Reading *No Longer at Ease* as a Text That Performs Local Cosmopolitanism

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No Longer at Ease is Chinua Achebe's only novel that captures the difficult period of interregnum in Nigeria. In this novel Achebe grapples with the dilemma of representing that period of transition—the emergence of a new Nigerian nation—without falling into the trappings of national romance, particularly because Nigeria "had yet to evolve linguistic and cultural figures for a new national consciousness" (Gikandi 81).

In this paper I seek to argue that Achebe navigates this dilemma of transition by pointing to two forms of cosmopolitanism in tension with each other: one is idealistic and outside local history, a universalist type of cosmopolitanism that "resists settlement in particular, conflicted social and historical contexts," while the other is inside history, a cosmopolitanism of local colonial subjects who, as Stephanie Newell argues, have been labeled mimics (104). By examining the tension between the members of the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) and Obi Okonkwo, I demonstrate that Achebe anticipates by several decades what has come to be called local cosmopolitanism. I aim to explore a cosmopolitanism that positions itself as universalist, in contrast to the groups that Kwame Anthony Appiah argues practice "segregation and seclusion" rather than global citizenship and inclusiveness (xviii). If critics like Appiah see the local as anticosmopolitanism, Achebe interrogates this assumption by creating an agonistic cosmopolitan subject, Obi Okonkwo, whose cosmopolitanism is shot through with contradictions, while juxtaposing him with the UPU, the body that sent Obi abroad to study, and with the discourses it represents.

Traveled, Obi believes that he can transcend not only his Englishness but also the traditions of his people. To do this, he must reach out to a derivative modernist discourse wedded to the idea of the nation, a discourse that is essentially nationalist and therefore anticosmopolitan. Although Obi carries himself as a cosmopolitan, he is in fact a nationalist with a romantic idea of Nigerian nationhood. One of the ways through which Obi seeks to perform his Nigerianness is by marrying Clara, an *osu* (an outcast among the Ibo), an act that would serve as "willed entry into the desired nationalist space, a space transcending ethnic traditions and family loyalties." And yet Obi can only occupy this space by marshaling arguments rooted in colonial grammar—"the doctrines of modernity and Christianity" (Gikandi 11). It is doubtful, though, whether Obi's attempts to evoke colonial grammar and values have any depth of conviction. They are his way of placating his parents, whose awareness of the authority of local histories and the demands of local geographies is sharper than Obi's. In telling Obi that "[b]ecause I suffered I understand Christianity" (125), his father, Isaac, suggests that experience has taught him not to act outside local histories and family loyalties as Obi tries to do. Indeed, the awareness of a curse on Isaac Okonkwo cast by his own father when Isaac turned his back on the family to embrace a new religion continues to haunt Obi's consciousness, especially when history threatens to repeat itself. At least Obi's father was decisive. Obi is not. His vacillation is the result of a form of idealism, born of his colonial education. And even though his parents are obviously serious, Obi is under the illusion that they will change their minds in good time. When confronted with Clara's pregnancy, Obi is paralyzed and cannot persuade her to keep the child.

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PMLA 129.2 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168245 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Obi's biggest dilemma is that he wants to participate in both tradition and modernity selectively. He is looking for Nigerian food (31), but he cannot countenance its taboos. He wants to be close to his people, but he is concerned that Clara makes her dresses in the slums. He seeks to transcend tradition, and yet he cannot immerse himself in Englishness because it makes him feel like an outsider in his own language. "Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation," he observes during a meeting of the UPU (45). And yet when those men reproach him for "moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her," he storms out of the meeting and threatens the president of the union with court action, effectively turning his back on the community that sent him overseas. By evoking the authority of a colonial institution such as the court, he rejects his people's way of doing things.

Contrasted to the protagonist under siege are a group of "colonized" subjects whose travel is limited; they are bound to local power structures and loyalties, but, significantly too, they are a group "whose gestures towards English clothing and language are a source of derision only to those who have traveled" abroad like Obi (Newell 110). Members of the UPU have indeed also traveled, but only from their rural traditional base to Lagos, an urban center whose modern pleasures and alienation, they all acknowledge, are daunting challenges. Yet they are here, as one of them notes: not for work but for money, a new instrument of commodity transaction. If we accept the work of imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity in which territories come to be seen as conditions of possibility as much as of constraint, then Achebe's Lagos is one such space. It is, as Arjun Appadurai would have it, "a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern," thus permitting the history of modernity to be rewritten "more as a vernacular globalization" (3–4). Some of these contestations take place on the margins—in gatherings such as those of the UPU and in eating and entertainment sites but also in the way cosmopolitanism is staged in ordinary things such as dressing codes.

One of the biggest sources of tension between Obi Okonkwo and the UPU relates to how he performs his cosmopolitanism. At his homecoming celebration, he fails to live up to the fantasies the people have about him, fantasies grounded on lived colonial mimicry. We read the narrator's ironic observation that when the people come to welcome Obi, everybody is "properly dressed in *agbada* or European suit except the guest of honor, who appeared in his shirtsleeves because of the heat." The narrator comments on Obi's attitude: "That was Obi's mistake Number One. Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out" (28).

Obi struggles to discover his place in the new Nigeria, while the sojourners have no problem moving in and out of the so-called modern and traditional spaces. Unlike Obi, they have no illusion about their sense of history because they carry their traditions with them. But they also can look at both cultures at once, celebrating certain forms of cosmopolitanism while displaying an awareness of local values they are still indebted to. Joseph, Obi's homeboy, takes pride in Obi's dramatic arrival at a UPU meeting in a new car, but he will not countenance Obi's marriage to Clara. My point is that local cosmopolitans are adept at exploiting symbols of modernity to fuel their own local projects. When members of the UPU demand that Obi carry himself in ways akin to mimicry, it is because they see in these colonial values a form of local cosmopolitan styling rather than a poor parody of the real thing.

The sojourners signal a cosmopolitan style that may not always indicate international mobility, but it suggests an interaction,

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168245 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"a cultural dynamic of reaching out to and signifying affinity with an 'outside,' a world beyond the 'local'" (Newell 110). These people's awareness of modernity is anchored in signs they know and can control and in the possibility of mobility between modern and traditional spaces. This is best captured in the analogy that an old man draws, during Obi's homecoming ceremony, between his travel abroad and the journey to the spirit world, thus using the local grammar to frame new experience, despite his awareness that, unlike in the time of Obi's grandfather, "[g]reatness is now in the things of the white man" (49). Travelers are seen here as the harbinger of change, but they are only useful to the extent that they return to engage meaningfully with the stay-at-homes—the autochthons. This is the bridge that Obi fails to cross—hence his restlessness in Umuofia and among his people in Lagos. If Obi returns to a vague construct called Nigeria, the sojourners return to a known place called Umuofia, and it is in the trafficking between Umuofia and Lagos that their local cosmopolitanism is enacted.

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Chinua Achebe's Ecocritical Awareness

ELAINE SAVORY

We mourn Chinua Achebe, a great writer and an extraordinary person. Hardly noticed, however, has been his insightful and important representation of Igbo culture and modern Nigeria in ecological terms. As we mourn him, those of us who think about ecology are anxious that human beings might one day have to mourn the loss of prime habitat, perhaps even the whole earth as habitable space. Achebe profoundly understood the consequences of losing a sense of balance between people and their environment long before environmental concerns became a movement and a consciousness.

Igbo culture entered modernity abruptly with the arrival of British colonists bent on profiting financially from the land and people they could dominate. The empire was a thriving business proposition. They traveled with the Bible, source of the story of Eden, and with English literature, which included a strong strain of the pastoral (from Theocritus on, an urban desire for delightful respite in rural places). Achebe not only critiqued empire (while being honest about what it brought, such as a particular kind of education, which he appreciated) but also resisted the pastoral. Nature for his traditional Igbo characters is not a simply delightful and beautiful frame for human life but a series of challenges. The earth goddess, Ala, has to be invoked often, along with the ancestors (Afigbo 163): death may

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PMLA 129.2 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168245 Published online by Cambridge University Press