

Culture and societal institutions in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: a critical reading

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Introduction

Chinua Achebe's famous novel, *Things Fall Apart (TFA)*, is an extended *reductio ad absurdum* predicated on a premise derived from an ironic twist on the name of the novel's dominant clan called Umuofia. In short, the argument is that this is Umuofia whose socio-political and economic institutions are so well developed, that they can compare favourably, with those of any other society in the same epoch and level of development, any where in the world. Thus, Achebe concludes, any society so well developed and organised like that of his people, cannot be legitimately called Umuofia.

From this perspective, this paper argues, contra the traditional interpreters of *TFA*¹, that the novel is neither a portraiture of the ideal Igboman as seen in Okonkwo², nor is Achebe in the novel concerned primarily with the obsession with power and its repercussions among his people even before, or at the inception of colonialism³. Rather, the novel is an indigenous portrayal and criticism of the culture and institutions of a denigrated people, with a view to highlighting both its strengths and weaknesses, and without any tinge of apology at all.

I intend to show subsequently, that Achebe achieves this by building argument and persuasive rhetoric around the lives and careers of some dominant individuals, and the operations or failures of societal institutions. For instance, the family, government, morality, law and order, diplomacy etc.

The irony of the name Umuofia

The dominant impression of an average African society in the literature inspired by the prejudiced theories of the early ethnologists and social anthropologists manifests

in Joyce Cary's *Mr. Johnson*⁴. In describing a western Sudanese town, Cary says inter alia: "Its people would not know the change of time jumped 50 thousand years. They live like mice... on a palace floor; all the magnificence and veracity of the arts, the learning and battles of civilization go over their heads and they do not even imagine them". A people so described would easily be called *Umuofia*, which literally means "bushmen" in Igbo, with all the primitivity that the word connotes and conveys.

Given that in Arabic, *bilad al Sudan* means "the land of the blacks", the description in *Mr. Johnson* appears to be representative of all the black nations. Normally, in Igbo language, the prefix, *Umu-*, to the name of a town, clan, or village shows that the indigenes of the town in question either believe themselves to have one progenitor or that they owe allegiance to one central idea or concept. Hence, the name *Umu-Odeju* shows that indigenes of such a village believe themselves to be descendants of *Odeju*. Similarly, a village or town called *Umudo*, could be either descendants of a progenitor called *Udo*, or regard themselves as 'peace-makers', for *Udo* also means 'peace' in Igbo.

In view of this, the name, *Umuofia* has two parts – a prefix *Umu-* and a suffix *Ofia*. The prefix can mean, "people from", indicating nativity i.e. place of origin, or it could mean 'people showing collective subscription to one ideology which the suffix connotes. In the present case, the suffix *Ofia* means 'bush' in Igbo language. So, in essence, *Umuofia* means 'people from the bush', or 'bush people', or what is generally known as 'bushmen'. Hence, Achebe consciously⁵ adopts the pejorative stance of the western anthropologists: describes his people as *Umuofia*, and subsequently reduces that appellation to absurdity by weaving description, exposition, rhetoric and argument, around interrelated plots in the novel under consideration. How he does this is what I endeavour to show in the remaining parts of the paper.

Cosmology and religion in *Things Fall Apart*

One cherished attribute among the people of *Umuofia* is cohesive community life. It is actually the destruction of this cohesion by an "abominable religion"⁶, and an external government that gave the novel its title. The overt expression of this cohesion is the "Week of Peace" which Okonkwo breaks and is punished by Ezeani.

This social cohesion is predicated on a world-view and religion, according to which Chukwu is the creator of 'heaven,' i.e. the sky or the sublunary world, and the earth.

Chukwu is worshipped through other lesser gods such as Amadiora, Ogwugwu, and Idemili. These are really, to my mind, deified natural forces that could either be beneficent or malevolent depending on circumstances⁷. Apart from these, there is also the cult of ancestor worship. The deceased elders of the family or the community are regarded to be yet alive but in the underworld or in the spirit world from which they oversee the affairs of their erstwhile families or community. There is a communion between the living and the departed members of the family or community through sacrifices by the former, and through oracles and divination by the latter. On special occasions, the ancestors re-visit the members of their community as masquerades.

Moreover, it is also believed in the context of this worldview, that there are other contending forces and spirits in nature and society: fortunes and misfortunes, *Ogbanje*, wars and pestilence. There are also such other violent emotions among men in society, as love and hate, fear and envy, intrigues and treachery.

It is in the context of this worldview, that an individual endeavours to succeed in life by actualising his destiny, or a community strives to realize its goals and aspirations by contending with other communities or individuals. In order, therefore, to enhance one's or a community's chances of success, supernatural forces are either invoked or appeased by using equally mysterious forces in the forms of charms or amulets called *Ogwu* which sometimes can be deified and propitiated as a god or goddess. Oracles can also be consulted to unravel a mystery or the future as seen in the oracle of the "Hills and Caves"⁸.

However, in the gregarious efforts to succeed either as a person or a community, positive morality of intentions and actions must be ensured. The custodian of morality is the Earth goddess - Ani. It ensures that no indigene of a community takes the life of another for whatever reason. Thus, Okonkwo has to be exiled for seven years after killing Ezeudu's son accidentally, at his father's funeral, in order to expiate the land.

In addition, this world view and religion sanctions and maintains such other beliefs and practices as: payment of ransom, two persons for one life taken, human sacrifice, disposal of twin babies in the belief that they were evil⁹, the *Osu* Caste system, and the *Ogbanje* phenomenon.

How these beliefs and practices were justified within the cosmology and religion of the fiction bothered Achebe a great deal. Oftentimes, he makes his characters question the rationale behind certain beliefs and practices. Through this style, Achebe portrays the

people of Umuofia as having had critical dispositions necessary for philosophical reflection as seen in other apparently civilized cultures of the world. We shall see later how the author does this in the novel.

Economy and economic relations

In the novel, Umuofia is depicted as having an economy in which economic activities and relations have advanced far beyond the itinerant, fruit-gathering type that the early ethnologists and anthropologists attributed to Africans. The Umuofia economy is a monetary one in which trade-by-barter has been greatly reduced. As such loans could be obtained and repaid as exhibited in the Unoka-Okoye episode in the fiction. Commerce has developed to such an extent that there are markets and expectedly, the existence of traders or merchants as a social class.

Agriculture is the main-stay of the economy of Umuofia, and thus the people have a symbiotic relationship with both land and environment. This then explains the religious importance of Ani (Earth), which is regarded and worshipped as a goddess that has regenerative potency. The agriculture is mainly the shifting, sedentary compound cultivation type, which is practised with some sense of rudimentary scientific knowledge. This is evident in the ways and manners the weather is watched, the time farms are cleared and cultivated, and also the ways Okonkwo endeavours to care for his yam tendrils during a prolonged drought. Moreover, the agricultural economy is such that a determined farmer does not need to have inherited barns of yams from his father; he could succeed as well by being a sharecropper. This is what Okonkwo does when he approaches Oguéfi Nwakibie to borrow seed yams.

Now, the terms and phrases, as well as the complexity with which a particular language renders economic relations and its overt expressions in the lives of individuals in society, usually indicate the level of its development. The economy in *TFA* is not only a developed one; it is described in a complex web of socio-economic relationships.

It is apt to point out that the Igbo society reflected in the novel is a shame culture and a contest society¹⁰. In a shame culture, “the important thing is to be successful in one’s enterprise and to be judged so by others, rather than having a “good conscience”¹¹. It is a culture in which the cliché: “Success has parents, brothers and sisters; failure is an orphan”, is apt and relevant. In other worlds, “merit and excellence are reckoned less by intentions than by results”¹². In such a culture, success is noble, and failure shameful irrespective of the circumstances. Achebe captures the essence of this culture by

informing us that "...among these people (the Igbo) a man was (is) judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father"¹³, and that age was respected among his (Okonkwo) people, but achievement was (is) revered"¹⁴. In other words, "If a child washed his hands, he could eat with Kings..."¹⁵. Apparently, therefore, it is shameful in such a culture as the Igbo one, to be an *agbala* – a man who had taken no title – like Unoka (Okonkwo's father whom he detests down to his marrow) and Osugo whom Okonkwo slights in a kindred meeting by the comment: "this meeting is for men". In a shame culture, failure is bearable when it is the lot of many more persons. Otherwise, in Unoka's words, "it is more difficult and bitter when a man fails alone"¹⁶.

By virtue of being a shame culture, the Igbo society of *TFA* and even nowadays, is also a contest society. In principle, it is an open society¹⁷ as seen in the economic structures and institutions for decision-making. Individuals in the society are in obvious competition with each other to get to the top and remain at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy of the society and community¹⁸. Personal success in a society like this one, attracts intense envy from the lowly and unsuccessful. This explains why it is a social norm in the society of *TFA* for a man never to take the life of his compatriot whether deliberately or otherwise.

This norm forestalls indiscriminate hauling down of achievers in a contest society by non-achievers like Unoka and Osugo. Thus, the society, which Achebe depicts in *TFA* is both a shame culture and a contest society. It is then not quite surprising that Okonkwo's "whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness..."¹⁹

Family values and societal morality

Achebe takes great care, and goes to length, to show that, although Okonkwo is polygamous, the family is nevertheless cohesive²⁰. Even the structural layout of huts in the compound shows that power, protection, leadership and prestige emanate from the Obi and radiates toward the other members of the family.

It is a family in which any of the wives could take care and charge of the children of another in her absence, and commensurately, any of the wives or elders of the family can send a child on an errand, without taking prior permission from the mother. These values are exemplified by the fact that Nwoye's mother feeds Ojiugo's children as she does hers, when the latter goes to plait her hair and cannot cook the afternoon meal for her children and husband.

Similarly, Ezinma, Ekwefi's only surviving child, takes fire across to Nwoye's mother,

and offers to make it for her before returning to her own mother's kitchen to resume her chores. It is also noteworthy, that as he matures, Nwoye can be sent for, to perform some of the difficult chores for any of his father's wives, and not necessarily his own mother.

When Okonkwo wants to pass his feelings regarding his daughters' suitors, he talks to Ezinma who in turn talks to Obiageli, her half-sister, and secures her consent not to marry any man in Mbanta. This is because the family cohesion affords her the chance to exert influence on other children of the family.

Furthermore, Nwakibie is a great man of rank in the society, who has three wives. But only Anasi, the first wife wears the anklets of her husband's titles²¹. This shows the locus of power and respectable authority among the women in the compound. In Okonkwo's compound, Nwoye's mother occupies a similar position. So in the absence of a man or any other male that can take charge, the women know who should take immediate charge – showing the cohesive nature of the average Igbo 'nuclear' family.

Even adherence to etiquette ensures that this cherished family cohesion is maintained. For instance, when called to the Obi to be given palm-wine brought by visitors, the younger wives of Nwakibie have to stand aside waiting for the first wife to arrive and drink first. It is also noteworthy that in a gathering of people, not just anyone shares things out among them. The youngest in any gathering does so.

Achebe also carefully shows the premium placed on marital bond and life-long mutual dependence between husband and wife, in the story told of Ogbuefi Ndulue and his wife Ozoemena²². In the words of perceptive Obierika, "it was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind... I remember when I was a boy; there was a song about them. He could not do anything without telling her". Even-though, this extolling of strong mutual marital bond, draws skepticism from a conservative like Okonkwo regarding the manliness of Ndulue, the author has made his point – family cohesion and life-long mutual bond and dependence is a cherished Igbo family value.

Now, moving away from family life into the village and even across the clans, there are ceremonies, feasts and events used by these people, to maintain family ties. An example is the Uri ceremony at which a suitor entertains the villagers of his bride. Apart from this, Uri is used to draw-in other families especially women, to share in the joy of a family, which has successfully raised a maiden fit for marriage. Women and children are invited to help in cooking and rendering other services relevant to the ceremony.

Secondly, feasts like the new yam festival are used to maintain not only village or clan unity, but also healthy relations and mutual bonds between in-laws as related by the hyperbole of the yam foo-foo set before in-laws²³. Daughters of a village married away to other villages or clans have an avenue to meet as a group through the institution called Umuada, in order to perform some vital duties like settling quarrels or mourning in their families of origin.

Moreover, Achebe also endeavours to show that even though the Igbo are predominantly patrilineal, maternity is not only sacred but also very important in the life of an Igboman. It is as if one is raised by his father to be a worthy participant in the life of the society, but he is rehabilitated by his mother or mother's family when danger or misfortunes strike. This is the whole point of Okonkwo spending seven years of exile among his mother's kinsmen. He is not tried for homicide, convicted and sent to jail for seven years. Rather he is given an opportunity to re-evaluate his life, make amends while still living a normal life with the full complements of his family.

However, this cohesive family so much extolled in the novel had to thrive in the community and in the clan in accordance with established morality. Some principles of this morality are highlighted in the novel.

The first among these is the principle of accommodation: "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break"²⁴. This principle justifies my claim that the Igbo society in *TFA* as well as the Igbo society of today is a "shame culture" in which visible success is revered, and individuals go to any length to achieve it. This principle is therefore primarily important in order to discourage unfair and virulent competition especially as a shame culture is normally a contest society.

Complementary to this moral principle is a taboo according to which a clansman cannot take the life of another in any way. Hence, Okonkwo's ostracization for inadvertent homicide. This taboo is also very important in a shame culture, in order to prevent feigned accidents through which a person can eliminate his competitor.

In addition, there is the etiquette, which demands that if one sets an edible item before another, he is expected to taste it first. When Okonkwo takes wine to Nwakibie to solicit his help, "the first cup went to Okonkwo, who must taste his wine before any one else"²⁶. This is to assure others that what is set before them, be it palm-wine, kola-nut, tobacco snuff, has not been poisoned.

In certain conservative settings, even wives taste food set before their husbands, especially in a polygamous family. Allied to the above is the principle of teleology or purposive action: every action has a purpose given that: "a toad does not run in the day time for nothing"²⁴ (it is either that it is pursuing something, or something is pursuing it). Since every action leads to an end, the intention behind which is not always obvious, caution is enjoined on all and sundry: "Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching"²⁷. This I call the principle of caution or cautionary action.

In the novel, there are glimpses of the people's sexual morality. For instance, the *Isa-ifi* ceremony²⁸ performed on behalf of the *Umuada* (council of daughters) by the eldest of them, is used to ascertain the fidelity of a bride to her suitor since betrothal. Similarly, premarital sex seems not to have been encouraged given the description of Akueke who was being married-off²⁹.

However, Ezeani, who upbraids Okonkwo for violating the "Week of Peace" by beating his wife says: "Your wife was at fault but even if you came into your *Obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her"³⁰. Reading the lips of Ezeani, one is at a loss about how to view the statement. It could be a way of stressing the enormity of Okonkwo's action³¹ But at the same time, it could also be a reflection of subdued practice that allows married women to have lovers. One's suspicion that this may have been the case is heightened by the story of how Okonkwo married Ekwefi eventually: she ran away from Anene, her first husband, to Okonkwo in circumstances that seem to permit a kind of sexual permissiveness for married women³².

This view does not, however, cohere with the *isa-ifi* ceremony and premium placed on sexual abstinence before marriage. Neither does it fit into contemporary Igbo life in many places. Perhaps, it is one of those liberties an artist takes in creating a work of fiction!

There is also a set of moral rules used to protect farm crops from willful destruction. For instance, anyone who carelessly lets loose his hooved domestic animals on another's farm pays a fine³³.

The purpose of all these rules is to produce a civil society in which a man can maximize his abilities without let or hindrance in pursuance of some obvious goods: wealth, health, children, social relations and prestige and long life.

Rites of passage

One mark of an advanced culture or civilization is the way it celebrates human life cycle: birth, growth and death. Apart from birth, Achebe, in the novel, gives details of the Igbo man's account and celebration of maturation and death. At maturity, a maiden is given into marriage through an established process, as seen in the case of Akueke, that dignifies the bride and groom's families, involves the whole immediate community and consequently validates the marriage.

It is clear that marriage among these people was not by capture or seizure of bride as some primitive tribes are wont to do³⁴. At marriage, a woman not only becomes a wife in her husband's homestead, but also automatically joins the council of daughters, Umuada, of her kindred. On the other hand, a young man at marriage inaugurates his own compound an Obi as well as his own ancestral shrine. He carves out his own farm-lands from which proceeds he creates his own barn. Thus, he ceases to be an *agbala* and can subsequently initiate himself into the Ozo society and masquerade cults.

Death is undesirable; but without it, there would not be the cult of ancestral worship, which is a vital aspect of Igbo Cosmology. So, the death of a successful man like Ezeudu, who lives to a ripe old age, and thus passes as a model of fulfilled life, is announced carefully but steadily by different connotations of the *ekwe* sound. Thereafter, there is a dignified celebration of his passage from earthly life to the life of the world beyond. In essence, therefore, there is no absolute death³⁵. The efficacy of this belief is shown in the fact that it is at Ezeudu's funeral that Okonkwo tactlessly violates a taboo that sends him into exile for seven years, in much the same way as he tactlessly disregards Ezeudu's advice and warning not to have a hand in Ikemefuna's sacrifice because the boy called him father. So, whether alive or dead, the words of a virtuous wise man abide, and one disregards them to his own utter peril.

Similarly, there is the tacit passage from "the dead" or spirit world to healthy earthly life as described in the digging up from the bowels of the earth of Ezinma's *iyi-uwa* that is the string that linked her to the kindred *ogbanje* spirit. Having broken that cord, she ceases to be a tormentor child to her parents by her erstwhile-unbroken cycle of reincarnation³⁶.

Government, judicial system and diplomacy

One other aspect of Igbo culture highlighted in the novel through interlocking plots is its republicanism anchored on an egalitarian spirit. This republicanism works through

certain organs of governance. The highest of the popular organs of governance is the clan assembly, which is the apex decision-making body. It declares wars and makes peace. However, the inner caucus of this assembly is the body of *ndichie* literally, the ancients: men who have taken the highest titles in the land, priests of various categories and lineage heads. On his return from his embassy to Mbaino, Okonkwo reports to this body with the ransom collected (Ikemefuna and a virgin girl), which makes the appropriate decisions.

Below the clan assembly and *ndichie* comes Umunna-kindred meeting at which family matters are discussed. It is at such a meeting for deciding the next ancestral feast, that Okonkwo commits hubris³⁷ by insulting Osugo who has just contradicted him. Okonkwo remarks: "This meeting is for men"³⁸.

Even at the height of his power and fame the kindred meeting forces Okonkwo to apologise to Osugo, and the eldest man forcefully reminds him: "those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble" (*TFA*:19). This remark, in my opinion, brings out the significance of hubris Okonkwo commits.

Hence, in Umuofia, decisions on important matters are not taken capriciously. However, Achebe hints that such an assembly, like the clan assembly, which works like the ecclesia of typical Greek city state say, Athens, could be swayed this way or that way by the power of oratory into hasty or wrong decisions on sensitive issues like declaring a war or making peace. This explains Okonkwo's apprehension of Egonwane's rhetorical prowess and influence on the fateful day it is to decide on either war on the white man and his socio-political structures or benign acquiescence in the new religion and government.

Consequently, the decision of the assembly, especially those pertaining to declaring war on another town or making peace with it, are moderated by a transcendental religious authority – the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. It always ensured that Umuofia, never went to war unless its case was clear and just (See *TFA* p. 9).

In diplomacy, before war is fully declared, even after the oracle has sanctioned it, Umuofia issued an ultimatum within which the offending clan or town is expected to choose between war or peace. If the later is chosen, then ransom must be paid for the unjustified provocation, or harm done to the community. Thus the lad Ikemefuna and a virgin girl are collected by Okonkwo, the emissary of Umuofia, as ransoms for the

murder of Ogbuefi Udo's wife. Overall, it is made clear in the novel that Umuofia, has the principle of just war and when it is necessary, wages it in accordance with the norms of civilized behaviour.

It is also emphasized in the novel that Umuofia, has a judicial system in which the Egwugwu, masquerade cult, is the highest judicial body. Thus in the case between Odukwe and others, a person in the crowd wonders why "such a trifle" as the dispute between husband and wife. "should be brought before the Egwugwu" (*TFA:67*). This suggests that there are lower levels of adjudication, which could have handled the litigation.

However, the masquerade cult, in administering justice, does so in accordance with the principle of fair hearing. "Your words are good," says the leader of the Egwugwu". Let us hear Odukwe, his words may also be good" (*TFA:P.67*). Similarly, in delivering judgement, the judicial systems aim at a balance or harmony and not at a bi-polar divisive declaration of innocent – guilty parties. It rather aims at what the Greeks called equipollence of arguments pro and contra on issues, especially family matters: "We have heard both sides of the case... our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute"⁴⁰. This equipollence of arguments is necessary for attainment of balance or harmony, which is a principle of existence that these people's values and consequently Ani, the Earth goddess, is the guardian of it.

In order to achieve this harmony in the social fabric of the society through the judicial process and pronouncements, the Egwugwu uses a somewhat jury system. "The nine egwugwu then went away to consult together in their house"⁴¹.

This manner of delivering judgement after hearing a case is quite congruent with the republican and democratic ideals of the culture and people, as epitomized in the various levels of governmental structures, but especially the manner of decision-making in the clan assembly – by consensus after a reasonable debate on the matter, pro and contra.

Entertainments and leisure

Even though the culture is one in which "Solid personal achievement" through the dint of hard work, is a leading ideal, the novel commences by showing a hilarious people agog with joy at watching a wrestling contest, which is a part of the greatest of their festivals – the new yam festival.

Soon after, we are introduced to a man given to music, play, leisure and story telling, although not the stories of violence, war and blood. Through him, we are told how various groups learn their music and dance.

We also see, that among these people, most events have entertainment dimensions to them. This is evident in marriages, funerals and other rites of passage. Even ordinary welcome gesture to a visitor, and the rituals of breaking kola-nut presented to him, is suffused with proverbs and aphorisms that could cause bellyaching laughter. A mere request for a favour can be turned to merriment easily. It is worth recalling that when Okonkwo goes to Nwakibia to borrow seed yams, he takes palm wine. Soon after his arrival a jolly company is formed and an ordinary request is turned into a light-hearted session of jovial friends.

Summary

From the foregoing detailed commentary and discussions on the societal institutions and cultural values and ideals carefully portrayed in the novel, *TFA*, it can be conveniently maintained that the Umuofia appellation, with its primitive connotations, used by Achebe to describe the Igbo people and culture of the time, is ironical, which when not understood as such, makes the surface meaning quite absurd.

This is because, the society so described and regarded has the social institutions, cultural ideals and values characteristic of civilized societies on common historical platform and economic development. The author endeavours to make just this point, for the purposes of reasserting the unique identity of a misunderstood and thus erroneously denigrated people, but he nevertheless distances himself from his people's civilization. This he does in order to peer into it with rational and critical insight that enables him raise questions about certain assumptions and fundamental beliefs of his people. How this is done with a kind of philosophical disposition and detachment is examined subsequently.

Criticism of culture and societal institutions in *Things Fall Apart*

One super-structural dimension to the people's culture that is subjected to critical appraisal in the novel is the cosmology or world-view. The cult of ancestral worship

is the first to be rationally and critically weighed in the tale of Obiako and his deceased father: Obiako had gone to consult the oracle which said to him, "Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him". But Obiako retorted, "ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive"⁴².

The import of this challenge is far-reaching. It stresses the point that people should not require from others more than they deserve. Moreover, the belief that places excessive demand on the living in order to satisfy the dead is fundamentally challenged. Meanwhile, Obiako's defiance raises the question about the powers of the ancestors over the living. In as much as it cannot be conclusively proved that they have or don't have powers over the living, Obiako stresses that reasonableness is a common attribute of man whether dead or alive. Assuming that his father was alive as an ancestor, he should be reasonable in making his demands.

The belief and practice pertaining to the Week of Peace are also critically assessed in the novel, through the reflections of the wise Ezeudu. Erstwhile violators of the Week of Peace were dragged on the ground round the clan. This practice was dropped later as a form of punishment, because it was pragmatically self-refuting. The whole principle and essence of the week of peace that is, harmonious neighbourliness, was negated by the practice. Through that insight, it was highlighted that practices must be consistent with beliefs otherwise the rationality of such a belief is seriously doubted.

In addition, the idea that a man could be blamed for the events over which he has no control is criticized. In some clans, it is an abomination for a man to die during the Week of Peace. They have that custom in Obodoani. If a man dies at this time, he is not buried but cast into the evil forest. It is a bad custom which these people observe because they lack understanding⁴³.

Apparently, why they lack understanding is because the person who dies within the Week of Peace has no control over life or death. In view of this, he should then not bear the blame for his own misfortune. However, rather than draw this conclusion, Ezeudu, while reflecting on the matter, draws a startling one – because the corpses of people who die within the Week of Peace are thrown into the evil forest, the towns of these practitioners are filled with wandering spirits. This deduction is consistent with the general framework of the people's worldview, (but deviates from the logic of the reflection).

Furthermore, the cultural perception of the bearing of twins as an abomination and their

disposal after birth is criticized by Obierika's introspection after participating in the destruction of Okonkwo's compound because of the homicide of a kinsman. Obierika asks himself: "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? This was a puzzle for him. Perhaps more puzzling is the killing of twins: "He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?" The only answer to these questions for Obierika is a dogmatic one: "The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed"⁴⁴. This, as an article of religious faith, is covertly questioned by the same Obierika in another context.

In discussing the Ikemefuna episode with Okonkwo after the latter has recovered from his stupor caused by pangs of conscience after killing a 'son', Obierika raises the question whether all divine commands must be obeyed? His outright answer is no! Those that violate natural bonds and enjoin discomfort for man should be tolerated, or at best one can be indifferent about them: "But if the oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it"⁴⁵.

The enormity of obeying such a command is seen against the background of the introspective questions asked by Ikemefuna himself as to how he came to such an impasse. Was his father involved in the killing of a daughter of Umuofia. Even if he was involved, "is it justified?" he would have asked, "for an innocent child to be used as a ransom?". He could not understand what was happening to him or what he had done⁴⁶. So, how does he come to merit his fate? At best it was an arbitrary decision and Achebe criticizes it as such in the thoughts of the innocent boy.

Similarly, the justification for the punishment meted to Okonkwo for the inadvertent homicide is also raised in the novel. Achebe, speaking once more, through Obierika critically appraises the custom or rule that demands that a man suffers grievously for what obviously is not a premeditated murder. This is quite (rationally) inexplicable. The only justification being that the Earth goddess decrees it. An explanation for some of these obnoxious customs is that they provide and protect public good, but exactly how this is so, is not clear.

The belief in *chi* and its influence on the fortunes of an Igboman, is also subjected to criticism in the novel. While at Mbaino in exile, Okonkwo has to reflect on his *chi* and destiny. It appears to him that despite his vision to be a great man and his active pursuit of it through hard work, he has suffered grievously just at the point of achieving it. Perhaps, his *chi* is not cut out for great things which, if it is actually so, negates

the wisdom of the elders that says: "if a man says Yea, his *chi* affirms". In his own case, he had said yea, and from all indications, his *chi* is saying no! ⁴⁷.

Furthermore, the belief in *Ogbanje* phenomenon and the practices it engenders like the mutilation of the corpse of a child suspected to be an *Ogbanje*, are all criticized in the fiction. In particular, the process of curing this *Ogbanje* by trying to break the wheel of incarnations by soliciting the child's cooperation in tracing his/her *iyi-uwa*, are shown, one and all, to lack scientific basis and thus a poor diagnosis of disease. The people's naivety in relying on a mere child to lead the way in tracing the cause of his/her disease is highlighted by way of criticism in the novel.

The idea of evil forest and the Osu Caste system especially are all given pragmatic refutation in the fiction. The one, by showing that humans stayed in the precincts of the evil forest for a month or so, without perishing contrary to the expectation and belief that they would perish in three days. The other, by showing that when they abandon their gods and shrines, and then run into the new Church, they do not die and no further calamity befalls them. Rather the only thing they lose is their bondage.

Finally, the drive for material prosperity through solid personal achievement, to the utter neglect of the intangible aspects of human culture, is severely criticised. This is vividly achieved through the portraiture of Unoka who ordinarily should win some awards as a talented and ingenious musical artiste. Rather than this, he dies a pauper and abominably too. Even at that, Unoka chides his society for neglecting what Achebe has called feminine values, music, story-telling, fellow-feeling, good neighbourliness, piety and virtuous living, by taking along with him his flute while being taken away to the evil forest to die despicably.

Okonkwo detests his father, and does everything in his power to deny everything Unoka stands for, and in doing so determines for himself a new set of ethos for personal achievements, which sometimes runs contrary to accepted mode of behaviour. He however moves steadily to perdition. His life is therefore a lesson and warning that no society or individual prospers and endures in its prosperity, if enabling virtues acquired through education and civilized behaviour are neglected. This warning is still pertinent to contemporary Igbo society that has suddenly embraced acquisitive materialism at the expense of education.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have endeavoured to show how Achebe goes into great details to reconstruct the workings of the societal institutions of his people whose dignity colonialism distorted and mortgaged. I also show how he uses authorial criticism through words put in the mouths of his major characters to criticize his people's culture and way of life. Overall, it can be concluded that the name of the dominant clan in the novel, Umuofia, as a pseudonym for the Igbo or African peoples for that matter, is essentially a misnomer. For Umuofia's import has been reduced to absurdity by showing that the people to whom it is supposed to apply, possess all the societal institutions, culture, and reflective intellectual tradition and disposition and which should qualify it as a civilized society in the modern context.

Notes

1. Umelo, P. (1999).
2. On the BBC programme, Book Choice, of 30th August 1996, Achebe himself declared that "Okonkwo was not an Igbo paragon. He was in many ways a misfit. He was a one-sided man, neglecting the feminine aspects of culture. He was too anxious to succeed".
3. Some scholars believe that given Achebe's perception of the writer or artist as a seer and teacher in his society, he, Achebe, had been concerned with the incidence of power: who has it, how he acquired it, and how he uses it. Achebe is then considered to be pre-occupied with this phenomenon in his fictions set in history like *TFA*, as he is concerned with it in his near sociological exegesis, *The Trouble with Nigeria*.
4. See the exposition on this book in "The World of Chinua Achebe: making of *Things Fall Apart*", *Newswatch* 3(12) March, 1986.
5. This claim is justified first in the context of the colonial epoch in which the book *Things Fall Apart* was written, during which the few educated elite were the vanguard for the restoration of robust self-image, and the appreciation of the culture of the colonized people. *Things Fall Apart* was, surely, an intellectual contribution to that re-descriptive effort. Secondly, in the Radio programme alluded to in note 2 above, Achebe said, inter alia, that given the literature with which his generation was fed at schools exemplified in Cary's *Mr. Johnson*, "one had to tell his own story". The story he told is *Things Fall Apart*, in the first instance, and in doing so, I contend that he appears to have consciously chosen the name *Umuofia* to connote the perceived primitivity of the Igbo people, a view he reduces to absurdity by the civilization he reconstructs in the novel. This argument is supported by the title the

- District officer chose for his new book after seeing the dangling body of Okonkwo. He entitled his account of the fate of this man, *The Pacification of the primitive tribes of the lower Niger*. Thus, I have not read the name *Umuofia* literally as some may want to believe.
6. Achebe, p. 120
 7. In much similar manner, the stoics of the 4th/3rd century BC in the Graeco-Roman world, allegorised natural forces and in consequence identified them with the gods in the Greek Pantheon, such that the whole world as a dynamic continuum, in which natural laws, especially those of causal determinism, hold inexorably was called Zeus. Zeus was the greatest of Greek gods.
 8. The Greeks used Apollo's oracle at Delphi for similar purposes. See Plato's *Euthyphro* where Socrates uses the revelation of this oracle to explain the origin of the perception of him as the wisest man.
 9. One justification for this practice was that, in the eyes of the practitioners, wild and domestic animals only have their young ones in numbers at the same time. So that the bearing of twins by a woman brings her and her babies nearer to the class of beasts, debases humanity, which is evil and should not be allowed.
 10. See Gouldner 1963. This tendency was evident in the Greeks even in the Classical period
 11. At least one strand of evidence supports my claim that the Igbo society of the fiction is a shame culture: when Ezeani had commanded Okonkwo to pay recompense to Ani for violating the week of peace, his subsequent demeanour is a classic posture in a shame culture: "Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbours that he was in error" (*TFA*, p. 22). In other words, his public image rather than the serenity of his conscience mattered to him so much.
 12. Gouldner, p. 83
 13. *TFA*, p. 6. Here, Achebe takes a swipe at (Victorian) England and contemporaneous European societies where a loafer like Unoka could suddenly come into economic prosperity and limelight through inheritance, but unlike Okonkwo, through solid personal achievements.
 14. Achebe p. 18
 15. Achebe , p 18
 16. Achebe, p. 18
 17. However, the existence of *Osu*, outcasts, in both the fictional and contemporary Igbo society, describes the limits of its egalitarianism and thus casts doubts on this claim to openness.
 18. This is clearly evident in the fact that while in exile in Mbanta, Okonkwo is preoccupied with the thought of how to recapture his pre-eminent position in Umuofia,

and in consequence, plans his return from ostracization in style: He would build a bigger compound than the one he had before his exile, initiate his sons into the prestigious Ozo society, and marry off his blooming daughters to worthy prosperous young men.

19. *TFA*, p. 9

20. The same ideal cherished by the whole society at large.

21. *TFA*, p. 14

22. *TFA*, p. 48

23. *TFA*, p. 26.

24. *TFA*, p. 14

25. *TFA*, p. 14

26. *TFA*, p. 15

27. *TFA*, p. 16

28. *TFA*, p. 94

29. *TFA*, p. 50.

30. *TFA*, p. 22 emphasis added.

31. *TFA*, p. 23. Even the oldest man can remember only one or two instances of such a violation.

32. *TFA*, p. 78

33. *TFA*, p. 82.

34. See Engels (1978.)

35. cf. Socrates' defence of the immortality of the soul in Plato's *Phaedo*.

36. *TFA*, p. 53: cf, The religious side of Pythagoreanism and the other Pythagorean beliefs in transmigration and the wheel of reincarnation of souls. (see Kirk G.S. and Raven 1957).

37. This is a Greek term which connotes, among other things, underserved slight or careless disregard for a person by another usually more successful than the slighted. Hubris includes maltreatment of slave by a master, or a foreigner by an indigene. It is an offence which the gods avenge on behalf of the subject of abuse. As Okonkwo's life unfolded in the novel, he seems to have been punished by the gods for his hubris against Osugo and other things including his tactless killing of Ike-mefuna.

This interpretation is consistent with the public perception of Okonkwo in the novel: "And so people said he had no respect for the gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird, *nza*, who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*" (See *TFA*, p. 22).

38. Osugo like Unoka, Okonkwo's father, is an *agbala* who had taken no titles and should, really in consequence be classed among women. This is the essence of Okonkwo's allusion, which the eldest man in the meeting caught and chided him for.
39. See *TFA* pp. 64-66.
41. *TFA*, p. 66
42. *TFA*, p. 15
43. *TFA*, p. 23
44. *TFA*, p. 89
44. This is contrary to Okonkwo's position that "all commands of the oracle must be obeyed". From which perspective he tries to rationalise his killing of a boy he raised, who called him father. This dialogue between Obierika and Okonkwo underscores the fundamental question about the nature of Theistic or humanistic ethics such as raised by Socrates in the *Euthyphro*. It also raises the question as to which is the predominant ethical disposition of the indigenous Igbo people. From the reaction of Obierika to Okonkwo's conduct, and Obierika's position in weighing the matter with his conservative friend, I suggest that the Igbo have a predominantly humanistic, rather than theistic ethics. Although, arguments could be raised, by any one of humanistic disposition, to show that for these people, as for Socrates, "Genuine goodness is a Unity".
45. *TFA*, p. 11.
46. In appraising Achebe's essay "*Chi* in Igbo Cosmology" in a different context, I have argued that this dictum would hold only when a man is reasonable about his ambitions and refrains from troubles and setting for himself impossible tasks. Proper conduct in life will tantamount to one's *Chi* saying "Yea" to his ambitions, otherwise, it would say no!. Somehow, in the novel, Okonkwo in many ways sets for himself impossible tasks, and consequently his *Chi* says no! to many of them, but not for want of trying and hard-work. The point made here underscores my contention that the Igbo have humanistic ethics.

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