

The Conflict of the West and the Centre in Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottled Leopard*

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Introduction: The West Versus Center

Society is virtually centered round conflict. Usually, these are internal conflicts. Conversely, external factors play a hidden, but dominant role in shaping the society. Conflict in this discourse would be defined as a dissonance or disturbance of the prevailing situation or *status quo*. By and large, the world is divided into blocs and ideologies – East, west, Centre, Socialism, Capitalism, etc. 'Centre' in this study is synonymous with Black Africa and her sensibilities, while 'West' connotes Euro-American attitudes and sensibilities.

Chukwuemeka Ike has shown keen interest in African – and especially, Nigerian youths. Much of his writing therefore focuses on children and the youth who imbibe positive tenets and manifest a critical temper. Unlike the university undergraduates of *The Naked Gods* (Ike 1970), the major characters of *The Bottled Leopard* (1985), are secondary school students – beginners who, like the key figures of the earlier work, leave their predominantly rural backgrounds and assemble in a school environment for academic pursuit. With the school setting comes the gradual but sure indoctrination into Western Culture and Civilization.

Ugochukwu Amobi leaves the rural Eastern Nigerian village of Ndikelionwu to attend the highly reputed Government College, Ahia. It is seen as a great privilege for one to attend such a school. In the school he meets and makes friends with students from diverse backgrounds in the country. Specifically, his closest friend, mate and confidante is Chuk (Nwachukwu) who was born in the United States by a Nigerian father and an American mother. Chuk is sent by his parents to imbibe local Igbo culture before rejoining

his parents in America. However, the college he attends is modeled after foreign colonial values. It is situated in Africa but trains Africans to shun indigenous practices in preference for Western values. In the said college, students are taught to eat in the Western style with forks, knives and spoons, even when eating local African meals like pounded yam or *garri* with *egusi* soup. They are also taught to discredit local practices such as the efficacy of traditional medicine and doctors, the belief in animal and spirit possession or the ability by a late elder to transfer such powers to a person of his choice.

Dilemma of African Youths

Amobi is caught in a serious dilemma as he is troubled by strange dreams and illusions which the traditional medicine man or *Dibia* links to a departed ancestor. The departed ancestor while alive, it is believed, possessed the ability to transform himself into a leopard in order to protect his family's interests where such were threatened. Now that he is dead, the ancestor seeks to transfer that power to a younger member of his family for the same protective purpose. The diviner – *Dibia* names Amobi as the chosen one.

Upon hearing this, Amobi could not believe his ears. Although recently he had repeatedly dreamt of a leopard causing atrocities and havocs within the neighborhood, he cannot understand the link between himself and the creature. Moreover, such beliefs are taken lightly and shunned in his school. No one attempts to validate these through modern scientific experimentation. Conversely, the Principal of the College vehemently denies the existence of the scenario and rebukes the students for peddling “the primitive and unscientific allegation that a student of this school — transformed himself into a live leopard whenever he desired” (Ike 1985:164).

In the rural village of Ndikelionwu, and indeed, in the surrounding villages, the belief in animal possession prevails. The author shows through subtle instances that such beliefs bordered on the psyche of the entire community. He draws support for such phenomena from the fact that similar manifestations are recorded in the Christian *Holy Bible* (81-83). It is customary for the European colonizer to ridicule and dismiss any phenomena which runs contrary to the Western Culture:

The European missionaries and traders who came to this country lumped together everything in our culture which was strange to them and branded it paganism. As a result, some of the things you ask about have remained mysteries, which should not be so. After all, the theory that the spirit can leave the human body temporarily, leaving the body empty, and either enter another body or roam about for some time before re-entering the original body, is not peculiar to Africa... (83)

Such stifling of reality however only breeds a greater yearning among people for the truth. Suppression of the truth even breeds fantasy and rumor mongering when it is

allowed.

The Government College is cast in its stark Western habit of emphasizing the individual, which runs counter to the African concept of communality. Amobi is thus made to emphasize his 'self' while in the College, not 'self' as part of a larger community or a larger whole. Hence, when he comes home on holidays, he is reserved, withdrawn and very self-conscious. He acts like a stranger in his own community. His only real friend and confidante becomes Adanma - Nma for short (109). Moreover, it appears that their rapport is sustained by the mere fact that both of them gained admission to a college upon completion of their primary education. The situation might have been different if one of them had been a drop out or an academic failure.

The design of the school, its buildings, the detachment of the staff from students, especially the Principal who is supposed to be a father and thus very close to them, all portray alienation which is a common ingredient in the Western culture. Indeed, students and staff live separately from each other. Students with problems are scared and afraid to consult their teachers for sustaining solutions.

Chuk – Nwachukwu – who was born in the United States and partly brought up there, views Africa very negatively. He does not see anything good about his ancestral home. He therefore looks condescendingly on people at the Government College. He is full of himself and his bloated ego fools him into believing that he is better than anyone else in the school. Students at the College tend to lend credence to his pomposity since they excuse his mistakes. For instance, Chuk employs American Slang to speak and no one complains or rebukes him. Nobody tells him to revert to Standard English usage. He is selfish and believes that no one else matters but himself. He attempts to exploit other people's generosity to their disadvantage. When Chuk and Amobi are suspended from the College for breaching regulations, Amobi shows compassion and understanding by taking him home to his village. Chuk shows little interest in learning local customs. He later slanders Amobi by spreading rumours, falsehood and exaggeration about him. To worsen matters, Chuk writes a derogatory letter about Africa to his parents in the United States of America. In it he says among other things:

Was I scared stiff when we first arrived? No electricity. In its place, all sorts of bush lamps I have never seen before, some of them too messy to touch. No running water, so no proper toilet... (141)

Chuk does not acknowledge and uphold his African cultural heritage. He instead clings to his mother's culture, which he perceives to be right and superior.

Accommodating Nature of the African Culture

However, in spite of Chuk's snobbish and condescending attitude towards local African habits, Amobi's family and other members of the Ndikelionwu Community

receive him warmly and cater to his needs. They expect his condescension which they generally attribute to his ignorance about the Igbo Culture, but they take time and pain to enlighten him about it:

The society was governed by innumerable rules handed down by their ancestors, Chuk had gone on. Rules, rules, rules! Your behaviour, the words you uttered at given times, everything was governed by rules. It was not until an old man had snatched a glass of palm wine from his hand that Chuk learnt that it was the height of rudeness for a boy of his age to receive the cup of wine extended to him with his left hand! (142)

The Ndikelionwu people display typical African communality towards Chuk. However, he rebuffs their hospitality and repays them with contempt and resentment. He equally becomes an embarrassment to his friend, Amobi while at school. The thorny issue, which leads to the embarrassment, is the concept of leopard possession, which Amobi is said to have inherited from his late relation. These beliefs and manifestations are common and integral to the African environment. To Chuk – and in the light of his foreign background, these sound strange since Westerners consciously ignore such issues. It is only through the Geography teacher at the College that Amobi realizes the existence beyond Africa of such practices. The passage in *The Holy Bible* about the man possessed by demons is also mentioned to lend credence to this view (81).

Two critical issues in this work are the Western perception of phenomena and the African reading of such manifestations. Underlying these two issues is the attempt to impose Western sensibilities on the African worldview. The result of this imposition is conflict, which erupts since no allowance is made by the foreign culture to understand and embrace local culture and sensibilities. Much of the local phenomena that is not appreciated and understood by the West is roundly dismissed as superstition, even where such beliefs and practices have existed among indigenous peoples for as long as their communities. Amobi's problem of leopard possession cannot be solved by the College he attends or by Western medicine because the West has already rejected the existence or possibility of such occurrence. The story would have been different if allowance was made for such phenomena from the outset. Instead of taking the bull by the horn through encouraging research and experiment into the matter which incorporates African and non African tools and concepts, the West exhibits its limitations and short sights by consoling itself through denial of the existence of such practices in Africa and elsewhere.

Syncretism: An Attempt to Blend

On the contrary, the reality and genuineness of practices such as animal and spirit possession are effectively grasped and resolved by the local physician in *The Bottled*

Leopard, Dibia Ofia. The physician, like Amobi – the story’s hero, has the benefit of Western education and Christianity. However, when the call for service comes, Dibia Ofia rises up to face the challenge. And, through his discourse with Amobi and his father, the Dibia displays knowledge of both traditional African and Western concepts. Thus, he manifests an understanding of both cultures:

Amobi took a quick view of the house before stepping in... Externally, the house looked rather attractive than anything in Amobi’s father’s compound. Built of cement blocks and corrugated iron sheets, it had a small veranda in front, dominated by two pairs of concrete round pillars, one pair on each side of the entrance into the veranda. It could have belonged to a civil servant or a trader. The only indicators that it belonged to a dibia were a termite ridden sign board and long strips of white cloth and red cloth... The sitting room resembled any ordinary sitting room, to Amobi’s surprise (122)

Again, the medicine man blends aspects of traditional African religion with Christianity to show how conversant he is with the two religions and cultures:

Also a small, doll-like human figure in either ceramic or wood, Amobi could not tell which, bearing a spear and standing on a large table at the far end of the sitting room. Amobi was intrigued to find standing beside the figure a full plate colour portrait of the Virgin Mary with her son Jesus Christ! (123)

Perhaps the most significant point about the medicine man lies not in his ability to blend local and foreign cultures, but in the fact that he resolves Amobi’s problem of leopard possession once and for all. Western medicine proves to be too shallow to disentangle the issue of leopard possession in the boy.

Juxtaposed with Amobi’s leopard possession is the Mammy Water story (72-75). Erinma is a student in a college for girls. She is said to be possessed at regular intervals by the water goddess – *Mammy Water*. The phenomenon is beyond her grasp and control and whenever it occurs, she is catapulted from the dormitory to a mysterious river where she undergoes rituals at the behest of the water goddess. She is powerless to resist and is entirely at the capricious dictate of the goddess (73). Once again, Western solutions prove to be too hollow to sort out the problem. And equally, it is a local medicine man or *dibia* who proffers an enduring solution (75).

Conclusion

Through such incidents, readers are shown an example of the conflict generated from a meeting of two differing and often opposing cultures. The opposition results largely from the lack of desire by the West to appreciate and grasp local cultures fully

because it assumes superiority over such. Local culture is however shown to be more sustaining for local problems since it ably resolves outstanding matters in the community.

Hence, there is the need to come to terms with local reality by according recognition to manifest phenomena and practices, which have existed over time among members of a given society. Western techniques usually prove to be enduring when blended with indigenous realities. Moreover, such a marriage of contrasting cultures affords locals and foreigners alike the opportunity to appreciate each other's diversities.

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