Flat Style: *Things Fall Apart* and Its Illustrations

EMILY HYDE

IN THE EARLY 1960S TWO EDITIONS OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL Apart* were published with competing sets of illustrations. The first, by Dennis Carabine, illustrates a realist novel, the second, by Uche Okeke, a modernist one. If illustration juxtaposes the contending representational claims of word and image, what do these two sets of images offer to our understanding of this celebrated novel? Carabine's ordered scenes and heavy shading reinforce the widely held view of *Things Fall Apart* as a necessary realist precursor to contemporary forms of African fiction. But Okeke's drawings replace that heaviness with the flat surface of the page. Reading *Things Fall Apart* for the modernist surface reveals it to be a novel of the mid-century: not a relic of independence-era realism but the story of a new way of seeing, one emerging with a newly independent nation as it joins a global culture of images.

Things Fall Apart was first published by Heinemann in London in 1958 and then reissued after Nigerian independence as the inaugural novel in Heinemann's African Writers Series (AWS). This 1962 edition contained drawings by Carabine, a Scottish illustrator, but Achebe recommended that Okeke, a Nigerian artist, redo these illustrations for the second AWS edition in 1963. Reading these editions for the dynamic tension between word and image reveals Achebe's novel to be—despite its iconic status—unfamiliar. Considered by many to epitomize a pedagogical realism verging on ethnography, *Things Fall Apart* in fact asserts the importance of modernism's impenetrable surfaces at mid-century. But this is not a taxonomic argument—the modernist surface can be made to serve realist imperatives. Achebe's novel is certainly driven by the pedagogical, truth-telling imperatives of realism, but if realism is a drive, modernism remains a powerful style in both the literary and visual arts at mid-

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century. The flat surfaces of Okeke's drawings thus emphasize the importance of modernist style to the poetics of decolonization.

The realist novel, whether European or postcolonial, is often associated with depth—in the foreground our main characters, in the background a teeming social world. This referential depth—psychological, cultural, historical—depends on a certain transparency. In George Levine's formulation, literary realism uses language in an effort to get beyond language, or, in other words, to give the illusion of representational transparency (6). Likewise, in the visual arts the invisible receding lines and grid work of linear perspective give the illusion of depth and distance. Not surprisingly, Achebe's language in *Things Fall Apart* is often described as plain and direct, while his knowledge of the Igbo world is deep and profound. Achebe is praised for his accuracy, his unfaltering accumulation of the details of daily life in Umuofia, the Igbo village where most of the novel takes place. But this focus on details (encouraged by Achebe's use of the term late in the novel) is misleading. It links to Roman Jakobson's account of realism, consisting primarily of metonymic digressions along a horizontal surface from plot to characters and setting and back again (111). Achebe's flat realist style, by contrast, does not develop through detail work but emerges when he suddenly incorporates the modernist surface into his novel at the end. European modernism rejects not depth itself but realist illusions of depth, and so it foregrounds the surface of the medium. Achebe's modernism operates in the same way at mid-century, but it does so by incorporating and then overcoming the legacies of European modernism.

While this critical distinction between modernist surface and realist depth is too crisp, it provides a clear starting point for reading *Things Fall Apart* through its illustrations. Many of Achebe's other novels and stories appeared with illustrations in the 1960s. His second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (Obolensky, 1960; AWS, 1963), the story collection *"The Sacrificial Egg" and Other Short Stories* (Etudo, 1962),[1] and Achebe's first children's book, *Chike and the River* (Cambridge UP, 1966), each contained drawings or prints by a different artist. These illustrations have not received sustained critical attention, though both AWS editions and what is collectively known as Onitsha market literature have provided a wealth of material for postcolonial book history.[2] I will place Carabine's and Okeke's drawings in their historical context while also reading them formally. They are, after all, illustrations—they are meant to illuminate Achebe's text. Carabine's referential depths and Okeke's flat surfaces direct renewed attention to the famous ending of *Things Fall Apart*, which, I will argue, turns on the problem of surface and depth. Often described as concluding with a narrative jump into the mind of a colonial administrator, *Things Fall Apart* in fact performs this feat visually. Achebe pulls a flat surface—a "mute backcloth" (204)—across his text and turns the modernist surface to anticolonial purposes.[3]

This distinction between realism as a drive toward referential depths and modernism as a surface style eludes the distinction between naive, nationalist realism and belated, Eurocentric modernism that is often allowed to structure critical views of mid-century anglophone literature.[4] For Okeke and Achebe, modernist style is not necessarily belated, though European modernism was by this period widely criticized as the aesthetic ideology of a Western, imperial elite. Achebe mocks this colonial form of literary modernism in his depiction of T. K. Winterbottom in *Arrow of God* (1964). Many critics thus see modernism at mid-century as both a colonial legacy and a part of the anticolonial project.[5] It is a site of aesthetic negotiation: modernist style can be appropriated, transformed, made new, and put to work in the era of decolonization.[6] In addition to presenting the two competing sets of illustrations from

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the early 1960s, my argument will center on two well-known moments in Achebe's oeuvre: his critical pronouncements on Joseph Conrad's imagery and the "backcloth" that flicks closed at the end of *Things Fall Apart*. This focus on the visual reveals how at mid-century Achebe incorporates the modernist surface into his fiction to create a flat style of realism.

The plot of *Things Fall Apart* has been read in dramatically different ways. At first, readers tended to focus on the protagonist, Okonkwo, as a tragic figure. The 1959 American edition, for example, included the subtitle *The Story of a Strong Man*. In this reading, Okonkwo's hubris causes him to make a series of fateful decisions: he kills his adopted son, Ikemefuna, and drives his son Nwoye into the arms of the English missionaries. When another Christian convert unmasks an ancestral spirit, Okonkwo participates in the retaliatory burning of the missionaries' church and is imprisoned along with the other leaders of Umuofia by the district commissioner. On their release, Okonkwo realizes that Umuofia will not go to war with the colonial administration, and he hangs himself in disgust. This reading is complicated, however, by Achebe's presentation of Okonkwo: he is "not a man of thought but of action" (69). He seems psychologically underrealized, especially compared with Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*. This was a feature one critic found common to African fiction of this period, whose characters, he wrote, are "flat and canvassy" (Abraham 97). Critics have also debated the extent to which Okonkwo is or is not a "representative figure of African historicity" (Irele 4). This question arises because Okonkwo's downfall occurs not as a result of his steadfast adherence to the communal ideals of Umuofia but because he regularly distorts those ideals. Thus, another reading of *Things Fall Apart* stresses Achebe's depiction of Umuofia and applauds the specificity and coherence of his presentation of Igbo culture in the late nineteenth century. His language is filled with the proverbial wisdom of Umuofia and the details of its everyday life. Abdul JanMohamed goes so far as to calculate the preponderance of material that describes Umuofia and is unrelated to Okonkwo: "Out of the one-hundred-and-eighteen pages that comprise part one of the novel only about eight are devoted, strictly speaking, to the development of the plot" (31). What might be background in another novel is foregrounded. In other words, Achebe's narrative can also be described as "flat."

To investigate the flat elements of Achebe's novel is not to belittle it—Achebe's flat style powerfully disrupts colonial modes of representation in the English novel. I pursue Achebe's flat style through the visual images associated with its early publication history to show how it also unsettles critical accounts of the legacies of modernism. By turning the flat modernist surface to the purposes of the realist novel, Achebe counters not just colonial modes of literary representation but the myth of modernist primitivism as well. The early illustrated editions of *Things Fall Apart* indicate, therefore, that modernism in the visual arts was a disruptive force, one employed by early postcolonial writers to challenge the certainties of literary representation and literary criticism at mid-century.

Images of Africa

A brief detour to some of the other images and illustrations associated with *Things Fall Apart* will set the stage for the contrast I wish to draw between Carabine and Okeke. In his depiction of Umuofia on the verge of colonial contact, Achebe reworked and recontextualized material from two texts by the missionary anthropologist G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (1921) and *Niger Ibos* (1938).[7] The photographs that accompany Basden's books provide a foil for the illustrations in *Things Fall Apart*. They are exactly the kind of colonial representations Achebe was attempting to sweep away, but they are remarkably

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consistent with how the novel is often read and taught today. The frontispiece to Basden's 1921 book depicts a young woman in profile and bears the caption "Hair-dressing as a Work of Art" (4 [fig. 1]). In 1996 *Things Fall Apart* was reissued by Heinemann in an edition for schools, as part of the series Classics in Context. This edition includes Okeke's illustrations, but it adds an expanded glossary and a lengthy introduction titled "Igbo Culture and History" with a second set of illustrative drawings. One of these, captioned "An elaborate coiffure for a girl whose marriage is being negotiated" (xxix), uncannily recapitulates the frame, pose, and even the shading of Basden's frontispiece (fig. 2).[8] The detail work of the hair—which is ostensibly the subject of both photograph and drawing—instead turns each woman into a figure of difference necessary to colonial management, on the one hand, and to the universal appeal of Achebe's novel, on the other. Each image demands to be read primarily for these referential depths. The recirculation of these ethnographically detailed images at the turn of the twenty-first century heightens the singularity of Achebe's mid-century illustrations, and it gives new meaning to the title of one of his most famous essays: "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*."

Achebe staged his attack on Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* in this essay, first delivered as a lecture in 1975 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Yet despite the title, it is rarely noted that he voices a specifically visual complaint about Conrad's images and recommends a set of alternative images from the canon of modernist painting. Achebe begins by arguing that Conrad's literary impressionism merely brings "the peculiar gifts of his own mind" to bear on the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination—the image remains the same (12).[9] For Achebe, Conrad relegates Africa to mere "setting and backdrop," and Africans thus become indistinguishable from the jungled riverbanks they



FIG. 1

"Hair-dressing as a Work of Art." Frontispiece in Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (1921).

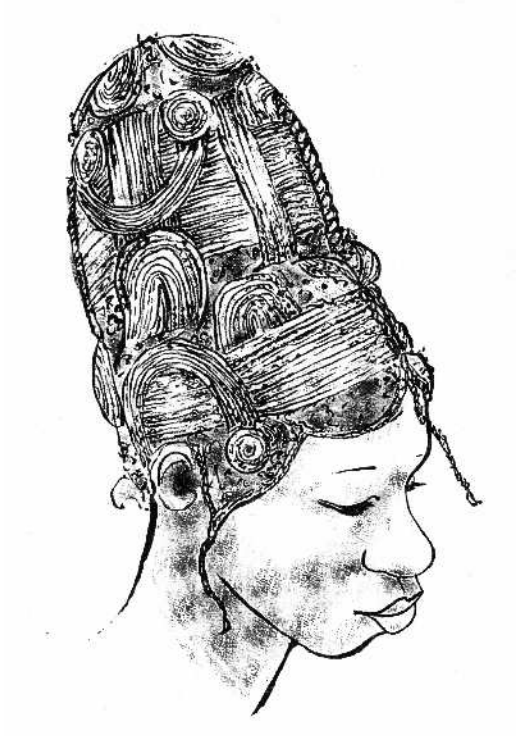


FIG. 2

"An elaborate coiffure for a girl whose marriage is being negotiated." Drawing by Priscilla Hinckley. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1996 [xxix]).

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Fig. 3
"Fang Mask, Gabon." Photograph reproduced in Willett, *African Art: An Introduction* (36). © CNAC / MNAM / Dist. RMN–Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

inhabit (8).[10] Achebe particularly objects to the way Conrad's phrase "black and incomprehensible frenzy" applies both to humans and to their setting (4). The African "backdrop" is there merely to set off Marlow and Kurtz as modern subjects abroad in the world.

Achebe also makes the historical argument that at the same time Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness* other Europeans could see that Africans "must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band." The "other" Europeans Achebe holds up are Picasso and Matisse in the moment they first encounter African masks. This, in Achebe's view, "marked . . . the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength" (11). Here, a different "image of Africa"—the mask, not the backdrop—reorganizes the European visual field. In his polemic against Conrad, Achebe takes pride in the fact that Africa played a part in the making of modernism. But of course there is much more to say about modernist primitivism in this context. Modern art, especially cubism, brings European attention to the surface of the artwork rather than to its depths. Its subjects are the processes of seeing and the medium of painting rather than the illusions of linear perspective. It flattens the image, and it announces its own modernity in the same breath that it disavows the primitive. Achebe's art historical source makes this clear.

This source was Frank Willett's *African Art: An Introduction*, first published in 1971 in London. Willett was a British authority on Ife art who lived in Nigeria from 1958 to 1963. In "An Image of Africa," Achebe quotes a long passage from Willett that describes Maurice Vlaminck's sale of a Fang mask in 1905 to André Derain, who in turn shows it to Picasso and Matisse. Willett includes an image of this mask in his book (fig. 3).[11] Willett's gesture toward this much debated genesis of modern art concludes his short history of the study of African art conducted in and by the West—a study that must have been familiar to Achebe as he wrote his own essay. Willet takes care to reject the term *primitive art*, arguing that it is tied up with nineteenth-century interest in the evolution of aesthetic forms. But while Willett discredits studies that pursue the primitive as "primary in time" (27), his own survey of Western approaches to African art has a temporal orientation. His story ends abruptly in 1905 with Derain's standing "stunned" and "speechless" before the Fang mask (35). For Willett, writing in 1971, the pinnacle of Western understanding of African art is still the moment of modernist primitivism. In the final chapter of *African Art* he describes mid-century African artists, but his account remains largely shaped by modernist ideas of form.

Thus, when Achebe cites Willett in "An Image of Africa," he embeds his arguments about Conrad and Picasso in a line of thinking about modernism and the surface of the artwork. This is the context in which Achebe repeatedly uses what at first might seem like a hackneyed term—*backdrop*—to describe

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the aesthetic location of the African image in Conrad. I take *backdrop* to refer to a painted cloth that defines the plane farthest from the viewer of a painting or from an audience member at the theater. The concept of a backdrop is necessary to linear perspective and to the depiction of depth and distance. Yet it is also a surface, and in Conrad it is a "black and incomprehensible" one, impenetrable, illegible (139). Despite Achebe's celebration of Picasso, there are similarities between Conrad's backdrop and Picasso's mask. Both present surfaces: in *Heart of Darkness* the African backdrop is a "curtain of trees" that suggests to Marlowe that he is one of the first men on a prehistoric earth, taking possession of an accursed inheritance (138–39). But when Picasso beholds the mask, he is also beholding a surface—he does not see the mask in context, in use, or in motion. Anne Cheng describes how Picasso encounters the masks as relics, "husks," "shells," "the residual skins of dead, racialized objects" (20–21).[12] Modernist primitivism thus begins with exteriority—with an impenetrable surface, an outside limit for the modern Western subject.[13] That exteriority is then transposed into style: Conrad's distorted impressions, Picasso's shattered planes.

In "An Image of Africa," Achebe prefers Picasso to Conrad—one infused "new life into European art that had run completely out of strength," while the other was a "thoroughgoing racist" (8). But Okeke's illustrations for *Things Fall Apart* show how Achebe's flat style turns the exteriority of modernist primitivism back on itself.

Things Fall Apart and Heinemann's African Writers Series

Heinemann's African Writers Series was a paperback anglophone educational series run out of London, and Achebe served as its editorial adviser in Nigeria from 1962 to 1972. In those first ten years, it published more than one hundred titles, including reprints, new works, and translations. School boards in newly independent African nations mined the series for examination material, and Heinemann's paperback model depended heavily on this market. But AWS also published new work in hardback so that it could be reviewed in the London papers and sold on a wider international market. The series has been described not just as creating a market for African literature both globally and on the continent but also as creating African literature itself—by nurturing certain writers, selecting certain works, favoring certain forms.[14] The series nearly folded in the 1980s with the collapse of the African oil economies and government cutbacks on educational purchasing, and it stopped adding new titles in 2000, after a long attempt to gain a more international following.

The bright-orange covers of AWS paperback novels often alluded to traditional African art. While the 1958 Heinemann dust jacket for *Things Fall Apart*, by Cecil Bacon, depicted a looming mask in the foreground and in the background a tiny black figure in a loincloth next to a white figure in a tropical suit, the first AWS cover, by the scholar, critic, and artist Dennis Duerden, depicted two African masks, one black, one white, arranged perhaps in reference to Greek drama.[15] But AWS novels were published with interior illustrations only in the first few years.[16] The initial decision to include illustrations looks quite different from the two poles of this publishing arrangement—Heinemann in London and consumers on the African continent. In each context, however, the AWS illustrations reflect a few basic assumptions about illustration in general: that it is intended for children, allied to popular media, and most appropriate in works of realism. From Heinemann's perspective, the postwar boom in trade paperbacks allowed them to offer inexpensive editions to the schools market in anglophone African nations while also directing some of their marketing to the United Kingdom.

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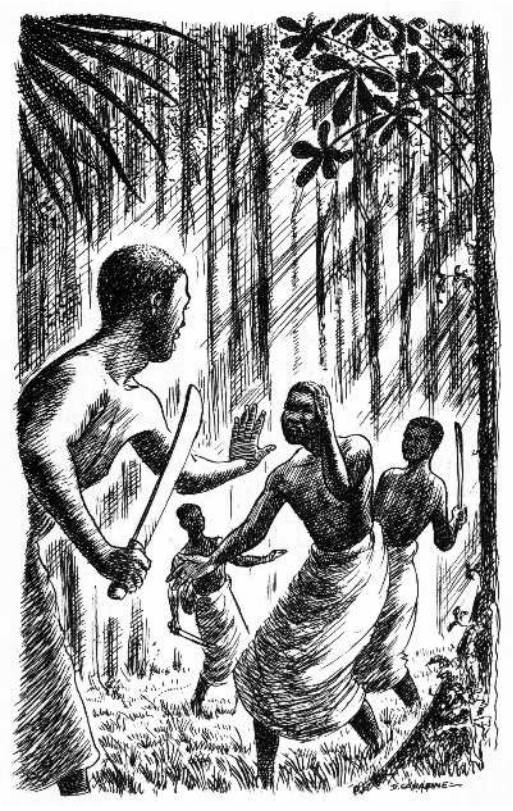


FIG. 4
Drawing by Dennis Carabine. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1962).

Graham Huggan has remarked on the "anthropological fallacy" inherent in the publishing of African literature in this period, and he describes AWS illustrations, cover art, and author photographs as exoticist packaging devices (52). These editions' illustrations, glossaries, and other paratexts also indicate Heinemann's assumptions about the literacy levels and abilities of African students. In this period, Dennis Carabine, Achebe's first illustrator, worked on a number of educational books in Edinburgh intended for the African market, including the publisher Thomas Nelson and Son's series of Yoruba readers and a volume titled *New Nation Arithmetics*.[17] But as pedagogical tools Achebe's illustrations may have had a different meaning in Nigeria.

Pedagogical illustrations are consistent with one of Achebe's famous pronouncements on the role of the African novel: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares?" ("Novelist" 30). Illustrations are certainly "applied art," and in Nigeria just after independence they can be seen to participate in the anticolonial, nationalist rhetoric Achebe suggests here. Another pedagogical context is the visual evangelism of missionary work in Africa—Achebe himself has written about the memorable illustrations in his mother's Igbo translation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* ("Named" 24). Isabel Hofmeyr has uncovered the long history of mission illustrations—drawings, prints, and even photographs—that circulated in Africa and mediated Bunyan's encounters with African intellectual formations (173–213).[18] Finally, these were the boom years of Onitsha market literature—popular stories and novels, advice books, pamphlets, and chapbooks published by local presses in the market town of Onitsha, which Achebe once called "the esoteric region from which creativity sallies forth at will to manifest itself" (*Morning* 126). Onitsha market literature was often illustrated with didactic prints and drawings and was influenced in part by the influx of Indian and English illustrated pulp-magazine fiction (Obiechina, *Onitsha Market Literature* 8). The early AWS illustrations engage with all these forms of pedagogical, applied art, but among these only Okeke's drawings have attracted attention as singular works of art.

The first illustrations published with *Things Fall Apart*, in 1962, interpret the novel as the story of Okonkwo's fall. Dennis Carabine was selected by Heinemann, and he illustrates a realist narrative centered on a "strong man" taking action in the face of history, a reading not uncommon today. The illustrations are heavily drawn, legible, and easy to connect to specific scenes in the text. The frontispiece depicts what many see

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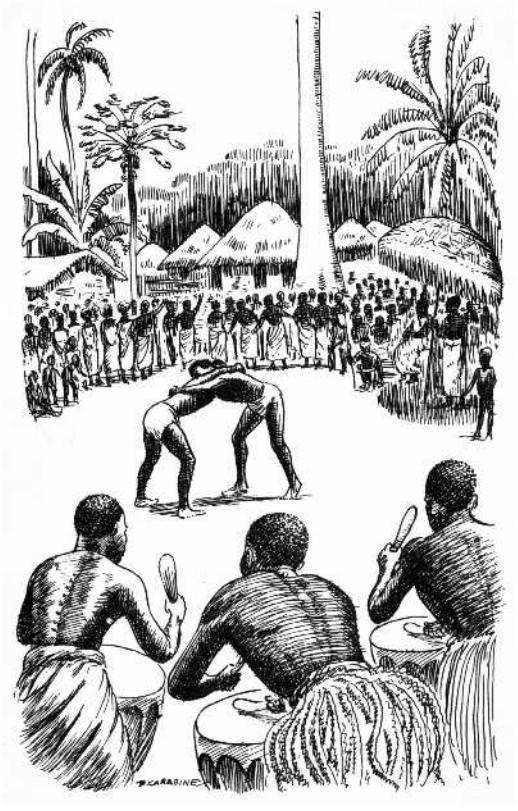


Fig. 5
Drawing by Dennis Carabine. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1962).

as the moment when the protagonist's fate is determined (fig. 4). Okonkwo sacrifices his adopted son, Ikemefuna, despite warnings from a friend who claims, "What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (67). Placing this scene on the frontispiece makes Okonkwo's decision to strike down his adopted son the tragic turning point of the plot, an allegory of the way his community is destined to succumb to missionary incursions and colonial rule.

The next three Carabine images precede the three sections of *Things Fall Apart*. The wrestling scene illustrates the novel's opening lines: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (fig. 5). In the next drawing, Okonkwo is beating his son Nwoye, who will soon leave his father's home to join the missionary society (fig. 6). And in the final image, Okonkwo exhorts his clansmen to war against the missionaries and the colonial order that backs them (fig. 7). These are images of action and violence. They confidently explicate the plot of the novel and the tragedy of Okonkwo. These illustrations are realist less because of their verisimilitude than because they are so sure of their referents, which range from the structure of tragedy to the fact that Africans wear raffia skirts, beat drums, and live under palm trees.

Achebe, as editorial adviser to AWS, objected to these images and recommended that Uche Okeke provide a new set of drawings for the 1963 edition. Okeke was a founding member of the Zaria Art Society at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in the late 1950s, and he is still an influential figure in Nigerian art today. He recalls how Achebe responded to his drawings with the simple comment "That is how it should be"



Fig. 6
Drawing by Dennis Carabine. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1962 [114]).

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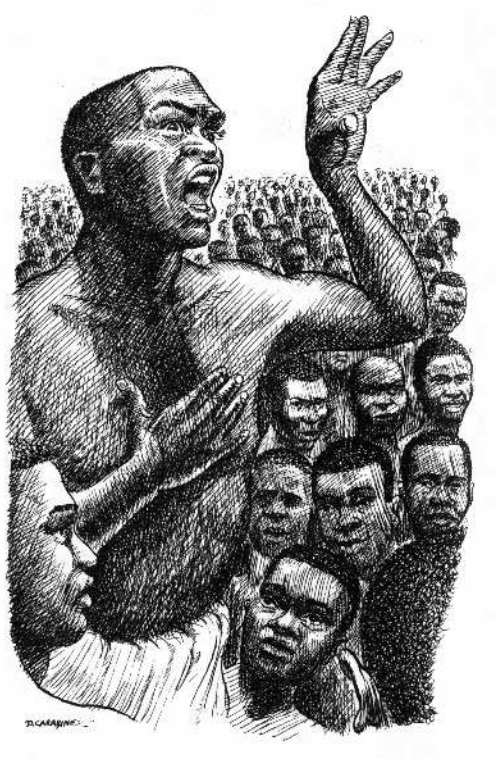


FIG. 7
Drawing by Dennis Carabine. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1962 [152]).

(Okeke and Achebe 148).[19] Okeke is often described as a "modernist" Nigerian artist—not because he inclined to high European modernism but because in 1960, the year of Nigerian independence, he advocated a synthesis of "old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake." Okeke's modernism, in the field of art history, means that he does not work in traditional modes but instead uses those modes to develop a critical practice that responds to colonial and postcolonial modernity in Africa (Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism* 12–15). Okeke's 1960 address to the Art Society at Zaria is now known as "Natural Synthesis," and it begins with zeal: "Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past." In this moment, Okeke and Achebe share a relation to time: the colonial past is perishing, and artists must look farther back in time to generate the postcolonial future. *Things Fall Apart* is thus set in Achebe's grandparents' generation, and Okeke based his drawing style on traditional Igbo body painting and mural design.

Yet neither Okeke nor Achebe turns naively to the precolonial past—they are both oriented to future horizons. Okeke concludes his 1960 address by asserting, "It is . . . futile copying our old art heritages, for they stand for our old order. Culture lives by change. Today's social problems are different from yesterday's, and we shall be doing grave disservice to Africa and mankind by living in our fathers' achievements. This is like living in an entirely alien cultural background." This passage shows the similarities between Achebe and Okeke in this period—they both draw on precolonial tradition from an "alien" position, to use Okeke's surprising word. They are both writing or painting their way into a workable relation with the past.

The artist and art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu has written extensively on Okeke's evolution as an artist in this period, including his illustrations for *Things Fall Apart*. Okeke-Agulu argues that Okeke's images are a visual equivalent to Achebe's novel in that Okeke developed a culturally specific visual language in the same way Achebe modulated the Queen's English to include Igbo rhythms and proverbs ("Politics" 74–76). Okeke's visual language in this period was based on *uli*, a traditional practice of female body art and wall painting. *Uli* favors a repertoire of motifs abstracted from known objects and natural forms, the primacy of line, and the dynamism between the line and negative space it creates (fig. 8).[20] In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe describes *uli* as a form of writing, when Okonkwo's son Nwoye, now grown up, recalls the power of the missionaries' written word: "Our women made black patterns on their bodies with the juice of the *uli* tree. It was beautiful, but it soon faded. If it lasted two market weeks it lasted a long time. But sometimes our elders spoke about *uli* that never faded, although no one had ever seen it. We see it today in the writing of the

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white man" (144). Okeke-Agulu argues that Okeke's illustrations for *Things Fall Apart* are practically verbal: they are built from a "visual vocabulary," constitute a "visual language," and depend on a "visual dialogue between form and space" ("Politics" 75). In his reading the visual image can be analyzed in the same terms as a verbal text because its subject matter is not of primary importance. *Uli* painting does not furnish indigenous subject matter for Okeke. It provides a mode of formal experimentation and a space for, in Okeke-Agulu's words, "the critical examination of the postcolonial condition" (85). This emphasis on formal experimentation makes Okeke a postcolonial modernist, and Okeke-Agulu's valuable reading brings to light the similarities between Achebe's and Okeke's modernist approach to form in the era of decolonization. Yet if illustrations can be the visual equivalents of text, text can also be understood in visual terms.

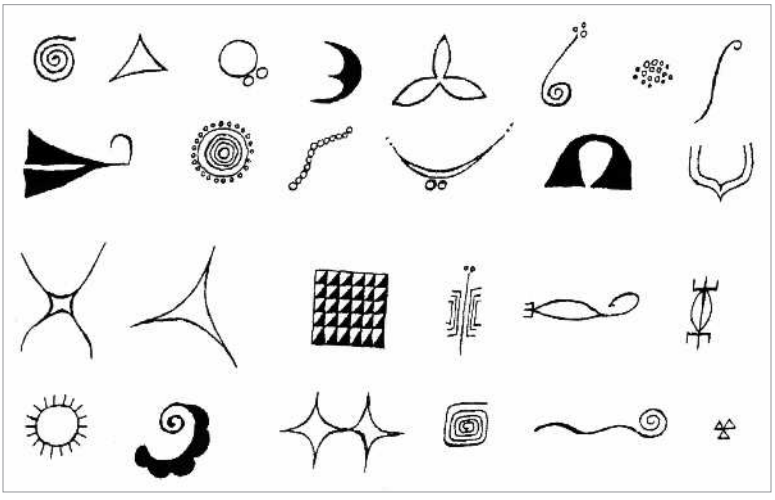


FIG. 8
Uli motifs. Illustration by Chika Okeke-Agulu. In Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism* (187). Used with permission of Chika Okeke-Agulu.

Okeke's illustrations—understood in their own right as examples of postcolonial modernism—open up Achebe's text through their emphasis on the surface of the visual image, not on its referential depths. His four images rework Carabine's: they also consist of a frontispiece followed by three drawings preceding each of the three sections of the novel. Here we no longer have the story of a strong man. Okeke's images are difficult to pin to scenes from the text because the drawings' overall effect is suggestion, not detailed delineation. They rely heavily on the blank white of the page and on a tangled swirl of lines and forms. At first glance it is difficult to distinguish background from foreground, figure from ground. In their difficulty they seem to be works of modernism in the European tradition: they do not yield themselves up as representations. And yet what seem like Euro-modernist features are clearly taken from *uli* painting. Okeke-Agulu describes their "strident linearity," "total abrogation of form/space boundaries," and the reduction of figural and floral forms to "highly simplified, almost abstract gestures" (84). But they also depict specific scenes from the text. Okeke's frontispiece seems to show the opening wrestling match (fig. 9). But the drummers are



FIG. 9
Drawing by Uche Okeke. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1963). Used with permission of Chukuma Okadigwe.

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now on the other side of the circle, so that the negative space at the center can become a compositional element. Whereas in the Carabine image one might say that the wrestlers occupy the central foreground while the palm trees, mud huts, and raffia skirts are relegated to the surrounding background, Okeke's drawing is based on a different spatial order. The viewer is absorbed into the crowd in the lower section of the drawing, and everyone concentrates on the empty circle in the center of the page. Okeke-Agulu reads this circular motif as emblematic of the communal focus of Okeke's drawings. The center is not, in fact, empty but reverberating with drumbeats and with the communal energies of the villagers and their ancestral spirits. But originally this drawing faced the epigraph from Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," from which Achebe takes his title:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
> (Achebe, *Things* [1963] v)

The facing page makes Okeke's drawing seem like a fairly obvious visual representation of Yeats's prophecy in the era of decolonization: the communal center of the Igbo world will not hold. This ambivalence marks the shifting place of modernism at mid-century—despite the oracular Yeats epigraph, in Okeke's series of drawings the circular motif persists.

The second drawing depicts a scene of judgment—the *egwugwu*, a masked ancestral spirit, steps into the central space and adjudicates a marriage dispute (fig. 10). In the third drawing, white missionaries enter the space (fig. 11). They are holding a hymnbook and singing—the "gyre" seems to be not widening but tightening. In this scene, the village decides to allow the missionaries to build their church, but they grant them a patch of cursed land on which to do it. The last drawing shows a moment in the final confrontation between the masked spirits and the missionaries—the church perches in the background, soon to be burnt to the ground (fig. 12). Instead of portraying a center that is doomed not to hold, Okeke draws a space of collective action, judgment, and choice. Okeke does not depict the aftermath of the burning of the church: the imprisonment and humiliation of Okonkwo and other village leaders, Okonkwo's killing of the colonial court messenger, or his subsequent suicide. Rather than the tragic history of Carabine's strong man, Okeke illustrates the space of history itself as communal, a space of decision-making and possibility. Okeke's modernist illustrations recast the realist narrative that Carabine—and many subsequent readers—found in *Things Fall Apart*.

But while Okeke's illustrations emphasize a different thematic reading of the novel, do they also suggest a new way of reading Achebe's style? At first, Okeke's images might seem to risk depicting Conrad's leafy, frenzied backdrop.[21] Unlike Carabine, Okeke includes



FIG. 10
Drawing by Uche Okeke. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1963 [2]). Used with permission of Chukuma Okadigwe.

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masks in his drawings. In the judgment scene, masked spirits surge into the central space; in the final scene of confrontation, they overrun the circle entirely. In both cases, the drawings that contain masks are decidedly more volatile and abstract than the images of the circular village gatherings. Okeke's masks, however, do not face the profane gaze of readers—they are turned to the business of the clan. They are difficult to see as separate from the bodies and trees that surround them. These are images of masks in motion, masks that are almost indistinguishable from motion itself. All the action occurs at the level of the line as it carves through the blank space of the page. The illustrative power of these drawings gathers at the surface of the image, but this is not the Euro-modernist surface. Okeke's postcolonial modernism—his mode of formal experimentation firmly grounded in the era of decolonization—suggests that Achebe's novel might also be read with an eye to the dynamism of the surface of the visual image.

Things Fall Apart and the Modernist Surface

In making a nuanced case for *Things Fall Apart* as a novel that incorporates characteristics of oral culture into its style, Abdul JanMohamed relies heavily on the idea of a flat surface.[22] He argues that Achebe's paratactic sentence structure emphasizes equivalence, contiguity, and context rather than the subordination of certain elements and the elevation of others. On "the flat surface of the paratactic prose," Achebe fashions a series of narrative episodes and rhythmic reoccurrences that tell the story of Okonkwo, his village, and the arrival of the colonial culture (30). JanMohamed shows how the novel's repetitions, digressions, and proverbs are inherent to oral culture in their refusal to distinguish between background and foreground. Toward the end of the argument, JanMohamed turns to Picasso for rhetorical force:

> By deliberately adhering to a flat surface Achebe obtains a result curiously similar to



FIG. 11
Drawing by Uche Okeke. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1963 [116]). Used with permission of Chukuma Okadigwe.



FIG. 12
Drawing by Uche Okeke. In Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1963 [154]). Used with permission of Chukuma Okadigwe.

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> the effect obtained by one of Picasso's paintings: the illusion of depth and perspective, of the third dimension in symbolic representation, is deliberately wrenched and displaced in order to create a two-dimensional representation that includes within it an abstract reminder about the third dimension. While Picasso drew his inspiration from West African art, Achebe draws his from West European fiction. (36–37)

This analogy links Picasso's emphasis on the surface of the picture plane to Achebe's flat style. If Picasso's paintings suggest the "abstract reminder" of three-dimensionality, Achebe's written form contains ghostly reminders of oral culture. Picasso makes a radical break with the past in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*; Achebe's equally radical *Things Fall Apart* documents the destruction of an oral culture by the written word of the novel itself. But there is another form of syncretism here, because there is another "abstract reminder" in Picasso: "the inspiration [of] West African art," in JanMohamed's terms, or the residue of racial difference and the ruin of the cultures that Achebe himself describes. I contend that for Achebe this parallel, secondary "reminder" is not "West European fiction," not entirely. The analogy breaks down at this point. While Achebe writes within the tradition of the novel even as he revolutionizes that form, Picasso does not create art in the idiom of the African masks he beholds. If there is a doubled haunting in Achebe's flat narrative style, it is, first, the oral culture whose destruction he describes and, second, the flat surface of modernist primitivism. The reminder, the residue, the ruin is the way the "image of Africa" was appropriated in European modernism.

Achebe's flat style reorients modernist primitivism in the era of decolonization by refusing its metaphors and instead operating in the realist mode of metonymy. In an analysis of the critical reception of *Things Fall Apart* as a work of realism, Ato Quayson describes the novel as a metonymic text, one that proceeds through the contiguous relation of narrative elements, especially Achebe's well-known proverbs, tales, and digressions. But Quayson also sees another "symbolic/metaphorical" level in the text: "This level subtends the metonymic text but gathers all the antimonies associated with metaphor: ambiguity, contradiction, irony, and paradox" (125). This is part of a still necessary argument for reading *Things Fall Apart* as more than a simple one-to-one representation of African reality. Prompted by Okeke's illustrations, I argue that it is not in the mode of metaphoric depth "subtend[ing]" the text but in the metonymic mode of realism—with its attention to the surface relations of things—that Achebe displaces colonial modes of representation.

Modernist primitivism denies visibility to the African mask by turning it into a metaphor about European aesthetic rupture and rejuvenation. Achebe praises this substitution in "An Image of Africa," where he writes that African sculptural forms infuse "new life" into European art (11). More recently critics have challenged this metaphoric substitution by exploring the context and particularity of images of Africa as they circulated in early-twentieth-century Europe, but ideas of "resemblance" or "affinity" between the primitive and the modern persist.[23] Yet Achebe's first novel refuses the metaphorics of the primitive. Uche Okeke's illustrations, as they interrupt the text of *Things Fall Apart* with an insistence on the surface of the image, direct our attention to the functions of metonymy: to the exteriorizing effects of Achebe's style and its displacement of colonial modes of representation.

Putting Okeke's images alongside Achebe's text draws attention to the famous ending of *Things Fall Apart*, where the narrative voice suddenly and uncharacteristically turns to metaphor. In the penultimate chapter, Okonkwo and other village leaders have been tricked and imprisoned by the dis-

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trict commissioner, bailed out, and called to a meeting of the clan. Five court messengers interrupt the meeting in Umuofia, and Okonkwo jumps up to confront them:

> In that brief moment the world seemed to stand still, waiting. There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting.
>
> The spell was broken by the head messenger. "Let me pass!" he ordered.
>
> "What do you want here?"
>
> "The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop."
>
> In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body.
>
> The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: "Why did he do it?"
>
> He wiped his machete on the sand and went away. (204–05)

Okonkwo scorns tumult; it is, for him, the opposite of the organized action of war and the ultimate evidence of Umuofia's weakness. But Okeke's illustrations direct our attention to the spatial order of this scene, to its representation of tumult. They serve as reminders of the exteriorizing effects of representations of primitive frenzy. In silence, then, the men of Umuofia are merged into "the mute backcloth of trees," and then the waiting backcloth jumps into tumultuous life. This is a jarring moment. Until this point, the narrative voice has been frank, proverbial, occasionally ethnographic, but rarely figurative. Only infrequently does it resort to phrases like "Obierika's compound was as busy as an anthill" or "Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water" (112, 3). But here at the end of the novel the men of Umuofia are not as silent and still as a backcloth: they are a backcloth. And the merging of people and backcloth is what Achebe rejects in his essay on Conrad. While the next and final chapter of the novel will be told from the district commissioner's point of view, the famous narrative jump has already happened, on the visual plane. A metaphor leads us into the colonial way of seeing.

The backcloth metaphor is categorical: from this point on we will not be able to see Okonkwo except as a body dangling from a tree. We will not be able to see the world of Umuofia that has been Achebe's subject; we will only hear the wise Obierika's short outburst of grief and rage. The curtain swings, and all that is visible is the realized metaphor of the backcloth—Conrad's "black and incomprehensible frenzy," the impenetrable modernist surface. In the novel's last paragraph we are fully within the mind of the district commissioner:

> The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.* (209)

At a basic level, metaphor is a substitution concealed behind the surface of the text (and

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indeed Achebe's figurative use of the word *backcloth* hides in plain sight). Metonymy, on the other hand, operates on the surface of the text through contiguity and association (Johnson; Chow). So when the metaphoric curtain swings, we are left with two texts and the relation between them: *Things Fall Apart* and *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Achebe's novel has not simply reversed the order of colonial representation by bringing the backdrop forward. That would create another substitution, a likeness between these texts. Instead, Achebe forces the operation of a primitivizing metaphor onto the surface of the text—the reader can flick back a few pages and reenter the totalized world of Umuofia. This is the work of metonymy: contiguity, sequence, and combination.

But the famous last paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* introduces a new term, one that has governed much analysis of the novel's realism. In the district commissioner's mind, the plot of *Things Fall Apart* becomes a set of undignified details that must be cut out of the colonial text. Because Achebe ends his novel this way, he is often seen as writing those details back into the colonial text, and thus back into history. In this reading, Achebe's is a realism of details that gradually build into the depiction of a totalized and coherent Igbo world. But this reading also suggests that Achebe's detailed realism is a mere metaphor for the universal.[24] The illustrations that accompany this sort of universal reading are the ones that appear in the introduction to the 1996 Classics in Context edition of the novel, and yet they still participate in the district commissioner's colonial order of representation, because we must imagine that the illustrations populating the pages of *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes* are Basden's own.

In the light of the deep metaphoric referents in the images from 1921 and 1996, Okeke's mid-century illustrations appear even more startling and destabilizing, and Achebe's flat style seems all the more revolutionary. Both Okeke's drawings and Achebe's style emphasize flat surfaces in the mode of postcolonial modernism—the surface therefore becomes the site of metonymic contact between colonial history and the art of the decolonization era. *Things Fall Apart* is not a collection of realist details that fills out *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes*. It is a novel that by maintaining a flat surface remains resolutely exterior to that text and displaces it, orienting itself toward the postcolonial future.

Or to put this another way, if Okeke's illustrations do not make *Things Fall Apart* new again, they do, in the best modernist style, make it strange.

Notes

1. The publisher Etudo Limited was located in Onitsha, Nigeria.

2. *No Longer at Ease* was illustrated by the well-known Nigerian artist Bruce Onobrakpeya, *"The Sacrificial Egg" and Other Short Stories* by R. Ndefo, and *Chike and the River* by Prue Theobalds. For more on AWS, see Currey; Hill; Huggan; Ibironke; Kalliney; Lizarribar; and Low. For an introduction to Onitsha market literature, see Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature* and *Onitsha Market Literature*, as well as the digitized material supported by the University of Kansas (onitsha.diglib.ku.edu).

3. All quotations from *Things Fall Apart* come from the Anchor Books edition (1994).

4. Gikandi's reading of mid-century anglophone literature includes the category of romance ("Realism"); see also Esty and Lye. For categorization of early postcolonial novels into first and second "stages," see Appiah; Casanova. See Andrade for a critique of this approach.

5. Brown, *Utopian Generations*; Enwezor; Gikandi, "Realism," "Picasso," and, esp., "The Short Century"; Hassan; Lazarus; and Okeke-Agulu, "Challenge," "Nationalism," "Politics," and *Postcolonial Modernism*.

6. This view modifies the contours of the powerful debate over African literature that raged in the 1970s and was encapsulated in the volume of criticism *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980), which aimed to "scotch the modernist infection" of African poetry (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 6). It is rarely noticed that the modernist novel fares far better in this volume: "Developments since Joyce, Proust and Kafka, as for instance in the French *nouveau roman*, overwhelmingly demonstrate

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that the novel is an open form. . . . The forms of the novel are capable of change in every direction" (88–89).

7. For more on Basden, see Brown, "Basden."

8. Papers in the Heinemann Educational Archives make it clear that these drawings were based on historical photographs. At one point in the production of this edition, Achebe refused to allow what he said was an inaccurate drawing to accompany the text, even though, as an editor pointed out in a note attached to a typescript of the novel, it was based on an early-twentieth-century photograph (Achebe, *Things* [Box 45]).

9. Critics have defended Conrad by claiming that his images indicate European disorientation on the imperial periphery (Moses 45–47; Harris).

10. V. S. Naipaul used a similar term—*background*—in an essay on Conrad from the same period ("Conrad's Darkness").

11. Accounts of Picasso's interest in and encounters with African masks abound: today many scholars cite André Malraux's *Picasso's Mask*, in which Picasso visits the Trocadéro Museum in 1907 at Derain's urging. Willett and, thus, Achebe cite Vlaminck's 1929 memoir *Tournant dangereux*.

12. Cheng is working from the account of Picasso's visit to the Trocadéro Museum. She argues that Picasso's aesthetic vision in that moment "was also a vision that understood seeing not as a mastery of surface, but as its agent. We do not master by seeing; we are ourselves altered when we look" (21).

13. I say "begins" because modernist primitivism almost immediately reads past the surface of the mask to the primitive unconscious. Picasso, in Malraux's account, called the masks he encountered at the Trocadéro magical "intercessors" and claimed *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* had nothing to do with the formal qualities of the masks he found inspirational. For more on Picasso and African art, see Gikandi, "Picasso."

14. For a critique of the series, see Lizarribar.

15. Moore and Heath provide a thorough look at the history of cover design for *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, "Conversation"). In the 1950s Dennis Duerden taught in Nigeria, where he became interested in African art, and in 1962 he set up the Transcription Centre, which produced and distributed radio programs for and about Africa.

16. The electronic AWS database distributed by Chadwyck-Healey Literature Collections contains scans of illustrations, but they are not cited by artist or year commissioned. In addition to Achebe's first two novels, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Burning Grass* (1962) and Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy* (1963) also included illustrations. Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino *and* Song of Ocol (1984) contained Frank Horley's woodcuts from the 1966 East African Publishing House edition.

17. Carabine seems to have done illustrations for many publishing houses in Edinburgh in the 1950s and 60s. In addition to his work for Nelson and Heinemann, he illustrated *Picture Tales*, by John Redgwick Crossland (Collins, 1950); *Modern Narrative Poetry* (Rose, 1959); *Alis and her Chicken* (Nelson, 1959); *Our First ABC* (Bonnard, 1962); *The Water Babies*, by Charles Kingsley (Collins, 1966); and the poetry of J. K. Annand, collected and republished in *Bairn Rhymes* (Mercat, 1998).

18. Hofmeyr notes that the Interpreter's House, where Christian learns to interpret pictures and tableaux, had "long formed a strand in African Christian and mission discussions of the text" (197).

19. In the conversation moderated by Christa Clarke, Achebe also recalls asking Okeke why his students did not do more book illustrations. Okeke replied that all his students wanted to be Picasso (Okeke and Achebe 148).

20. Okeke-Agulu, "Nationalism" and *Postcolonial Modernism*; see also Willis.

21. Lawtoo traces the continuities between Conrad's and Achebe's representations of frenzy.

22. Wole Soyinka was perhaps the first to describe Achebe's style as flat, in a 1963 essay that also makes use of the backdrop metaphor.

23. For the context of the circulation of African masks, see Gikandi, "Picasso," and Leighten. The notorious 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibit "'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" used *affinity* to describe the relation between modern European and tribal art. James Clifford criticizes *affinity* as a kinship term and a "universalizing allegory" (190).

24. Achebe complains about an early work of criticism in which the test of universality consists of replacing all the African details in a novel with American ones ("Colonialist Criticism" 51).

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