



## **Onomastic Precision in *Things Fall Apart*: The Writer as Teacher**

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*Names are everything.*  
Linda Rosenkrantz & Pamela Satran

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done... Art is important but so is education.

- Chinua Achebe

### **Abstract**

Critics have continually dwelt on Achebe's cultural foci in *Things Fall Apart*, but they have failed to take notice of his deliberate choice of names and naming of characters and situations. Yet, it is an area of his creative interests that are particularly, instructively significant. Achebe wrote back to the West as a way of educating them on their ignorance at African culture. He also uses it to re-educate and re-assure Africans on the popularity and remarkability of their peculiar cultural life-style. Among the cultural sites that he highlights and promotes is his philosophy about African names and naming. African (Igbo) names mean in relation to situational context of birth, history and cosmology. It is the aim of this study to examine names of characters and situations in *Things* from the linguistic, contextual and semantic persuasions. One shall observe that Achebe's cultural practice herewith is a consciousness-raising effort that not only tries to legitimize African cultural tradition but also could engender continental/national cultural development.

### **Introduction**

The story of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is not only foregrounded on culture, it is an instructive expression of culture of a people – the Igbo, the Africans. Perhaps, one of Achebe's major objectives is to use this novel to (re)education the world that Africans had esteemably viable and vibrant culture they were known for and proud of before the Europeans colonized them. It could also be his

desire to use this novel to promote and develop African (Igbo) culture. It is principally a story of a people's rich culture. No wonder in his *Approaches*, Charles Nnolim asserts thus: "No African prose fiction is more deeply rooted in the African cultural tradition than Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" (28). Nnolim certifies *Things Fall Apart* as containing heavy dosage of African cultural norm.

Name is a signifier of a culture. Name is an identity. Naming (pattern) is a cultural index and/or praxis of a people. The story in *Things* shows that the Igbo are culture-bred and pliant, for they are full of cultural practices that are systematically observed. Naming is part of their cultural life-style, producing distinct names that culturally mean. The writer, Achebe, could be teaching the reader that Igbo names are not a product of happenstance, they inhere in either cosmological philosophy and belief or historical, cultural context. Achebe's characters are so named/characterised, with special reference to such names as Nneka, Nwofia, Chukwuka and Obierika.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theory of onomastics. According to Anthony Oha, "onomastics is the scientific study of names and naming. It deals with specific or 'proper' names and their origin, the former being normally written with an initial capital letter" (225). He supports his definition by quoting Edwin Lawson who says thus: Onomastics is the area of study concerned with the content and process of all types of naming. Among its major concerns, along with literary names and place names, is the subject of personal names. (225)

The above definitions may imply that onomastics is a scientific study of all that concerns names and naming with special reference to those of people and places, toponym. It investigates the constitution of names and the processes that go into the practice of naming. The impression offered one here is that names and naming are very fundamental factors that identify and situate human beings and places. Definitely, human beings or things begin to exist only when they are named. Achebe appreciates the above truth and accords it adequate consideration in *Things*.

### Textual Analysis

This study adopts two methods of examination of names used in the novel. While the first method principally examines the cultural implication of certain names – Nneka, Nwofia, Chukwuka and Obierika – the second, subjectively though, examines, from a hypothetical point of view, such names as Nwakibie, Ikemefuna and Okonkwo. First of all, it is worthy of note that human beings could be observed as having six shades of names. The primary name is that given to one by one's parents (Okechi, Amarachukwu). Second is that one's profession gives one name (lecturer, farmer). Third is that one's circumstance or situation gives one name (a wretch, an orphan). Fourth, one's character gives one name (peace-maker, dupe). Fifth is the name one gives to oneself (Adaeze, Nwaoma). Sixth is that status can confer a name to one (HOD, Chief). One can qualify to have more than a shade of the above name categories. One is also free to change any name one is not comfortable with. However, for convenience, this study does not intend to go into all this, except to examine the culturally-related names as used in *Things*.

Starting with Nneka, the reader listens to Uchendu educate his children and Okonkwo on why people name their children Nneka. He uses this name to sensitize Okonkwo on the reason why the latter finds refuge in his motherland, Mbanta, after fleeing from Umuofia, his fatherland, where he has committed manslaughter. Uchendu prefaces his words of education by arguing thus: "A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka – 'Mother is Supreme'" (106). He clarifies the paradox thus:

A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you... that is why we say that mother is supreme. (107)

Uchendu does not just throw light on the reason why Igbo people name their children Nneka, he makes his audience to know that there are meanings in the names Igbo people bear. It could be out of this knowledge acquisition that makes Okonkwo to christen "the first child born to him in exile Nneka – 'Mother is Supreme' – out of politeness to his mother's kinsmen" (130). Okonkwo's decision to name his child Nneka could have been motivated by two reasons. One is to pay homage

to his kinsmen for treating him well. The reader appreciates Okonkwo's feelings: "His mother's kinsmen had been very kind to him, and he was grateful" (130). Second is that having been inaugurated into and socialised on the cultural tradition of his people as regards names and naming, it becomes parsimonious to him that he carries it on to his children, the next generation.

It is likely to be certain that this cultural consciousness shapes Okonkwo's overall cultural attitude to names. This informs why he gives his son born in Mbanta a name that circumstantially means: "But two years later when a son was born he called him Nwofia – 'Begotten in the Wilderness'" (130). For him, any place outside Umuofia, his clan, is a wilderness. Chibueze Orié believes that "names bear and/or inhere cryptic messages that remind the namers (and the named) their backgrounds" (247). Nwofia could be seen as a child of history. So, Okonkwo probably chooses this name to remind him about his historic sojourn to Mbanta, the wilderness. Name, therefore, could serve as a repository of history.

At another context, Akunna, while striving to convince Mr Brown on his kinsmen's perception about the supreme God (Chukwu) hints at the people's cultural attitude to deities and Chukwu, the supreme being. He emphasises their knowledge of the supremacy of God in heaven, and that that is why they name their children Chukwuka which means "Chukwu is Supreme" (144). That is, God is Supreme. The whole emphasis on Akunna's argument invariably details the reader about the socio-cultural naming consciousness of the people and the wisdom cum meaningfulness of their names.

Obierika is another character Achebe uses his name to teach the reader that Igbo names mean. Although he does not provide a scene of conversation where Obierika as a name is transliterated, the reader accesses its meaning contextually. Etymologically, it is a combination of two words – 'obi' and 'erika' – which means 'heart is burdened with thoughts'. It could invariably mean that man's heart is full of burden of thoughts.

The contextual meaning of Obierika as character is appreciable where the writer portrays his kind of character by privileging the reader the character's burden via a stream of consciousness. The writer introduces him to the reader in these words: "Obierika was a man who thought about things" (100). At this point, Obierika broods over Okonkwo's predicament of inadvertently killing Ezeudu's son. Obierika's character trait is true to his name, character of

thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness is his image. Of course, we are reminded that "all names carry an image" (Rosenkrantz and Satran 136). He is thoughtful and wise. He maximises his thoughtfulness and wisdom in his association to Okonkwo, his bosom friend. His help to Okonkwo is immense; his pieces of wise counsels helpful to Okonkwo. He is a friend in need and in deed; so, he is disturbed by and worried about Okonkwo's unfortunate situation at the point of being compelled, as stipulated by their cultural tradition, to go on exile for seven years before returning to his fatherland.

Hypothetically, certain names such as Nwakibie, Ikemefuna and Okonkwo conform to the cultural norm of significance. Nwakibie, the reader is told, is very wealthy and influential. Listen to the narrator: There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan. (15)

It was from this man that Okonkwo earned eight hundred seed yams with which he began his quest for a man of means. He served Nwakibie before the latter trusted him with his yams.

Nwakibie can be transliterated to mean somebody who is greater than his peers. His name is true to his status in Umuofia. The reader notes that he is very wealthy and that people go to him requesting him to lend them some seed yams for their farms. He is greater than them, that is why they go to him. He is a lender. He is a man among equals, a man highly respected, if not revered.

Ikemefuna was a lad of fifteen years old the people of Mbaino gave, along with a nameless girl, to Umuofia in replacement of Ogbuefi Udo's wife murdered in Mbaino market. These children (who knows what happened to their parents?) were handed to Umuofia people to placate the pains of sorrow that went with Ogbuefi Udo's murder. While the girl was given to the widower to marry in place of his murdered wife, the lad was handed over to Okonkwo to keep custody of in the interim until the clan would decide what to do with him. Ikemefuna lived with Okonkwo's household for three years. He was integrated into the family especially with the influence of Nwoye whom he was very close to. Okonkwo became his (surrogate) father and he called him so, until the day the former gave him away to the elders of the clan to be slaughtered on the instruction of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves.

Against the advice of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village, not to bear his hand in the killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo (coward to the fear of being called weak) defied it and cut him down with his machet.

But Ezeudu had advised him reasonably: “That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death... Umuofia has decided to kill him... I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father” (45-6). Ikemefuna ought to enjoy the right of a father who on no circumstance, except on the premise of abomination, should murder his son. Ikemefuna transliterates as 'Let My Efforts Not be in Vain'. It is a prayer. It is a name anchored on fear. Beside being a human being that deserves to live having committed no crime, his efforts are his possessing Okonkwo as father and his active participation in domestic matters, efforts that make Okonkwo begin to be fond of him, though he is not the type to show love emotion openly. Ikemefuna's labour of love receives vain reward for when he cries and runs back to Okonkwo, calling him: “My father, they have killed me” (49), instead of saving him, Okonkwo cuts him down. The fear of the unknown that was Ikemefuna's fate manifests in his murder.

Then, Okonkwo as a name could have anthropological ontology. Igbo people name their children after the market days they are born, maybe, in commemoration of such days: Eke, Orie, Afor and Nkwo. Perhaps, Okonkwo is a constitution of 'nwoke Nkwo' (Man born on Nkwo day) which is reduceable to 'oko Nkwo' – Okonkwo. It becomes a name with a temporal philosophy. But its significance lies more on its commemorative value.

### Conclusion

*Things Fall Apart* is a statement of cultural assertion. In it, Achebe provides African (Igbo) people a literature that promotes, propagates and preserves their culture. Charles Nnolim, in *Ridentem*, posits that “our culture as a people is promoted, propagated and preserved in our national literatures whether vernacular, written or oral” (18). Igbo people, particularly, can only owe the author gratitude for being a great teacher and apologist of their culture. With his novel, the world now appreciates that African people never heard of culture the first time the Europeans colonised them; Africans had been a cultural people. Through this novel, Achebe contributes to our national development as Abiola Irele would tell the reader, “not in the immediate sense of improving the GDP but in a more fundamental way of helping the process of self understanding, of shaping the collective consciousness”

(qtd. in Onyerionwu 50). Achebe uses *Things* to raise the Igbo (Africans) consciousness about who they are, how they were and what they passed through as well as to assure them of their great cultural root.

In this study, one learns that name means and that name is a cultural product. One learns that *Things Fall Apart* is a literature that the author deliberately chooses the names of certain characters and situations to teach various significant lessons. The author not only encourages his people to be proud of their names, he uses this work to promote, propagate and preserve Igbo (African) culture.

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