Historical Perspectives in Master Narratives: Ironies and Subversions in the Novels of Cary and Achebe

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Abstract The history of the colonial world is interpreted differently by western historians and “nativist” historians and ethnologists. The colonialist perspective of history often disregards an entire phase of history before the colonial period, exalting the colonialist enterprise. On the other hand, ethnologists and native historians stress indigenous sources of history, including oral accounts. The paper, Historical Perspectives in Master Narratives: Ironies and Subversions in the Novels of Cary and Achebe, places the literary works of Joyce Cary (1880-1957) and Chinua Achebe (1930 - ) in their historical context as reflecting either colonialist or “nativist” discourse, yet assesses their deviations from these historical traditions with the objective of exploring the common theme of ironies and subversions that undercut master-narratives. Cary’s novels reflect colonialist accounts of African history while Achebe attempts to give authority and validity to oral sources of African history. Yet both novelists initiate a critique of the dominant ideology.

Keywords: Master narratives, colonialist, ethnologist, subversions.

The history of the colonial world is interpreted differently by western historians and “nativist” historians and ethnologists. The colonialist perspective of history exalts the colonialist enterprise while ethnologists and native historians stress indigenous sources of history, including oral accounts. However, there is a third approach to history that counters accounts by colonialist historians and exclusively “nativist” accounts. Such an approach discussed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his book, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, highlights ironies and subversions in master narratives. While acknowledging Roth’s contention in, “The Nostalgic Nest at the End of History,” that, “No major Western thinker, for instance, has publicly shared Francis Fukuyama’s “vulgarized Hegelian historicism” that saw in the fall of the Berlin wall a common end for the history of all human beings”, Chakrabarty challenges the idea of historicism, the thought that to comprehend anything, it has to be seen as part of a whole, as a phase in historical development (Roth 163–174, cited in Chakrabarty 3). Referring to the example of John Stuart Mill, who believed that a certain length of time had to lapse before Indians or Africans could rule themselves, Chakrabarty argues that Africans and Indians had been relegated to “an imaginary waiting room of history” (8). He thus questions the idea of “global historical time” which ironically, after an interval, led diverse non-Western nationalisms to construct indigenous variations on master narratives, accounts where Europe is substituted by a local center (7).

Historical accounts of Africa, such as Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore’s Africa Since 1800, focus on the history of imperial conquest. In fact, even historical accounts that strive to present African history often overlook African history before the colonial period and center on the period after colonization. Bruce Vandervort who stresses the imperative need to understand African history ironically begins his description of African history with a chapter titled “Lords of the
Land: Africa on the eve of conquest” (italics added). Toyin Falola in the History of Nigeria gives a brief timeline of the historical events of Nigeria. This is followed by a description of the geography of Nigeria, a discussion of the precolonial states and systems of African society, and then an account of the slave trade in terms of the demand and scramble for slaves and its effects on politics and state formation. However, the unimaginable agony and misery of the slaves is left untold as we move from one event to another and from one empire to the next. As Sylviane A. Diouf says, “Because the records of shippers, merchants, banks, and insurance companies provide the most extensive evidence, economic and statistical studies are disproportionately represented in slave trade studies” (x).

In contrast, African historians emphasize the value of oral historical sources and traditions of Africa. African ethnologists like Joseph ki Zerbo have invested a great amount and effort to underscore the African perspective in lieu of a European one. In an interview with Karen Andersson Schiebe, Zerbo comments:

To end the use of the colonisers’ school-books and the phrase: ‘Our ancestors, the Gauls’, we had to undertake research, read thousands of books, and travel the length and breadth of African countries. Our first school books were duplicated lecture notes. But we have contributed to proving that Africa is the cradle of Mankind. Nowadays it is the Europeans who speak of ‘Our ancestors, the Africans.’

Other historians like Cheikh Anta Diop have attempted to provide scientific evidence of the African foundations of Egyptian civilization. Diop states, "The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt” (cited in Rashidi para 2).

So passionate is this viewpoint of African history that Claude Wauthier in his book The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa, argues that the movements of Negritude and Nationalism derive their inspiration from a specific approach of African history. Additionally, Wim van Binsbergen in an article “Rethinking Africa’s Contribution to Global Cultural History” comments that it is a characteristic of African cultural history to discover:

i. Dynamic initial contribution in global cultural origins

ii. Indigenous and regional inspiration in cultural and political processes

iii. “Entrenchment” or “cultural involution” which confines cultures to a specific region to the extent that the outcome is an exclusive, local culture with no indication of an inter-continental exchange

However, though an emphasis on nativist accounts may serve as a response to a colonial interpretation of history, yet it does not rewrite history. The remedy, then, is as Chakraborthy states, “to work into the history of modernity, the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force and the tragedies and worries that attend it” (43).

Postcolonial theorists such as Gyan Prakash and Elleke Boehmer question the central categories of postcolonialism: the colonizer and the colonized, the colonial and the postcolonial, the civilized and the uncivilized and other such binary oppositions. Boehmer highlights the superfluous distinction that exists in works termed as colonial, colonialist and
postcolonial. According to him, colonial literature or literature perceived to be part of a colonial culture and colonialisist literature or literature that propagates the colonialisist ideology cannot be seen in stark opposition to postcolonial literature.

Since an author may both reflect the dominant ideology of the period, yet attempt a critique of it, a close scrutiny of historical perspectives in literary works reveals ambivalences and contradictions that undermine the very ideology the author appears to articulate. My focus is on the literary works of Joyce Cary (1880-1957) and Chinua Achebe (1930 - ). Both novelists depict Nigerian history. However, while these novels may be placed in their historical context as reflecting either colonialisist or “nativist” discourse, yet an assessment of their deviations from these historical traditions underlines the common theme of ironies and subversions that undercut master-narratives.

Arthur Joyce Lunel Cary, was born on 7 December 1888 in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. According to his biographer, Malcolm Foster, after Cary completed his schooling at Hurstleigh School, Tunbridge, he joined Clifton College where he stood out as a loner. Later, in 1912, he took a degree in law from Oxford, and also developed his interest in writing. In 1913, he enlisted for the Nigerian Colonial Service where he came in contact with many colonial officers who influenced his perception about Nigeria. Cary’s African novels, *Aissa Saved* (1932), *The American Visitor* (1933), *The African Witch* (1936) and *Mister Johnson* (1939,) reflect colonial accounts of African history as his novels are based on his observations as a colonial officer. Nonetheless, even while Cary endorses imperialist ideology, he distances himself from it at various points in the novels in order to critique the dominant ideology.

In the “prefatory essay” to *Aissa Saved*, a novel which discusses the clash between two faiths, Christianity and the traditional Yoruba religion, Cary locates his novel in African history:

> When I was pulled out of the army about 1917 after the Cameroons Campaign, and sent across the Niger to take over Borgu (it was then a piece of Kantagora province) I was given some important looking maps, marked, War Office, 1910. These maps turned out ludicrously bad; probably they had been made up from rough sketches sent in by officers during the first occupation about 1902. (AS 6)

According to Mueni wa Muiu, the Royal Niger Company, which was established in 1886, laid the foundation of the formation of Nigeria. The company set up trading posts along the coast. Though these trading posts were lucrative, the British occupied the territory for more efficient exploitation and domination and a period of brazen imperialism began in 1900.

The novel, *Aissa Saved*, begins with a description of the Shibi Rest Camp on the Niger built by Bradgate, the Assistant Resident, about 1912. The introduction to the British colonial officer is followed by an introduction to the Winkworth Memorial Mission—a symbol of war and conquest and nostalgia. The mission contains a chapel and a hospital-- symbols of British attempts at “civilization.”
In the “prefaratory essay” to another novel, The American Visitor, the narrator of the story, Marie who at the outset of her visit had a naïve and romantic view of the village of Nok, describes a stay in Borgu, “. . . in the bush (italics added) . . . in Borgu, primitive and remote, where there had lately been ‘big trouble’; that is to say war between followers of a certain chief and a large body of tribesmen” (AV 8). In a country full of “social and tribal conflict”, this colonial officer finds it hard to devise “even the elements of security and a reasonable life, especially for the masses” (AV 9). The British resident officer, Bewsher, roars at the “wooden-headed, uneducated, ill-mannered, ungrateful…” Birri. Here, Cary both places the novel in its historical context as well as identifies his perspective of a colonial officer.

Moreover, the African novels include various references to the League of Nations (AV 9, 10, 98), the British Army (AV 12), the Imperial Troops (AV 129) and ceremonial farewells given to colonial officers. In Mister Johnson, the story of a young Nigerian clerk at the English district office in Fada, Nigeria, such farewells are deeply rooted in the local tradition: “No officer who has ever commanded a Nigerian company can forget the Hausa farewell, that tune upon the bugles played as he rides away for the last time.”(MJ 7) These colonial officers govern and control the “riotous” Africans as is evident in the reference to the Riot Act in The American Visitor (AV 97).

In Cary’s portrayal of the natives as lawless and mindless, we see ideology in its most obvious form where it both legitimizes the regime in power and expresses its interests. It is thus tempting to dismiss Cary’s novels as “narcissitic colonialist text(s)” (Jan Mohammed 20). However, there are undercurrents present in this totalizing master-narrative. Cary satirizes symbols and motifs of imperialist discourse, for example, the building of roads and bridges. The British administration is ridiculed: “In this the treasury did its duty which is not to produce wealth or advance the welfare of the people but to scrape and hoard and to invent new obstacles in the way of officers who desired to spend anything” (AS 70). Cary’s ironic description of the collection of tax by colonial officers in The African Witch, a novel that depicts an African witch exploiting juju to defeat the enemies of the emirate of Rimi in South-Western Nigeria, is another such example:

He (Aladai) explained to the old farmers that the old lands needed manure and he spent hours with paper and pencil doing sums for the chiefs required by the government to divide a total tax of thirty-two pounds, seven shillings and four pence equitably between nine families, all differing in size and wealth; two butchers with farms, one dyer with a horse but no cart, the village idiot, a widow with two grown up sons and a prosperous thief and a fisherman suspected at will of being a hyena possessing unknown sources of income. (AW 105)

In fact, the British administration is depicted as being highly incompatible with the Yoruba political system. In 1900, when Lord Lugard was made the high commissioner of the Northern Protectorate of Nigeria, he introduced the policy of indirect rule through which the British could govern the people. According to Peter Schwab, this implied acknowledgment of the emir as the legal power. However, the Yoruba Oba, with whom the British wished to negotiate did not command absolute authority and thus could not take independent decisions. The British failure to appreciate the fact that there was no parallel authority amongst the Yorubas resulted in disorder.
in Yorubaland. It is this perspective that Cary has in mind when he comments “The dual
government of Nigeria is leaky at both ends” (AW 181).

Thus, though Cary may appear to write a master-narrative, he works into this history references
that challenge this sovereignty. Historical references to the women’s wars in The African Witch:
the women’s war of 1925, the spirit women’s war of 1927, and the Calabar women’s war of
1929, further question this sovereignty. As Cheryl Johnson says, south-western Nigeria, which
was dominated by the Yorubas was most active in anti-colonial protests. Yoruba women in the
pre-colonial era were involved in marketing agricultural produce. Colonialism thus affected these
women adversely, particularly when the decision to tax women was taken. By the mid-1920s
associations such as the Lagos Market Women’s Association (LMWA) became dominant and in
1932 organized a protest which was followed by a mass-based movement in 1940.

In addition to references to Yoruba history, Cary examines overt resistance to imperialism. In
The African Witch, a novel that discusses the belief of juju, Cary examines the genesis of African
national identity. E.A. Ayandele discussing the growth of nationalist sentiment in Africa
analyses that though the early nationalists did not constitute a cohesive group, they felt
themselves to be different from their British masters and from their uneducated countrymen.
They scrutinized two major institutions— polygamy and indigenous secret societies. Aladai in
The African Witch represents the visionary nationalists:

‘Are you a nationalist?’ she asked cautiously.

‘I don’t know,’ he answered; and then, speaking with force, ‘I think I am — if that means
standing up for one’s own people.’ (AW 21)

Though hazy about his own line of action as a nationalist, he is convinced that Africa must be rid
of secret religious societies: ‘The blood of what you call Rimi Civilization is juju—so crude and
stupid… (AW 24)

In fact, the juju cult is described in graphic terms, “‘Dis very big juju,’ Elizabeth explains. She
puts her hand on the canon with easy familiarity. ‘And dis where I make medicine. Blood very
strong medicine.’ (AW 40) and critics like Jack Wolkenfield point out that neither the
missionaries nor the administration are acquainted with the equivalent religious organizations
of the Africans. However, another extract from Cary’s The African Witch shows the dichotomy in
Cary’s views as a colonial officer and as an author. After Aladai sums up African civilization as
“juju,” Judy comments,” ‘Not all of it Louis’” (AW 24). The parallel thread of argument running
throughout the narrative clearly highlights the ambivalences in the novel.

Such ambivalences are also evident in Achebe’s novels. Chinua Achebe was born on November
16, 1930 in Ogidi, Nigeria (see Ohaeto). After studying at St. Philips Central School,
Akpakaoegwe, Ogidi and Nekede Central School, he joined Government College in 1944, and
then won a scholarship at Ibadan University College. At the University, he was taught Joyce
Cary’s novel Mister Johnson (1939) by Eric Robinson of the Department of English, Ibadan
University. Achebe was horrified by the fact that the professor did not dispute Cary’s portrayal
of Africa and resolved that the story of the Africans could be best told by the Africans and not by
anyone else however talented the narrator was.
In the novels of Achebe set before colonization, the emphasis is, thus, on oral sources of history, folklore, storytelling, and legend. *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe’s response to *Mister Johnson*, depicts the conflict between the colonizers and the Igbo from the African point of view:

“‘Have you heard’ said, Obeirika that Abame is no more?’

‘How is that?’ asked Uchendu and Okonkwo together.

‘Abame has been wiped out’, said Obeirika, ‘it is a strange and terrible story They have a big market in Abame on every other day and, as you know, the white clan gathers there. (TFA 115)

The historical reference to Abame, the land of the highland warriors or the Abam sets the stage for a discussion of the imperial conquest. However, the emphasis on the story form lures the reader to view it from an African perspective. History is no more the forte of the book. The significance of the story form amongst the Igbo may be appreciated on understanding the code of communication in the African oral tradition.

In an article “Ncheteka: The Story, Memory and Continuity of Igbo Culture,” Emmanuel Obeichina comments on the importance of the story form amongst the Igbo. According to him, the story defines cultural connections, endorses philosophical convictions and authenticates social principles. The theme of *Things Fall Apart* is the encounter between the European and African worlds and Obeirika, who is also the moral spokesperson of the novel, throws himself into the role of the story-teller, compelling us to view this encounter from the perspective of the Igbo.

Once the stage is set, we are introduced to the main character of the novel-Okonkwo who embodies this conflict. He clashes with the colonial authorities, and ultimately, subjugated, hangs himself from a tree. The District Commissioner resolves to write a book on this and calls it *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Biodun Jeyifo analyzing the “ironic juxtaposition” (56) of the commissioner’s synopsis of the tragedy of Okonkwo with the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* remarks that the last paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* assumes itself to be the only reliable account of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. However, in my opinion, the ironic attitude of the narrator makes us further review our perception of the printed word vis-à-vis the oral tradition. The reader is forced to choose between two historical perspectives: Obeireika’s oral narrative which captures the anguish of the conflict and the detached account of the district commissioner which merely chronicles the events of the story.

Apart from establishing the historical perspective Achebe uses the oral traditional narrative to explain the judicial and political hierarchy of the Igbo. In *Things Fall Apart*, the nine masked mortals, the egwugwu, who represent the dead fathers of the nine villages moderate conflicts The reference to the title of ozo parallels Cary’s reference to the oba of the Yorubas.. The title of ozo has to be earned and carries with it certain obligations. For example, the fifth and final rank of the ozo is that of the king, and nobody actually wants to be the king as it would mean paying the debt of each and every person in the village. Neither the position of the oba nor that of the ozo enjoys total power and authority, but unfortunately, the British administration fails to appreciate this. Like Cary, Achebe criticizes Lugard’s policy of indirect rule which introduced warrant chieftancy amongst the Igbo and caused social and political upheaval in Umuaro.
Simultaneously, Achebe critically examines African culture. The rejection of the *osus*, albinos, twins and even victims of the swelling sickness shows the cruelty of some of the customs of Igbo society. In Obeirika’s words, “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer” (TFA 105). By exposing the weaknesses of Igbo culture, Achebe consciously deviates from a master-narrative. As Jeyifo comments:

One cannot read the countless, fragmentary stories around ‘minor’ characters like Unoka, Chielo, Ogbeufi Nbulue and his wife Ozoemena, Ikemefuna and Nwoye, Ekwefi and Ezinma, Okonkwo’s uncle Uchendu, Akunna, Obiako and many others, without consciously or unconsciously feeling oneself in the presence of a narrative and discursive logic which admits of illogic and which makes everything negotiable, including the most sacrosanct values of the culture. (63)

*No Longer at Ease* (1960) further explores the disorder ushered in by colonization. It reflects the post-independence disenchantment with nationalism: “In Nigeria the Government was ‘they’. It had nothing to do with you or me, It was an alien institution and people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble” (NLE 200). *A Man of the People* (1966) extends this disillusionment to party politics in Nigeria in the general elections.

The post-independence atmosphere of confidence and expectation after Nnamdi Azikiwe, leader of the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons, became President of the Republic of Nigeria in 1960 was short-lived because of ethnic and political conflict. The political tension in the country was an important reason for the military coup led by General Ironsi in which Tawafa Balewa, Prime Minister of Nigeria, was killed. Cdr. S.K. Sarin, an Indian naval officer who was on deputation to the Nigerian Navy from 1964 to 1969, gives a first-hand account of this coup attempt in Nigeria:

Life has become quite cheap now. Shooting incidents are being reported in Ikoyi and Yorubaland. The victims are mostly service officers. It is impossible for me to record the details. This much is certain that a lot of officers are being rounded up and bumped off. (Sarin, unpublished diary account given to author)

However, he does acknowledge the disillusionment of the people with the civilian administration: “One cannot deny the basic truth about this changeover, that people in Lagos are very happy and jubilant over the military takeover. They seem to be utterly disgusted with the politicians.”

In fact, coups were an important part of African history. Other coups followed—Yakubu Gowon’s coup in 1966, the bloodless coup of Murtala Mohammed in 1975, General Obesegeun Obasanjo coup in 1976 and two other coups in 1983 and 1990 (see Falola). In 1990, Masood Olawale Abiola pronounced himself to be the President of the Federation of Nigeria in Lagos Many critics like Ohaeto see a link between *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). According to him, *Anthills of the Savannah* begins where the narrative of *A Man of the People* is disrupted by the army coup. The fictitious republic of Kangan replicates Nigeria. Larry Diamond draws parallels between the protesting students at the University of Bassa and those at the Ahmad Bello University in May 1986. Similarly, he traces the character of the forthright
and candid editor of the *National Gazette*, Ikem Osodi, in *Anthills of the Savannah* to Dele Giwa, the editor of *Newswatch*.

Apart from the coup attempt of 1990, there are other economic and social references that place the book firmly in its historical period. In Nigeria, the oil boom from the 1970s resulted in a mammoth expansion of the role of the state and the private sector (see Ikpeze, Soludo & Elekwa). This led to the growth of centres of power and institutions for collective action, and by the time General Babangida came to power in 1983, there were many such centers. Institutional pluralism altered the relationship of the elite to the state as they grew in power and prestige which, in turn, had further ramifications. The ideological orientation of this class remained elitist and divorced from the needs of the masses. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, both Ikem and Beatrice comment strongly on class disparities. At the public execution, Ikem wonders: “How does the poor man retain his calm in the face of such provocation? (ATS 40) while Beatrice succinctly sums up the economic and social fallout of the postcolonial political situation in Nigeria in *Anthills of the Savannah*:

> In the absurd raffle–draw that apportioned the destinies of postcolonial African societies two people starting off even as identical twins in the morning might quite easily find themselves in the evening one as President shitting on the heads of the people and the other as night man carrying the people’s shit on his head. (ATS 183)

The novels set in the colonial and postcolonial period seem to depict a historicist view of African history that traces phases in an overall pattern of development. However Achebe unmistakably analyses various problems of indigenous African culture and of neo-colonialism. While analyzing problems of class disparity and corruption, Achebe incriminates both the leaders and the masses. Thus in the novels set both before and after colonization, Achebe assesses fairly the strengths and weaknesses of the social structure thereby, succeeding in building into the narrative inconsistencies, ambiguities and paradoxes.

Though the historical perspective in Cary’s and Achebe’s novels differs because of their respective ideologies, neither Cary nor Achebe writes a master narrative. Cary reflects colonialist accounts of African history, as Europe remains his focus, and he sees the Africans from a European point of view. On the other hand, Achebe attempts to give authority and validity to oral sources of African history. He takes into account pre-colonial Africa, British interaction with Africa and the consequent exploitation, African nationalism, independence and the subsequent disillusionment with independence. However, my analysis has shown that, while focusing on Europe, Cary does not hesitate to depict the Yoruba historical perspective. Further, through his ironic descriptions of colonial officers and colonial administrators he undercuts the imperialist discourse. Similarly, Achebe shows the weaknesses of African culture, thereby ensuring that he does not write an exclusively African point of view.
References


term historical consciousness carries the in-built assumption that history can be an unconscious phenomenon, that unconscious threads run throughout history. This explains the Africa (much like Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart). This narrative structures the following family history and introduces early metaphors and themes, which carry throughout the narrative. One significant image is the three people in a village: the living, the dead, and. The narrative of abuse plays an essential role in historical master narratives of many modern national communities, as their integrity is strongly dependent on defining themselves via binary oppositions. According to Anthony Smith, in this self-identification process of a nation culture, mass communication and education play a particular role [Smith, 1991]. Exposed some reflections about the historical learning and master narratives from a similitudes in the literature novel "1984" by George Orwell and the short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" by Jorge Luis Borges. Historical Perspective. A Tribal Society. Things Fall Apart was published in 1958 just prior to Nigerian independence, but it depicts precolonial Africa. Achebe felt it was important to portray Nigerians as they really were—not just provide a shallow description of them as other authors had. The story takes place in the typical tribal village of Umuofia, where the inhabitants (whom Achebe calls the Ibo, but who are also known as the Igbo) practice rituals common to their native traditions. The Ibo worshipped gods who protect, advise, and chastise them and who are represented by priests and pri