

### In this Issue:

- LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT:(TOWARDS THE USE OF LANGUAGE TO PRODUCE AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY LITERATURE) BY CHINYERE NWAHUNANYA
- TOWARDS PRAGMATICISING THE NIGERIAN ENVIRONMENT: THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND AFRICAN LITERATURE AS DETERMINING PARADIGMS BY INI OBONG UKO
- THE NOVEL AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE BY IFEOMA OKOYE
- BRIDGING SOCIAL REALISM AND THE SPIRITUAL IN EBELE OFOMA EKO'S *BRIDGES OF GOLD* BY IDAEVBOR BELLO
- BEYOND THE IGBO COSMOS: ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART AS A CROSS- CULTURAL NOVEL BY FRANCIS IBE MOGU,
- HUMAN RIGHT VIOLATION AGAINST THE WOMAN: EXAMPLES FROM SELECT AFRICAN NOVELS BY JONAS EGBUDU AKUNG AND ETON DIEN SIMON
- Co-operation in the Language of Selected Medical Reports in Nigeria By Steven Magor Allah
- Parental Control and the Child's Quest for Freedom in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* By Grace Eche Okereke and Itang Ede Egbung
- The Oblique and Elusive Nature of Expression through Proverbs: a Pragmatic Perspective By Pam Keziah Jonah and Juliet Nkane Ekpang
- Reinvigorating Black Vision Amidst Controversy: Chinua Achebe's Linguistic Forte in the Decolonisation of African Literature By Psalms Chinaka
- The Land as Woman in Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* By Idom T. Inyabri
- SONGS AS CONSCIENCE OF SOCIETY: A STUDY OF NIYI OSUNDARE'S POETRY BY EGBERIBIN LAWRENCE DENNIS AND ETIM SUNDAY OSIM

**Beyond the Igbo Cosmos: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a Cross- Cultural Novel**

**BY**

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**Abstract:**

Much, very much has been written about Chinua Achebe's premier novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). This paper establishes that *Things Fall Apart* which was intended to counter the depiction of Black Africa in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and other texts written by European Colonial and Eurocentric authors, has now defied the expectations of even the most adept optimists in terms of its cultural and economic imports. This essay further reveals that *Things Fall Apart* is not only consistently popular among Igbo students and Scholars, it is very popular with other Nigerian and African people and aptly mirrors cultural aspects shared by Igbos and other Africans. It is now the given; the novel to read, as a pointer to other works in the African literary canon. This paper draws direct parallels and reveals the numerous connections between the Igbo people and the Ejaghams of Ogoja

As a Nigerian (the Bakor Ejagham of Ogoja in Cross River State), and my reading of *Things Fall Apart* drew immediate parallels and revealed the multiple similarities between the Igbo people and the Ejaghams of Ogoja. The aspects of the novel that touch cords which bind our people and which elicited my instant response range from the organisation of the Igbo society, the various festivals and religious worship, the folklore (especially proverbs) the dances and masquerades, the marital rites, the belief in ancestral spirits, among other things. Achebe should be praised for his ability to mirror within the confines of *Things Fall Apart*, The salient cultural attributes of not only the Igbo people in Nigeria but also those of other ethnic groups within and outside Nigeria.

Among the Igbos (as among neighbouring ethnic groups such as Bakor – Ejagham of Ogoja), a lot of the cultural so ably reflected by Achebe though applicable, have undergone changes and modifications. Western Christianity, intellectualism and economics have in no small measure, interfered with the traditional African setting visible especially at the outset of *Things Fall Apart*. This assessment is equally applicable to Arrow of God, his other masterpiece. However, since culture is dynamic, there would still have been changes in aspects of the culture reflected in the novel, with or without interference from Christianity or the West.

*Things Fall Apart* reveals that the Igbo community is ordered around a hierarchy of male elders, who serve as collective leaders in both the secular and spiritual realms. These elders (*Ndichie*) consist of respected men and achievers in the land. They are very conspicuous in the secular level of society, but mask themselves in the guise of ancestral spirits (*Egwugwu*), who appear very rarely in the community to settle disputes and reconcile factions. By remaining less conspicuous and rare, the ancestral spirits succeed in commanding respect and fear from members of the community. In an incident which warrants the intervention of the *Egwugwu* (ancestral spirits), the Umuofia community (which is central in this novel) assembles on the village 'ilo' – the village square or play ground, to hear their verdict in a case involving two families over a marital rift:

An iron gong sounded, setting up a wave of expectation in the crowd. Everyone looked in the direction of the *egwugwu* house. *Gome, gome, gome, gome* went the gong, and a powerful fluite a high-pitch blast. Then came the voices of the *egwugwu*, guttural and awesome. The wave stuck the women and children and there was a backward stampede. But it was momentary. They were already far enough where they stood and there was room for running away if any of the *egwugwu* should go towards them.

...No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan. *Achebe (1958 Reset); 62-63.*

The verdict of the ancestral spirits is final and binding on the squabbling parties or disputing factions. What is immediately glaring upon a reading of the proceedings in the case, is the relegation of the female folk to the background in the scheme of things. The essentially male-prone or patriarchal society depicted by Achebe is what contemporary feminists oppose. The situation above is largely similar to what prevailed in the past among the Ejagham people. Rather than centralizing power in an individual in the community (such as the king, Chief, among others), a council of elders vested with the responsibility to preside over and direct affairs affecting the community was constituted. Of course, this was based on certain criteria which became, with time, part of the community's statutes. As among the Igbos, the influence of European colonialism introduced a new element into the ordering affairs in the Ejagham set-up. So that, nowadays we have in addition to the council of elders, token chiefs (figure heads) who, superficially are in charge of their communities and whose loyalties to their people remain questionable. In the strictly traditional past however, as Achebe reflects in *things Fall Apart*, the elders presided over the community effectively and power was not vested in an individual.

The Nkum clan in Ogoja (which is part of the Bokor - Ejaghma ethnic group) consists of seven villages, some of which are bigger than others. These villages (Ukpe, Ukagada, Mbagide, Alladim, Igodor, Ikandangha and Ibil) in the past had a similar pattern of administration by a council of elders who played both secular and spiritual roles.

Specifically, in Nkum (as in all other Ejagham speaking areas) masquerades play a prominent role by fostering cohesion and peace in the community. When the environment is perceived to be infested with evil (nocturnal practices such as witchcraft), an alarm is raised by the council of elders or other concerned members of the community. Thereafter, the elders meet and map out strategies to curb the perceived menace in order to restore trust and tranquility. Although masquerades serve to purify or cleanse the society at specific periods (such as the period preceding the New Yam Festival), they also manifest themselves in moments of calamity or perceived threats or danger to the existence of the community or of its individuals. They are essentially viewed as spiritual essences largely representing departed ancestors who intervene benevolently in the community because they are perceived to be custodians of such societies and are therefore keenly interested in whatever happens to their people. These masquerades are of two kinds: the '*Atam*' are the more revered of the two and are seen as ancestral spirits that purify and cleanse the community especially before (or after) an evil visits the land, while the '*Irom*' are largely, dancing masquerades that entertain at functions such as funerals or other community functions and festivals. They too are highly revered, but the '*Atam*' is accorded greater reverence.

The villages in the clan are closely knit and each village had its own elders overseeing its affairs and reporting directly to the central council of elders. Ibil was the administrative headquarters, while Ukpe was spiritually (religiously) very significant. Today however, in the Nkum clan, you have clan and village heads who interfere with the work of the council of elders. Also, with the advent of Christianity and Western education, these elders have largely been relegated in their religious duties. Traditional African modes of worship have largely been overtaken by Western Christianity with churches playing an increasingly dominant role in the affairs of the community.

As in *Things Fall Apart*, festivals and ceremonies which serve as reaffirm communalities among Ejagham people such as the *New Year Festival* (in Ogoja, yam is also a king of all crops and the festival is second only to Christmas in the modern sense, although in the past it was viewed as the most important even in the land) and initiation to various esteemed positions in the society, prevail to date. The age grade system, the naming of days of the week to coincide with market days in the villages within the clan among others compare favourably with what obtains in *Things Fall Apart*. Today however, the western week has effectively replaced the traditional one which was anchored on market days in the clan.

Charles Nnolim argues that Achebe's manifests "techniques in the use of the folk tradition" (21) to drive home his message and that he does this by employing "the least complicated element: the simple folk tale:" (24)

In *Things Fall Apart* a memorable folk tale is told Ezinma by her mother, Ekwefi. It is that story of the birds and the tortoise who accompanied the former to a great feast in the sky, this story is sandwiched between chapter 10, where it is revealed that Okonkwo has attained the second heights position of importance in Umuofia as a masked Egwugwu during the case between Uzowulu and Mgbafor, and chapter 13, where Okonkwo was forced into exile for the inadvertent murder of Ezeudu's son. (18).

Nnolim further reasons that, "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 the Tortoise, just as *Things Fall Apart* is the story of the rise and fall of Okonkwo" (18). The folk tradition (which embraces folk tales, proverbs and parables), though anchored in the rural past, serves to advise, forewarn or pre-empt against ugly situations and, it is only the discerning that can read and interpret the writing on the wall. Okonkwo was sufficiently counseled and warned to desist from 'destroying himself' by not taking part in the killing of Ikemefuna – the ransome lad from Mbaino. However, he went against the advice and suffered as a result. He is banished from Umuofia (his father land) for seven years. Thus, his pride precipitates his disaster: pride, the source of disobedience, regularly leads to a fall or demise. Such serve to warn other people of the danger inherent in excessive pride (what one may term 'being full of oneself' to the point that one ignores other people's counseling in the vain belief that one has ample answers to all problems within the vicinity). Traditional folktales like this are common and appear to reinforce or draw from the Christian Biblical account of the creation and the fall – both of Lucifer and man, owing to pride and subsequent disobedience.

Among the Ejaghams and as among the Igbos, another folk tradition that is still blossoming in spite of the rapidly changing values such as westernization and Christianization of the local communities, is the *new Yam Festival*. The Bakor Ejagham

people observe the event in mid-September every year. Although the festival reaches its peak on September 1 annually, celebrations marking the harvest of the 'new' yam begins at least a week or prior to that date and continue effectively for the next few days after that date. During the yam festival, 'Atam' masquerade ensures that the society is purified and cleansed of all evil-spirits. Subsequently, they are dances all through the fiesta characterised by the active presence of the 'Irom' masquerades which consist mainly of star dancers in the community. Unlike the 'Irom,' the 'Atam' consists of only revered and accomplished elders. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe elaborately dwells on the New Yam Festival in Umuofia as a way to amplify its significance as an avenue for the reaffirmation of the values that held these people together as a closely-knit community. The festival accomplished this through bringing people together. This accession actually marked the beginning of a new year for the Igbo people as it did for the Ejaghams and other ancillary ethnic groups. Chinua Achebe in his novel under study argues that:

The feast of the new yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility....

The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honour the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. New Yams could not be eaten until some had first been offered to these powers. Men and Women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because it began the season of plenty – the New Year. (26).

While effectively countering the white colonial portrayal of Africa, *Things Fall Apart* also presents itself as a useful source of materials for both the Igbo and non-Igbo ethnic groups. For, especially minority groups which are ancillary to the Igbos, the novel has the potential to propel scholars to embark on similar imaginative and artistic recreations of their societies prior to the interference by white European colonizers in the affairs of sub-saharan Africa. Chinweizu et al makes clear Achebe's thus:

*Things Fall Apart*, was... a deliberate (and successful) effort to recreate a pe-Westernized Africa reality, using authentic Igbo characters, situations, values and religious concepts, and bending the English language to express Igbo proverbs and idioms. (288-289).

The European colonial enterprise in Nigeria and the rest of Africa was decidedly geared towards the total eradication of the African cultural heritage and its replacement with the Western (eurocentric) culture. The absence of authentic historical, literary and sociological materials to counter the colonizer's assessment and subsequent categorization of issues relating to Africa would have made it more difficult to convince the rest of the world that ours was not a dark and primitive continent as alleged by the Europeans. In Achebe in his 1975 essay avers that Indeed, Africa, was not the jungle, 'upon which the white Man acting on God's behalf sought to civilize, (2) as *Things Fall Apart* and other creative Afrocentric works vividly show. Instead, through this novel, the author asserts strongly that the coming of the white man to Africa caused much dislocation to our people and values. Aigboje Higo draws this conclusion when he states that:

*Things Fall Apart*, then, is about a clan which once thought like one, spoke like one, shared a common awareness and acted like one. The whiteman came and his coming broke this unity. In the process many heads rolled; new words, new usages and new applications gained

entrance into men's heads and hearts and the old society gradually gave away. The process continues even today. (v).

The trend of dislocation referred to above is as pronounced among the Igbos as it is among non-Igbos, especially the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. For instance, the languages, dialects and thought processes of members of these groups are permeated with English vocabulary through and through either, in the standard usage or in the pidgin rendition. The interesting and refreshing point in this regard about novels by Afro-centric writers such as Achebe's (*Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*) and Ngugi's (*Weep Not Child*, *The River Between and Petals of Blood*) is that aspects of the indigenous language or culture which have no English equivalent are left intact and later, these find their way into mainstream usage as words or terminology in the English language. The expression "Iroko Tree" (31) as used by Achebe in his novel is a good example. In other words, *Things Fall Apart* and other related texts have contributed immensely to the enrichment of the English language: Surely, nowadays English is no longer a western-only affair.

Also, one would be right by simply stating that this novel which dwells on the Igbo past, is not rendered in the Igbo language (even though it transliterates and views phenomena from the angle of the Igbo people as much as possible), is cross-cultural since it is rendered primarily in English – a foreign language!

It is clear therefore that Achebe's premier novel acts as a bridge; a link between the Igbo cultural heritage and other cultures both within and outside Nigeria – especially Sub-Saharan Africa.

Other aspects of the Africa cultural heritage which Achebe dwells at length on in the novel include the traditional marital system which allows a man to marry as many wives as he can afford and the funeral rites accorded the dead, especially elders. Both the marital and funeral rites cut across most African ethnic groups. Differences – where these exist, are only in the details. The reverence and emphasis accorded these rites in the African traditional set-up (sub-Saharan Africa especially) is very great. In *Things Fall Apart*, it is revealed that the protagonist, Okonkwo has three wives, all of who prepare and serve him meals, tend his farms, bear and fend for his children. Regarding, marital rites, the novel recounts a life-like, occurrence in which the various stages are spelt out and implemented in a relaxed and friendly manner. There is a gathering of members of both the suitor's and bride's families in the bride's father's household and, amidst good natured conversation, wining and dining, the bride-price is determined amicably to the mutual acceptance and pleasure of both families. Friends of the two families are also present, so that at the end of the ceremony it becomes clear that marriage among the Igbo people is not just a giving of the bride to the groom, but a union of two families and the entire communities involved. The bond which is therefore cemented with the marriage lasts beyond the ceremony and breeds enduring goodwill between the relevant communities. The bond is summarized in the statement made during the haggling by the bride's family:

'We had not thought to go below thirty. But as the dog said, "If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is a play". Marriage should be a play and not a fight; so we are falling down again? (51).

And so, the two families enter into an enduring marital bond which follows strict Igbo

traditional conventions. This type of marriage is still common among many ethnic groups in West Africa.

The full details of the marital ceremony and the pomp and pageantry involved are provided in Chapter Twelve of *Things Fall Apart*. The intricacies make it abundantly clear that marriage is not a brief, one day affair, but an enduring ritual which binds peoples, families and communities, while turning strangers into not only friends, but kinsmen and kinswomen.

The dead of the Umuofia elder, Ezeudu (Chapter Thirteen) reveals to reader of *Things Fall Apart*, the intricacies involves in the internment of distinguished Igbo elders:

Ezeudu was a great man and so all the clan was at his funeral. The ancient drums of dead beat, guns and cannon were fired, and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. It was a warrior's funeral, and from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups. They all wore smoked raffia skirts and their bodies were painted with chalk and Charcoal. Now and again an ancestral spirit or *Egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. (84-85).

Like other ethnic groups in sub-Saharan – Africa, the belief in reincarnation, the ancestral spirits and life as a continuous process even after death) prevails. They author states clearly that:

The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festival and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors. (85).

Indeed, this belief summaries the African cosmology especially with regard to religion. And, in any case, every aspect of the African world view tends to embrace aspects of religious worship and veneration. Every actively seems to be carried out with the prevailing realization that the spiritual realm is actively present and determines the course of events. Without the tacit approval of the ancestral/ spirit world of the departed ancestors and the gods, nothing gets done in the human realm. Ezeudu's funeral therefore vividly mirrors the general order of such ceremonies in most subtropical Africa societies. The parallel is so great with the Ejagham funeral rites that one wonders after a reading of Achebe's text if, after all, the Ejaghams and other neighbouring ethnic groups are really different from the Igbos and whether they have a common origin or ancestry. The parallel is further strengthened with the eulogy to the late Ezeudu, which is made by a revered ancestral spirit who is "one handed" and "came, carrying a basket full of water." Such eulogies are completely similar to what obtains among ethnic groups that are ancillary to the Igbos:

Ezeudu! he called in his guttural-voice. 'If you had been poor in your last, I would have asked you to be rich when you come again. But you were rich. If you had been a coward, I would have asked you to bring courage. But you were a fearless warrior. If you had died young, I would have asked you to get life. But you lived long. So I shall ask you to come again the way you came before. If your death was the death of nature, go in peace. But if a man caused it, do not allow him a moment's rest. (86).

Conclusion, *Things Fall Apart* is an African novel because it aptly mirror's African

sensibilities, culture and world view, while specifically relying on Igbo cosmology to attain its objectives. It does this by exploring core aspects of the Igbo tradition and customs at the threshold of the European colonization or intervention in the internal affairs of the Igbos. The experiences and responses of the Igbos bear very closely resemblance to those of other traditional societies in Africa, especially in the Southern part of Nigeria. The Ejaghams of Eastern Nigeria are mentioned in passing to provide one such instance. A more detailed analysis showing the vast similarities between the two cultural groups would have necessitated an anthropological or sociological study which literary import of this exercise does not make room for.



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