

# Chinua Achebe's Dynamic World in *Things Fall Apart*

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**Abstract-** *The society of Umuofia in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart can be seen as a dynamic world based upon Mikhail M. Bakhtin's theory of social heteroglossia. The opposing social worldviews reflected in these languages or speech, in Bakhtin's words, can be referred to as two contrasting forces, the centripetal forces and the centrifugal forces. In Things Fall Apart, the centripetal forces are represented through the unified centralized rigid social ideologies while the centrifugal forces are revealed through the disunified decentralized flexible social ideologies in the speech of characters. The society of Umuofia is an active dynamic one within which the diverse social ideologies or forces interact and contest.*

**Keywords-** Achebe; Bakhtin; social heteroglossia

The society of Umuofia, permeating the consciousness of Igbo dualism, becomes a typical traditional Igbo "dynamic world of movement and of flux," where opposing viewpoints interact with each other (Achebe *Hopes* 62). To interpret the Igbo society as a place in which different principles or viewpoints coexist and counteract can not only meet Achebe's intention of representing an authentic traditional Igbo world from the African insider view rather than the Western outsider one but also effectively subvert prejudice embedded in colonial discourse.

For Achebe, to reveal Igbo traditional cultural thought of dualism in the novel can effectively shatter and challenge the misrepresentation of the uncivilized barbarian African culture in colonial discourse. Representation of the restless dynamism in the society of Umuofia is also able to show up the stereotypical static African society in colonial discourse as a lie. Hence, only when the Igbo dynamism is revealed in the novel can Achebe successfully write back to western colonial discourse.

In this paper, I will interpret the society of Umuofia as a dynamic world by revealing contestations of diverse opposing worldviews and social ideologies within it. Through Bakhtin's concept of social heteroglossia, I expect to read the novel as a work permeated by a dynamic African tradition and culture rather than as a sentimental Négritude tragedy or a nationalistic epic. The contestations and conflicts between the opposing social ideologies embedded in the characters' speech will be unveiled so as to represent the phenomenon of social heteroglossia in *Things Fall Apart*.

## BAKHTIN'S SOCIAL HETEROGLOSSIA

According to Bakhtin, social heteroglossia is represented in the novel through the double-voiced discourse, the direct speech of characters, and incorporated genres. First of all, the double-voiced discourse is composed of the interactions and dialogizations of various

speech or languages in regard to socio-linguistics. According to Bakhtin, "in the novel, this double-voicedness sinks its roots deep into a fundamental, socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-linguagedness" (DI 325-6). To go further, when heteroglossia is incorporated into the novel, to a certain extent, it is always represented in human forms. That is, the opposition of social values or ideologies is individualized in human figures, in characters in the novel. Thus the individualization of characters and the opposition of the diverse characters' viewpoints become "the untamed elements in social heteroglossia" (DI 326).

Secondly, the direct speech of characters is also a means to incorporate social heteroglossia in the novel though it is indispensable that the characters' speech is still influenced by the authorial speech. As we have seen, in Bakhtin's thoughts, the position of a character is elevated to be equally as important as that of an author. Therefore, each character possesses his or her own *character zone*. Bakhtin himself has given a definition of it: "These zones are formed from the fragments of character speech, from various forms for hidden transmission of someone else's word [...] from those invasions into authorial speech of others' expressive indicator" (DI 316). In reality, the character zone is the field for the interaction between a character's voice and an author's voice. As a result, there is a constant dialogue between characters and their author through the zones. However, along with the dialogical relationship between them, there are two other pairs which intersect or interact within the novel. As Michael Holquist has well demonstrated, "social heteroglossia can enter the novel either through the speech of specific characters, each bringing their own ideological orientation to the text or, more significantly, as a wider 'dialogizing background' which interacts with the form and content of the work as a whole" (qtd. in Gardiner 41). Holquist refers to these two interactions, between the ideologies of characters and the text and between the text and the background associated with the text. In the short quotation from Holquist's essay,

it can be discerned that the latter is emphasized by Holquist because of its “significance.” The latter in essence refers to “the general dialogical relation between text and context, an underlying and primordial social heteroglossia which saturates the words and thoughts of characters and author alike with a ‘fundamental speech diversity’” (qtd. in Gardiner 41).

Thirdly, incorporated genres also contribute to the representation of social heteroglossia in the novel. To begin with, the connection between a genre and social change should be revealed: “Genre belongs rather to the collective and the social – hence the conviction that a ‘genuine poetics of genre can only be a sociology of genre’” (Medvedev 135). From this short quotation, it can be discerned that the essence of a genre is rather collective or social than individual and that a genre is closely interrelated with its social milieu. According to Bakhtin, there are two fundamental forms of speech genres: primary speech genres and secondary speech genres. The former, primary speech genres, signify everyday speech or conversation, which is “the speaking style determined by social situations” (Thomson 36). Primary speech genres possess the feature of completeness before they are changed or altered for a specific professional usage. These genres are composed of everyday talk, speech, or conversation about trivial things in daily social life. The latter, secondary speech genres, refer to more complex or complicated genres than the former, such as professional discourses, literary genres, scientific or political speech. When a writer fuses a primary everyday speech genre into a secondary literary genre in the literary art of work, the former will have a great impact upon the latter. In consequence, the literary work will permeate the linguistic style determined by social situations.

From these three approaches to representing social heteroglossia in the novel, the double-voiced discourse, the direct speech of characters, and incorporated genres, we can discern the significance of the opposing social ideologies embedded in the speech or utterances of characters. First, double-voiced discourse becomes possible only when it is involved in the interactions and intersections of opposing social varieties of speech, personified as individual characters in the novel. Second, Bakhtin endows the characters with positions equal to the author’s through the invention of character zones, in which the characters’ voices are in conflict with the authorial voice or someone else’s voices. The diversity of speech in social heteroglossia can be revealed through the interactions and contestations between the ideologies of characters and the text or even between the text and context of the novel. Third, social heteroglossia can be incorporated and the impact of social situations can be spread in the novel through interaction between the primary speech genres and the secondary speech genres between everyday conversations and literary discourses. To some extent, the two kinds of speech genres can be represented through the speech or utterances of characters in the novel. In the meanwhile, worldviews and social

values embedded in the speech genres are incorporated into characters’ speech or utterances. The interactions between characters’ speech or utterances reveal the interrelated dialogizations of the two speech genres. Social heteroglossia cannot be represented in the novel without the interactions of social ideologies within characters’ speech or utterances because, “for Bakhtin, an utterance can only have meaning in and through its relations with other utterances in the dynamic processes of social heteroglossia” (Thomson 185).

As we have seen, social heteroglossia, represented through interactions and contestations of social ideologies within characters’ speech or utterances, can be seen as confrontations between two opposing consciousness: “[Social] heteroglossia is [...] the constituting condition for the possibility of independent consciousness in that any attempt to impose one unitary monologic discourse as the ‘Truth’ is relativized by its dialogic contact with another social discourse, another view of the world” (Morris 73). Bakhtin has categorized the ideological opposing confrontations within utterances into two contrasting forces – centripetal and centrifugal forces. The centripetal forces “seek to impose order on an essential heterogeneous and messy world” while the centrifugal forces “either purposefully or for no particular reason continually disrupt that order” (Morson 30). In a nutshell, the centripetal or official forces conflict with the centrifugal or unofficial ones in the tension-filled cultural world.

In a social situation, the centripetal forces are formed in the speech of the group which possesses the dominant power. Such a powerful group is inclined to create their own language as a unified authoritative language, which, in Bakhtin’s terms, is one of unitary monologic utterances, excluding and suppressing the emergence of other utterances. As Thibault has well demonstrated, the centripetal forces tend to assemble “the plurality of forces at work to a single (monologic) locus of power and knowledge” (38). The unitary language is always “a system of linguistic norms,” which “constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language” (DI 270). The reigning group poses itself in the official central position in a society through the centripetal force embedded in the unitary authoritarian language.

On the other hand, as Bakhtin argues, “every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (DI 272). While the speech of a dominant powerful group constitutes the centripetal forces to consolidate his dominion and superiority, simultaneously, the speech of an opposing or suppressed group develops the centrifugal forces to dissent against its hegemonic domination. These two forces coexist and contest with each other through their speech. The conflict caused by their contestation will make the unitary

language of the dominant group disintegrate and constitute the dialogical languages between the two opposing groups.

As Bakhtin has explained, a language cannot be viewed as a Saussurian “system of abstract grammatical categories” but as “ideologically saturated” or as “a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life” (DI 271). The social ideology of centralization brought to the speech of the dominant group is constantly confronted with that of decentralization brought to the speech of the opposing group, causing the national language of the literary work to be saturated ideologically. As we have seen, such a confrontation between social ideologies or the values of characters is the very feature of social heteroglossia in the novel. Hence, one cannot find social heteroglossia in a novel without first revealing the dialogical confrontation and conflict between opposing social ideologies within it.

Based on Bakhtin’s thoughts of social heteroglossia, I will explore the contestations and conflicts between the opposing social ideologies embedded in the characters’ languages or speech. The opposing social worldviews reflected in these languages or speech, in Bakhtin’s words, can be referred to as two contrasting forces, the centripetal forces and the centrifugal forces. In *Things Fall Apart*, the centripetal forces are represented through the unified centralized rigid social ideologies while the centrifugal forces are revealed through the disunified decentralized flexible social ideologies in the speech of characters. I will probe into these two opposing forces in relation to three issues: gender, the Igbo oracles, and the Christian missionary work.

## GENDER

The society of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* is permeated by the belief system of the masculine tradition. It is filled with the inflexible patriarchal social code of gender politics. In the speech of the dominant powerful characters like Okonkwo, the rigid strong support for the patriarchal worldview is manifested. Okonkwo is the strongest and most loyal defender of the worldview. His attitude toward gender politics is completely dichotomous and hierarchical. In his eyes, the dichotomy of gender must be absolute and complete. That is to say, a man has to possess absolute masculine characteristics without feminine ones, and, vice versa, a woman has to have feminine characteristics without masculine ones. It is a rigid inflexible belief system in Okonkwo’s mind. In order to conform to the patriarchal social code, Okonkwo does his best to express the manhood and repress the womanhood in his speeches. For example, after killing Ikemefuna, he has an inner monologue with himself: “When did you become a shivering old woman? You, who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed” (TFA 65). From the monologue, we can see that Okonkwo is

endeavoring to get rid of the feminine emotions in his mind by remembering his masculine valor in war. The only absolute disposition allowed in his mind is the violent manly emotion instead of the sympathetic womanly one.

In addition, Okonkwo’s rigid view of gender is also revealed in his attitude to his family. So far as Okonkwo is concerned, Unoka, Nwoye, and Ezinma are all incomplete persons in the society. Unoka, in the eyes of Okonkwo, is not an ideal father but instead an unsuccessful father because of his feminine traits. Because Unoka prefers art and music to labor and war, he is given a feminine nickname by his clan, *agbala*, referring to a man who has not taken titles. Through the indirect narrative of Okonkwo’s inner speech, it is evident that Okonkwo cannot accept the feminine traits represented by Unoka: “And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness” (TFA 13). In Okonkwo’s mind, “gentleness” or “idleness” should be attributed to a woman not a man. If a man like Unoka possesses these feminine traits, he is not a complete man and ought to be viewed as a failure in the society of the masculine tradition. Likewise, Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, resembles Unoka due to his feminine traits, such as his devotion to female stories and his impotence in labor and war. Okonkwo complains to Obierika about the weakness of Nwoye: “I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match. [...] I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him” (TFA 66). For Okonkwo, the womanliness in Nwoye is absolutely inappropriate and might turn Nwoye into a woman rather than a man. In contrast with Unoka and Nwoye, possessing excessive feminine traits, Ezinma, in Okonkwo’s eyes, has too many masculine ones. Okonkwo tells Obierika that “[i]f Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit” (TFA 66). Despite her great beauty, Ezinma always behaves like a boy and is fond of masculine activities like wrestling. Okonkwo often asks her to act like a girl especially when she stretches her legs in front of her: “‘Sit like a woman’ Okonkwo shouted at her” (TFA 44). Because she is a girl, Okonkwo tries to repress the masculine characteristics in Ezinma and insists that complete womanliness be represented by her. From Okonkwo’s attitudes toward these three characters, it is evident that he has a rigid inflexible dichotomous view of gender: man is man and woman is woman. There is no possibility of the coexistence of the two genders within a person.

Furthermore, Okonkwo’s view of gender is also hierarchal. In other words, he always puts gender in a hierarchal order. Following the masculine tradition of Umuofia, Okonkwo naturally gives privilege to male identity rather than female. In his speech, he always adopts a sovereign commanding masculine voice to talk with those female characters. For instance, in conversation with his wives and daughters, he shouts at them in a commanding threatening voice all the time: “Do what you



are told, woman. When did you become one of the *ndichie*<sup>1</sup> of Umuoifa?” or “If you bring us all this way for nothing I shall beat sense into you” (TFA 14, 82). Faced with the effeminate Nwoye, Okonkwo maintains the same attitude: “If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw” or “Answer me before I kill you” (TFA 32, 151). Even talking with an unsuccessful man who has taken no title, Okonkwo tries to kill his spirit by saying something like “[t]his meeting is for men” (TFA 26). Thus, from his speech, we can realize that Okonkwo’s viewpoint of gender is absolutely hierarchal, that man is always the one who gives orders or commands to woman. That is, the former is always superior to the latter in gender politics. Man represents strength and authority while woman symbolizes weakness and conformity. For Okonkwo, such a hierarchy of gender is absolutely rigid and unchangeable.

Apart from Okonkwo, Nwakibie shares the same rigid patriarchal attitude. Nwakibie is a wealthy and powerful man who has taken the third highest title in the clan. For Okonkwo, his ideal image of father is in truth Nwakibie rather than Unoka. He is the symbol of greatness which Okonkwo intends to follow and learn from, so Okonkwo calls him “Our father” (TFA 19). In the episode of the loan of seed yams, Nwakibie is fond of Okonkwo’s active manly disposition and agrees to lend him seed yams: “It pleases me to see a young man like you these days when one youth has gone so soft. [...] I shall give you twice four hundred yams. Go ahead and prepare your farm” (TFA 21-22). Nwakibie’s lamentation at the weakness or softness of the youth implies his yearning for the lost masculine strength and power in the society of the masculine tradition.

Both Okonkwo and Nwakibie belong to the dominant groups in the society of Umuofia. The patriarchal view of gender within their speech represents the centripetal forces of a community noted for strength and bravery. Their rigid inflexible social ideologies regarding gender are inclined to turn the social languages into a singular unitary masculine language by repressing other feminine languages so as to fit in with the unified centralized tradition of the patriarchal society.

In contrast with the rigid ideology of Okonkwo and Nwakibie, Uchendu, Okonkwo’s uncle in his mother land, offers a flexible compromising social ideology of gender. After being exiled by his clans for the inadvertent murder of Ezeudu’s son, Okonkwo flees to his mother’s village, Mbanta, for shelter and is well taken care of by his mother’s clan. One of the most important maternal clan members is Uchendu. After seeing Okonkwo in deep despair over his misfortune and loss of power and status in Umuofia, Uchendu tries to comfort him in the words of maternal protection:

*Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that  
one of the commonest names we give our  
children Nneka, or Mother is Supreme?  
[...] A man belongs to his fatherland*

*when things are good and life is sweet.  
But when there is sorrow and bitterness  
he finds refuge in his motherland. Your  
mother is there to protect you. She is  
buried there. And that is why we say that  
mother is supreme* (TFA 133).

In Uchendu’s speech, we can see that the importance of femininity cannot be overemphasized by him. The role of a woman is not inferior to that of a man, but is quite useful and helpful. One lives not only by the support of his or her father but by the protection of his or her mother as well. Uchendu’s view of the supremacy of femininity reminds Okonkwo of his fallacy of privileging masculinity and oppressing femininity. In contrast with Okonkwo and Nwakibie, Uchendu brings up a flexible compromising belief system regarding gender, where one gender is not superior to the other and where they ought to strike a balance in their proper places.

Furthermore, Uchendu’s speech about the white man also implies a flexible alterable worldview: “There is no story that is not true. The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others” (TFA 141). His viewpoint is similar to the Igbo cosmology of dualism. In a nutshell, there is nothing absolute in the world. As one Igbo saying goes, “wherever something stands, there something else will stand” (Achebe *Beware* 33). Such a dualistic worldview as Uchendu’s in fact can be appropriately applied to the issue of gender. When masculinity rises, the opposite femininity will emerge to stand against it. One can live well or a society can be formed well only by the maintenance of a balance of genders. Therefore, we can see that Uchendu’s flexible dualistic view in actuality counters the monological view of Okonkwo and Nwakibie. This resistant power by the former forms centrifugal forces against the centripetal forces of the latter. The interactions and intersections of the two forces or opposing social ideologies lead to the phenomenon of social heteroglossia, which makes unitary singular monological languages impossible.

## THE IGBO ORACLES

Aside from the rigid patriarchal worldview, readers can also discern the inflexible Igbo oracles in the society of Umuofia. For the religious Igbo people, the oracles are “the places where, or the mediums through which, the Igbo deities are consulted,” and the will of the gods will be revealed through the priests and the oracles of the gods (Ogbaa *Understanding* 136). In *Things Fall Apart*, the oracles of gods are depicted in the murder of Ikemefuna and in the Chielo-Ekwehi-Ezinma encounter.

Ikemefuna, in compensation for the murder of an Umuofia woman in Mbaino, is sent to Okonkwo’s village and nurtured as Okonkwo’s adopted son. For three years, Ikemefuna has gotten along well with Nwoye and other family members in Okonkwo’s compound. However, one day, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves suddenly announces that the young boy has to be killed for unknown

<sup>1</sup> Ndichie, an Igbo word, refers to elders in the traditional village.

reasons. According to the social custom of Umuofia, Ikemefuna has to be taken outside the village and executed there. If the oracle demands the death of anyone, he or she has to be killed. Okonkwo is the best example of an Igbo man who shows the greatest piety to the authoritarian oracle. Even after Ezeudu suggests that Okonkwo not get involved in the execution since Ikemefuna calls him father, Okonkwo not only takes the young lad out of the village himself but also kills him with his own machete. With regard to the affair of Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo defends his murder by arguing that he was obeying the oracle of gods: "The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger. A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm" (TFA 67). Okonkwo utilizes a traditional Igbo proverb to depict the relationship between god and man as that between a mother and child, in order to attest that it is a hierarchal relationship in which man is subject to god as a child follows his or her mother's order. Thus Okonkwo's explanation represents the centripetal forces of absolutely following and supporting the order of the oracle.

In addition to the episode of Ikemefuna, that of Ezinma also concerns the oracles of gods. One night, Chielo, the priestess of the god Agbala, is sent to take Ezinma to the shrine in the hills and the caves because the god Agbala would like to see his daughter. Like the oracle that announces the death of Ikemefuna, this one also frightens Okonkwo and Ekwefi because Ezinma might be hurt or killed: "At the mention of Ezinma's name Ekwefi jerked her head sharply like an animal that had sniffed death in the air. Her heart jumped painfully within her" (TFA 100). Even though Okonkwo pleads for the poor girl not to be taken away from them, the oracle is absolutely irrefutable: "Beware, Okonkwo! Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!" (TFA 101). In this episode, Okonkwo shows his strong respect and piety to the oracle of god once again by arguing "a reasonable and manly interval to pass" before leaving for the shrine (TFA 112). In fact, Okonkwo's deliberate delay in the quest for Chielo represents not only loyalty to god but also an expression of the centripetal forces regarding the issue of the Igbo oracles.

From the two episodes described above, we can see that Okonkwo represents the centripetal forces regarding the issue of the Igbo oracle. As one of the dominant groups in the society of Umuofia, Okonkwo absolutely supports and centralizes the power of the oracle even if it may endanger the lives of his own son or daughters. It is obvious that the centripetal forces are revealed through Okonkwo's absolute authoritarian speech.

In contrast with Okonkwo's strong absolute piety toward the oracles of the gods, some characters adopt flexible or alterable attitudes toward them. The opposing ideologies embedded in the compromising speech can embody the disunifying or decentralizing centrifugal forces. Obiako, a marginal character, appears in the

seemingly unimportant comical story told derisively by Nwakibie:

*"Obiako has always been a strange one. I have heard that many years ago, when his father had not been dead very long, he had gone to consult the Oracle. The Oracle said to him, 'Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him.' Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, 'Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive.'"* (TFA 20-1)

Instead of submitting to it, Obiako directly questions the reasonableness of the sacrifice ordered by the oracle. His responsive language to the oracle and his dead father not only is "obstructive to the perpetuation of Umuofia's traditions" but also "appraise[s] the restrictiveness of tradition in ways that men like Okonkwo and wealthy, titled men like Nwakibie cannot comprehend" (Osei-Nyame 154). Such a speech by a marginal character in the form of a marginal story constitutes the subversive centrifugal forces to be resistant to the centripetal forces within the authoritarian speech of Okonkwo.

Though Okonkwo endeavors to express his piety toward the oracle in the murder of Ikemefuna, his son Nwoye poses an opposing viewpoint to Okonkwo's. In Nwoye's mind, he objects to the murder: "as soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow" (TFA 61). The simile of the broken bow represents the rupture between Nwoye and the Igbo tradition represented by the oracles of the gods. The close tie between him and the Igbo religious tradition is broken for the cruel slaughter of an innocent young boy. For Nwoye, Ikemefuna dies as a result of the rigid ruthless power and authority of the oracle. Due to Ikemefuna's death, therefore, he is determined to flee from the Igbo religious tradition and to turn to the more compassionate Christianity instead.

Nwoye is to the questioning of the inflexibility of the oracle what Obierika is to the interrogation of Okonkwo's rigidity in carrying out the order of the Oracle. In his conversation with Okonkwo, Obierika proposes a flexible point of view toward the oracle: "But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (TFA 67). Obierika's compromising viewpoint in reality challenges and shatters Okonkwo's rigid insistence on carrying out the execution with his own hands and his confidence in the protection of gods: "what you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (TFA 67). In Obierika's eyes, Okonkwo's blind inflexible submission to the oracle may bring about not the protection of gods but the punishment of the whole clan because of the slaughter of his own son. Therefore the centrifugal forces embedded in Obierika's speech indeed successfully subvert the centripetal forces that imbues with Okonkwo's speech.



To sum up, on the one hand, the speech of the dominant group in the society of Umuofia like Okonkwo absolutely supports and centralizes the power of the rigid oracles of the gods and thus represents the centripetal forces. On the other hand, the speeches of the opposing group of the society, such as Obiako, Obierika, and Nwoye, resist the power of the oracles of the gods and represent the centrifugal forces that counteract the former. The contestations and conflicts between the two forces or social ideologies dialogize the social speech, generate the phenomenon of social heteroglossia in the Igbo society, and make the unitary singular monological language of no avail.

## THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY WORK

In the third part of *Things Fall Apart*, the themes of the novel have gradually turned from the Igbo religious tradition to Christianity. There are two opposing social ideologies in the Christian missionary work. One is the soft flexible means adopted by Mr. Brown while the other one is the heavy inflexible measures taken by Reverend James Smith. R. J. Smith's speech represents the unified centralized rigid centripetal forces to impose Christianity upon the Igbo people and to proscribe the Igbo traditional religion while Mr. Brown's speech reveals the disunified decentralized flexible centrifugal forces to respect the Igbo traditional religion and to plant Christianity softly in the Igbo villages. The interactions and contestations between the two opposing social ideologies will lead to the phenomenon of social heteroglossia. Here I will represent the two opposing contrasting ideologies regarding the Christian missionary work.

Reverend James Smith, a leader of the Christian missionaries, assumes an absolute inflexible viewpoint in dealing with the issue of religion. His rigid point of view is characterized by the hierarchal dichotomy: "He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness" (TFA 184). Mr. Smith's dichotomous view completely separates the world into two parts, white and black or light and darkness. The relationship between the pairs is absolutely hierarchal whether in politics, morality, or religion. White refers to goodness while black symbolizes evil. White is always superior to black in the hierarchal order, so in the conflict between them, the white of goodness can constantly defeat the black of evilness. It is this dichotomous belief system that Mr. Smith treats the traditional Igbo religion and Christianity. For him, the white's Christianity is absolutely superior to the Igbo traditional religion of the black. Disgusted with the Igbo religion, he refuses to accept and understand the Igbo religious tradition. For instance, he refuses the conversion of a poor young woman who suffers from the *ogbanje*<sup>2</sup> just

because he does not believe a heathen story like this. Instead he thinks that "such stories [are] spread in the world by the Devil to lead [the Igbo natives] astray" and that anyone "who believes such stories [is] unworthy of the Lord's table" (TFA 185). Thus, we can see that Mr. Smith absolutely eliminates and rejects the traditional Igbo religion and sees it as heathen and evil. As a whole, Mr. Smith adopts the absolute inflexible point of view to be insistent upon the supremacy of Christianity and the evilness of the Igbo traditional religion. His speech represents authoritarian unified centripetal forces to oppress other voices in order to keep his voice monological and unitary.

In contrast with Mr. Smith, Mr. Brown, the earlier leader of the church, regards the Igbo religion from a flexible compromising viewpoint. He always restrains those over-zealous followers like Enoch from irritating and annoying the Igbo people by saying that "everything was possible [...] but everything was not expedient" (TFA 178). His policy of restraint and accommodating attitude toward the Igbo traditional ritual and social customs not only reduce the conflicts between the Christian converts and the Igbo clan but win the respect of the Igbo people as well. He befriends a large number of Igbo friends, especially inclusive of Akunna, one of the greatest men in Umuofia, who is always visited every time Mr. Brown comes to the Igbo villages. In the novel, there is a long detailed debate between Mr. Brown and Akunna on their individual religions. They heatedly argue out the differences and similarities between Christianity and Igbo traditional religion with each other. Though they do not succeed in persuading each other, their conversation is quite helpful to their mutual understanding of each other's religion. After their conversation, for example, Mr. Brown realizes that "a frontal attack on it [the Igbo religion] would not succeed," so he decides to take a compromising measure, to attract the clan to Christianity by building a school and hospital, a tactics which works very well indeed (TFA 181). Therefore, we can see that the reason why Mr. Brown is respected and accepted by the Igbo clan is that he adopts a flexible compromising open attitude toward the Igbo religion. Mr. Brown's speech represents the centrifugal forces against the centripetal forces represented by Mr. Smith's. The contestations and conflicts between the former and the latter constitute an example of social heteroglossia.

In my discussions of *Things Fall Apart* above, I appropriate Bakhtin's theory of centripetal and centrifugal forces to uncover the inner phenomenon of social heteroglossia embedded in this seemingly monological novel. We can see the contestations and interactions between the opposing and contrasting social ideologies in the characters' social speech. So far as gender is concerned, the inflexible patriarchal view of Okonkwo is opposed to the flexible harmonious view of Uchendu. In

<sup>2</sup> Ogbanje, an Igbo word, means a child who repeatedly dies and goes back to his mother's womb to be reborn. The cycle of dying and being reborn would not cease until the child's special stone

forming the link between the child and the spirit world is found and destroyed.

the aspect of the Igbo oracles, the rigid inhuman social codes supported and maintained by the dominant titled men is in conflict with the flexible human viewpoints of Obierika and Nwoye. As for the issue of the Christian missionary work, the absolute dichotomous worldview of Mr. Smith is in opposition to the compromising accommodating worldview of Mr. Brown. In all three pairs, the formers represent the unified centripetal forces because of their authoritarian inflexible characteristics while the latter reveal the disunified centrifugal forces because of their compromising flexible characteristics. The dialogic interactions between them may constitute the phenomenon of social heteroglossia.

## THE DYNAMIC IGBO SOCIETY

From the theoretical analysis of social heteroglossia in the text, we can see that there are interactions of various social ideologies or forces in the Igbo society of the novel. As a matter of fact, such a phenomenon of social heteroglossia in the novel reflects the authorial intentions of Achebe with regard to the authentic Igbo world. For Achebe, there are two fundamental features in the Igbo world. One is the interplay of diverse social ideologies or forces and the other is the changeable mobile dynamism. These two features interrelate with each other and form a relationship of cause and effect. It is the interaction of social forces that leads to the society becoming dynamic and moveable. Through unveiling the phenomenon of social heteroglossia in the Igbo society of the novel, we can see that such a dynamic worldview is applied by Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. The society of Umuofia is altered and changed by the constant contestations and interactions of diverse social forces or ideologies. Here I would like to explore the authorial intentions regarding the interplay of forces and the dynamic worldview hidden under the phenomenon of social heteroglossia in the novel.

First of all, in actuality, the contestations between the opposing social ideologies in the Igbo society of the novel are a representation of the authentic Igbo world in Achebe's eyes. According to Achebe, "the Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces" (Achebe *Hopes* 62). Achebe, in his article, "The Igbo World and Its Art," expounds the interaction of a variety of forces by means of an Igbo proverb: "when a person has satisfied the deity Udo completely he may yet be killed by Ogwugwu" (Achebe *Hopes* 63). From the quoted proverb, we can see that there is no absolute force or view in the Igbo world. In other words, anyone who possesses a singular absolute point of view toward something may be in danger. Therefore, when Achebe creates the Igbo society of Umuofia, the view of the interplay of social forces must be included in the novel. In fact, the interaction of diverse forces in the Igbo world can be represented by the conflicts between the centripetal forces and centrifugal forces of social languages or speech in the novel. Based upon the analyses of the characters' speech above, the centripetal

forces represented in the rigid inflexible social speech consistently contests with the centrifugal forces manifested in the compromising flexible social speech. As we have seen, the contestations of the two forces is revealed in three primary sets: gender, the Igbo oracles, and the Christian missionary work.

In the aspect of gender, Okonkwo and Nwakibie both represent the absolute patriarchal viewpoint in their social speech, countered by the accommodating dualistic viewpoint in Uchendu's social speech. The former embodies the centripetal forces and the latter symbolizes the centrifugal forces. These two forces interact and intersect with each other, which eventually leads to the impossibility of the unitary patriarchal language in the society. With regard to the Igbo oracles, they manifest the absolute inhuman worldview implicitly maintained by the powerful titled men like Okonkwo, which is also resisted by the flexible human views of Obierika and Nwoye. The former is regarded as the centripetal forces and the latter as the centrifugal forces. The interplay of the two forces in reality interrogates and subverts the authority of the oracles of the gods. As for the Christian missionary work, Mr. Smith represents the aggressive absolute viewpoint of suppressing the traditional Igbo religion and social system in their speech, opposed by the flexible compromising viewpoint of Mr. Brown. The former can be regarded as the centripetal forces and the latter as the centrifugal forces. The conflicts and contestations between the two forces result in the diversity of the viewpoints regarding the Christian missionary work. In consequence, through the interplay of the forces, the monological singular voice or worldview in the Igbo society become impossible and instead is replaced by the dialogic polyphonic one.

In addition to the feature of the interplay of diverse social ideologies or voices, the other fundamental feature in the Igbo world is the dynamism. The interplay of diverse forces or worldviews in the Igbo society of the novel in actuality results in "a dynamic world of movement and of flux" (Achebe *Hopes* 62). It is a world of continuous movement and change. One force or ideology cannot stand alone and must be consistently contesting with another. There is no absolute or extreme thing in the Igbo world. In *Things Fall Apart*, as the authoritarian patriarchal view rises in the society, another oppositional view of the supremacy of motherhood emerges to be against it. Thus, the society of Umuofia is gradually changing from a land of man and hierarchy to a world of harmony and equality. When the oracles of the gods absolutely inhumanly suppress the innocent people, the opposing viewpoint or force against them is represented in contrast. Accordingly, the society is shifting from a land of ruthlessness to a world of humanness little by little. When the compromising accommodating Christian love appears in the society, the opposing absolute inflexible Christian over-zealousness also turns up. The relationship between the Igbo society and the Christians or converts is altering from harmony and peace to conflict and war.

## CONCLUSION

From these three social changes, the Igbo society in the novel can be seen as not a static one without movement or change but as an active dynamic one within which diverse forces interplay and interact. Achebe has well demonstrated his viewpoint of the social changes of an African society in an interview: "As long as people are changing, their culture will be changing. The only place where culture is static, and exists independently of people, is the museum, and this is not an African institution" (Lindfors 28). Achebe makes the point that an African Igbo society or institution is never as static as a cultural museum but as dynamic and restless as other societies all over the world. As a result, only when the society of Umuofia is seen as active or restless can we understand the authentic African Igbo world well which Achebe intends to represent in the novel.

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## Author Biography

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