

# ORALITY AS AFRICAN SENSIBILITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVEL THINGS FALL APART

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## Abstract

Oral Tradition is the cultural material transmitted orally from one generation to another by folktales, songs, proverbs or stories. Chinua Achebe is regarded as the inventor of African literature who represents an oral tradition in the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The novel presents vivid illustration of the Igbo tradition and culture of Africa. It is important to consider that the African culture is primarily an oral culture in which history is transmitted with stories to the young generation. Proverbs, myths, legends and folklores are used to show the tribal tradition and culture. In the novel, Chinua Achebe defends against the impact of British colonialism by narrating the story in an oral tradition. The oral culture recovers history, identity and ethnicity of the Igbo tribe in Nigeria. However, Achebe writes in English to communicate African sensibility in the mode of an oral narrative. Ezeulu's speech to Oduche, Ekwefi's stories of the mosquito and the tales of the tortoise portray moral lesson to the Igbo society. The invasion of the English people disrupts the centre of an oral culture in which they put a knife and the centre falls apart. They convert the Igbo religion, education, tradition and culture to adopt and adapt with the British people. Okonkwo, the protagonist, resists against the British administration to restore the disintegrated Igbo society. This paper will explore how an oral tradition is reflected in the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to juxtapose the tribal tradition and culture.

**Key Words:** Oral tradition, Folktales, Proverbs, Culture and Colonialism.

## Introduction

Oral tradition is cultural material and tradition transmitted orally from one generation to another. The messages or testimony are verbally transmitted in speech or song and may take the form of folk tales, ballads, songs, and chants. In this way, it is possible for a society to transmit oral history, oral literature, oral law and other knowledge across generation without a writing system. In the African novels, oral tradition plays a vital role in depicting their indigenous culture and identity. For the African people, oral tradition linked their way of life. Religious beliefs, folklore, songs, riddles and proverbs are used in the African narratives to bring consciousness of the past against the present situation. It preserves traditional values and moral values among the African society. Chinua Achebe, one of the renowned novelists of Africa, significantly reflects the oral tradition in the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). It depicts the situation and problem that are associated with the colonisation of Africa and its impact of African culture and society. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), oral tradition is manifested in many facets. Achebe primarily uses proverbs, folklores, songs and rituals to illustrate the Igbo tradition and culture. To revitalize the past, Achebe juxtaposes the identity of Igbo society in the mode of oral story. Story telling gives a moral values and cultures in the characters of the novel.

## Methodology

The study is based on both primary data and secondary data. Primary data includes books and other original sources. Secondary data includes journal and internet sources. Both the data are used to discuss more vividly in order to bring out the relevant issues, which are related to oral tradition.

## Objectives

The aim of this paper is to show how Chinua Achebe in the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) portrays the importance of proverbs, folk tales, rituals, legends and songs in the oral tradition of Igbo tribe. It will also discuss how oral tradition is established among the characters in order to preserve moral values and traditional values.

## Hypothesis

Oral tradition is considered one of the relevant concepts among the tribal society. Oral tradition gives moral values and indigenous identity among the tribals. It preserves past, culture, custom and tradition. Chinua Achebe, one of the dominant African novelists, clearly highlights the relevance of oral tradition in the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In the novel, the materials of oral story are used to bring consciousness of the past that are proverbs, folk tales, legends and songs against the backdrop of British colonization. Though, Achebe writes in English, he

reflects the unwritten story and tradition of human beings and animals to show the transmission of oral culture of the Igbo tribe.

### Discussion

In the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe juxtaposes the proverbs in connecting the tradition. The story of Okonkwo's rise and fall and of his community's disintegration is strung with proverbs. Okonkwo is the title holder of his clan. His physical prowess makes him highly visible in the Umuofia where his fame is said to have grown like a bush in the harmattan. The centrality of the proverbs rooted in the beginning of the novel. "Among the Igbos the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 6). In order to maintain Igbo tradition and culture, Okonkwo and his clan people act according to the meaning of the proverbs that teaches the moral values and traditional values. The transmission of oral knowledge leads Okonkwo to resist against the European colonization. According to Igbo proverb: "when a man says yes his chi' also says yes" (Achebe 20). This is how an individual is responsible for his own destiny. Okonkwo's tragic fate is the result of a problematic *chi*. The narrator relates how the Igbo proverbs uplift the tribal tradition and culture before the advent of the missionaries.

Proverbs are also mentioned in the customs of the Igbo society. Their customs portray an indigenous identity. During the festival occasion, yam, foo-foo and kola nut are used for celebration and to pay respect to their ancestors. The tradition of passing kola nut for fellowship and alliance is addressed: "He who brings kola brings life" (Achebe 80). Kola nut gives the living tradition of the Igbo people where they can enjoy peace and happiness among them. Achebe places the proverbs in well-ordered places throughout the novel. For instance, the Igbo proverb: "when the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk" (Achebe 65) would be a rather old and random statement in a novel but within its context is refer to someone doing it. Many of the proverbs refer to animals in the bush to make a cultural point. Nwakibia uses a proverb to describe his wise and careful attitude toward those who would borrow from him. He says "Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to fly without perching" (Achebe 42). Achebe also uses proverb and sayings to describe his characters especially Okonkwo. He is described by an old man thus: "looking at a king's mouth one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast" (Achebe 26). Such a proverbial description defines Okonkwo as being proud as a king self supporting and having a quick rise to fame and fortune. The proverb makes his character so much more vivid and alive than any other literary device.

Oral tradition symbolises the precolonial period of the Igbo community. The story of the novel is narrated in the oral mode where it depicts about the dangerous impact of colonial culture among the Igbo tribe of Nigeria. Though, the novel is written in English language, it focuses on the African sensibility in which the African words are used to juxtapose the indigenous identity. Okonkwo follows the Igbo traditional laws and customs, so he breaks the peace of sacred week by accusing his wife Ojiugo. Okonkwo's father Unoka is a lazy person who could not maintain the agrarian tradition of the Igbo people. But Okonkwo in the novel, stay as an epitome of the Igbo society. He was a great wrestler of the nine villages. His downfall occurred, when he breaks the peace of the sacred week and during the funeral day of Ogbuefi Ezeudu. Ezeudu's son is killed by Okonkwo's gun and this leads him to go for the exile. Such customary laws reflect Igbo system of life, which are presented in the proverbs. Nwoye and Ekemefuna are victimised due to the Okonkwo's act in maintaining the traditional norms. Okonkwo's idea of manliness not only killed Ekemefuna, but also affects Nwoye that leads him to adopt Christianity as a good religion. The idea of oral story telling reflects not only their consciousness of the past but also Igbo people's conflict within their culture. The form and content of the story are in the conversational style. The characters use traditional speeches and words and act according to the voice of their ancestor. The Igbo people consult the oracle orally for the solution of some problems. Unoka, the father of Okonkwo consults Agbala to make him more prosperous farmer. Unoka said to the priestess of Agbala:

"Before I put any crop in the earth. I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of the land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ibejioku, the god of yam. I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yam when the first rain falls and stake them when the young tendrils appear" (Achebe 120).

The Igbo community prefer more to the story of men than the story told by women. In the novel, Nwoye fears to listen the tale told by her mother because Okonkwo never accept the tale told by women. Achebe uses many folk tales to illustrate the culture of the characters. There is one principal instance where folk tales are used to give depth to certain characters inner working and psyche. In chapter seven, Okonkwo is described as telling stories to her sons. He told them stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories, his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children – stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *enke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat. This folk tales sets Nwoye and Okonkwo up for the rest of the story and even supports their differences that resurge later on in the novel. Achebe uses the traditional tales with their stupid large animals and small trickster animals to

describe the cultural values of the village and how even the natural world they see around them is implanted with their own values and traditions. Such is seen with the image of the bird and cat wrestling. Wrestling was a huge part of their culture and so they put it in the animal world as well. Nwoye prefers stories like vulture and the sky which are much more interesting and less violent. However these stories are dismissed as being for young children and are hated by Okonkwo. Another folk story used in the novel is a mother's tale: the story of tortoise. The folk tale within the story of the novel shows the behaviour of certain character, especially their knowledge and interest in the story, but also how African people used the stories to explain certain natural phenomena like why the tortoise shell is not smooth. This is the general nature of folk tales. While Achebe's novel is not replete with Western themes and ideas, the idea of having folk tales within a novel is somewhat like the western literature, there are many framed stories like the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Decameron* and others and the literary device is used to give texture and creativity to work. Achebe's use of frame stories in this novel is not as purposeful yet they do some in colouring and texturing the novel as a vivid display of African oral culture.

Legends and religious beliefs are significant when Achebe reflects against the backdrop of European colonization. The impact of Christianity and the colonial education disintegrates among the Igbo people. After the domination, the oral culture of the tribal people is perished. Before the advent of the English people, Igbo culture and customs are enriched folktales, legends and ritual songs. Legends are one of the many elements that lend fascination to *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Several of them concern the legend of Idemli, the legends of Ekwugwu. These are a few of the many legends mentioned. Since market is important in Igbo society, market legends show that the traditions of the clan are kept alive. The elaboration of various ceremonies gives us a chance to have a closer look at the well-developed symbolic view of religion in ancient societies. They also lend charm to the narratives as do the stars to the night sky. Some interesting ceremonies include the appearance and proceeding of the Ekwugwu, the coming of the Idemli festival. But, when the missionaries came these things change in to different level. Nwoye and Nneka are converted to christianity. The missionaries destroyed their system of traditional society. Mr. Brown converts the people with a passive ideology without any violence. Such conversion of Igbo religion makes all the gods to weep. Because of the conversion, Idemli, Ogwugwu and Agbala are weeping. The shameful act leads the Igbo gods, goddesses to suffer, and abomination. Characters like Enoch killed and ate the sacred python. For the Igbo custom, python is considered as god, so to kill the python is to commit a great crime. Besides all these problems, there is a conflict between the villages of Igbo community. Nneka, Nwoye and Obeirika cannot adjust the system of Igbo society and finally accept the Christianity as a good religion. Okonkwo too suffer from his adjustment in the Igbo customs in which he leave his native land for Mbanta. Okonkwo seeks a solace in his mother's place, Mbanta. Uchendu, the uncle of Okonkwo give him a plot of land to establish himself. Though, Okonkwo prefers more to his fatherland, it is his mother's land that comforts him more when he was ostracised from his fatherland Umuofia. Finally Okonkwo accepts the proverb: 'Mother is supreme'. It is a moral implication that teaches Okonkwo to accept the truth. In traditional society, mothers are accorded respect. When a man falls in to misfortune, as in the case of Okonkwo, he seek solace at his mother's place.

Song is one of the important contexts to understand oral culture. It gives traditional African feelings and thoughts. In the novel, song is presented in the marriage ceremonies, wrestling match and religious ceremonies. It combines cultural tradition with the imagery that helps the reader to have clear knowledge of the Igbo cultures and traditions. The first song is a children's song. "The rain is falling, the sun is shining,/ Alone Nnadi is cooking and eating" (Achebe 30). It reflects Igbo system of life that shows the indigenous tradition. The context of the song is "Gradually the rains become lighter and less frequent and earth and sky once again become separate" (Achebe 65). The rain fell in thin slanting showers through sunshine and quiet breeze. There are other songs which are sung by people in the village and they have something to do with wrestling, marriage, work and even death. The song for wrestling is written in English:

"Who will wrestle for our village?  
Okafo will wrestle for our village  
Has he thrown a hundred men?  
He has thrown a four hundred men?  
Has he thrown a hundred cats?  
He has thrown four hundred cats". (Achebe 45).

There are other songs that are sung in the same manner of parallelism and questions and answers. However, wherever Okonkwo sings, which is only once, it is left un-translated:

"Ezeelin, elin  
Sala  
Ezeilikwaya" (Achebe 40).

This very interesting traditional song is used to suggest the thoughts of the main characters and describe his gait. In knowing the rest of the book and its outcome, there is a possible reason why Achebe translates the villagers' songs in to English but leaves Okonkwo's song in its original language. Since a majority of the village later becomes Christian and colonized, their songs could be written in English to show the 'shiftiness' of their hearts and their inevitable surrender to English occupation and rule. Okonkwo is never subdued by the English or Christian. So his mind and heart is unreservedly African. Perhaps that is why Achebe leaves his thoughts untranslated.

Part Three of the novel finds Okonkwo back among his people in Umuofia, but it now contains a court house and a prison where the white men incarcerate anyone who offends them or transgresses their laws. As his friend Obierika tells him, the whites have put "a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (160). Things become worse when the accommodating Mr. Brown is replaced by the aggressive Reverend James Smith. With his encouragement, Enoch, the turncoat slayer of the royal python, kills an ancestral spirit till Umuofia is thrown in to confusion and the land seems to be full of a strange and fearful sound. The connection between the land and the community has come under severe strain and the eerie voices of countless spirits, disturbed and militant, raid Mr. Smith's church to flush out Enoch and then burn to it. For the white invaders, the destruction of the church is the last straw. The white District Commissioner captures the Umuofian Okonkwo and the other men responsible for the attack and humiliates them. His court messengers then broadcast through the land his decision to release them only after a hefty fine had been paid by the clan for them. Through a whole series of negative constructions Achebe portrays the dark and depressing shadow that has benighted the land, straining its people till they are on the verge of collapse. Okonkwo who hangs from the tree at the end is the son of mean who could not be properly buried, the warrior who must forever prove his own courage, the wealthy man who has taken the second highest title in the land, the short tempered husband quick to suspect insubordination and to beat his wives, the wearer of a spirit mask, the father who is rejected in his turn by his son, the man who wrestles with his CHI, and the killer of the white man's messenger. He is alive and he is dead, and he could not be anywhere else than hanging on that tree.

### Conclusion

In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe brings land and its stories alive with the help of indigenous story-telling tradition and techniques. Achebe can be considered as a master of the oral tradition and his knowledge of it is shown in the prolific amounts of various kinds of oral tradition found in the novel. Proverbs, folk tales, myths, legends and songs are used to juxtapose the indigenous identity. Through the style of oral narratives, Achebe draws the tradition of Igbo people against the missionaries. Achebe masterfully describes a village culture and tradition along with the characters in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Though, Achebe writes in English, it communicates in the mode of oral tradition to portray African sensibility. The use of words, sentences and the conversation of the characters, reflects a resistance against the impact of colonisation.

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