

Probe: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Article abstract

In a contrapuntal organizational pattern, I discuss Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), on the one hand, and, on the other, the mature work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University. I style this short essay as a "Probe" because it is fundamentally exploratory in nature.

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Probe: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Abstract: In a contrapuntal organizational pattern, I discuss Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), on the one hand, and, on the other, the mature work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University. I style this short essay as a "Probe" because it is fundamentally exploratory in nature.

Over my long teaching career, from September 1969 to the end of May 2009, I frequently taught the Igbo-and-English-speaking Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960) – more frequently than I taught any other works of imaginative literature.

For example, I required the students in my reading-intensive introductory-level survey course Literacy, Technology, and Society at the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) to read both of those Achebe novels. The two novels are related to one another in the sense that the main character in *Things Fall Apart* is the grandfather of the main character in *No Longer at Ease*. For further information about my course Literacy, Technology, and Society, see my UMD homepage www.d.umn.edu/~tfarrell (click on the prompt for courses and then select the course numbered 1506 from the drop-down menu).

Now, *Things Fall Apart* centers on the encounter of the Nigerian people in a remote village with the British Empire around the turn of the twentieth century (circa 1905). But the story in *No Longer at Ease* centers around the mid-century (circa 1960) educated urban Nigerians who are awaiting Nigeria's freedom from the British Empire.

The *Wikipedia* entry on *Things Fall Apart* reports that "it has sold more than 20 million copies worldwide." It also says that it "has been translated into more than 50 languages."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart Wow! I find these numbers impressive!

Now, **over the years of my adult life** (I turned 80 on my last birthday), I have devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to writing about my former teacher at Saint Louis University, the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). See, for example, my *OEN* articles (1) "Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought" (dated September 20, 2020); and (2) "Thomas J. Farrell on Thomas J. Farrell" (dated November 17, 2023):

[https://www.opednews.com/articles/Walter-J-Ong-s-Philosophi-by-Thomas-Farrell-](https://www.opednews.com/articles/Walter-J-Ong-s-Philosophi-by-Thomas-Farrell-Communication_Communications_Communications_Consciousness-200920-664.html)

[Communication_Communications_Communications_Consciousness-200920-664.html](https://www.opednews.com/articles/Walter-J-Ong-s-Philosophi-by-Thomas-Farrell-Communication_Communications_Communications_Consciousness-200920-664.html)

<https://www.opednews.com/articles/Thomas-J-Farrell-on-Thoma-Professionalism-231117->

[426.html](#)

Now, I want to re-frame what I just said about *Things Fall Apart* in terms of Ong's media-ecology account of our Western cultural history.

On the one hand, the British Empire circa 1905 represents the print culture that emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s.

On the other hand, the remote Nigerian village that Achebe portrays in *Things Fall Apart* represents a residual form of what Ong refers to as a primary oral culture.

However, the mid-century (circa 1960) educated urban Nigerians that Achebe portrays in *No Longer at Ease* were living at the time when what Ong refers to as secondary oral culture was emerging world-wide, thanks to the communications media that accentuate sound.

I discuss what Ong refers to as secondary orality ushered in by the communications media that accentuate sound, to distinguish it from the primary orality of our pre-historic and pre-literate human ancestors, in my 1991 essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today." In my upbeat 1991 essay, I hone closely to points that Ong makes. However, in my 1991 essay, I do not claim to have exhausted all that should be said, or should be said, about secondary orality. But I would have to have written a far more extensive essay about secondary orality to include a relevant discussion of Edward C. Whitmont's 1982 book *Return of the Goddess* and of Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette's 1990 book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*.

However, I have discussed Whitmont's 1982 book in my OEN article "Can Deliberate Human Destructiveness Be Staved Off?" (dated February 11, 2015):

<https://www.opednews.com/articles/Can-Deliberate-Human-Destr-by-Thomas-Farrell-Aquarius-Awareness-Crucifixion-Culture-150211-742.html>

In my estimate, secondary orality resonates deeply in the human psyche – in what C. G. Jung and his followers refers to as the collective unconscious, where secondary orality resonates with the archetypes and memories of primary oral cultures, which resonances, in turn, reverberate with ego-consciousness. These reverberating resonances in the human psyche at the level of ego-consciousness can trigger deep longings for an idealized past in what Ong refers to as print culture.

Now, Ong's pioneering study of print culture in our Western cultural history is also his pioneering media ecology account of the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history, his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (for specific page references to the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history, see the "Index" [p. 396]).

Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr whose works in logic were extremely popular for a time – for example, at Cambridge University and at the fledgling Harvard College.

Concerning Ong's account of both primary oral culture and secondary oral culture, see Ong's

seminal 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University. Now, subsequently to the publication of his seminal 1967 book, Ong published one of his most perceptive essays, "World as View and World as Event" in the *American Anthropologist* (August 1969).

It is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 69-90). I discuss Ong's 1969 essay extensively in my article "Walter Ong and Harold Bloom Can Help Us Understand the Hebrew Bible" in *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2012). Now, the titles of those two novels by Achebe contain literary allusions. The title *Things Fall Apart* is a line in William Butler Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*, and the title of *No Longer at Ease* contains a line from T. S. Eliot's poem *The Journey of the Magi*. For further discussion of Achebe's choice of those two titles, see Judith Illsley Gleason's book *This Africa: Novels by West Africans in English and French* (1965, pp. 81-93 and 130-136 and 140). For a relevant critical assessment devoted primarily to Achebe, see Chinwe Christiana Okechukwu's *Achebe the Orator: The Art of Persuasion in Chinua Achebe's Novels* (2001). In the "Foreword" (pp. ix-xi), Chinyere Grace Okafor of Wichita State University says, "Okechukwu studied English in universities in Great Britain and Nigeria, has a Ph.D. in Rhetoric from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., taught English language and literature in various institutions in Nigeria, and is at present a Full Professor at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, where she teaches English, Literature, and Writing" (p. ix).

In Okechukwu's "Acknowledgments" (pp. xiii-xiv), she thanks "Dr. Jean Dietz Moss, Professor of Rhetoric and director of the Rhetoric Program at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., my teacher, mentor, and supervisor, who not only encouraged me to explore the academic field of rhetoric, but exercised great patience and showed a great amount of caring throughout the duration of putting this work together" (p. xiv). In Okechukwu's 2001 book *Achebe the Orator*, she discusses Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in Chapter 2: "Audience and Oratory: *Things Fall Apart*" (pp. 13-43) and Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* in Chapter 4: "Locale and Argumentation: *No Longer at Ease*" (pp. 77-97). However, I am sorry to report that Okechukwu does not even mention Ong's work in her 2001 book *Achebe the Orator*.

Now, for a biography of Achebe, see *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* (1997) by the Nigerian poet Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1958-2005; Ph.D. in literature, University of Benin, 1991). But also see the *Wikipedia* entry on Chinua Achebe: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe.

Now, in Ong's seminal 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, mentioned above, he discusses Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease*. In it, Ong says, "In his sensitive novel *No Longer at Ease*, concerned with the acculturation of his native Nigeria, Chinua Achebe cogently portrays ([1961], pp. 126-127) the awesome impression which knowledge of writing has made on a thoughtful elderly man, who is fascinated by its order and stability and rather given to explaining this order and stability to illiterate kinsmen. He urges them to meditate on Pilate's words (which he quotes in oral fashion, that is thematically, not verbatim, suppressing Pilate's 'I'): 'What is written is written.' The same man is even more impressed by print. He never destroys a piece of printed paper, but in boxes and the corners of his room saves every bit of it he can find. Order so assured as that of printed words deserves to be preserved, whatever the words say. It appears reasonable

that such experience of this spectacularly ordered environment for thought, free from interference, simply there, unattended and unsupervised by any discernible person, would open to the overstrained psyche the new possibility of withdrawal into a world away from the tribe, a private world of delusional systemization – an escape not into violence or tribal magic, but into the interior of one's own consciousness, rendered schizoid but once and for all consistent with itself" (Ong, 1967, pp. 136-137).

Now, in an interview published as "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" in the journal *New Letters* (1973), Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, revealed that his father, an Anglican catechist, had served as the real-life model for the elderly man he portrays in the ways that Ong describes. In the interview Achebe says, "My parents' reverence for books was almost superstitious. . . . My father was much worse than my mother. He never destroyed any paper. When he died, we had to make a bonfire of all the hoardings of his life" (p. 20).

"Named for Victoria, Queen of England" is reprinted in Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975, pp. 116-124) and in Achebe's *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1989, pp. 30-39). No doubt both Achebe's 1960 novel *No Longer at Ease* and his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* are rooted in his own personal memories. Nevertheless, I would not characterize them as semi-autobiographical novels in the same sense that I would characterize D. H. Lawrence's 1913 novel *Sons and Lovers* and James Joyce's 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* as semi-autobiographical novels. Whatever else may be said about Achebe, his 1960 and 1958 novels provide a unique – and beautiful -- contributions to the anglophone history of the modern novel. Yes, to be sure, the modern novel in English emerged in our Western cultural history in the print culture that emerged in Europe after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s. Because Ong liked to say that we need both proximity (closeness) and distance to understand something, I's like to use these terms now to re-frame Achebe's 1960 and 1958 novels. Because of Achebe's **proximity (closeness)** to his native Igbo language and culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, **his distance** from his native language and culture by using the English language, he was able to **understand** and sensitively portray the psychodynamics of British colonialism in both his 1958 and his 1960 novels.

In any event, back to Ong. In April and May of 1974, Ong served as a Lincoln Lecturer. He lectured in Central and West Africa, including Nigeria. After his lecture tour, he published three Africa-themed articles:

- (1) "Mass in Ewondo" in the Jesuit-sponsored magazine *America* (September 28, 1974). It is reprinted in volume four of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1999, pp. 103-110). "Mass in Ewondo" is one of my favorite essays by Ong.
 - (2) "African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics" in *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* (Spring 1977). Ong reprinted it in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 92-120).
 - (3) "Truth in Conrad's Darkness" in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature and Ideas* (Fall, 1977). It is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 186-201).
- In Ong's "Preface" in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word* (pp. 9-13), he says the following in

the first sentence: “The present volume carries forward work in two earlier volumes by the same author, *The Presence of the Word* (1967) and *Rhetoric Romance, and Technology* (1971).” He then discusses these two earlier volumes.

Then Ong says, “The thesis of these two earlier works is sweeping, but it is not reductionist, as reviewers and commentators, so far as I know, have all generously recognized: the works do not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to an electronic culture, which produces secondary orality, causes or explain everything in human culture and consciousness. Rather, the thesis is relationist: major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state. But the relationships are varied and complex, with cause and effect often difficult to distinguish” (pp. 9-10).

Thus, Ong himself claims (1) that his thesis is “sweeping” but (2) that the shifts do not “cause or explain everything in human culture and consciousness” and (3) that the shifts are related to “major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness.”

Major cultural developments include the rise of modern science, the rise of modern capitalism, the rise of representative democracy, the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of the Romantic Movement in philosophy, literature, and the arts.

In effect, Ong implicitly works with this thesis in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* – his major exploration of the influence of the Gutenberg printing press that emerged in the mid-1450s. Taking a hint from Ong’s massively researched 1958 book, Marshall McLuhan worked up some examples of his own in his sweeping 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (for specific page references to Ong’s publications about Ramus and Ramism, see the “Bibliographic Index” [pp. 286-287]).

Ong reviewed McLuhan’s 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in the Jesuit-sponsored magazine *America* (dated September 15, 1962). Ong’s review of McLuhan’s 1962 book is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 307-308).

In the spirit of Ong’s relationist thesis, I want to mention here that the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church took place in what Ong refers to as our contemporary secondary oral culture – around the time that Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960) were published.

For fresh English translations of the six key documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, see the book *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, edited by Norman Tanner, S. J. (2012).

For an account of what happened at the Second Vatican council, see the American Jesuit church historian John W. O’Malley’s book *What Happened at Vatican II* (2008).

For discussion of the ongoing reception of the Second Vatican Council, see *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (2023).

As odd as it seems to me, the ongoing reception of the Second Vatican Council seems to be involved in the vociferous anti-Francis rhetoric of certain conservative American Catholics. For a discussion of this, see the Italian philosopher and papal biographer Massimo Borghesi’s book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated by Barry Hudock (2021).

Now, in 2009, Norton published *A Norton Critical Edition: Chinua Achebe: Things Fall Apart*, edited by Francis Abiola Irele (1936-2017; Ph.D. in French, University of Paris, Sorbonne, 1966). Irele is the author of the rich essay “The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” in the *African Studies Quarterly* (2000, pp. 1-40) – which is far too lengthy to be reprinted in its entirety in the Norton Critical Edition. However, the Norton Critical Edition does reprint a somewhat lengthy excerpt from Irele’s 2001 book *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (pp. 115-153) titled “The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” (pp. 453-491).

In any event, in the Norton Critical Edition, Irele reprinted Abdul JanMohamed’s 1984 essay “Sophisticated Primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” (pp. 571-586). In JanMohamed’s essay, he refers frequently to Ong’s 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* – Ong’s most widely read and most widely translated book.

In conclusion, JanMohamed and other scholars interested in Achebe’s novels *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* should draw not only on Ong’s 1982 book but on his other works as well to provide a more thorough account of Oral and Literate Modes of thought and expression in those two related novels.

(Because JanMohamed’s “Notes,” giving bibliographic information, are not reprinted in the 2009 Norton Critical Edition of Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, I have included a complete bibliographic reference to JanMohamed’s 1984 article in my “References” at the end of this essay.)

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