

## Dialogical Theology as Politics in Mongo Beti, Werewere Liking, and Chinua Achebe

Ashton Nichols  
Dickinson College

The postcolonial literature of sub-Saharan Africa has produced a powerful critique of Western discourses of domination by offering Francophone and Anglophone readers an analysis of religious discourse and its connection to political power. In such texts, hitherto silenced speakers—the voices of the colonized people—speak loudly through the technique first called “dialogism” by the Russian formalist M. M. Bakhtin. This essay will frame its analysis with the work of two Cameroonian writers, Mongo Beti and Werewere Liking. The Bakhtinian theoretical framework will then expand into a more detailed examination of a number of novels by Chinua Achebe. Religious discourse invariably, and necessarily, takes on a political dimension in postcolonial settings; at the same time, however, African fiction often displays the tensions inherent in any attempt to unite traditional, Muslim, and Christian ways of thinking. These conflicts may consistently fail to unify the ethnic groups or the cultures in question, but the dialogue thus produced often succeeds in limited ways by exposing complex interactions between language and human experience and by revealing the stakes whenever religious discourse takes on a powerfully political perspective.

Western colonizers consistently appropriated and misread African languages and cultures in an effort to imagine the worlds that they needed for their own purposes: religious, economic, and political. In the process, such colonizers sought to produce a monological version of verbal authority that could be spoken “over” the voices of colonized peoples. As I have argued elsewhere, the words of countless Africans were described by many early explorers as “meaningless noise”: “Even when meaningful sounds are attributed to native populations, the utterances tend to be interpreted in ways that will serve the needs of the dominant [Western] Speaker” (1-2). Once Africans begin to speak for themselves in literary works, however—once silenced voices of Africans begin to be heard—the verbal energy thus released is often as startling as it is revealing. As Bakhtin notes, “a language is revealed in all its distinctness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages” (411). Whatever one person says can be dialogized by the utterance of another. The possibility of dialogue is always able to conditionalize or modify a singular, seemingly dominant viewpoint. Michael Holquist notes that “a word,

discourse, language or culture undergoes ‘dialogization’ when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions” (427). On these terms, “there can be no actual monologue” (426) since every statement can possibly point up limitations in any other point of view. Monological discourse, when employed in literary works, is a verbal strategy that seeks to establish definitive or stable meanings. Dialogism, by contrast, invokes multiple meanings. Such multivocal discourse emphasizes the equivocal aspects of language: indefinite reference, connotative implication, and ambiguous or psychologized meanings. Multiple viewpoints produce a literary discourse that “parodies and relativizes itself” (Kristeva 79). A dialogized word or statement can never be finalized. Dialogism is the “characteristic epistemological mode of a world [in which] everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (Bakhtin 426). Postcolonial literature in sub-Saharan Africa consistently creates just such a world of conditional meaning.

This linking of African fiction with Bakhtinian dialogics has been discussed by numerous critics. Fictional narratives of Africa have often been seen as invoking multiple voices, numerous perspectives, and alternate points of view. So a work like Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* has been described as a single-voiced monologic text—written in the voice of the colonizer—while most fiction by Africans has been seen as including multiple colonized voices speaking back to the colonizer: the hitherto-silenced side of the discourse erupting into speech. Catherine Lynette Innes argues that “Achebe rejects the ‘monologic’ form of Cary’s novels to create his own kind of ‘dialogic’ novel” (18), while Zohreh T. Sullivan notes that—compared to *Mister Johnson*—*Things Fall Apart* brings us “a more pluralistic understanding of the modern African novel, of the problems inherent in decolonized discourse, and of Achebe’s world (106). Sullivan adds that Achebe’s novel reveals a Bakhtinian version of language, “the inherently dialogic nature of all utterance: all words are born in response to other words and other languages” (101). Simon Gikandi links dialogical plurality in Achebe to the very foundations of traditional African thinking: “Duality appeals to Achebe precisely because it produces a multiplicity of meanings and indeterminate zones of representation which generate narrative invention. . . . duality allows the author, like his Igbo ancestors, to contest the central claims of Western metaphysics and its dependence on ‘Reason’” (*Reading* 20). For Gikandi, part of the power of Achebe’s language derives from its ability to place the verbal acts of colonizer *and* colonized in such complex, and revealing, interactions.

Similarly, numerous feminist critics have discussed the tensions produced by female voices in dialogic relation to male voices in postcolonial texts. For these feminist critics, voices in conflict, when seen from a Bakhtinian perspective of linguistic power relations, allow the speech acts of women (for instance) to conditionalize and relativize the speech acts of men. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame appropriates Bakhtin’s notions

of “heteroglossia” (the interplay of unofficial voices that challenge and threaten “official” language in any culture) and dialogism to discuss “the representation of ideology in *Things Fall Apart*” (148). Osei-Nyame reveals how the “crisis of masculine authority” is negotiated in a world where “female insights and indigenous folk wisdom acquire not only subversive and residual but even dominant potential” (244). More broadly, Florence Stratton notes that her analysis of intertextuality in African women writers relies on Fredric Jameson’s dialogical “analysis of the structure of class discourse” (17), while Mary Ebum Modupe Kolawole claims that “African womanist ideology derives from [a] dialogic outlook,” adding that “many African scholars have advocated a dialogic approach” that relies on “Bakhtin’s theoretical framework” (35). Once competing representations—expressed in language—come into dialogical relation, a new array of voices can be heard.

What has not yet been discussed in terms of postcolonial writing is the way one specific discourse (in this case, the language of religion) can shade into another discourse (the language of politics) as a function of an internalized heteroglossia like that described by Bakhtin. In Beti and Liking, the voices of religious proselytizing, for example, appear initially as unofficial utterances. The voices of the missionaries are outside the dominant culture when they arrive in traditional villages, yet over time these theological claims—the power of the Judeo-Christian God, the necessity for absolute conversion, the lure of salvation—take on a power that transforms countless lives, for good and for ill. Dialogism in these texts reveals the way that Western religious language critiques the religion and the politics of precolonial Africa. Beti sees religious discourse as a way of politically subduing the once-dominant African culture, while Liking argues that the voices of women might speak for all Africans and challenge the authority of Western religious-cum-political power. In the fictions of Achebe, the discourse of religion becomes the first challenge posed by the colonizers—the question of which religion is “true”—while over time we see the power of one discourse to modify and displace another. Colonialist discourse argues “first accept our God, and you will then accept our laws.” In all of these fictions, a Bakhtinian critique also reveals a way back to the precolonial forms of language that were first challenged by the colonial oppressor.

As early in the history of African literature as the work of Mongo Beti, the dialogic intersection of religious and political language is clearly evident. Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956) describes how the religion of Europe was used as a tool of exploitation which often failed theologically and culturally but always left behind a legacy of colonized consciousnesses. Even in the relatively monological rhetoric of Beti’s novel—a single narrator, chronological order, conventions of realism—the perspective of the young narrator (a priest’s assistant) and the voices he chooses to include in his story reveal the instability of the perspective provided by the Western colonizer. Early in the novel, even the senior priest admits that “only the miserable or the oppressed can have faith in

God” (18). This sense of a critique of religion from the silenced side of the discourse emerges even more directly from the mouth of a catechist in Timbo: “Father, they say that a priest is no better than a Greek trader or any other colonialist. They say that all you are after is money” (20). Even before the central horror of Beti’s novel unfolds, the cook Zacharias offers a dialogical critique of missionary activity, once again spoken directly to the missionary priest. The first Africans

who ran to religion, to your religion, came to it as a sort of . . . revelation . . . a school where they could learn your secret, the secret of your power, of your aeroplanes and railways . . . Instead of that, you began talking to them of God, of the soul, of eternal life, and so forth. Do you really suppose they didn’t know those things already, long before you came? . . . [Now] they are turning from religion and running elsewhere, after money, no less. That’s the truth of it, Father. As for the rest, it’s all make believe . . . (30)

Here the colonized subjects realize early on that there is a crucial link between the Christian message and economic power. Accept the religion and all that it entails if you want to be part of a political power structure that will grant you economic advancement: planes, and trains, and the chance to ride on them into the cities where the emerging power of colonial culture resides.

The most clearly-realized dialogism in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, however, occurs when the priest himself moves over to the hitherto silenced side of the dialogue and begins speaking for those he has been trying to convert: “These good people worshipped God without our help. What matter if they worshipped after their own fashion? . . . Why do we insist on imposing our customs upon them?” (151). The priest’s rhetorical questions receive no answer, except perhaps in the complete collapse of his twenty-year mission in a nightmare of venereal disease and decay. But before this self-deluded priest leaves to return to Europe, he articulates a crucial connection between theology and political authority in colonial contexts. When the local administrator first notes the possibility of this connection—“For if the Christian religion doesn’t make sense here, it must be admitted that the civilization we’re seeking to implant is an absurdity under the tropical sun” (152)—the priest snaps back and strips the veil away from both of these colonizers’ efforts: “You are not here to implant civilization . . . You are here to protect a certain and precise category of people, that’s all” (152). Having unmasked the fiction of piety, the priest now realizes his own complicity in an ultimately political project: “I never stopped to think that I was in a colonized country, or that a subjugated people might have special characteristics. . . . I built schools, churches, houses. Almost a whole town at the Catholic mission of Bomba. I didn’t even ask myself what all this display had to do with Christ. In a word, I became an administrator like you, Monsieur Vidal” (154). This awareness may come too late for this particular priest, but Mongo Beti clearly hoped that such a realization would not come too late for his African readers from 1956 onward. Similarly his readers, half a century

later, understand clearly the way his fiction revealed a crucial connection between the discourse of religion—which was so often used to lure the colonized into Western culture—and the discourse of political power, a form of language that became the means of controlling, and often subduing, an entire culture.

More recently, the Cameroonian author Werewere Liking has suggested a comparable link between religious language, political discourse, and the dynamics of postcolonial power in Africa. Even amid the cacophonous polyphony of Liking's unique fictions, the connection between theology and politics is evident in a series of dialogic exchanges. Early in *It Shall be of Jasper and Coral*, Liking's female narrator critiques the history of missionary proselytizing: "[The invader] told them that the ancestor was nothing not even a mediator—there were Buddha Christ and Muhammad—and he proved it to them: it was written! He told them also that power freedom and wisdom were to be bought and he proved it to them: he bought their sons and the tombs of the ancestors . . . he vanquished them and bought their soul" (34). Such a process leads eventually to a world in which "everything was for sale. They bought heaven love or they sold themselves to God to the Devil" (35). The final stage in the process links the image of the Christian or Islamic God to widespread images of earthly authority: political, military, tribal, and familial—"Then God allowed himself to be represented by kings and commanders then by chiefs and relatives and finally by misery and one day the people became pitiful parasites" (35). Liking's feminist parable is clearly designed to resituate the consciousness of her readers, but the multiple voices she presents critique more than gender relations. They echo loudly from the religious to the political dimensions of her fiction. Once again, as in Beti, religious language is dialogized when it is linked to the very political discourse that undermines its claims to authority. Most of the kings and commanders and chiefs in postcolonial African fiction concern themselves with religion only insofar as it strengthens their political power and their secular authority.

In *Love-across-a-Hundred-Lives*, the character Madjo, grandmother of the suicidal narrator, offers another feminist critique that dialogizes Liking's own theology:

Woman is needed  
Binding him unifier creator  
God is woman and woman knows it  
And woman keeps it silent  
God knows why . . .  
This is why man is afraid of woman  
And why he so prizes the first place on earth. (149)

In this subtle critique, man is seen demanding the "first place" politically, and likewise demanding a God who has the "first place" theologically, in order to cover a truth he knows only too well. Woman is the source of a power that has been masked in both traditional and Christian religious

contexts. This truth is evident, however, when it becomes clear that a woman might speak, not only for women but for men as well. With *woman* in a position of authority, all humans would be more likely to see themselves as biological and social entities, not merely as theological tools of the colonial oppressor or political pawns of the postcolonial power structure.

As the critic Irene Assiba d'Almeida has noted, "If woman is God, and if one conceives of God as the ultimate organizing force, then woman has a limitless power that she needs to put at the service of the community (including men) to bring about a rebirth of the continent" (Liking xxxvii). Such an understanding is possible only in the dialogic interchange of voices that combine—and echo one another—in fictions such as Liking's. A critic like d'Almeida, who does not refer to Bakhtin directly, nevertheless makes it clear that the voices of women have the power to dialogize, conditionalize, and revise, the seemingly monological authority of male language. Kathryn Wright does cite Bakhtin to comment on the "openendedness" of Liking's novel, first published in French as *L'amour-cent-vies* (1988). The complexity of this polyvocal, polyvalent fiction produces, for Wright, "a hybrid text that includes numerous genres and stylistic features present in oral traditions: praise-naming, lullaby, allegorical and etiological tales, proverbs, legends, myth, and some of the formal and thematic components of both the epic and the initiation story" (46). As is so often the case in dialogical texts, multiplicity of meaning can also be echoed in a rich multiplicity of forms.

One of the most complex and developed treatments of these issues can be found in the novels of Chinua Achebe. Interactions among a multiplicity of voices may be the most effective way of understanding religious language in Achebe's novels from *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). As Carey Snyder has said of *Things Fall Apart*, "in its maneuverings among different Igbo as well as Western perspectives, the narrative consciousness that emerges is more than double; it has multiple, shifting permutations" (167). Achebe's fictions all give voice to many hitherto silenced speakers; like Beti and Liking, he thereby dialogizes the clash between Africans and Europeans. In the words spoken by his characters, religious conflicts display not only a wide variety of spiritual beliefs, but also a series of interactions between those beliefs and political action. Dialogism is even evident in Achebe's description of Igbo cosmology. He points out that "nothing is 'totally' anything in Igbo thinking; everything is a question of measure and degree" (*Morning* 166). Likewise, "wherever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute" (*Morning* 161). Fictional dialogue is one means by which numerous points of view can be presented. Verbal exchanges among Achebe's characters are rich and multifarious in his descriptions of traditional Igbo life; they become even more complex when they incorporate the political and religious concepts of the Western colonizers.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* (1960) religion is a central issue; the narrative depends on the way characters give voice to their religious views. In all of Achebe's novels to date, spiritual issues are apparent, even when they are presented indirectly, in relation to social conflict or political power. By the time of *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe offers his most successfully dialogical—we might also say *polytheological*—view of religion. Here we find a multivocal and multicultural society in which many versions of god, if not many gods, struggle to coexist. The result is at once positive and negative. Achebe's modern Nigeria is a society so complex, some might say chaotic, that a unified viewpoint is hard to achieve. At the same time, Achebe argues that this newly democratic society is possible only if different groups of people learn to talk to—and then listen to—one another. Bakhtin might say that all of these voices conditionalize one another's meanings; Achebe might say that each of these voices can offer something fruitful to the ongoing dialogue.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's first and still most widely-read novel, religion is the central focus of change in Igbo society with the arrival of Europeans. Surprisingly, we do not hear about the white man's religion until the second half of the novel, but that fact is significant and intentional. When Christianity does appear, it becomes a crucial aspect of social and familial life in Umuofia. The earliest converts are all “efulelu,” “worthless, empty men.” When Nwoye, the son of the main character (Okonkwo), converts to the new religion, he is forced to say that Okonkwo is no longer his father (101). From the outset, Christianity attracts only the outcasts of the village. However irrational the practitioners of this new religion may seem to the Igbo, they bring a faith that captivates some with its “mad logic” and its “poetry” (104). As often happens in precolonial and colonial settings, the religion succeeds because it offers something to the outcasts, the powerless, in the society. In a society like that of the Igbo, where twins are thrown into the “evil forest” to die, and where Ikemefuna is killed in order to satisfy the Oracle of the Hills, the humanitarian aspect of Christianity has an obvious appeal to the disenfranchised and their sympathizers.

*Things Fall Apart* suggests that the new religion is also fostered by the absence of a central political authority figure among the Igbo. The missionaries “asked who the king was, but the villagers told them that there was no king. ‘We have men of high title and the chief priests and the elders,’ they said” (105). In a society where all religious disputes, such as judicial decisions, are rendered by a council of elders, any new idea has a chance to be seriously considered. In addition, the Western church fills a need in the lives of individuals like Nneka, a woman who has seen her four sets of twins killed at birth, and Nwoye, a young man who is unwilling and unable to stick-fight with his peers and is therefore called “degenerate and effeminate” (108) by his father. Women who bear twins, like men who are unwilling to establish their place in the society on the

basis of physical strength, are just two examples of the sorts of outcasts to whom Christianity appeals.

*Things Fall Apart* also points out the spread of colonial influence through the development of religious, governmental, and educational institutions, in that order. Once the new religion of Christianity has established a spiritual foothold among the Igbo, the Europeans “built a place of judgement in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion” (110). So the need for a Western judicial system arises solely out of the need to protect the Igbo followers of the new religion. The implication is clear; accept the truth of the new religion and we will offer you protection from those who would judge you based on your acceptance of our—colonial and Western—truth. One of the first acts of the new system of justice is to have “hanged one man who killed a missionary” (110). From the beginning, religious morality and secular justice are closely linked. As soon as a judicial system is in place, schools are established to teach young children (and the adults who attend the school) about the alien culture that produced these new laws and this new religion. The missionary Mr. Brown well understands this subtle connection between theology and pedagogy: “Mr. Brown learned a good deal about the religion of the clan and he came to the conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. . . . From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand” (128). Courts follow churches, and then schools follow courts. With this relentless logic, and sequential progression, the colonizers’ ideas are spread into every aspect of Igbo social life.

Achebe offers a multivocal account of the rise of the new religion and its effect on traditional belief systems. One Christian convert named Enoch unmasks an “egwugwu” (ancestral spirit) in order to prove that the masked figure is merely a human with no supernatural powers. The band of masked “egwugwu,” however, proves their literal power by burning Enoch’s compound and Mr. Smith’s church to the ground. The Igbo do not believe in revenge against individuals, but they do believe in the toleration of a variety of viewpoints. As Ajofia, who is ready to destroy the church, says to Mr. Smith: “You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt” (134). The situation is complex, however, because the Igbo do believe in the destruction of objects associated with false worship; the Christian shrine “must be destroyed. We shall no longer allow it in our midst. It has bred untold abominations and we have come to put an end to it” (134). Here another example of a conflict between dialogical voices—it is good to worship the god of your fathers, but your religion has brought us abomination and must be destroyed—reveals the complex dynamics of power in Umuofia in the early twentieth century.

Achebe’s first novel thus presents a wide range of voices: from those who are in complete sympathy with the white man’s religion—“It was the poetry of the new religion, something he felt in his marrow . . . He felt a



relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul” (104); to those who are afraid—“An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors . . . I fear for you; I fear for the clan” (118); to those whose anger helped to give the novel its name—“The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (125). The multiple voices and points of view that close the story present a world appropriate to the Yeatsian epigraph of the novel. “Things fall apart” and “the centre cannot hold” not because the centre no longer exists, but because there are now many centres, numerous perspectives from which to view these two cultures. There are certainly limits to accommodation at each stage in this historical development, but different individuals will accommodate in widely differing ways. Achebe suggests, throughout his roughly chronological fictions, that while Western culture brought many useful changes to traditional Igbo society, it was not necessary to lose so much in such uncompromising and destructive ways.

Chima Anyadike clarifies part of this apparent tension by noting that Umuofian culture generates “resilience in the twin notions of duality and balance” (49); this apparent ambivalence—duality *and* balance—is achieved through the multiple voices of the narrative, the way “Achebe balances, in his narrative, the colonial point of view with several other levels of equally powerful discourses” (51). So the voices of the colonized are consistently heard, and retain certain authority, throughout the colonizing process described by Achebe. Although Anyadike does not discuss dialogism directly, he does note that “the Umuofia society portrayed by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* is squarely in the tradition of the modern novel best described by Mikhail Bakhtin” (52). Clayton G. MacKenzie connects this problem of authority directly to the question of religion: the religions of Africa and the Christian West could never coexist in Umuofia, because “the economics of Mr. Brown’s religion demand ideological substitution, not concurrence or hybridization”; we need to modify MacKenzie’s next claim to note that *many* (not all) of the Umuofians came “to believe in the supremacy of the missionary colonizers as devoutly as they once had in their own theatre of gods” (128). Even if the centre did not hold, there were elements of traditional village culture that were well worth saving. As we shall see, some of them were saved, or at least they returned, sometimes in modified forms.

*No Longer at Ease*, Achebe’s second novel, was originally connected to *Things Fall Apart* as a single work. Like the first novel, *No Longer at Ease* traces the history of one man, in this case Okonkwo’s grandson, Obi Okonkwo. By the mid-twentieth century, when this novel takes place, Christianity has had a profound effect on Igbo family life: “Being a Christian convert—in fact a catechist—he [Obi’s father] could not marry a second wife” (14). But Achebe also describes this as a stage in Nigerian

history when the second colonized generation begins to react against Western ideals. Accommodation has now been rendered conditional by the fact that many Africans can flourish by maintaining certain aspects of their pre-Christian, pre-Western culture. Gikandi has argued that “one of the key themes in this novel is Nigeria’s search for a national idiom that might express its collective will” (*Reading* 81). The notion of a collective will, however, becomes even harder to achieve when each member of this second colonized generation gets to determine how much of Nigerian precolonial culture will be retained in the colonial and—eventually—the postcolonial setting. Members of Obi’s generation go back to eating food with their fingers, partly because they claim it tastes better, but also “for the even better reason that they were not as scared as the first generation of being called uncivilized” (27). The first chapter of *No Longer at Ease* ends appropriately with a Christian offering—“Praise God from whom all blessings flow”—during which Obi’s family and friends press gifts and money into his hands. These gifts point up a link between spiritual and material well-being in one interpretation of the Christian blessing. These “offerings,” however, also prefigure the political bribe that will prove to be Obi’s downfall. The Western offering plate can be easily accommodated into a culture that accepts the idea of gift-giving, “tipping,” and money exchanges that exist on the semantic border somewhere between gift-giving, *bakshish*, and bribes. Such an accommodation represents another way that multiple cultural alternatives—or interpretations—are represented in multiple discourses. When the centre does not hold, individuals often grab on to whatever seems easiest to reach.

Obi “had very little religion” (29). He represents a modern, secularized Nigerian who can imagine saying to his Christian father, “I no longer believe in your God” (59). The second generation after colonization seems to have little need for the all-or-nothing negotiation with religious ideals so common among the first generation of converts. Obi’s father, who is also Okonkwo’s son, tells him: “I left my father’s house, and he placed a curse on me. I went through fire to become a Christian. Because I suffered I understand Christianity—more than you will ever do” (131). Obi, as a member of the next generation, tends to see Christianity almost entirely in terms of its impact on social and economic life. His mother has been forced to stop telling folk tales and accepting food from heathen families once his father has converted. Obi finds it equally scandalous that his father “after nearly thirty years service in the church” is given only two pounds a year in pension, “a good share of which went back into the same church” (58). Once the “new” religion is no longer new, once it has become integrated into the wider culture, it becomes easier for members of the colonized society to critique and judge its effects. In Achebe’s fictional universe it is often politicians, and those involved in political life, who become the harshest critics of the damage done by uncompromising versions of Christianity.

*No Longer at Ease* details two important ideas about the cultural impact of Western religious thinking on traditional Igbo belief. Ogbuefi Odogwu claims that “his only criticism of the Christian service was that the congregation was denied the right to respond to the service” (55). This comment emphasizes Christianity’s history of monological hierarchy—a version of authority unknown to the collective decision-making of Igbo society—and stresses the absence of dialogue in Western theology. As the Igbo congregation is unable to respond directly to the sermon, so the Christian laity throughout history has been discouraged from questioning the priesthood. The development of Western theology, as Achebe suggests, indicates a similar lack of dialogue. The history of the early Christian heresies, the crusades of the Middle Ages, and the Protestant reformation, all suggest a theology based not on dialogue but on appeals to a single hierarchical authority. Unlike the single-voiced missionaries who convert them, traditional Igbo are encouraged continually to debate their relationship to the spiritual world. In fact, Igbo cosmology allows a human to “talk and bargain even with his chi [personal deity] at the moment of his creation”; the Igbo hold that even Chukwu, the supreme deity, “did not make the world by fiat. He held conversations with mankind . . . to make the earth firm and productive” (*Morning* 175). Imagine a version of *Genesis* in which Jehovah consulted with mankind about the creation of the world! No voice in history is more ostensibly monologic, more absolute, than the voice of the Judeo-Christian idea of divinity.

A similar theological point is made in Achebe’s meditation on the power of the written word in Christianity. Obi’s father expresses absolute amazement at printed words, words that remain in books for untold years: “In the Bible Pilate said: ‘What is written is written.’ It is the ‘uli’ (ink tree) that never fades” (121). Achebe points out that one important premise of Christianity is the idea of a scriptural word that never loses its meaning. But there is no Igbo scripture. Western logocentric theology, in fact, denies the multiplicity of interpretations so essential to Igbo culture. The Igbo say: maybe the oracle meant this, maybe your “chi” (personal god) had this in mind, perhaps your sacrifice was not accepted by the deity to whom it was offered. On these terms, Christianity has a restrictive view of verbal permanence—because a word can last indefinitely in ink or stone, its meaning appears to last forever. In Achebe’s fiction just the opposite is true: words may be a lasting source of interpretation, but they are not the final resting place of a permanent or singular meaning. What was true for the fathers and mothers may not be true for the sons and daughters. Written words may remain the same over time, but the ways that human beings interpret these words can always, and do always, change.

*Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) moves us to a more contemporary time-frame and presents a spiritual vision that links the artist to the many voices that make up modern Nigeria. In this novel, Achebe develops a “complex and paradoxical” view of the world. He also expresses a point of view that may come close to his own when his narrator, Ikem, says: “a

genuine artist, no matter what he says he believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy” (92). Ikem values contradiction because it can “spark off the fires of invention. Orthodoxy whether of the right or of the left is the graveyard of creativity” (91). Ikem claims that religious conflict often originates in shared forms of social domination. Igbo women, like their Christian counterparts, have filled a subservient role since the origins of their culture. An Igbo legend claims that women provoked the sky to move away from the earth, taking God with it. Ikem compares this myth to the story of Eve: “our ancestors, without the benefit of hearing about the Old Testament, made the very same story differing only in local colour” (89). In the New Testament, by contrast, “the idea came to Man to turn his spouse into the very Mother of God . . . our ancestors out here, unaware of the New Testament, were working out independently a parallel subterfuge of their own” (89). Thus Igbo society blames women for distancing god from the world, while also teaching that the “Mother is supreme.” These seemingly contradictory claims are connected to another Igbo belief that when men finally reduce the world to chaos it will be women who will reorganize it. In European, as in Igbo culture, the gender that brings evil into the world (or sends god away) is the gender that gives birth to divinity (or saves humanity).

For Ikem, however, the goal is not to resolve the conflicts between opposed religious traditions but to establish a complex viewpoint that allows several traditions to coexist. He identifies a danger in a personal upbringing that denies any part of this multiple culture. The character of Beatrice Nwanibuife is thus described as suffering, because she “was baptized and sent to schools which made much about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forbears and the divinities with whom they had evolved. So she came to barely knowing who she was” (96). But there is a parallel danger in social perspectives that shut individuals off from “others” within the society. As Ikem says: “you must find a way to accept something however small from the other to make you whole and save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism” (142). Such a collaborative viewpoint would allow for varying religious and political systems within the same society.

A similarly pragmatic and inclusive view is expressed by Elewa’s uncle at the naming ceremony for her child: “Owner of the world! Man of countless names! The church people call you three-in-one. It is a good name. But it carries miserly and insufficient praise. Four-hundred-in-one would seem more fitting in our eyes. But we have no quarrel with church people; we have no quarrel with mosque people. Their intentions are good, their mind is on the right road. Only the hand fails to throw as straight as the eye sees” (211). In this powerful final scene of the novel, the women and the elders of the tribe seek to unite Igbo, Christian, and Muslim ways of thinking. The horrific murder of the main character, Chris Oriko, turns out to be potentially redemptive because it can be linked to numerous cultural perspectives. Characters with names ranging from Adamma,

Abdul, and Elewa to Beatrice, Immanuel, and Agatha interpret Chris's death in terms of its relationship to a traditional rhyming proverb, the heroic death of the Zulu chieftain Shaka, and also to an act of Christian sacrifice. In so doing, they seek to draw solace and understanding from the many traditions that have produced their complex, polyvalent culture.

Ali Erritouni sees *Anthills of the Savannah* as significant in its ability to present alternative solutions to contemporary problems without necessarily reaching the closure of a final resolution. He notes that "*Anthills* is a dialogic novel in the sense that it dramatizes not only characters from privileged socio-economic backgrounds, but also urban workers, peasants, taxi-drivers, and housemaids" (65), but his emphasis on the "dialogic" as a dramatic element in the novel contrasts with my emphasis on the shifting heteroglossia of religious and political discourses. Erritouni does note, however, that political and religious pluralism are part of the version of a "solution" offered by Achebe at the close of the novel. Part of Achebe's answer to the problem of needing to appease an embittered history "lies in a pluralistic civil society—a society that acknowledges the differences of its members and learns to live with its contradictions"; similarly, "his treatment of religious pluralism," says Erritouni, can lead to a "model of religious co-existence" in which "contradictions need not lead to antagonism" (70). In this regard, Gikandi's claim that *No Longer at Ease* "records Nigeria's search for a national idiom that might express its collective will" (*Reading* 81) is conditionalized in *Anthills of the Savannah* by the sense that "co-existence" does not mean "collective," and that a new national will might be expressed as pluralistic tolerance.

When Gikandi says that Achebe "invented, or reinvented, the idea of African culture," he means that all of Achebe's fictions are able to produce affirmative versions of West African culture by "shifting the idea of Africa [away] from romance and nostalgia, from European primitivism, and from a rhetoric of lack" ("Invention" 7). Gikandi notes that for an African secondary school student—like he was in the early 1970s—reading Achebe for the first time, the effect of this African fiction was to produce "real and familiar worlds," presented in a "language and structure that seemed at odds with the history or geography books we were reading at the time" (3). The power of this claim cannot be overstated. Gikandi's "at odds" carries the full force of Bakhtinian dialogics. The voices of the colonized Umuofians can dialogize the voices of the colonizing British, and the voice of the District Commissioner, transmitted through the title of his report on *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, can leave a reader literally stunned with the power of one side of the dialogue to draw meaning from its antithetical voice; as Gikandi puts it, its "power to manage the colonial anxieties that generated it in the first place" ("Invention" 7). Here, the multiple perspectives of voices in dialogue—and an emphasis on those voices that can "dialogize" the negative stereotypes of the past—are seen as one means by which a new framework for cross-cultural communication might emerge. In our own post-9/11

world, it may seem too optimistic to imagine that we only need to fictionalize multicultural understanding in order to bring it about. But Achebe's novels can still be seen as offering potential models of the beginnings of productive and fruitful dialogue.

While Gikandi claims that Achebe's oppositional perspectives can preserve a positive view of African culture, his critique of Ngugi wa Thiong'o ("Traveling") notes that a single author can also occupy a dialogical position in relation to himself and his own work. Ngugi's case in point is the example of a Kikuyu speaking author, who made his name as an academic and public intellectual by writing fiction and criticism in English, who then—in 1986, in *Decolonising the Mind*—announced his decision to stop writing in English, and who later returned to English and also to a senior professorship at New York University. The dialogic tension thus created, in Ngugi's own work from the 1970s to the 2000s, presents the voices of an African speaker, writing in the British-inflected English of the culture in which he received his higher education (at Leeds), a Kikuyu speaker still intent on writing to and for the ethnicity from which he emerged, and a powerful American academic, writing from the belly of the capitalist and culturally-dominant beast, an America that feels to many like the economic inheritor of the very colonizing forces (political and social) of the British empire that Ngugi has spent his life implicitly attacking. In this case, as Gikandi critiques Ngugi by noting that one language replaces another in a sort of dialogue with the self, "the grammar of the Fourth International has been replaced by the idiom of North American multiculturalism with its easily consumable notions of identity and alterity" (201). So the Ngugi who speaks as the voice of Kikuyu culture (in works produced immediately after his decision to stop writing in English) is a very different voice from the fictional voice in the novels of the 1970s, or the globalized speaker of *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* (1997).

The multiple voices of Ngugi in dialogue with himself produce yet another example of the relativizing and conditionalizing power of language described by Bakhtin and his interpreters. We can apply aspects of Gikandi's critique of Ngugi to Chinua Achebe as well: an Igbo child who is now an Igbo elder, educated in and among the voices of the family, the village, and the colonial Nigerian nation, before receiving his literary education among the Westernized voices of imperial British culture and the postcolonial Nigeria of his adulthood. Most recently, of course, Achebe has become a creator of his own unique literary voice, one whose multiple fictional "voices" now echo the complex world of a Nigeria seen, no longer from the village of Ogidi, but for fifteen years from Bard College in Annadale-on-Hudson, New York, and most recently (2009) from Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, U.S.A. Achebe's voices, in dialogue with others, and with themselves, have produced some of the most powerful fictional—and nonfictional—language in the growing pantheon of African letters.

In a 1988 television interview, Achebe linked the complexities of postcolonial authorship and authority to his own religious thinking. In Igbo proverbial knowledge, Achebe reminded his audience, “there is no absolute anything . . . if there is one god, fine, there will be others” (PBS). The resulting clash between Western and African ways of thinking over the past two centuries has produced a historical imbalance that Achebe, in this interview, claims the need to redress: “the missionaries came with the idea of one way, one truth, and one life—a view that my people considered fanatic. . . . It was not necessary to have thrown overboard as much as was thrown overboard in the name of Christianity.” For Achebe, religion had to become politics in late colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, because religion had so much to do with the forces that shaped the culture and the politics of these eras. This viewpoint might be shared by Beti and Liking as well, although both of them call for a more thoroughgoing critique of the limitations of any Westernized religious view than Achebe seems to do. The novels produced by all three of these authors, however, seek to recover some of what was lost in the process of colonization, to assess the impact of Western religion on the politics of these cultures, and to argue for a complex and multivocal view of African religious and political society. At its best, such a view might allow numerous traditions to move toward productive and fruitful dialogue. In the context suggested by this essay, that struggle must at least be linguistically acknowledged before any meaningful dialogue—or social change—can occur.

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