

# Hegel in African Literature: Achebe's Answer<sup>1</sup>

*Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Eunice Njeri Sahle*

The colonial project has three interrelated facets. It is at once a practice; a body of knowledge; and a technology for mind change, or simply mental engineering. Decolonization is necessarily a negation of the three-in-one character of the colonial process, to produce a third possibility: independence, liberation and social justice. Colonialism as mind-engineering results from colonialism as practice and text but it also aids them. Mind-engineering is directly the result of colonialism as text, for the colonial text is simultaneously a boost to the minds behind colonizing practices and a prison house for the mind of the colonized. The battle between the colonial text and its dialectical opposite, the anti-colonial text, is central to the entire process of decolonization. Achebe and Hegel exemplify this.

Now we do not know whether Achebe, at the time of his writing *Things Fall Apart*,<sup>2</sup> had read Hegel or not, but it does not matter, for the Hegelian view of Africa and the African, itself derived from 19th-century missionary and explorer narratives, permeates the entire colonial text.

Achebe is part of a group of graduates from Ibadan University, the others being Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, and J. P. Clark, who in the 1950s helped consolidate the base of the tradition of African writing in English. But they were not the first Africans to write in English or for that matter in European languages. We have before them the writings by Africans in the 19th century as part of the anti-slavery movement. In the 1920s and 1930s there was writing by Africans in English in South Africa. By the time that Chinua Achebe and others came to write, Peter Abrahams from South Africa had already made a name with titles like *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom*. In French-dominated West Africa Sedar Senghor, David Diop and others had already created significant poetry, part of the movement that came to bear the name Negritude.

What is significant in Achebe and that group of writers who emerged in the 1950s is their being a product of two movements taking place in the British colonies in particular and in the colonies as a whole. One was the rise in Africa of university colleges such as Ibadan in Nigeria, Achimota later the University of Ghana in Ghana,

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Makerere in Uganda, and similar ones in the West Indies and Malaysia. These were all overseas colleges of the University of London. Central to them was the English Department with the syllabi modeled on that of the University of London. Thus they would all have been exposed to the great tradition of English literature, meaning the canon, from Shakespeare to T. S. Eliot, or what Abiola Irele called Spenser to Spender. In short, they would have been exposed to the colonial text in one form or other. The other was the worldwide upsurge of anti-imperialism, seen in the rise of anti-colonial nationalist movements demanding independence in Asia, Africa and the rest of the world.

In a sense both movements were part of each other, part of the historical moment of decolonization. The universities were meant to produce an elite imbued with the values of a British middle class so that at Independence they would form a partnership based on a shared community of values – Eurocentric of course – but the energy of the anti-colonial upsurge found its way into the classrooms.

The anti-colonial nationalist movement after the Second World War, Achebe tells us in the essay *Named for Victoria*, had brought about a mental revolution that began to reconcile his generation to itself. They rejected having the story of Africa told for them by anyone else. If the nationalist agenda rejected colonialism as practice, the new home-grown intellectual rejected it also as a body of knowledge. The colonial text is brilliantly captured in the title of the book the District Commissioner – the erstwhile enforcer of colonialism as practice in *Things Fall Apart* now turned producer of knowledge – is writing: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger*. Note that while Achebe has written a whole book on the life and times of Okonkwo, the District Commissioner cannot decide whether the story of Okonkwo deserves even a paragraph in his grand colonial narrative. Here within the novel is a collision of the two texts: the counter-text that is the novel itself and the colonial text, that is the narrative of the colonial administrator turned producer of knowledge.

This colonial narrative has a rich intellectual ancestry and to say that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's work *The Philosophy of History*<sup>3</sup> is a foundational text in this discourse is a profound understatement. At any rate, in these influential lectures, Hegel finds the African continent lacking in the core features of what he deems historical societies.

First, the region represents humanity in its most irrational stage, since it 'exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state' and thus he counsels the 'World-Historical Individuals' to 'lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character'.<sup>4</sup> According to Hegel, desire and untamed passions permeate all spheres of life in Africa. For Hegel, 'mere desire – volition in its rough and savage forms – falls not within the scene and sphere of Universal History'.<sup>5</sup>

Second, African peoples are marked by high levels of cultural underdevelopment as evidenced by the lack of embrace of the notion of a 'High Power'. African religious beliefs whose pivotal feature is sorcery hold man at the centre of the universe.<sup>6</sup> Such a view of the divine is pregnant with virtues of the uncivilized world for it has 'nothing to do with a spiritual adoration of God, nor with an empire of Right. God thunders, but is not on that account recognized as God.'<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon accord-

ing to Hegel severely limits the ability of Africans to develop 'consciousness of any Universality'.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that for Hegel it is only societies in which the Christian religion is entrenched that hold historical promise and in this respect he claims that 'the German nations, under the influence of Christianity, were the first to attain the consciousness that man, as man, is free: that it is the *freedom* of Spirit which constitutes its essence. This consciousness arose first in religion, the inmost region of Spirit . . .'.<sup>9</sup>

Third, the non-existence of modern rational states in Africa situates the continent outside the parameters of historical progress. For Hegel the establishment of states serves as the litmus test in the development of the spirit and struggle for freedom.

The State is the Idea of Spirit in the external manifestation of human Will and its Freedom. . . . We observe, therefore, an essential union between the objective side – the Idea – and the subjective side – the personality that conceives and wills it. The *objective* existence of this union is the State, which is therefore the basis and centre of the other concrete elements of the life of a people – of Art, of Law, of Morals, of Religion, of Science.<sup>10</sup>

Africa then embodies for Hegel all that is uncivilized about humanity, a region that remains 'for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World – shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself – the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night'.<sup>11</sup> The continent's failure to demonstrate movement in achieving his indicators of progress leads him to conclude that: 'At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit'.<sup>12</sup> Of course he makes a partial exception for those African societies located in the north, which he declares '*must* [his emphasis] be attached to Europe . . .'.<sup>13</sup> According to him these societies are the only ones that have demonstrated historical movement, although in a limited form, since only Egyptians have made the transition 'of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase'.<sup>14</sup>

This view is to be found in many other narratives, particularly in the popular literature of the Rider Haggard and Joyce Cary variety, where the African emerges as the acted upon rather than as an actor in the theatre of human history. It is embedded even in the work of some that claim to be engaged in serious scholarship. It is interesting that just a year after the publication of *Things Fall Apart* (in 1959), Hugh Trevor Roper was giving Hegelian-type lectures in Oxford repeating the same Hegelian view of the continent as exhibiting only darkness prior to European presence. The history of Africa was therefore only the history of Europe in Africa, for darkness could never be the subject of history. And the claim of the centrality of Christianity in the development of historical societies was recently reproduced in a much-cited book by one of Hegel's followers, Francis Fukuyama, who states: 'the first truly Universal Histories in the Western tradition were Christian'.<sup>15</sup>

The Hegelian image of an African people as being indistinguishable from nature is most insulting. For what distinguishes human beings is that they establish a contradiction between themselves and nature of which they are a part, and change it to their needs. They act on nature. It can be the simplest of acts like growing foods, multiplying seeds if you like, instead of merely collecting from wild plants. It can be

the herdsman's act of domesticating animals instead of merely being dependent on hunting. Out of the struggle with nature, they create a social nature. They create nurture from nature. And in the workings out of their social nature they make history. Animals on the other hand merely adapt themselves to nature. They live within nature of which they are a part but they remain an indistinguishable part of it. They do not make history. Africans are outside of history.

This was a serious charge, especially when set in the context of Hegel's larger project: history as freedom in motion. If the African was outside history, he was then in slavery. Slavery was his natural condition and European enslavement of the African, in Hegelian eyes, becomes almost a moral ideal: it is good for the African. For Hegel, Europe's involvement in the institution of slavery is justified and moral since it existed in a State and in this form it was 'a phase of advance from the merely isolated sensual existence – a phase of education – a mode of becoming participant in a higher morality and the culture connected with it . . . The gradual abolition of slavery is therefore wiser and more equitable than its sudden removal.'<sup>16</sup>

*Things Fall Apart* is a brilliant answer to Hegel. Of course Achebe is not a historian. He is a writer, an artist, but among the many brilliant images in his work, the wrestling sequence which opens *Things Fall Apart* is an image of struggle. Central to this narrative of the meeting between a pre-capitalist African society and a European capitalist modernity is the drama of Okonkwo struggling with Nature, struggling with himself, struggling with his society, and, finally, against the new force in world politics: capital as imperialism. The struggle between Okonkwo and the forces of nature is almost epic in force and dimension, and that alone becomes an affirmation of human will to order nature. The struggle within himself – his lifelong struggle against fate in the person of his father Unoka, only to end up the same way – raises Okonkwo to the level of great tragic heroes in world literature, figures like Sophocles' Oedipus and Hardy's Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. What he is, the self-made man, also prepares Okonkwo to recognize the real threat posed by this colonial capitalist modernity.

Okonkwo is the maker of his world, and he refuses to live in a society in which he is no longer the maker of the values by which he must live. But not before Okonkwo has struck a blow against a messenger, the new bondsman of the new forces, and this act has a symbolic significance. In so doing he rejects the whole basis of Hegel's notion of Africa as a place without historical struggle. He also rejects another of Hegel's influential ideas of the dialectic of the master and the slave, which he develops in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.<sup>17</sup> Okonkwo as it were refuses to enter into the process of the unfolding of the dialectic for he wants to remain a person with an independent consciousness, and he will not entertain the second stage of the dialectic, that of a dependent consciousness. The dependent consciousness will in fact be imbibed by the new social forces which embrace Christianity and become beneficiaries of the collaboration with the colonial state.

What we see in *Things Fall Apart* is not only the coming of imperialism but the simultaneous birth of a nascent messenger class that was to increasingly become a kind of buffer zone between the white-controlled colonial state and the masses of the people. This class, or sections of it, had internalized the negative Hegelian images of Africa, and it embodied the dependent consciousness of the bonded, described in

Hegel's dialectic. If Okonkwo's act is an early shot against the colonial practice, Achebe's act is an early shot against colonialism as a body of knowledge. Combined, his writer's act and that of his hero resist colonialism as a mechanism for remoulding the mind, and they are important steps in the continuing, unfolding adventures of decolonization.<sup>18</sup>

Ngugi wa Thiong'o  
University of California, Irvine

Eunice Njeri Sahle  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### Notes

1. This is part of an ongoing project by the two authors on Hegelianism in African literary and political Thought.
2. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London, Heinemann, 1958.
3. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, trans. J. Sibree, *The Philosophy of History*, New York, Dover, 1956.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 18. What is one to do with Ethiopian and Eritrean societies in which the Christian faith has shaped cultural, political and economic arrangements for centuries? In the Hegelian world these are in 'Africa proper' south of the Sahara.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 29, pp. 47–9.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 99. Hegel declares that Egypt 'does not belong to African Spirit' [*ibid.*] and the historical development of the other societies in this region is neither Asiatic or European and as for the rest of the continent, what he calls 'Africa proper' is the 'Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature . . .' [*ibid.*]. This view continues to be reproduced and one need look no further than the extensive literature that continues to present and search for 'scientific evidence' to demonstrate the non-African origins of Egyptian society.
15. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, New York, The Free Press, 1992, p. 56.
16. *Ibid.*
17. G. W. F. Hegel, trans. A. V. Miller, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979. In paras 13–31, he discusses the struggle for recognition between a master and a slave and concludes that it is through this kind of long-fought social struggle that we become historical beings. Achebe's Okonkwo demonstrates the struggles and contradictions that are the pillars of historical development in their finest form.
18. Achebe's work continues to challenge the Hegelian view of Africa in the wake of independence, a period marked by the rise of authoritarian politics. See, for instance, his *Anthills of the Savannah*.