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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Future of Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> Ahmed Yerimah.....	1
Modern African Literature and the Making of its Classics Osita Ezeliara.....	12
The Post-Afrocentric Vision in Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> James Tar Tsaaio.....	36
Archetypal Contemporaneity in Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> Abiodun Adeniji.....	59
Primal Fantasy and Story-Telling in Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> Felicia Ohwovoriole.....	71
"Let the Kite Perch, and Let the Eagle Perch too": <i>Things Fall Apart's</i> Vision of a Multicultural World Patrick Oloko.....	85
Challenges of Leadership in Chinua Achebe's Rural Novels Adetokunbo Pearse.....	103
"Mbari" and the Igbo Concept of Art in Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> Christopher Anyokwu.....	124
The Poetry of War: Chinua Achebe and Siegfried Sassoon Akachi Ezeigbo.....	142
Fifty Years of Reading Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> Oyeniye Okunoye.....	153

"Mbari" and the Igbo Concept of Art in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Christopher Anyokwu

ABSTRACT

'Mbari' is an Igbo art form which involves the moulding of artistically forged figures such as the Earth Goddess, several other deities and idealities in the Igbo pantheon as well as humans and inanimate objects, all in kneaded special clay. Mbari also is an art/act of sacrifice which embodies both the functional and aesthetic dimensions of African art. This dual function of the Igbo art derives from the fact that the Igbo traditional artists usually abandon their carefully-designed pieces to the ravages of the elements, and start remoulding from scratch in a subsequent season. This is the basis of what in this paper is called *Ephemeral Art of the Igbo: an aesthetic philosophy shot through with the values of dynamism, innovativeness, and, indeed, kinesis*. Achebe thus relies on this Mbari art philosophy as the informing principle of his own work and, in *Things Fall Apart* in particular, uses Mbari as a counterfoil to the classical (Western) concept of art.

Mbari, according to M. Keith Booker, is "a traditional institution peculiar to Owerri people of Nigeria, linked to the veneration of the Earth Deity" (155). Booker goes on to elaborate that:

Every once in a while, the Earth Goddess ordains the creation of an mbari, a collection of statues and other artistically forged figures, all in kneaded special clay. This special clay is actually taken from anthills that the young men and women who make up the select group of mbari "inmates" collect from the farmlands. (115)

John Okparocha in his work entitled *MBARI: Art as Sacrifice* provides more specific information on the whole concept of 'mbari'. Chike Ezimora, summarizing the points made by Okparocha in his book, argues that: "Mbari is a rich heritage. From the earliest times it existed in Nguru, Enyigugu and Okwuata in Agbaja clan of Mbaise and other parts of Old Owerri province" (6). Ezimora writes further:

In its simplest definition Mbari is a sacrifice. In the old days, when the people were faced with a major crisis like war, famine or infant mortality, they usually consulted a diviner, often they promised any of the gods (Ala, the earth goddess, Duru Ojiaku, god of wealth, Agwu Nsi, the author of all troubles and leader of fortune tellers; or Amadioha, god of thunder) that if he removed their trouble they would celebrate an Mbari in his honour. (qtd. in Okparocha 6)

On his part, Onuora Ossie Enekwe in his book entitled *IGBO MASKS: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*, draws our attention to the aesthetic impulse at work in the creation of these Mbari statues:

Even when they are motivated by religious worship, Igbo art productions still tend to be "original in arrangement and composition". This quality is exemplified by the Mbari ritual art in which people without formal artistic education construct a mud structure and form for the god, the act of building being in itself a prayer. There is a profusion of styles and a technical skill, for each participant is free to

express imaginatively. When completed, the building, together with its images, is abandoned. Nobody makes an effort to preserve it from collapse or decay. The essential thing in Mbari is the *process*, not the *product*. (Emphasis, mine, 50)

Developing further the *essence* of the Igbo *Mbari*, Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, tries to properly delineate the uniqueness of the *Mbari* art by juxtaposing it with the western concept of art. She avers thus:

Through Mbari art, the community documents old and incorporates newly occurred events. In this respect, Mbari is, in fact, the opposite of western academy or museum whose collections remain static if not stale. It would also take Chinua (Achebe) to articulate the aesthetically charged application of *Mbari*, as a creative process that expresses in moulded clay, the life of the community, and thus ensure its survival. (125)

What, in essence, the foregoing discourse has demonstrated to us is that the clay objects or *Mbari* art captures the life of the Igbo universe, reflecting as it does the spatio-temporal specificities of the social milieu. Nature, through weathering, "destroys" the clay "documents", in order for other upcoming chosen mediums of the god, the youth, to fulfill themselves *creatively*. As witnesses to the tribe's epic struggles with "the greater than man" as well as the tribe's triumphs and achievements, the young artists arrest in kneaded clay all of these highs and lows of their community. This dynamics of Igbo art underscores the values of innovativeness, experimentation, change, progress, egalitarianism and democracy. History is, therefore, a product, not of monumentalized heroism but rather of collective struggle and cooperation.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe uses the *Mbari* art as leitmotif to discourse on the relationship between the storyteller and his material, that is, the story itself. Achebe considers the living as "blind beggars" (115) and the "story" as the escort or guide to the generations unborn. And,

Since History is mediated by the creative imagination of the individual artist, art (or the 'story') is seen as *becoming* or *praxis* unlike the western notion of art as *being* or *essence*. Thus, the 'story' or the monomyth is not inert, unvarying and unchanging, but rather dynamic, malleable to the inventive imagination and deft artistry of the newcomer raconteur and bard. This innovative and dynamic bardism sustains the tribe's sense of collective entelechy and historical becoming. It is instructive, at this point, to outline the fundamental points of divergence between the Igbo concept of art (as informed by the *Mbari* paradigm) and the western concept of art. We shall thereafter proceed to investigate the influence of the *Mbari* art tradition on Achebe's *magnum opus*, *Things Fall Apart*.

II

'To everyman his due' is a popular Igbo saying (see *Anthills* 113, *Hopes and Impediments* 4?) which underscores the notion of individualism common both to the Igbo and the West, but while the West is essentially and fundamentally *individualist* in orientation and outlook, the Igbo (African) is *communalistic*. Accordingly, Enekwe writes: "man finds his fulfillment (sic) not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family and a community. This includes relationships of people with the earth as a whole" (49). In African art, there is no isolated, lonely hero, whose activities are unconnected to the society. Hence, Enekwe tells us that: "it appears that the Igbo are averse to the concept of heroism or any cult of personality that may threaten their individual liberty" (49). Francis E. Ngwaba seems to share the same conviction with Enekwe, as Ngwaba equally asseverates that:

The factors which gave rise to the novel in England encouraged *individual assertion*, whereas those which gave rise to the novel in Africa encouraged *cultural assertion*... The founding fathers of the English novel found it necessary to pay special attention to the creation of a fictional figure or figures whose presence in the works dominated practically everything (emphasis added, 13).

drama, costumery, even architecture, for the Ijele masquerade is indeed a most fabulously extravagant construction (144).

Achebe's characterization of the Igbo art as *kinesis* strikes a responsive chord in the whole idea of Negritude, especially the Senghorean variety. The reason for this conceptual affinity is not far fetched. The 'organic sense of rhythm', to use Senghor's phrase, clearly underpins the Igbo art as enunciated in Achebe's excerpted passage above. Defining this peculiarly African sense of Rhythm, Leopold Sedar Senghor notes:

Rhythm is the architecture of being, the internal dynamics which gives it form, the system of waves which it sends out towards others. It expresses itself through the most material, the most sensuous means: lines, surfaces, colours, volumes in architecture, sculpture and painting, accents in poetry and music, movements in dance. (Irele, 1981, 76).

The African artist, according to Abiola Irele, has a "spiritualist conception of the African mode of consciousness" (79), his emotive and mystical disposition is reflected in his *dynamic*, and vitalist art which does not seem to draw a line between the secular and the numinous. This quasi-Negritudinist character of Igbo art (and Achebe's work) as well as the conflation of the materialist and the metaphysical, the functional (religious) and the *aesthetic* (secular) is said to define the Igbo sensibility. According to Onuora Ossie Enekwe:

The whole of life is sacred for it is "saturated with being". Igbo metaphysical life is consistent with this concept of religion. *Everything is connected*; the secular and the sacred, the natural and supernatural, are a continuum, similarly, there is no clear line between the functional and the celebrative elements... the Igbo, therefore, can enjoy their rituals as entertainment

(emphasis included, 49).

This dual rôle of art as metaphysical engagement and entertainment is epitomized by the *Mbari* art tradition. Foremost Africanist scholar, professor Ulli Beier, who was also a former editor of the influential *Black Orpheus* and proprietor of the Mbari Artists and writers' club as well as Mbari publications a few years ago, gave an interview in which he espoused what he called 'the concept of Ephemeral Art:

I really loved the idea that people of a certain age grade and that under the guidance of craftsmen they created mud buildings populated by art figures. They had a figure of the earth goddess with a child on her laps (sic) a leopard pouncing on a goat, a school teacher with a book and a tailor with his sewing machine. Then within a few years, this building crumbles back into mud because it's not fired and all the figures virtually collapse. But there's a beauty in that. The building and art works must give way for the next age grade to practice their own craft. ("What Chinua Achebe told me about the Biafran War", *Sunday Sun*, 48).

Mbari, therefore, is a very democratic art form which acknowledges *every* presence in the community; *everybody* irrespective of rank or status gets a look-in and is *represented* in the ensemble. Unlike western historiography which is highly selective and hegemonic in orientation, *Mbari* allows a thousand flowers to bloom, and, like the sky, allows a thousand birds to fly without clashing. Thus, the *Mbari* principle of inclusion and acknowledgement of every presence in human society is similar to the English Romantic poetry's deployment of varied strata of society, that is, the nobility, the working-classes, the waifs-and-strays, and even the lunatic dregs of society as fit and proper subjects of poetry. This egalitarianism and democratization of the *subject* and *style* of English romantic verse finds ample equivalent in Chinua Achebe's work, particularly *Things Fall*

Apart.

The libertarian, egalitarian and dynamic nature of Igbo art resists any form of orthodoxy or superannuated fixity. Achebe, thus, writes that 'Orthodoxy whether of the right or of the left is the graveyard of creativity' (Achebe, *Anthills* 91). Additionally, the freedom of expression which *Mbari* promotes finds eloquent expression in the Igbo notion of the collective ownership of the "story", or, the fact that nobody can exercise proprietary rights over the "story". Again, we turn to Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* as guide:

The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us, and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle: it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbours (114).

And, since the Igbo aesthetic value is one of *process*, rather than of *product* (Achebe, "The Igbo World", 43), *anybody* is eligible to occupy the High office of the communal Oracle. Wole Soyinka, for example, in *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Kong's Harvest* opines that 'a man is born to his art'. But that is not quite so for the Igbo as Achebe obliquely argues. Achebe makes us believe that all it takes for *anybody* to be *vox Dei* (God's voice) is his/her possession by *Agwu*, the Igbo god of seers, diviners, artists and healers: "Agwu possesses his own just as securely but has him corralled to serve the compound. Agwu picks his disciple, rings his eye with white chalk and dips his tongue, *willing or not*, in the brew of prophecy, and right away the man will speak and put head and tail back to the severed trunk of our face" (115). Like the *Mbari* artist who is chosen by the god and is sequestered and secluded from society for the task of moulding statues, the writer is equally *chosen* through divine *inspiration* to bear witness to chaos; hence the Igbo word, *Okike* [Creativity] "is charged with cosmic overtones of imposing order upon chaos" (Egejuru 123). This Igbo idea of possession or *mediumship* is akin to the Biblical concept of supernatural endowment as demonstrated in the story of prophet Isaiah, who, though, admittedly impure and, thus, unfit for divine use, was promptly purged by God and commissioned to proclaim the Living Oracle (Isaiah 6: 5-8).

If the artist, like the prophet, is *inspired* to proclaim the Word, where, then, is the 'perspiration'; where the *hard work* which is the essence of artistic creativity? Does Agwu whip the village idiot into an awe-inspiring utterance of epoch-making revelations? Where, then, is the place of apprenticeship? In *Understanding The Elements of Literature*, Richard Taylor ponders the opposing arguments over the role of "inspiration" and "perspiration" in the creative process, and suggests that, in spite of the apparent difference between spiritual inspiration and conscious craftsmanship, the cumulative and incremental life-experiences gathered by the artist ultimately constitute the basis of his muse or afflatus (15-16). Biodun Jeyifo shares the same convictions with Taylor:

We should not of course mystify poetry [or literature] and the process of poetic creation. What has been said of literature in general is truer of poetry in particular: it is 90 percent perspiration and 10 percent inspiration (Osundare, 1983, vii).

Phanuel Egejuru discloses that Achebe found himself in Owerri and then the *Mbari* tradition by chance. And Achebe would reach back into his childhood, retrieve and propound a concept that would affect how the world thinks of Igbo art (125). She goes on:

Chinua has continued to couch most of his lectures on African concept of art, in the *Mbari* tradition. Just as he appropriated the communal wisdom of Igbo proverbs, to create a specific mode of narrative discourse in his novels, he has created out of *Mbari*, the powerful metaphor of acknowledging and registering every presence in human society. In the same way that proverbs provided him with the means of exposing a wide range of African philosophy, *Mbari* provided the platform for exploring the Igbo concept of art. (124)

III

In our foregoing discourse we have tried to sketch as well as examine the concept of the Igbo *Mbari* art tradition as the basis of Igbo art in general and Chinua Achebe's artistic vision in particular.

A careful perusal of Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart* would reveal the extent of the novelist's indebtedness to his people's concept of the art of storytelling; we shall attempt to examine the stylistic and technical fault-lines of the narrative while bearing in mind the constitutive elements of Igbo art as highlighted above. Perhaps, it is necessary to begin our discussion of *Things Fall Apart* by pondering on the protean complexity of the main matrix of narrative action: that is, "Umuofia". Simply, "Umuofia" in English translation means "children of the forest", or "Inhabitants of the wild". It stands to reason to imagine that Achebe does not intend to denigrate or deprecate his people by referring to them as the benighted denizens of the wild. Besides, the name 'Umuofia', does not refer specifically to a particular village or town in the southeastern part of present-day Nigeria. Thus, "Umuofia" can be said to be a village in fantasyland or in the never-never world of folklore. Having situated the story in an unlocalised region of myth, Achebe proceeds to tell us of "the founder of their town [who] engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights"(3). By virtue of the fact that the tale has been suspended above the mundane and quotidian trammels of Time through its mythic compass, one naturally expects the remainder of the narrative to pursue the same archetypal path. But the writer proves himself to be *historicist* and *empiricist* by 'earthing' his story in the everyday world as we know it. This he does by introducing a human being, warts and all, as the novel's protagonist: Okonkwo. With a skeptical and ironic disposition partly derived from the philosophical orientation of the novel genre as a cultural artefact, and partly from Achebe's idiosyncratic outlook on life and living, he introduces a character who clearly embodies "the tense and restless dynamism" of the Igbo: Okonkwo is huge, energetic, war-like and aggressive; he is impatient with failures and is obsessed with "achievement" or "success". Somewhat cast in the mould of the modern western anti-hero like Michael Henschel, Ahab of *Moby Dick*, Crusoe, and, to a lesser degree, Heathcliff, Okonkwo initially announces his pact with destiny with his defeat of Amalinze the cat. His "greatness" is further set off by the antithesis of Unoka, his father, a placid, docile and frail

figure of fun. In spite of his improvidence and docility, Unoka's musicianship and love of talk are duly acknowledged in the spirit of the *Mbari* notion of inclusion. However, Umuofia does not seem to have much use for his type but rather prefers the man of action, Okonkwo who totalizes the warrior ethic upon which the tribe's heroic ideal is based. Accordingly, warfare as well as the warrior is highly celebrated by the people:

He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. (8).

Now, let us contrast this portrait of Okonkwo, the warrior, with how Achebe delineates Unoka, the easygoing sybarite:

Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed. He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the Ekwe and the Udu and the Ogene, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out, decorating them with a colourful and plaintive tune. The total effect was gay and brisk...(5).

The entire novel reads like an epic drama as the three-part narrative careers on a knife-edge of tension: the concatenation of incidents and events, either auspicious or dolorous, gives an impression of a masquerade, dancing. Indeed, an Igbo proverb '*Ada-akwu ofuebe enene mmuo*' ('You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade') seems to be at the back of Achebe's mind as he constructs his narrative. Clearly, the *kinetic* character of the Igbo masquerade is at work in the plot development of *Things Fall Apart*. To be sure, the Igbo predilection towards the "mobile, and active, even aggressive" (Achebe, *The Igbo World* 42) is borne out in the

construction of the Okonkwo persona: outwardly, Okonkwo is courageous, fearsome and mean-spirited; a domestic terrorist who beats up his wives- first, Ojiugo whom he beats during the Week of Peace (21) and, second, Ekwefi, his second wife and Ezinma's long-suffering mother, whom he batters over her plucking of a few banana leaves. However, inwardly, Okonkwo's life is "dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (9). As a consequence of this kind of Jekyll and Hyde two-facedness Okonkwo's life is constantly teetering on the lunatic fringes of the society as evidenced in a series of tragic occurrences such as the slaughter of his "adopted" son, Ikemefuna (40) and his accidental killing of the sixteen-year-old son of Ogbuefi Ezeudu (88).

Having risen to the highest echelon of the tribe to become one of the *Adichie* (council of elders) in Umuofia, Okonkwo, the masquerade, in a manner of speaking, guides us, the audience, to the pulsating centres of the social self. Apart from his own personal (shall we say, *pathetic*) drama, Okonkwo is made to take us by the hand and ears to various sites of communal self-renewal and the recuperation of ancestral memory. Let us consider a few of such instances. As the foremost wrestler himself, Okonkwo attends the village's wrestling contests organized by the youth on the *ilo* (33), that is, the village square. Here, the Igbo sense of drama is on full display, what with the milling crowds of spectators, singing and dancing and the drums sounding out the collective tension which rules the Igbo:

The drums rose to a frenzy. The people surged forwards. The young men who kept order flew around, waving their palm fronds. Old men nodded to the beat of the drums and remembered the days when they wrestled to its intoxicating rhythm. (33)

The Igbo sense of drama is also displayed during the wedding ceremony of Akueke (50-53; 82-85), the burial ceremony of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, and the public outing of the *Egwugwu* masquerades. Perhaps, we should remark at this juncture that the *drum* occupies an iconic and totemic place in Umuofia's *semiosis*. Whether or not the occasion is happy, the Igbo (as most Africans) usually turn it into a *celebratory* and carnivalesque

One, with a lot of *drumming*. This basic African autochthonous penchant for *celebrating* the sweet and the sour, has led some literary historians and theoreticians to question the argument that Africans have a sense of tragedy as a drama genre. These polemicists opine that, since Africans tend to take in their stride "tragic" events as a result of their cosmogonic outlook which is fundamentally *optimistic* at bottom, then, the "tragic" mellows into the "pathetic", a necessary setback which is, in the last analysis, *remedial* and *useful*. It is in this light that the tragic multiple births and deaths of Ekwefi's children lose some of their painful and numbing edge. If anything, these series of family crises further deepen Ekwefi's and, to a lesser degree, Okonkwo's dependence on the gods. The names given to the infants at birth say it all: 'Onwumbiko' 'Death I implore you'; 'Ozoemena' 'May it not happen again'; 'Onwuma' 'Death may please himself', among others (55).

More than anything else in the narrative, the ritual killing of Ikemefuna *should* have elicited the greatest amount of grief and sorrow in the people, since the young lad has come to be recognized as one of their own, with his blending in with the Okonkwo household. We do not, however, notice a universal gloom enveloping the clan over the killing of Ikemefuna. Okonkwo only experiences remorse for a couple of days and thereafter snaps out of his sadness. For a reader weaned on the Christian faith and schooled in western formal education, the Ikemefuna episode is indeed an unmitigated tragedy. But it is not so for the people, especially, the elders of Umuofia. For them, the death of Ikemefuna is a form of ritual sacrifice to the gods of the land. It is important to bear in mind that Ikemefuna is made to carry a gourd of palmwine on his head, signifying in the process his role in this context as *carrier* or a scapegoat: his spilt blood like that of Christ washes away the spiritual filth and evil in Umuofia; Ikemefuna has to die for Umuofia to live. In any case, human sacrifice was common in traditional African societies, and might possibly still be with us to date. We need to also recall that "*Mbari*" whose creative spirit permeates *Things Fall Apart* as a shaping force is said to be all about *sacrifice*. This *Carpe Diem* notion of life is played out in several instances in the novel: the death and burial of Ogbuefi Ezeudu who dies at full, ripe age, is the culmination of human life-cycle on earth. Achebe, thus, narrates: 'A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors' (87).

The second part of the novel dramatizes the years of exile of Okonkwo and his household. According to Chinua Achebe, the Igbo world is a "dynamic world of movement and of flux" ("The Igbo world" 42). This essential flux and cosmic dynamism is demonstrated by Okonkwo's exile and ostracism from Umuofia to his motherland of Mbanta. Okonkwo's fate, thus, demonstrates the grounded insecurities and the fragility of hope as well as the hollowness of human achievement. Fittingly, the Igbo sing:

"For whom is it well, for whom is it well?"

There is no one for whom it is well". (97)

This deep-seated sense of insecurity predisposes the individual citizen as well as the social self to engage the *Other* in the hope of benefiting from the encounter. Appropriately, therefore, the white man appears on the scene, inaugurating a paradigm shift in the tribe's metaphysics and its value-system. The inclusiveness and sense of acknowledgement of new events and presences are also demonstrated by Achebe here as he does not only narrate the activities and impact of the white colonial masters and missionaries, but also recounts the conversion of many natives, including Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son, to Christianity (103). The Christian missionaries breathe new life into the Igbo universe which is at the last stages of spiritual self-immolation: from the killing of Ikemefuna, through the dumping of twins in the Evil Forest to the apartheid policy practised against the *Osu* caste, it is only a question of time for the tribe to get to the point where it will self-destruct. The white man leaves no one in doubt as to the efficiency and the efficacy of his magic: his methodical madness as he successfully debunks and explodes the sinister and debilitating myth of the evil forest by building his church there; the successful marriage unions between freeborns and *Osu* "slaves" forged by the missionaries and the unwarranted killing of the sacred python (114), without any sign of retribution from the wronged deity.

As always, Okonkwo, the unrepentant and rigid traditionalist, witnesses all of these events and grieves for both self and society. He had earlier on seen a locust invasion and, now, he is witnessing the despoliation and the collateral violation of the human pest. For a man who has never found his own centre, a proud, bigoted masculinist whose chauvinism has been rebuked by the natural superiority of the female, couched in the Igbo

name 'Nneka' – "mother is supreme" – the comprehensive rout of Okonkwo's ancestral religion and the corresponding impotence of his household gods prove too much of a burden to bear. And, upon his return to this fatherland of Umuofia, Okonkwo realizes that 'things have fallen apart' in his absence. Achebe notes: 'A man's place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another' (123). This image of the clan as a 'lizard' underscores the dynamism and the sense of flux of the Igbo world, just as the rites of passage (that is, birth, marriage, death) re-enact the "multi-level experience of the mystical and the mundane" (Soyinka, 1976, 2). Also, the inner movement of meaning in the narrative scheme shows Okonkwo as mere fossil, a throw-back to a bygone era in the new dispensation. Consequently, he tries to rally the residual forces of reaction against change but fails woefully and commits suicide and is cast away into the Evil Forest, unsung like Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The future of the Igbo world as portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* is firmly in the hands of the white man who has set up trading posts, schools, courts and churches. *Things Fall Apart* is, all told, an anthem of change, a paean to *progress*; an epic drama of *becoming* and praxis; and the epochalization of a historical, *conjunctural* experience as the novel's title testifies. This in a way also captures the complex meaning of *Mbari* as *ephemeral* art whose purposeful neglect and re-construction underline not only the cyclic consciousness of time but, more critically, the fundamental flux of human life, and, to quote Ovid:

There is no death, no death

Only change, and innovation.

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