" (229). Moreover, since Ezeulu's mother has also gone mad, it is possible to view his behavior as hereditary.

Ezeulu's collapse is fitted into narratives that serve others' purposes. The Christians, led by Goodcountry, invite the disenchanted and hungry worshipers of Ulu to join the church and to eat the yams that Ezeulu has forbidden. The people of Umuaro agree so that they can harvest their yams and preserve the community. Who is using whom? Under pressure to redraw its boundaries, the community risks splitting apart. The mass conversion to Christianity conspicuously redraws the boundary between the sacred and the profane; however, other boundaries are subtly redrawn along reassuringly familiar lines. The distinction between real programs and moral objects, for instance, is strengthened: the community turns from Ulu to a god that will bless the harvest of the yams. So, too, the distinction between intentionality and inevitability remains relatively constant. Ezeulu's demise allows the community to evade direct responsibility for the mass apostasy by blaming the gods. It is not the community that abandons Ulu but Ulu who abandons his people: "For a deity who chose a moment such as this to chastise his priest or abandon him before his enemies was inciting people to take liberties; and Umuaro was just ripe to do so" (230).

Another way the community avoids final responsibility for its apostasy is by redrawing the boundary between reason and madness that defines the space in which meaningful discourse takes place. At the end Ezeulu really is mad; that is, he is unable to insert himself into the consciousness of others. Yet both Clarke and Nwaka believe that Ezeulu was already mad when he refused the position of warrant chief (175–76). At the same time most

Umuarans consider Ezeulu's rejection of the British offer a courageous model of meaningful discourse. Afterward, however, they interpret Ezeulu's final madness not as a break with what has come before but as the fulfillment of something that has always been at least potentially present. Midway through the novel the priest's laugh disturbs his friend Akuebue because it sounds like a madman's: Akuebue "was given no chance to examine this strange feeling of fear closely. But he was to have it again in future and it was only then he saw its meaning" (131). Akuebue does not at first understand that Ezeulu's laughter is a sign of madness for the good reason that the laughter of deities can be equally fearful. Eventually, however, the meaning of the laugh is understood, and Ezeulu's final madness is traced back to his tenure as priest of Ulu. Although Ezeulu's sanity is shattered by the silence of his god when his son dies, others later assume that Ezeulu was already mad when he conversed with his god. Two different kinds of madness are conflated here: that of the absence of God and that of the presence of God.

The distinctions that constitute identity are created by rituals, symbolic acts "performed for expressive rather than purely instrumental purposes" (Wuthnow 140). Two kinds of ritual are depicted in *Arrow of God*. Organized, regularly recurring ritual occasions, such as the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves, provide participants with the opportunity to discharge moral obligations and thereby to acquire a sense of moral worth. This kind of ritual is not a means of knowing but an expression of what is already known: for some, like the five wives of Nwaka, the festival is as much an occasion to display wealth as it is an opportunity to fulfill moral duties (68). When the moral order comes under stress, however, extemporized rituals that dramatize the crisis are felt to be more meaningful than organized, recurring rituals are. Oduche's imprisonment of the python is a ritual in this second sense, a symbolic-expressive dramatization of the conflict that engulfs the community. Responses to this ritual event, which derives its meaning from the particular historical moment, are stronger (and less unanimous) than are responses to the annual Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves.

Ezeulu's final madness is also a ritual of this second kind, an expressive manifestation of the passing of the old and the drawing of new symbolic boundaries. Ezeulu recapitulates at a single unrepeatable moment the scapegoat role that he plays every year at the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves: taking the sins of the community on himself so that the community can be renewed. Ezeulu makes possible the community's mass conversion to Christianity by conspicuously drawing onto himself all the cultural features that stand in the way of that move and then suffering immolation.

The community interprets Ezeulu's final madness and expulsion as a ritual tragedy. Umuaro and its leaders read in Ezeulu's fate the gods' punishment of his ambition and stubbornness and the vindication of the wisdom "that no man however great [is] greater than his people" (230). Casting Ezeulu's story as a tragedy allows the community to render intelligible its own changing identity at a moment of historical crisis. What is at stake in *Arrow of God* is not any particular cultural values but the capacity of a collectivity to generate a satisfying narrative.

As Achebe says in his preface to the second edition of the novel, Ezeulu's defeat operates like a rite of passage. For Wuthnow, "[r]ites of passage . . . dichotomize the continuous progression of real time into two distinct periods as far as social time is concerned" (113–14), a division that is artificial. Ezeulu's defeat is not the death of a single complete and internally consistent culture, but the story is told that way. The validity of this telling lies not in its correspondence to objective reality but in its status as a symbolic expression of an Umuaran self that has been reinvented in colonial times.

The conversion to Christianity does not necessarily mark the death or falling apart of a culture, for culture does not have an ontological existence apart from what cultural agents do. John Tomlinson argues against the conception of cultural imperialism as the spread of false behavior and false consciousness, against the presumption that people are something more than what they do. More accurately, cultural imperialism deprives cultural agents of the spiritual resources or institutional space necessary to generate meaningful collective narratives.

Achebe's Igbo suffer political imperialism but are able to resist cultural imperialism, for they retain a "collective will-formation" (Tomlinson 165) and a capacity to account for their experience and their place in the world through narrative.[8]

The Umuaran narrative is, of course, a tragedy about the loss of authenticity. Tragedy, however, is not the only possible mode for the community's story. If continuity rather than discontinuity were stressed, the experience of colonization might be figured as a heroic narrative of resistance, or if the discontinuity were rendered more absolute, the narrative might trace the integration of a subsistence economy into a capitalist world order. Tragedy is accepted as the most appropriate narrative configuration because it is that part of the reservoir of available cultural elements that proves most useful for Umuaran self-definition.

IV

Greenblatt writes that improvisation, the manipulative role-playing favored by the West ever since the Renaissance, requires seeing the other's culture as an ideological construct but does not risk—and may actually strengthen—one's own worldview. And yet the narrative strategies of Achebe's Igbo characters presume a self-conscious awareness of the constructed nature of all cultural systems: the people of Umuaro never forget that Ulu is their own creation.

Andrew Apter contends that the deep or secret knowledge of the guardians of Yoruba ritual is the human invention of their practices. Achebe's model of double consciousness among the Igbo in *Arrow of God* represents a more democratic view: the guardian of ritual forgets that Ulu is a human creation, but the rest of the community remembers.[9]

Achebe's model more closely reflects Karin Barber's analysis of Yoruba religion, which focuses not on the priests' deep knowledge but on the devotees' worship. In Barber's study of praise songs Yoruba devotees of an *orisa*, or god, are well aware that their god is a function of human belief and acknowledge that the relation between god and devotee is characterized by mutual dependence. Devotees rely on the *orisa* to answer their needs; the *orisa* in turn requires worship for pres-

tige and existence. If one *orisa* fails, the devotee is always free to experiment with another; there is plenty of room for innovation and adjustment. For Barber, the reception of Christianity and Islam in Yorubaland was facilitated by this openness. The presence of other religions enlarged the devotee's choices instead of inspiring skepticism, as a religion's claims to a complete and all-inclusive account of the world might have done. Barber's account of elastic paganism can be usefully applied to *Arrow of God*,[10] which illustrates not the collapse of one religion and the triumph of another but the flexibility of Igbo beliefs. Gods are abandoned and in effect cease to exist when they do not satisfy their devotees; other, more accommodating gods are adopted if they can better answer the needs of worshipers.

I do not mean to suggest that Igbo religion is a consistent whole resilient enough to triumph over all vicissitudes. The tragic narrative told by the people of Umuaro makes possible the redrawing of symbolic boundaries and distinctions necessary for the community's survival. Yet it is inaccurate to speak of the survival of the community, because that phrase implies an internally consistent identity. At the end of the novel, worship is addressed no longer to a local patron deity but to the Christian God, and the identity of the people of Umuaro is subtly dissolving within a more general Igbo identity. In Njaka's terms, the *ikwu* 'field of which one is a member' is expanding to include Igboland and perhaps even all of Africa, while the *ibe* 'world of the other' is shifting from Okperi to the British and the white man more generally (54). Cultural agents change who they are as they change what they do. *Arrow of God* describes how the people of Umuaro become Igbo and African. Umuaro is only a fictional place, but Igboland and Africa define identities that Achebe shares with many readers.[11]

Although *Arrow of God* celebrates a paganism sufficiently elastic to contain Christianity, Achebe's novel is not itself pagan, any more than Barber's or Apter's anthropological analyses are.[12] Only once is Ulu shown speaking to his priest, and on that occasion Ulu's laughter suggests that the god is the projection of a madman: "I say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suits

you? You want to save your friends who brought
you palm wine he-he-he-he-he!" (191). And in the
second edition of the novel Achebe adds the com-
ment that "[o]nly the insane could sometimes ap-
proach the menace and mockery in the laughter of
deities" (191). Achebe's world is made by humans,
not by gods or by transcendental forces.

V

Ezeulu's tragedy is the narrative configuration that
the people of Umuaro give to colonization. The
configuration that Achebe gives is more radically
self-reflexive: colonization is a tragedy *because*
the colonized write it as a tragedy, complete with
cathartic release, and the capacity of the colonized
to fit their experience into a narrative indicates the
community's resilience. Writing for the citizens of
newly independent Nigeria, Achebe in turn con-
structs a narrative that explains their low status in
the world order but that also offers possibilities for
collective self-definition and action. *Arrow of God*
presents self-fulfilling evidence that Nigerians are
capable of generating a meaningful narrative.
Achebe's narrative is not a tragedy but a realist
novel about the telling of a tragedy, a novel in
which Africans are not the victims but the makers
of their own history. They do not always make
what they intend, of course—"Our eye sees some-
thing; we take a stone and aim at it. But the stone
rarely succeeds like the eye in hitting the mark"
(171)—but then neither do the British.

Although Achebe makes changes in the second
edition of *Arrow of God* that implicitly side with
reformers rather than purists, in the introduction
to that edition he declares himself ready to "salute
those who stand fast, the spiritual descendants of
that magnificent man, Ezeulu." Achebe admires
Ezeulu's steadfastness even though *Arrow of God*
shows that the priest himself has drawn the line at
which he stands fast. Achebe explores how peo-
ple use appeals to tradition or to change to invent
themselves.

Authenticity and creolization are accounts of
culture that do what Walter Benn Michaels calls
"cultural work" (682). Michaels argues that at-
tributing a culture to someone who does not prac-
tice it implicitly ascribes culture to genes, blood,

or the collective unconscious and commits a racist
fallacy. My point is related but different: neither
authenticity nor creolization has ontological valid-
ity, but both are valid as metaphors that permit col-
lective self-fashioning.

In rejecting the notion of pure, uncontested
cultures, I may appear to side with advocates of
creolization against supporters of authenticity.
Objections to authenticity's ontological status do
not, however, negate its force as an enabling
metaphor. One may not be able to return to the
world of one's ancestors, but one can claim to be
doing so, with political effect. Tradition has an
ontological existence, not in the past but in the
present, where it affects people's self-images and
their behavior. Uzo Esonwanne writes that "[a]s
with the history of any other peoples, the history
of Africa's 'past' derives its ideological and cul-
tural valence from the current struggles of its peo-
ples" (124); this assertion has always been true.

Appeals to authenticity are neither regressive
nor progressive in themselves. Ezeulu's "tradition"
serves his own will to power, in opposition to that
of his rival Nwaka, but can also advance the pur-
poses of those in Umuaro who are more demo-
cratic. In the service of, say, Mobutu in Zaire,
authenticity is mere obfuscation in the service of
tyranny. But Ngũgĩ's call for a return to the lan-
guage that he learned at his mother's knee, made
in the name of decolonizing the mind, serves a
Marxist-inspired project of social change by di-
rectly addressing the classes who could not read
his novels if they were written in English.

Like authenticity, hybridization is a metaphor
that does not define a particular political program.
Hybridization is most often invoked by advocates
of pluralism and tolerance, but it can also under-
write imperialism. "The intersection of races and
the blending of opposed civilizations are the
most powerful auxiliaries of liberty," writes Jules
Michelet, a nationalist and believer in France's im-
perial mission (Todorov 241). Michelet claims that
the blending of races makes France manifestly su-
perior to other nations, which are less exposed to
outside influences, purer, and therefore weaker.
Creolization, like authenticity, is a rallying stan-
dard in intracommunal debate. What is really at
stake in such debates is not authenticity or cre-

olization but democracy as opposed to totalitarianism (Amselle 11).

My own attempt to subsume authenticity and hybridization within a single discussion is, of course, part of a current North American debate that has uncertain meaning for African debates. That I have eschewed the division usually drawn between imperialist capitalist modernity and precapitalist tradition makes possible a vision of the equality of cultural identities but precludes explanation of why some collectivities achieve power over others. A neo-Marxist narrative of late capitalist modernity's expansion and its integration of the globe in an unjust order might offer a response. What my own narrative offers is a reminder that political and economic imperialism is not necessarily synonymous with the overtaking of one national *culture* by another. Authenticity and creolization are best regarded as valuable rhetorical tools that can be made to serve liberation. It may also be liberating to remember that these constructions are effectively rhetorical.

Notes

[1]It will be obvious to readers that this essay is indebted to James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* and to the essays collected by Clifford and George Marcus in *Writing Culture*.

[2]In postcolonial literary circles, the epitome of the false self is often V. S. Naipaul. Françoise Lionnet argues that there is a binary opposition between assimilation and authenticity, between sameness and difference, that creolization or "transculturation" is able to transcend. I am sympathetic to her values, but I would point out the binary opposition between authenticity and creolization. Creolization cannot be understood without a notion of cultural purity to which it stands opposed. Assimilation, however, is a position that is usually attributed to others and rarely espoused. Writers who are prepared to accept the label "assimilationist," such as Naipaul and Nirad Chaudhuri, are lone pessimists who signal that they have left behind a community.

[3]Gikandi acknowledges that the novel illustrates "Achebe's concern with contradictions and cosmic dualities," a concern informed by the Igbo process of artistic production known as *mbari*, but he believes that the novel is essentially predicated on "the loss of narrative and linguistic authority" (52).

[4]Goodcountry is from the Niger Delta (46), an area that suffered colonization decades earlier than Igboland but that Achebe's readers in 1964 would have thought of as close to Ig-

boland and falling within the same national and even state divisions.

[5]Amselle would go so far as to say that nothing is less traditional than so-called primitive societies (57); tradition is the result of contact with the literate European ethnographer.

[6]"It is not the existence of different cultures that produces comparative ethnology, but comparative ethnology that constitutes cultures as different" (Amselle 51).

[7]For Winterbottom to see the Igbo as truth tellers would require that the truth be singular and stable and that colonizer and colonized agree on that truth. Of course Winterbottom believes that the colonized are liars before they open their mouths.

[8]I do not deny the possibility of cultural imperialism (slavery, dispossession, and genocide have deprived people of the ability to generate meaningful narratives. I am suggesting that political imperialism is not always cultural imperialism.

[9]Apter points to a critical practice at the heart of ritual that "sanctions self-conscious awareness of the role of human agency in rewriting official illusions of legitimacy, of the practical role which ritual fulfils in the unmaking and remaking of hegemony" ("*Que Faire?*" 100).

[10]If an analogy can be drawn between Barber's description of Yoruba beliefs and Achebe's depiction of the worship of Ulu in Umuaro, it is not because the Yoruba and the Igbo are Africans and therefore the same. Barber herself contrasts the Yoruba beliefs she describes with the beliefs of the Tallensi of northern Ghana. I apply Barber's analysis because it is suggestively parallel to the depiction of Umuaro in ways that Apter's analysis of Yoruba religion, for instance, is not.

[11]The notion that ethnic identity in Africa is an invention can be found in the essays collected by Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'bokolo. For the argument that Africa and the Negro race are inventions, see V. Y. Mudimbe, as well as Kwame Anthony Appiah.

[12]In *Black Critics and Kings* Apter does suggest what a pagan critical philosophy would look like.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. 1964. London: Heinemann, 1986.

Amselle, Jean-Loup. *Logiques métisses: Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*. Paris: Payot, 1990.

Amselle, Jean-Loup, and Elikia M'bokolo, eds. *Au coeur de l'ethnie: Ethnies, tribalisme et état en Afrique*. Paris: Découverte, 1985.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Apter, Andrew. *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992.

———. "*Que Faire?* Reconsidering Inventions of Africa." *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1992): 87–104.

Barber, Karin. "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes towards the *Orisa*." *Africa* 51 (1981): 724–45.

Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988.

Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.

Cohen, Anthony P. "Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's View." *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 195–209.

Curtin, Philip D. *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1964.

Esonwanne, Uzo. "The Madness of Africa(ns); or, Anthropology's Reason." *Cultural Critique* 17 (1990–91): 107–26.

Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.

Hountondji, Paulin. *Sur la "philosophie africaine."* Paris: Maspero, 1977.

Laitin, David D. *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.

Lionnet, Françoise. "*Logiques métisses*: Cultural Appropriations and Postcolonial Representations." *College Literature* 19 (1993): 100–20.

Michaels, Walter Benn. "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity." *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 655–85.

Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986.

Njaka, Mazi Elechukwu Nnadibuagha. *Igbo Political Culture*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1974.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *Nous et les autres*. Paris: Seuil, 1989.

Tomlinson, John. *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.

Wuthnow, Robert. *Meaning and Moral Order*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.

Young, Crawford. "Patterns of Social Conflict: State, Class, and Ethnicity." *Daedalus* 3.2 (1982): 71–98.