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Panorama of Folk Traditions in Chinua Achebe's Fictional Works

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Abstract

By folk lores we mean the unrecorded traditions of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, customs, beliefs, magic, rituals, superstitions and proverbial sayings.Folklore includes myths, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells found among a homogeneous group of people. In ***Things Fall Apart****, his popular novel Chinua Achebe has told us that among the Igbo, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Achebe makes use of proverbs, myths, tales to add touches of local colour and to sound reiterate themes and finally to comment or to warn against foolish and unworthy actions. Almost all his novels reveal Achebe's technique in the use of the folk tradition; the simple folk tale. The folktales of birds, tortoise, Earth, Sky are used within the narrative of Achebe's fictional works. This paper has tried to establish the many ways Achebe uses Igbo folk ways in his novels in which Igbo tradition has the pride of place.*

Panorama of folk traditions in Chinua Achebe's fictional works

African literature cannot be properly understood and appreciated as an isolated expression but rather must be viewed as part of the totality of human experience. As a literature of a people it cannot be fully understood by the simple separation of form and content, for literature is part of a social situation and must be approached primarily as a mode of collective belief and action. The folk tradition in African literature has thus become part of the essential qualities of its literary expression, for the value of a work of art transcends its documentary function as the artist gives expression to perceptions of which he may not be entirely conscious. And judicious use of the folk tradition is at the root of the appeal of much of the literature emanating from black Africa, especially the works of Achebe. A writer with the sophistication of Achebe does not aggressively intrude the African folkways into his works but rather subtly and cunningly works them into his narrative.

By folklore we mean the unrecorded traditions of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstitions, and proverbial sayings. Folklore also includes myths, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells found among a homogeneous group of people; it is a major component in the total folk culture of such a homogeneous group of people. The most inclusive part of folklore is the folktale which is a popular tale handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told either about animals or

the common folk, to draw attention to their plight and to teach a lesson. Achebe has told us in **Things Fall Apart** that among the Igbo, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Proverbs enter into the realm of literature because of the imaginative possibilities they are capable of evoking. A proverb, of course, is a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognized truth or shrewd observation about practical life and which has been preserved by oral tradition. Proverbs are generally accepted as truths ascertained through experience and they are marked by the epigrammatic and figurative turn in. Achebe makes use of proverbs, he argues, to provide a "grammar of values" by which the deeds of his protagonists can be measured; to serve as thematic statements reminding us of some of the motifs in the novel, for example, the importance of status, the value of achievement, and the idea of man as a shaper of his destiny; to add touches of local colour and to sound and reiterate themes; and finally, to comment or to warn against foolish and unworthy actions. [2]

Here are few examples of proverbs;

"there must be a reason for it. A toad does not run in the day time for nothing." (AOG)

"He who brings kola brings life." (TFA)

"Iam against people reaping where they have not sown." (NLAE)

"A man who brings ant-ridden faggots into his hut should expect the visit of lizards." (AOG)[3]

Myths represent a people's perception of the deepest truths about nature through narratives that stir us as something "at once familiar and strange." Myths have their roots in the primitive folk beliefs of a people or a nation and generally present supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in order to concretize or particularize a special perception of man or his cosmic view. Myths differ from legends in that legends are unauthenticated narratives, folk-embroidered from historical material and often mistaken for a historical account. The legend is thus distinguished from myth in that it has more of historical truth and less of the supernatural. But pure myth tries to offer explanations for the great forces found in nature. For example, myth tries to explain away the origin of creation their expression. the origin of life and death, and tries to account for natural phenomena and the great forces found in nature. One function of the folk tradition in the novels of Achebe is to form the background for his stories. **Arrow of God** is replete with the customs, myths, and legends preserved among the common people of Umuaro. These vestiges of primordial ritual and ceremony the voice of immemorial community, the unspoken and unconsciously held beliefs and value systems, and

the unique religious rituals and ceremonies — all mirror the cosmic view held by the people of Umuaro. The legend of Umuama as narrated to a skeptical, even sneering Mr. Good-country by Moses Nwachukwu and the legend-cum-myth of the phenomenal growth of Okperi market as narrated by Akukalia to her travelling cornpanion with all the earnestness of a believer help to form the background of events in **Arrow of God.**

To show Achebe's technique in the use of the folk tradition, one might best begin with the least complicated element: the simple folk tale. In **Things Fall Apart** a memorable folk tale is told Ezinma by her mother Ekwefi. It is the story of the birds and the tortoise who accompanied the birds to a great feast in the sky. It is a story that is sandwiched between chapters ten, where it is revealed that Okonkwo had attained the second highest position of importance in Umuofia, as a masked Egwugwu during the case between Uzowulu and Mgbafor (when the Egwugwu appeared, Okonkwo's position was next to the leader, Evil Forest. As Achebe reveals "Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo") ,[3] and chapter 13, where Okonkwo was forced into exile for the inadvertent murder of Ezeudu's son.

The simple tale of Tortoise and the birds is a paradigm for the entire novel. It is the story of the sudden rise and fall of Tortoise, just as **Things Fall Apart** is the story of the rise and fall of Okonkwo. The story says that the birds lent Tortoise their feathers so he could accompany them to the sky. This is paradigmatic of the masive communal support given to Okonkwo by his people that enabled him to be Umuofia's ure. proud and imperious emissary on a mission of war to Mbaino where he "was treated with great honour and respect" (p. 10) just as the hosts in the sky took Tortoise "as the king of the birds" (p. 86) and so accorded him a befitting respect. After Okonkwo's elevation to membership in the highest decision-making body in the land, he is exiled to Mbanta, abandoned even by his closest friends who took part in destroying his compound. After Tortoise is elevated to the highest place in the sky, he is exiled there abandoned by all the birds, his former friends. Tortoise, finding himself deserted in the sky, sent word to a woman, his wife, to arrange for his survival. This is a paradigm for Okonkwo's flight to his maternal kith and kin for survival. The folk tale tells us that when Parrot misinstructed Tortoise's family, he fell and "his shell broke into pieces." This reflects Okonkwo's return from exile only to find Umuofia "breaking up and falling apart" (p. 163). Now, the folk tale says that a great medicine man gathered all the bits of shell and stuck them together to

give Tortoise his rough "skin." After Okonkwo's suicide, the tribe, though broken, was held together and stuck together by the sheer resilience of collective will, after, according to Obierika, the white man has "put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (p. 158). Tortoise survives, a patchwork of himself, just as Igbo clanship survives, half pagan (who adheres to its ancestral ways) and half Christian (iconoclasts all). Therefore, as I have said earlier, the simple tale of the birds and the tortoise is a paradigm for the entire novel. Okonkwo, as the representative of Igbo clanship is all of you, greedy of things affecting his people so that his break-up and despair becomes symptomatic of the break-up and despair of Igbo clanship before the unassailable and inexorable forces of the white man.

Another folktale is the story of the quarrel between Earth and Sky. It further reveals that Achebe does not randomly tell any tale within the narrative of his novels. He carefully chooses them for their structural importance and for their ability to advance meaning and gain poetic mileage. The folk story of the quarrel between Earth and Sky comes up in **Things Fall Apart** to draw attention to the "effeminate" nature of Nwoye which worries his father, Okonkwo. Achebe tries to point out that Nwoye prefers the "effeminate" story of his mother about Vulture who was sent to soften the heart of Sky %ith a song about the plight of men to whom Sky has denied rain, to the story of blood and war told him by his father. The Vulture, Earth's emissary, was sent to appeal to sky for mercy and move him to pity. Vulture succeeded, for Sky gave him rain wrapped in cocoyam leaves which his long talon inadvertently pricked open so that rain fell as it never fell before.

So much for **Things Fall Apart.** In **Arrow of God,** there is the story told her children by Ugoye about the jealousy of the two wives. It is the Igbo version of a more universal myth of the origin of disease in the World — the myth of the Pandora's box, now thoroughly domesticated and purportedly caused by envy, greed, and jealousy bet. Now **Arrow of God** could be said to be a novel not only about culture-conflict but also about major and minor rivalries between various persons and gods in Umuofia whose unremitting and built-in jealousies and envy lead to a disturbing disquiet in the entire narrative — a disquiet that leads to irreconcilable differences that lead to fragmentation and tragedy. Many people and the gods they serve behave with blind envy and ruin their own cause, like the proverbial lizard that ruined his own mother's funeral — a proverb that is repeated ad nauseam in the novel. To be specific, in Ezeulu's household there are tensions and rivalries existing between Edogo, his

eldest son, and Nwafor, the youngest, over the inheritance of the priestly mantle; between Matefi and Ugoye, his wives, as has just been discussed; between Ezeulu the father who saw the wisdom of sending Oduche to school, and Ugoye the wife who saw no wisdom in choosing her son as a guinea pig; between Ezeulu who inherited the priestly mantle from his father, and his elder brother, Okeke Onenyi, who had been led to believe that the priestly mantle would fall to him. Then there are the traditional tensions and rivalries and even jealousies between Umuaro, the bastion of stubborn "unchange," and Okperi, the seat of government administration, and this tension is exacerbated by the longstanding land dispute between the two towns which was ended by Winterbottom's intervention. And how could one miss the rivalry between Ezeulu, the high priest of Umuaro, and Nwaka of Umunneora, his most outspoken opponent, and then the fightto-death rivalry between Ezeulu, High Priest of Ulu, and Ezidemili, Priest-guardian of the royal python? And among the Christians there are tensions and rivalries between Mr. Goodcountry, the missionary, and Moses Unachukwu, the neophyte convert, over the attitude of Christians towards the royal python. And finally, we are all aware of the on-going ideological battle between Winterbottom, the colonialist on the spot in the hinterland who really knows his natives, and his starry-eyed superiors at headquarters over indirect rule and the method of appointing Paramount Chiefs. The tale of the two jealous wives told by Ugoye to her children is thus a paradigm for the entire novel.

One of the rare exchanges in **Things Fall Apart** between the immortals and mere human beings occurs between Uzowulu and the egwugwu. The respect due the ancestors is sown in that exchange:

"Uzowulu's body I salute you"

"Our father, my hand has touched the ground," he said.

"Uzowulu's body, do you know me?" asked the Spirit.

"How can I know you, Father? You are beyond our knowledge." (p. 80)

In **Things Fall Apart**, the role of the masked Egwugwu is thematically important since the Egwugwu are represented as the symbol of communal spirit and the living embodiment of that vital link which exists between individuals and their departed ancestors. The thematic importance of the masked Egwugwu in **Things Fall Apart** thus becomes self-evident: the unmasking of the egwugwu by the Christian zealot, Enoch, echoes in **Things Fall Apart** not only

the collective break-up of the cohesiveness of the clan after the intrusion of alien forces but also the powerlessness of the clan against those alien forces which the District Commissioner represents. The unmasking of the Egwugwu is the unmasking of the clan. In another significant but unexplored aspect, the jungle justice which the egwugwu wields and executes against Enoch and the Christians (whose buildings were swiftly razed to the ground) parallels the equally jungle, retributive justice wielded by the alien forces (which wiped out Abame for killing one white man on an iron horse), and the forces of the District Commissioner which imprisoned leaders of Umuofia — all without due process of law.

In **Arrow of God**, the narrative is suffused with the figurative language of the Mask. The corporal sent to arrest Ezeulu by the sick Winterbottom, having missed him tells Ezeulu's people: "But we cannot come and go for nothing. 'Nhen a masked spirit visits you have to appease its footprints with presents. The white man is the masked spirit of today" (p. 174) ; or we can view Nwaka's wives decked with ivory anklets during a ceremony so that their walk was "slow and deliberate, like the walk of an Ijele Mask lifting and lowering each foot with weighty ceremony" (p. 78) ; or we can hear the astute Ezeulu sending Oduche to learn the wisdom of the white man, shrouding his message in a proverb: "The world is like a mask dancing. If you wish to see it well you do not stand in one place" (p. 51) ; or we see with amused disgust the drunken pair Ofoedu and Obika, coming to work so late that they appeared "like a pair of Night Masks caught abroad by day" (p. 91) . The point is that Achebe, in **Arrow of God**, weaves the Mask into his narrative in his use of proverbs and in his use of concrete detail so that just as the place of the Mask in **Things Fall Apart** is a vehicle of meaning, it partakes of narrative texture in **Arrow of God**.[7]

The folk tradition of a people wears many garbs and etches itself unconsciously in the subconscious of the artist. This study has tried to establish the many ways Achebe uses Igbo folk ways in his novels in which Igbo tradition has the pride of place. It goes further to establish that Achebe consciously uses Igbo folk ways to enrich his narrative, to give it form and structure, and from there, to imbue it with meaning. This is the tradition he has established in the African novel.

NOTES

1 Quoted by Bu-Buakei Jabbi in Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe, ed. C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978), p. 136.

2 Bernth Lindfors, "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's words are Eaten," in Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe, ed. C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978), pp. 47, 65..

3 Chinua Achebe, **Things Fall Apart** (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1958), p. 79. Subsequent references to **Things Fall Apart** will be to this edition.

4 Donald Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan, "Symbolic Structure in **Things Fall Apart**," in Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe, ed. C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1978), pp. 126-134.

5 Mary Ellen B. Lewis, "Beyond Content in the Analysis of Folklore in Literature: Chinua Achebe's **Arrow of God**," Research in African Literatures, VIII, no. 1 (Spring 1976) pp. 47-48.

6 Chinua Achebe, **Arrow of God** (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969), p. 223. This and subsequent quotations from **Arrow of God** will be from this edition.