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The Rule, the Law, and the Rule of Law in Achebe's Novels of Colonization

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Achebe's two novels of colonization, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, one written just before and one just after independence, both begin with the threat of war between village groups. In the first, war is averted by the groups themselves, negotiating compensation on the basis of reciprocity. In the second, war is not avoided and leads directly to intervention by the British, who assert a monopoly on violence and justify it on the basis of the desirability of the rule of law that they impose. I read Achebe's novels not as historical narratives but as parables of political philosophy. Reciprocity (the basis of vengeance but also of a gift economy) is opposed to the law (imposed by a sovereign and legitimized by its disinterested arbitration). The interest that Achebe expressed in models like reciprocity, which do without the state, disappeared after independence, when Nigerians had their own state. Nevertheless, both novels express a deep ambivalence about the law and the violence required to impose it.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, law, reciprocity, political philosophy, violence, state, sovereignty, colonization and decolonization

In his late memoir, Achebe offers this "piece of heresy":

> The British governed their colony of Nigeria with considerable care. There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country. This was not something that the British achieved only in Nigeria; they were able to manage this on a bigger scale in India and Australia. The British had the experience of governing and doing it competently. I am not justifying colonialism. But it is important to face the fact that British colonies, more or less, were expertly run.[1]

Achebe recalls that "driving alone, going all the way from Lagos to Asaba, crossing the River Niger, to visit my relatives in the east" was a much easier undertaking when the British ran things than it would later be for one did not have to be "consumed by fear of abduction or armed robbery."[2]

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1 Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 43.
2 Ibid., 45

When he says, "There was a distinct order during this time,"[3] Achebe is not being nostalgic for colonialism, the rule by and for foreigners, but he is commenting on what is lacking in postcolonial Nigeria. Nigeria lacks what many want a state to provide: "competent management," including a hierarchical administration whose directives were effectively carried out, and security for citizens, made possible by an effective monopoly of violence by the state *and* subordination to the rule of law. In twenty-first-century Nigeria, not only is the state unable to eliminate armed robbers or rebels, but the violence of state actors themselves is to be feared.

Achebe's exculpation of the colonial order poses a conceptual problem: the monopoly of violence by the colonial state, which assured security on the roads, was achieved through an original exercise of overwhelming violence, and the British always retained the capacity for that violence. As Achille Mbembe says, citing Simone Weil, "one can say of the 'colonial peace' that it differed from war only in that one of the camps was deprived of arms."[4] To appreciate the violence that the British were still prepared to use in the 1950s one had only to look at the contemporary police states they maintained and the anti-insurgency wars they waged in Kenya and Malaya. How does one separate the law, which the Irish poet Yeats, who faced the same colonial conundrum, praised as seemingly "indifferent to blame or praise, / To bribe or threat,"[5] from the oppressive sovereign authority that imposed it, what Mbembe calls the *commandement*?[6]

The "heresy" that Achebe risks is not just that of exculpating colonialism but of justifying the centralized state. The memoirist believes that peace and security guaranteed by the state's authority are values whose loss must be taken into account when drawing up the moral balance sheets of systemic violence and the counterviolence of resistance. Achebe can scarcely be faulted for wanting a rule of law to contain the fearsome predatory nature of the Nigerian state. But what if the law and the *commandement* cannot be so easily distinguished? To desire the law, as Achebe does in his memoir, is to accept certain ideas about human nature, which requires control from above, about the state, which provides security and justice to citizens, and about alternatives to the law, which are mistrusted as anarchy.

My aim here is not to unravel the conundrum but to signal it and understand it. The conundrum of the law and the sovereignty that imposes it has far-reaching *post*colonial resonance. In Zimbabwe, for instance, the rule of law inherited from the British was much resented after majority rule was achieved because it continued to protect property, and specifically land ownership, and put obstacles in the way of social reparations, but the eclipse of the rule of law since the farm invasions starting in 2000 has been felt by as many others as a terrifying loss of protection for persons.

Achebe himself did not always feel the rule of law was an unalloyed political good, and fifty years before, at the time of independence, when he was starting his career as a novelist, he had held very different ideas about human nature, the state, and

3 Ibid., 45.

4 "*l'on peut dire de la 'paix colonial' qu'elle ne différait de la guerre que par le fait que l'un des camps était privé d'armes*." Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la Grande Nuit: Essai sur l'Afrique Décolonisée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 91.

5 "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

6 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 25.

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alternatives to the law. The young Achebe wrote two novels, the first a few years before independence in 1960 and the second as many years after, depicting the extended moment of colonization that had first imposed the law. Both novels open with a threat of war between neighboring village groups, scenes that introduce the theme of violence and its control and set the stage for the intervention by the British. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) concerns a "just war" and shows precolonial village groups averting violence among themselves. It presents an alternative to the law, one that Achebe does not choose but that he does present as a viable choice. After independence, however, when the law had become the foundation of the postcolonial state, it was harder to question the need for it, and *Arrow of God* (1964) begins with a "war of blame" between village groups only ended by external military might. Like its predecessor, however, that novel shows that the new law does not remove tensions but creates new ones.

Recalling Colonization on the Eve of Independence

Things Fall Apart presents a limited case study of a village group and its immediate neighbors. The first half of the novel deliberately excludes most of what commonly constitutes history: economics, state formation, and wars of conquest. The novel, of course, has been read for what it reveals of a much larger history, including slavery and transoceanic trade networks, but those readings read for what the novel disavows. *Things Fall Apart* never visits the Umuofia market, ignores the pan-Igbo oracle established at Arochukwu, and never mentions the wars for control of the trade hinterlands. Everything the novel shows has a basis in fact, even in research, but a reader who knew no more about West Africa than the novel showed would have no idea that before colonization, Igboland had long had relations with Europe and the rest of West Africa through trade, first for slaves and later for palm oil, but also through wars, for captives and for control of trade networks.

Many critics have compared *Things Fall Apart* to anthropology, the academic study of stateless peoples, but I am reading the novel here as a political allegory like those of Rousseau or Nietzsche, a meditation on violence, the law, and the origins of the state. As Christopher Wise argues, *Things Fall Apart* contains a strong utopian element: it is an examination not so much of what was the case but of what *should be* the case.[7] On the eve of the new state of Nigeria, Achebe writes a novel about a past epoch of statelessness.

John Lonsdale has claimed that "the most distinctively African contribution to human history could be said to have been precisely the civilised art of living peaceably together *not* in states."[8] This is not to deny that African history displays a full panoply of empires, kingdoms, and city-states, but to argue that that history obscures the viability of those many societies that, like the Igbo, did without states. The Igbo, as often noted, were proud of not having kings. The village groups were not subordinate to a central authority and lived in a segmented society constituted along the same lines at every level. Achebe has stated his admiration for the limited scale of a village world

7 Christopher Wise, "Excavating the New Republic: Post-Colonial Subjectivity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," *Callaloo* 22.4 (1999): 1054–70.

8 John Lonsdale, "States and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey," *African Studies Review* 24.2/3 (1981): 139.

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where human relations remain face to face, political association does not rely on representation of the many by the one or the few but involves direct democracy where every citizen has a say (though only titled men are citizens), decisions are negotiated, the ideal of all transactions is balance, and relations among people are created and reinforced by exchange.[9]

The novel presents a deliberate contrast between precolonial and colonial violence, which differ in scale. Okonkwo keeps a human head he won in the "inter-tribal wars" that Umuofia wages with its immediate neighbors.[10] The term *inter-tribal* wars is misleading, however, for the combatants are not "tribes" but groups of villages, what the novel calls (equally confusingly) "clans" or "towns," and the term suggests derogatory connotations of endemic violence—implicit in the phrase "the dark days of inter-tribal wars."[11] Insofar as the term *inter-tribal* suggests that the combatants are symmetrical and the wars are limited in scope, it has some validity, but what it obscures is the sense that these wars were the subjects of discussion and negotiation, and had to fulfill certain conditions for their legitimacy.

Before the present of the narrative a woman from Umuofia had been killed in Mbaino market and Umuofia threatened war in reprisal. Murder is irreversible, but blood vengeance seeks to restore balance by exacting a violent death from the murderer's party.[12] By casting its gaze forever backward at the affront by another, retaliatory killing can careen forward without control in an endless spiral of killing.[13] In this case, however, the decision to go to war is debated democratically by a council of the titled men, who needed to satisfy themselves that the case for war was "clear and just" and not "what the Ibo call *a fight of blame*."[14] The two groups manage to avert war when Mbaino accedes to Umuofia's demand that it hand over "a young man and a virgin"[15] in compensation.

Without a centralized authority to enforce a law, how do Umuofia and its neighbors avoid the vicious circle of violence? The elders in both village groups are able to stand outside the cycles of vengeance to discuss them, affording themselves autonomy from the momentum of violence. Negotiation presumes reason, a parity in status, and some level of mutual trust. Both sides also acknowledge the external point of view of the gods, who will take sides in cases where there is blame.

Mbaino, the offending party, averts war by handing over the son of a man who "had taken a hand in killing a daughter of Umuofia."[16] Violence in Achebe's Umuofia can thus be understood in relation to the gift economy analyzed by Marcel Mauss.[17] Although revenge is backward-looking and negative, and gift exchange is anticipatory and positive, both rely on the principle of reciprocity. "Vindicatory debt," explains

9 Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Chinua Achebe," *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 165–84.
10 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988), 6.
11 T. M. Aluko, *One Man, One Matchet* (London: Heinemann, 1965), 112.
12 Mark Rogin Anspach, *À Charge de Revanche: Figures Élémentaires de la Réciprocité* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 9–11.
13 Ibid., 12.
14 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 9.
15 Ibid., 8.
16 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 11.
17 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*. Trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990).

Marcel Hénaff, "belongs to the logic of gift-exchange relationships; it is a debt of reply and a debt of honor. Reply is mandatory, as are the gestures of ceremonial gift exchange—offering, receiving, and reciprocating a gift. Debt is erased by the fulfillment of the procedure."[18]

In the case of the woman killed in Mbaino, the life of a member of the offending party is not enough compensation because a woman is more than a life; she is the potential for future lives. To avert war Mbaino must also give a girl to Udo "to replace his murdered wife,"[19] in effect recasting the debt of death in terms of bride-givers and bride-receivers. Compensation for victims whose lives have been taken away and the exchange of brides who will be the bearers of new life are twin aspects of what Philippe Rospabé calls "the debt of life."[20] The negotiations around the exchange of a bride take up two chapters in *Things Fall Apart*, three if one includes the case of the man whose wife left him and who wants the bridewealth returned to him.

The exchange of brides, like the exchange of gifts more generally, looks forward rather than back: young men pay a "bride price" to the bride's father not to clear a debt once and for all but in acknowledgment of the ongoing relation between the families *and* as a gauge of the obligation by the suitor's family to supply a wife in return.[21] As a key participant in an extended scene of bride price negotiations says in *Things Fall Apart*:

> "It will be good for you and it will be good for us."
> *"Ee-e-e!"*
> "This is not the first time my people have come to marry your daughter. My mother was one of you."
> *"Ee-e-e!"*
> "And this will not be the last, because you understand us and we understand you. You are a great family."[22]

The exchange of brides between village groups (Okonkwo's own mother came from neighboring Mbanta) makes war less likely, but bridewealth and vindicatory violence are not just opposites: they are also twin examples of reciprocity. Indeed, the negotiations around bridewealth in the novel appear even more precarious than those concerning war: in marriage as in war everyone is alert to slights to honor.

Mauss says that where two groups of men meet, if they do not move apart, they must either fight each other or else sit down and trade.[23] Claude Lévi-Strauss elaborates, "Exchanges are peacefully resolved wars and wars are the result of unsuccessful transactions."[24] The word *payment* etymologically means "making peace."[25] It is no

18 Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 225.
19 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 9.
20 Philippe Rospabé, *La Dette de Vie: Aux Origines de la Monnaie Sauvage* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995), 34.
21 Ibid., 33.
22 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 82.
23 Marc Abélès, *Anthropologie de l'État* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), 44.
24 Quoted in Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine, 1972), 182.
25 Rospabé, *La Dette de Vie*, 31.

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coincidence that Udo's wife was killed in a market. The markets that rotate every four or eight days among the village groups foster binding ties and create vitality and abundance, but those same energies carry dangers, especially associated with theft, cheating, rumors, the power of crowds, and the magic of marketing (Umuike has become the largest of the markets as the result of a powerful medicine that beckons people to it from all directions[26]).

The principle of reciprocity, which, in the case of gift exchange, makes allies and even kin out of other people, does imply that, were it not for the equilibrium maintained by such exchange, the relations between groups would be hostile. In its potential for war, the Maussian world of gift and countergift, blow and counterblow, resembles a Hobbesian world of violence and insecurity—each village group is surrounded by enemies—with this key difference: the village groups already have political links to each other. "The state of nature is already a kind of society," writes Marshall Sahlins:[27] "Reciprocity is a 'between' relation. It does not dissolve the separate parties within a higher unity, but on the contrary, in correlating their opposition, perpetuates it."[28]

For Hobbes, individuals must agree to surrender private force to a single public power in order to achieve security, "a structure of submission, and sometimes of terror."[29] This is the origin of the sovereign and the law. The Maussian pact, on the other hand, does not imply the dissolution of the parties involved nor their submission to an all-encompassing state.[30] Reciprocity represents neither "the victory of one" nor "the submission of all," but "mutual surrender":[31] "The gift is alliance, solidarity, communion—in brief, peace, the great virtue that earlier philosophers, Hobbes notably, had discovered in the State."[32] Sahlins could be describing Umuofia and Mbaino when he writes that, in the Maussian scheme of things, "the right to give battle is retained by the people in severalty. But this must be underlined: it is the right that endures, not the battle."[33] Sahlins goes so far as to say the gift marks "the triumph of human rationality over the folly of war."[34] The historian Elizabeth Isichei argues that the same principle of an eye for an eye that regularly led to war also constrained the spiral of violence among Igbo village groups: "the combatants knew that at the end of the war, a balance sheet would be drawn up, and the side with the lower casualty list would have to give the other side victims to equalize."[35] The wars between neighboring village groups, each constituted symmetrically, none subordinate to another, have inherent limits.

In the quotation with which I opened this essay, Achebe measures independent Nigeria against the late colony, not against the precolonial situation. What would travel from Lagos to Asaba have looked like before the British amalgamated its colonies in the area and created Nigeria? A contemporary traveler between Lagos and

26 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 79.
27 Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 172.
28 Ibid., 170.
29 Ibid., 170.
30 Abélès, *Anthropologie de l'État*, 44.
31 Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 177.
32 Ibid., 169.
33 Ibid., 172.
34 Ibid., 175.
35 Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 79.

Asaba would have had to pass through the city-states of Yorubaland, which charged tolls in return for protection, and wars between the city-states often closed the routes. East of Asaba, however, in Achebe's home territory, there were no centralized states and no "public force charged with and capable of safeguarding travelers."[36] Travelers had to negotiate their own security arrangements. *Things Fall Apart* limits its frame to the village group and its neighbors and travels only as far as nearby Mbanta, but if we extrapolate from the principle of reciprocity that regulated village groups to imagine long-distance travel at the time we would arrive at a picture that did have historical reality. Traders in Igboland moved along a chain of relays, from one known and trusted host to the next.[37] Trust in these cases was established by gift exchange, marriage, and by rituals and solemn oaths of alliance.[38] Security was based not on a confidence that strangers all understood and obeyed a single rule of law, but on a trust in known others with whom one had established relations.

Things Fall Apart readily acknowledges the drawbacks of reciprocity. Mark Anspach argues that to reverse the negative cycle of revenge and embark upon the forward cycle of the gift, including the exchange of brides, requires sacrifice, a killing that is not revenge but a gift because it is of one's own.[39] That is how the boy Ikemefuna came from Mbaino to live with Okonkwo and his family. The novel deplores the ultimate fate of the boy whom readers come to know not just as a sacrificial countertoken given in compensation for a murder but as a person of admirable character loved by Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. The reciprocity that binds Umuofia and Mbaino in death and in marriage alike is woefully indifferent to the persons who are the objects of exchange as brides, debt pawns, or sacrificial victims. As David Graeber, discussing reciprocity, reminds us, "human beings can never be equivalent to anything—even, ultimately, to one another."[40]

The drawbacks to reciprocity as a mode of regulating social relations are evident to anyone living in a state under the rule of law, that is to say every reader of Achebe's novel. In a world governed by principles of reciprocity, as Nietzsche suggests, justice itself is defined as the balance among equal powers "who come to terms with one another, who come to an 'understanding' once again by means of a settlement."[41] The question of intention, and thus of guilt or innocence, is irrelevant. No one asks if the death of the woman in the Mbaino market was an accident. When Okonkwo later kills a boy accidentally and must go into exile, his friend Obierika asks himself, "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently?"[42] There is an incipient desire on the part of Obierika for an objective outside judgment that would remove violence from reciprocal exchange and make it a matter of morality, that would weigh the guilt of the individual rather than calibrate the honor at stake in interpersonal or intergroup relations.

36 David Northrup, *Trade without Rulers: Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 155.

37 Axel Harneit-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging: Igbo Communities and the Nigerian State in the Twentieth Century* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 70.

38 Northrup, *Trade without Rulers*, 97–98.

39 Anspach, *À Charge de Revanche*, 19.

40 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville, 2011), 158.

41 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Michael A. Scarpitti (Penguin, 2013), 56.

42 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 8.

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Not all gift exchange in Umuofia is between equals. One prominent form of gift is based on pooling and redistribution rather than reciprocity: men can convert wealth into titles and status by hosting immense ceremonial feasts for the community at large. Such gifts establish a hierarchy between giver and receivers, binding "one to another, in licentious benevolence" to use the words of the American short story writer John Cheever writing about the survival of gift economies in twentieth-century New York.[43] As Jacques Godbout explains, "The gift between equals gives rise to equality," but "the gift between those who are unequal gives rise to inequality."[44]

Exchange, whether of violent death or of gifts for the purpose of acquiring status, has an element of masculine rivalry that renders unstable the very equilibrium it creates. Okonkwo in a rage remembers a war against another village group, Isike, when "We killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours."[45] When Mbaino acknowledges the justice of Umuofia's grievance and accedes to the demands for compensation, they do so because they fear their neighbor's prowess in war. A village group needs to be able to instill respect in others if it is not to be taken advantage of. This is not the absolute fear Umuofia later learns to feel for the British—the village groups do not go to war to subjugate each other nor to take land from each other—but it is fear nonetheless.

Reciprocity works well between village groups but does not apply at the domestic level, between, say, husband and wife or father and son. When violence breaks out in a man's compound, it cannot be reciprocated for each blow would strike against the life of the group as a whole.[46] Domestic violence therefore requires the intervention of an outside party, the ancestors in the form of masked *egwugwu*, for its adjudication. In public "hearings" that resemble a court of civil law, the ancestors apply the "law of Umuofia,"[47] "not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute."[48] The *egwugwu* judge violence in terms of the implications for reciprocity: When a wife leaves her husband who beats her, should the bridewealth be returned? Violence is also difficult to regulate *within* the village group: when Okonkwo accidentally kills the boy, he must go into exile and his compound is destroyed by the boy's clansmen in disguise, who thereby take on a collective responsibility intended to preclude revenge.[49]

The principle of reciprocity is well suited to regulating relations among groups who recognize themselves in each other, but *Things Fall Apart* makes clear why some in the novel would prefer a law based on a transcendent morality. Okonkwo's son Nwoye and his friend Obierika feel the bonds of reciprocity as chains and long for another mode of justice, based on the recognition of and equality for the individual. Some, like Nwoye, will look for that justice in Christianity and the new British law (I do not have the space here to distinguish between these as I should).

43 John Cheever, "Christmas Is a Sad Season for the Poor," *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 136.
44 Jacques T. Godbout, *The World of the Gift*. Trans. Donald Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 137.
45 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 141.
46 Rospabé, *La Dette de Vie*, 107.
47 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 65,
48 Ibid., 66.
49 Rospabé, *La Dette*, 107.

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To regard subordination as oppression, as Nwoye comes to do, may or may not be an anachronism on Achebe's part: Joseph Slaughter has argued that the form of the novel implies a modern Western framework of rights for the individual.[50] My concern here, however, is not with the accuracy or completeness of Achebe's depiction of the past so much as with the nature of the past that he imagines. I follow Adélékè Adéeko in considering the conflict in *Things Fall Apart* not in terms of conversion or culture clash, which emphasize identity, but rather in terms of the transition of political systems, "the consolidation of law-making power and law enforcement violence amidst the uncertainties of regime change."[51] I differ, however, from Adéeko in that I consider the transition in the novel not to be from one system of law to another but *from* a stateless world without law where violence is limited by the principle of reciprocity *to* "law-making power and law enforcement violence." Achebe's primary interest in reciprocity is as a way of understanding the law that replaced it.

The second half of the novel creates a parable-sized depiction of the essence of colonialism. The British military conquest of Igboland is crystallized in the single incident of the killing of a white man on a bicycle in Abame and the retaliation by the British, inspired by an actual incident involving a Mr. Stewart in Ahiara, Mbaise, in 1905.[52] To read *Things Fall Apart*, one would not know that that incident occurred in the context of British military expeditions sent over a decade and a half to subdue Igboland in the face of fierce resistance. The annihilation of the village group of Abame is the only metonym in the novel of that much larger violence.

The British do not acknowledge any parity with those whose land they are invading. When the Englishman on a bicycle is killed, the British do not seek compensation in the form of a life for a life. They do not even send a delegation to explain to Abame how it has offended. They simply attack on a market day, when normally war would be forbidden, and smash the village group with the aim of teaching it and its neighbors a lesson. When Achebe makes the incident of the "iron horse" the emblem of first contact, the effect is to emphasize the impossibility of parity:[53] for Nigerians in the 1950s a bicycle is the most ordinary of commodities, but the "iron horse" that can live only when its owner rides it represents a magical "debt of life" that Abame can never hope to repay. From the disenchanted British point of view, on the other hand, Abame's "crime" does not demand compensation, not even proportionate punishment, but must be met with a display of strength so severe it will be registered throughout the region.

The lack of parity between Abame and Britain is a difference in scale that the British cast in moral terms. The invaders regard the stateless world of autonomous village groups along the Lower Niger, as they did Africa at large, as a field in which law and morality did not apply until they, the British, imposed it. From this point of view, the conquest was itself neither legal nor moral, as befits the amoral field it saw itself intervening in, but it claimed legitimacy retrospectively on the basis of introducing a law that bore a relation to a would-be transcendent morality. The British justified their

50 Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

51 Adélékè Adéeko, "Okonkwo, Textual Closure, Colonial Conquest," *Research in African Literatures* 42.2 (2011): 82.

52 Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People*, 113.

53 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 97.

own violence as putting an end to what they perceived as the anarchic violence in which they themselves had perforce participated. The British thus claimed to be rescuing Africans (not yet Nigerians) from an anarchy they projected as endemic to Africa and intolerable even to Africans.

The British declare they are breaking the cycle of retaliatory violence by imposing an "arbitrational justice" administered by a judge.[54] As Nietzsche writes of the law, "while, after the establishment of law, the authorities treat the aggressive and arbitrary acts of individuals, or of whole groups, as a violation of law, and as resistance to the authorities themselves, they distract their subjects' attention from the immediate injury inflicted by such a violation, and thus eventually achieve the very opposite result to that always desired by revenge, which sees and recognizes nothing but the standpoint of the injured party."[55]

At the end of *Things Fall Apart*, the district commissioner (DC) invites six leaders of Umuofia, including Okonkwo, for a palaver. The new rule of law presents itself as rational: it listens to both sides; it protects all equally against ill-treatment. Says the DC, "We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If a man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen."[56] However, the elders who listen to the DC's speech about the magnanimous impartiality of the new justice have been forcibly seized and sit in handcuffs. The new law, which derives its claim to legitimacy from the consent of the governed and the impartiality of its judgments does not actually need the consent of the elders, whom it regards as irrational and in need of coercion until they comply with reason.

Okonkwo summons Umuofia to resist the British, but his call goes unheeded. Umuofia has many reasons for not fighting: the new religion has divided its members; the new British order opens up attractive economic opportunities; and some, like Nwoye, feel that the new law will put an end to violence that unjustly ignores the individual. Primarily, however, many in Umuofia fear that they will suffer Abame's fate.[57] Umuofia chooses not to die but to live. Foucault writes that:

> It is fear, the renunciation of fear, and the renunciation of the risk of death. It is this that introduces us into the order of sovereignty and into a juridical regime: that of absolute power. The will to prefer life to death: that is what founds sovereignty, and it is as juridical and legitimate as the sovereignty that was established through the mode of institution and mutual agreement.[58]

Recalling Colonization on the Morrow of Independence

The distinction I have drawn here between reciprocity and the law as two ways of regulating violence resonates widely outside Achebe's novels. It is related to the important current debates about international criminal justice: Does Africa need

54 Hénaff, *The Price of Truth*, 225.
55 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 61.
56 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 137.
57 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 139.
58 Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended," Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 95.

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criminal tribunals, international in scale, to carry out the justice that African states are too weak to carry out, or should the demands of absolute justice be sacrificed to the needs of peace? Should tyrants and killers be punished, or should they be engaged in dialogue and negotiated with? The ICC or Truth and Reconciliation Commissions?

Achebe himself, however, soon ceased to consider reciprocity as a viable option. *Arrow of God*, set in 1921, roughly twenty years after the destruction of Abame[59] and in the same area of Igboland, also begins with a war among "blood brothers,"[60] but now this war threatens to be infinite in scope. The village groups Umuaro and Okperi dispute a piece of land, and at stake are honor and perceived disrespect. When Umuaro presents Okperi with the choice of war or peace, as Okonkwo had once presented Mbaino, so filled are the emissaries with the importance of their position that they rebuff their hosts' hospitality. Rudeness inspires challenge. One young envoy loses his temper and breaks an Okperi man's *ikenga*, an object imbued with the owner's own spirit, and everyone understands when that man in turn shoots the offender—"How would the victim set about putting himself right again with his fathers unless he could say to them: Rest, for the man that did it has paid with his head?"[61] This is the vicious circle of retaliatory violence: the offended party can only redeem his honor by killing the offender in turn. But this violence is not constrained by limits. The clearing of one debt merely creates another, and the two village groups go to war. Ezeulu, the priest of Ulu, counsels against further reprisals, which would constitute a "war of blame,"[62] but others still suspect an insult to Umuaro, and they join Ezeulu's rival Nwaka in feeling that "three or four Okperi heads must fall to settle the matter."[63] In the subsequent wa,r Umuaro kills six men and Okperi three, making the score six to four, and Umuaro is proud that they have provided the dead emissary with "three men on whom to rest his head."[64]

In *Things Fall Apart,* village groups averted war by turning reciprocal violence into gift exchange, which created a third entity that transcended giver and receiver: the relation between them. In *Arrow of God*, reciprocity is a thoroughly poisoned affair, contaminated by self-interest and false ideas of honor, and warring parties will require an external third party to adjudicate between them. What has happened to explain the difference?

Nicholas Brown has suggested that the dispute between Umuaro and Okperi reflects a new land scarcity.[65] Whereas Umuofia, around 1900, is ready to go to war over a murder of a daughter, Umuaro in 1921 fights over a piece of land. In *Things Fall Apart*, as in most of Africa, wealth was measured in people—how many wives, children, and dependents a man had to work for him—rather than in land. Land was

59 Dr Stewart was killed in 1905, but in *Things Fall Apart*, Abame is destroyed while Victoria is still queen, that is, before 1901. The destruction of Abame is repeatedly mentioned in *Arrow of God*, where the white man who was killed is identified as Macdonald (Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* [Oxford: Heinemann, 1986], 108).

60 Ibid., 131.

61 Ibid., 25.

62 Ibid., 27.

63 Ibid., 27.

64 Ibid., 28.

65 Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: the Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 114.

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not an issue because it was still abundant, and the young Okonkwo could farm as much land as he had seed yams to plant. Whereas, throughout its history, Africa has been underpopulated and the land plentiful, Igboland has been a notable exception; there, land started to become scarce sometime in the nineteenth century.[66] Brown regards the increased pressure on the land as a historical necessity: not itself the product of colonialism, it motivates Umuaro's transition from self-sufficient farming to the new trade-based economy opened up by colonialism. Certainly, in the twentieth century, Igbos spread throughout Nigeria in a great trade diaspora.

If Brown is right, and the underlying motive for the violence at the beginning of *Arrow of God* is economic, then questions of honor are mere ideology. The conflict between Umuaro's emissaries and their Okperi hosts becomes secondary, for even had they shown mutual respect, that would not have solved the question of ownership, which may, of course, be why respect cannot be shown. War over land then, despite appearances, is not irrational but serves greater ends or betrays the presence of greater forces at work. In many versions of European history, it is land scarcity and war that provided the inspiration for momentous historical transformations such as the development of the modern state.[67]

I am arguing, however, that the violence with which *Arrow of God* opens is not incidental but central and that the novel deplores it as irrational. Land scarcity without an outlet almost always reflects a pessimistic account of economic transformation; it is, for instance, the explanation for contemporary African violence in the apocalyptic accounts of Robert Kaplan and Jared Diamond.[68] I am arguing, in effect, that the land scarcity in the novel is not so much the source of Achebe's pessimism as its expression. When Achebe makes unlimited reciprocal violence the focus of narrative attention, he is thematizing the law and adopting the law's point of view on reciprocal violence in order to test it.[69]

Like the modern state everywhere, the colonial state does not regard violence between subjects as a question of honor demanding reciprocity but as a crime against the state and "a danger undermining the legal system."[70] The colonial state imagines reciprocal violence among groups as "intertribal violence," as automatism, disproportion, and blindness carrying the danger of proliferating endlessly.[71] Raymond Verdier considers that the "conception of destructive vengeance without end does not actually describe the 'state of nature,' but proceeds from a modern vision that arises only after the establishment of the State makes of vengeance an entirely 'private' matter by arrogating to itself the monopoly on force and punishment."[72]

66 G. Ogo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 189.

67 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

68 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy* (New York: Random House, 2000) and Jared Diamond, *Collapse* (New York: Viking, 2005).

69 For a novel that presents a precolonial dispute over territory in southeastern Nigeria that cannot be resolved and so escalates into a near-cosmic conflagration, see Elechi Amadi's *The Great Ponds* (London: Heinemann, 1970).

70 Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Violence and its Alternatives: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, eds. Manfred B. Steger and Nancy S. Lind (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 57.

71 Raymond Verdier, "Le Système Vindicatoire," *La Vengeance: Études d'Ethnologie, d'Histoire et de Philosophie*, ed. Raymond Vernier, Vol. 1. (Paris: Cujas, 1980), 14.

72 "*Il y aurait lieu bien plutôt de se demander si cette conception de la vengeance sans fin et destructrice, loin de se rapporter à la 'fondation du monde' ne procéde pas d'une vision moderne postérieure à*

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It is, argues Paul Kahn, the "myth of the social contract" that "projects extrajudicial violence back into the prehistory of the state."[73] Nevertheless the author of *Arrow of God* presents just such a version of the myth of the coming of the law.

The war between Umuaro and Okperi is ended by the intervention of the district officer (DO), Captain Winterbottom. "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord, and the British act like the new God, ending the cycles of violence and transferring judgment and punishment to a level beyond the possibility of recrimination. Rousseau wrote that the law presumes a legislator who stands outside because

> in order to discover the rules of society best suited to nations, a superior intelligence beholding all the passions of men without experiencing any of them would be needed. This intelligence would have to be wholly unrelated to our nature, while knowing it through and through; its happiness would have to be independent of us, and yet ready to occupy itself with ours…. It would take gods to give men laws.[74]

Winterbottom certainly intended to impress people with the fairness of his judgment. Unable to ascertain the original owner of the land (and Achebe never does tell us who it was), the DO, like the biblical Solomon, heeds the one person, Ezeulu, who did not plead his own self-interest and so rules in favor of Okperi. It is not the facts that matter but the end of violence, which requires a law backed by overwhelming power *and* able to claim legitimacy on the basis of its manifest disinterestedness. An early consensus even in Umuaro is that "It was a good thing perhaps that the war was stopped. The death of Akukalia and his brother in one and the same dispute showed that Ekwensu's hand was in it."[75] We should note, however, that the village groups accept the enforced peace not because they acknowledge the outside arbiter's decree as just, but explicitly because, like Umuofia at the end of the earlier novel, they remember what had been done in nearby Abame.[76]

I am attributing the difference between Achebe's two novels not to the deterioration in the traditional farming economy between 1900 and 1921 but to the closing of political doors that happened between the moments just before and just after independence when the novels were each written. After independence, Achebe became less interested in village democracy as an alternative political model; reciprocity now appeared irrelevant as a principle regulating human affairs and indeed came to be seen from the law's point of view as a threat of anarchy. Indeed, *Arrow of God* is an exercise in imagining the rule of law *as an African development*: Winterbottom recognizes in Ezeulu a kindred spirit who has integrated into his psyche a law that transcends self-interest and interpersonal relations.

Colonial sovereignty, achieved through violent conquest, originally imposed the law, but at independence, the law itself supposedly governed the transition of

l'instauration de l'État, qui en fait une affaire 'privée' quand il s'arroge le monopole de la contrainte et de la sanction." Ibid., 14.

73 Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 129.

74 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 68.

75 Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 28.

76 Ibid., 28.

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sovereignty from the foreign regime to an indigenous one. The ceremonies of independence confirmed the law's rule. At decolonization, an absolute prerequisite for a new state's external sovereignty, the recognition of its right to self-determination by other states and international bodies, was that it have in place a law and the institutions to uphold it (how well the law was upheld mattered less than that there be an entity that claimed the legitimacy afforded by the law). That means that, in Africa (as in the Americas the century before[77]), it was always the colonial territory that demanded and received independence, never the precolonial polity or the ethnic nation, which did not have a law on the books (and often did not have books).[78] United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514 of 1960, which declared that *all* colonies are entitled to self-determination, also assumed that *only* colonies, not subnational or non-state groups, merit self-determination. Where collectives other than the colonial territory revolted against imperial rule, for example, Buganda or the Gikuyu, their resistance was regarded, rightly, as a threat to British law and put down,[79] but nationalists who sought independence for the colony, though regularly subject to arrest and imprisonment, were eventually allowed to contest elections and to claim sovereignty on behalf of the new state. We cannot escape the conclusion that it was *because* people had been made subject to colonial law that at the time they were judged worthy of self-determination.

If Ezeulu's significance is as one who has integrated a law (*not* the British law but nonetheless a law instituted by an absolute father), Achebe remains as skeptical about the relation of the law to the sovereign authority that imposed it as he had been in *Things Fall Apart*. The law does not suppress conflict but foments it, and the reason it does so is that the outside and superior position the law occupies is illusory. Winterbottom imagines that, as district officer, he stands to his new African subjects as a father to his children or as a "school prefect" to junior students.[80] The truth is, however, that childish quarrels characterize the entire world of the novel including the British at Government Hill.

When the elders of Okperi meet to respond to the ultimatum from Umuaro, they are interrupted by a little girl who runs in calling for her father because her brother has slapped her,[81] an ironic diversion that implies the war between village groups is as petty as the squabble among children. The novel consistently pays as much attention to the quarrels among children as to the wars between village groups or between gods. In the opening pages, as Ezeulu waits for the new moon to appear and ponders the majesty of his priestly power, his young son and daughter begin an almost ritual exchange of taunts.[82] Later, just before Ezeulu is summoned to appear before the

77 Benedict Anderson uses the model of Spanish America to argue that nationalism as an ideology originated in colonial territories.

78 The one exception is Ethiopia, a feudal empire that evaded colonization in part by arms but also by successfully mirroring the trappings of modern statehood—written law, central administration—so that the European powers did not have the justification for invading that they used elsewhere. Ethiopia was invaded by Fascists in the thirties, as many nations in Europe were, but the invasion was short lived.

79 In many other ways, precolonial polities and traditional rulers were actually fostered by colonialism's policy of indirect rule and not just in the British Empire. But traditional rulers were never considered candidates for independence.

80 Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 32.

81 Ibid., 22.

82 Ibid., 2.

district officer, setting in motion the events that will result in his fall, we are given a blow-by-blow account of the fight that erupts between Oduche and his half-sister, Ojiugo, at the stream where they draw water, a fight that quickly spreads to neighbor women at the stream, and, after the children return home, to their mothers.[83] The crisis Ezeulu provokes at the climax of the novel, when he refuses to proclaim the New Yam Festival and the beginning of the harvest, is so great that "Even children in their mother's belly took sides in this one."[84] We are told in some detail of the fight that young Nwafo has in defense of his father with Obielue,[85] the son of Ezeulu's best friend, Akuebue,[86] and then of a fight between Ezeulu's wife, Matefi, and another woman at the market.[87]

Children's quarrels are put to an end by their mothers, who are, however, quick to defend their own children against the children of a cowife. The mothers' disputes must in turn be silenced by their husband. As the proverb has it, the only way to escape from "the mouth of a leopard" is to find "something bigger than a leopard."[88] When a great uproar erupts in his compound, an exasperated Ezeulu refuses to listen to any of the combatants: "Let one of you open his mouth and make *fim* again and I will teach him that a man does not talk when masked spirits speak."[89] Women and children are to men as men are to masked spirits (or to the god Ulu) or, it would seem, as Igbo village groups are to the British: subordinates who would quarrel endlessly were there not a superior authority to bring order.

Superior force can put a temporary end to quarrels among subordinates, but it does not thereby put an end to violence, which only shifts upward and downward to different levels. Within his own compound, Ezeulu's absolute power contributes to the feelings of resentment and the perpetuation of petty injustice that will fuel future conflicts. When, on the rare occasion of Ezeulu's absence, his eldest son acts as head of the household, he uses the opportunity to mistreat his younger brother and his father's current favorite.[90] The novel is at pains to show that British are not more peaceable and, in their relations with one another or with Africans, not more just. The British can force an end to a war among village groups but their peace is itself based on violence, manifest in the whipping of Obika. And they create new sources of power that increase the potential for oppression and violence. The new court messengers and warrant chiefs abuse their authority. As one young man observes of clan warfare among Igbos, "It is all due to the white man who says, like an elder to two fighting children: You will not fight while I am around. And so the younger and weaker of the two begins to swell himself up and to boast."[91]

Such negative reciprocal violence percolates to every level, from the domestic to the world-historical, including the family, the council of elders, and even the gods

83 Ibid., 127–29.
84 Ibid., 210.
85 Ibid., 210.
86 Ibid., 110.
87 Ibid., 210–11.
88 Ibid., 158.
89 Ibid., 129.
90 Ibid., 165.
91 Ibid., 20.

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themselves. The risk of violence escalating from one level to the next is the theme of a children's song that tells the story of Nwaka Dimkpolo (whose name recalls that of Ezeulu's great rival), killed by the falling of a big ukwa fruit. A fatal accident that verges on comedy demands retribution. That retribution in its turn will require further retribution. The first verse asks who will punish the fruit, the next who will punish that avenger, and so on until the chain of retribution engulfs the earth:

> And who will punish this Water for me?
> *E-e Nwaka Dimkpolo*
> Earth will dry up this water for me
> *E-e Nwaka Dimkpolo*
> Who will punish this Earth for me?[92]

The children's hymn about the cycle of violence is interrupted only when the singers quarrel over mistakes that each makes in the song, that is, when the children have been infected by the violence that they sing about. As young Obiageli complains to her playmates, the song really "has no end."[93]

Although Winterbottom believes that intercommunal war is a sign of African primitiveness, he also recognizes that the basis of British rule is merely a greater capacity for violence. He wishes the British could be as honest as the French who say to those they have colonized, "This land has belonged to you because you have been strong enough to hold it. By the same token it now belongs to us. If you are not satisfied come out and fight us."[94] The same Winterbottom who admires the Ezeulu's disinterestedness also prides himself on being a realist who understands that self-interest motivates everyone and superior might lays down the law.

The parity that Winterbottom recognizes between Britain and France is also a source of rivalry. For centuries the two powers had waged wars in the Americas for control of territory and trade, but in Africa, for a few decades following the Conference of Berlin in 1884, the European powers accepted limits to their expansion and respected the balance among themselves. This reciprocity was not like that between Umuofia and Mbaino, based on gifts and countergifts, but merely a mutual self-interest in non-interference. The détente was made easier because, with the recent opening of the continent, there was enough territory for all. Later, of course, war to the death would break out again among the European powers, and Nigerians would be conscripted to fight for Britain against Germany in Cameroon (mentioned in *Arrow of God*) and later against Japan in Burma (mentioned in *No Longer at Ease*). *E-e Nwaka Dimkpolo*!

As a concomitant of the state's monopoly on violence within its borders, violence is transferred to an outside where it assumes more dangerous forms. As Jens Bartelson explains, "if what was other to the state in the Classical Age was what went before it and constituted its fictitious prehistory—a state of nature—then what is other to the modern state is what is over and above it: a state of war between states."[95] In the international

92 Ibid., 65.
93 Ibid., 65.
94 Ibid., 36.
95 Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 189.

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field, says Hobbes, "Kings, and persons of Soveraigne authority, because of their independency, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another."[96] Because each imperialist state justified itself according to a universal principle of morality, embodied in the state and its law, inter-state violence could not acknowledge reciprocity as a value. Here lies the true threat of infinite violence, not in the cycles of reciprocity in a supposed state of nature but in the war between self-proclaimed universals, each justified in their self-interest and refusing to acknowledge reciprocity. The conflict between Ezeulu, the priest of Ulu, and the priest of Idemili threatens to be of this new and larger order.

In *Things Fall Apart*, there was no general will larger than the face-to-face relations among people (though Okonkwo wishes there were). Reciprocity, which regulated relations between groups, produced a tragic tension between two absolute values: democracy and equality at the level of political authority; equality and freedom at the level of the individual. The larger impersonal scale, introduced by the British, is associated with an overpowering violence that is ultimately blind to either of these sets of values. In *Arrow of God*, reciprocity now appears as anarchy and justice as a tyrant's fiat; the only principle that matters is naked self-interest, as displayed by Nwaka. To be sure, Ezeulu and Winterbottom each uphold a higher morality that transcends self-interest, but absolute morality actually proves more dangerous. Efforts by the priest of Ulu or by the British to insist on a transcendent morality that they enforce on others are self-deceiving or self-defeating for they cannot see the larger whole in whose name they attempt to rule.

The colonial dilemma discussed at the beginning of this essay—Achebe wants the law but not the sovereign authority that imposes it—is a version of a conundrum built into the modern state everywhere. Derrida, discussing Benjamin, reminds us that the rule of law, which proscribes violence within the territory of the state and underwrites a seemingly universal morality that the state itself must adhere to, always requires an original violence of its own for its establishment: "the operation that consists of founding, inaugurating, justifying law (*droit*), making law, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor injust and that no justice and no previous law with its founding anterior moment could guarantee or contradict or invalidate."[97] This "law to come" retrospectively legitimates the violence needed to bring it into being: "its future anterior already justifies it."[98]

Derrida the Frenchman imagines that the "foundation of all states occurs in a situation that we can thus call revolutionary. It inaugurates a new law, it always does so in violence."[99] Derrida overlooks the fact that the origin of many, perhaps most, states was not in revolution but in conquest and colonization. Foucault, a Frenchman who downplays the originality of political revolution, would say that invasion has been far more important than revolution in constituting the sovereign state, including in England, where the law was inaugurated by the Norman Conquest, and in France, where the state was created by the invasion of Gaul by the Franks and, before that,

96 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 79.
97 Jacques Derrida. "Force de Loi: Le "Fondement Mystique de l'Autorité," trans. Mary Quaintance. *Cardozo Law Review* 11.5–6 (1990): 941, 943.
98 Ibid., 991.
99 Ibid., 991.

by the Romans.[100] It could be said of Achebe's Africa as Foucault says of the Norman Invasion, "Formulated from on high and in a foreign language, the law was the stigmata of the foreign presence, the mark of another nation."[101]

Simon Critchley writes that "the problem of politics is: how can those chains be made legitimate? Or, better, how can citizens wear legitimate chains?"[102] In the North Atlantic world, the "people" appear successfully to have appropriated sovereignty from the monarch in revolutions like the English, French, and American and retrospectively to have recast sovereignty as a social contract expressing what Rousseau calls "the general will." There are those, however, like Foucault, who believe that the discipline imposed by the state has been only psychically integrated by subjects and thus rendered more effective but also more sinister. In Africa at independence, some celebrated that decolonization would appropriate the colonizers' sovereignty for Africans; others feared that the transfer of sovereignty under the aegis of the law would only result in an unreal sovereignty and consequently a law without foundation; and still others feared that the law would merely preserve the *commandement* that had imposed it.

The conclusion of *Arrow of God* conceives of survival in terms not of surrender but of self-defense, and in this sense it is actually less pessimistic than its predecessor. The story of what British "soldiers did in Abame is still told with fear" twenty years later in nearby Umuaro.[103] The men of Umuaro feel complicit in Abame's fate because some from there had served the British as guides and porters on that punitive expedition. *Arrow of God* also mentions, however, another entity called Abam, which does not figure at all in the earlier novel. Abam are "warriors"[104] or "hired soldiers"[105] whose "ravages" Umuaro had regularly to flee in the past.[106] The Abam, too, have historical extratextual counterparts: the Abam from the Cross River area provided soldiers to the Aro people of Arochukwu, who maintained a network of satellite towns throughout Igboland that in the early nineteenth century allowed them to control the slave trade. The Aro did not themselves wage war, but relied on mercenary allies like the Abam.

The Aro and the Abam are not mentioned in *Things Fall Apart*, which presents precolonial violence as if it were limited to the scale of village groups. This is part of the exclusion of history from that novel that we have already noted.[107] The Abam in

100 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 124. Nietzsche, too, attributes the state *in Europe* to conquest by "a herd of blonde beasts of prey, a master race, a race of conquerors which, aggressive, powerful and organized, pounces with its most horrid claws on an unsuspecting population, one which in numbers may be tremendously superior, but is still undisciplined and nomadic. Such is the origin of the 'state' (I think we have disposed of that notion, one held enthusiastically by many, according to which the 'state' originates with a sort of contract)." Nietzsche, *On Genealogy of Morals*, 72.

101 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 100.

102 Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 37.

103 Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 28.

104 Ibid., 28, 120, 134.

105 Ibid., 14.

106 Ibid., 202.

107 The fictive Abame is strangely close in name to the nonfictive Abam, and Taiwo Osinubi has argued that Achebe invites a confusion of the two polities ("Chinua Achebe and the Uptakes of African Slaveries," *Research in African Literatures* 40.4 [2009]: 32). He reads Abam wherever Achebe has written Abame, even in *Things Fall Apart*, because his interest is the disavowed connection between slavery, which divided Africans, and colonialism, which all alike suffered. But if the potential for confusion

Arrow of God point to a violence among the Igbo themselves that is not governed by reciprocity. Indeed, some have seen in the historical Aro a proto-state, "having a kingship (Eze Aro) and other institutions of government,"[108] that was emerging in stateless Igboland. By the first half of the nineteenth century, the Aro had "created what K. Onwuka Dike termed a regional 'pax' under which large-scale trade flourished in a multiethnic region, and their operations eased exchange and 'brought rapid impetus to economic expansion' in a region with a multitiered currency system."[109] They had set up an external arbitrator in the form of the Long Juju at Arochukwu, which the British sent military expeditions to destroy. This indigenous state is, however, regarded as a menace by Umuaro and with good reason. Pushed thus "beyond the end of things" by the slave raiders of Abam,[110] the six villages had taken an almost existential leap of faith and created a new social contract involving a new god and a priesthood to serve that god.[111] Although the name Umuaro appears to mean "children of Aro," the villages are not a satellite of the Aro; their union is a response to the *threat* posed by the Aro.

When, in the narrative present, the villages are once again pushed beyond the end of things, this time by the British and by one of their own who demands a no less absolute sovereignty for the god Ulu, they will have to forge another social contract in self-defense. At the end of the novel, the people of Umuaro leave behind their local god and join in the worship of the universal Christian God. There is now no question of reciprocity, but also, significantly, neither is there equality or absolute justice, those goods promised by the law—in a world of competing and dangerous self-interests, the greatest moral value is survival. The social contract-to-come glimpsed at the end of *Arrow of God* does not retrospectively legitimize the state and its law, but instead defines a proto-civil society created in self-defense against all claims to sovereignty, whether British, Igbo, or even emerging from within.

Fifty years later Achebe the memoirist had forgotten his misgivings about state sovereignty and waxed nostalgic for the rule of law. If we are to understand, however, the nature of the state, as developed in Europe and imposed on Africa *and* as it subsequently developed in Africa, we have to appreciate his original ambivalence. There is much more to be said about both novels and the question of sovereignty and the law: I have not addressed Achebe's proclivity for tragedy, his monomaniacal heroes who would be kings among a kingless people, the theme of succession from one generation to the next, nor the necessity of sacrifice. Here I have only enough space to indicate the tension between the law and reciprocity. I hope, however, I have shown that the novels of what is often considered the first generation of African writers are invaluable meditations on political philosophy that have much to teach about how the state and the law work in Africa *and* how they work anywhere.[112]

between the two entities needs explaining, so does the consistent distinction maintained between them in *Arrow of God*, where Abame is always a victim, and a warning, Abam always a violent external threat on the scale of the British themselves.

108 Harneit-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging*, 57.

109 Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade*, 53.

110 Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 134.

111 Like the nine villages of Umuofia, the six villages of Umuaro had always imagined that they were the descendants of a single ancestor. Kinship is no longer enough, however, a social contract is needed.

112 This essay owes much to the perceptive comments of Ato Quayson, Debjani Ganguly, and Taiwo Osinubi. They are not responsible for the opinions expressed here and, in some cases, disagree with them.