

# **CHI SYMBOLISM IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*: A HERMENEUTIC UNDERSTANDING**

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## **Introduction**

The hermeneutic application in this work is to project the philosophic enterprise in the thought embedded in the fiction of an African contemporary thinker Chinua Achebe. I will extract the chi symbolism as exhibited in his famous work *Things Fall Apart*. *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe gives fictionalized account of Igbo life and times which are close to the reality of our era. Philosophy, according to D. D. Raphael in *Problems of Political Philosophy*, is “the critical evaluation of beliefs which we normally take for granted without thinking of any grounds for justification” (4). Hence, philosophy is the conscious effort of man to understand and give meaning to his world-thought the solution which he offers to the problems of daily living in society. Philosophy is critical because nature itself, which is its subject matter, has no attributes or character, no final or fixed point.

J. F. Mora in *Philosophy Today Conflicting Tendencies* highlights that one of the important features of philosophy which can not be denied is that of its heterogeneity and diversity. As such one can therefore talk of continental or even racial philosophies within the ambit of the universal discipline known as philosophy. Thus we have African philosophy, Western philosophy, Oriental philosophy, American philosophy, Latin-American philosophy etc., each of which has a plethora of philosophical doctrines, schools and traditions.

African philosophy is a rational coherent and critical reflection on the African experience. Because of its critical nature, African philosophy constitutes the highest form of African thinking and reflection, it is the motor and catalyst of Africa's entire cultural endeavours and civilization.

This enterprise is undertaken out of critical extraction of inherent philosophic contents embedded in this fictional novel, *Things Fall Apart* which has been described by Emmanuel Ngara in *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* as:

the picture of an Igbo society that was highly organised and deeply religious, a society which valued bravery, hard work, material wealth as well as eloquence and dignity—a society that possessed an enviable culture (p.111).

The work will extract the chi symbolism from this novel via hermeneutics to assert philosophic content in African thought pattern.

### **Symbols in African Thought**

Attempts are now being made to contextualize African thought and give it a new presentation and interpretation especially after the distortion and suppression it suffered from the collapse of the early black African civilizations and particularly during colonial rule in Africa.

Ernest Cassier in *An Essay on Man* tend to understand the African culture when he describes man as a symbolic animal, that is, an animal that can invent and use symbols. Richard C. Onwuanibe in one of his lectures described symbol as a sign which points to the presence of another with additional value(s) according to the intentionality of the user. Thus man operates not only on the level of signs but also at the level of symbols. Man's world is a world of symbol. We can talk of culture because man can rise to the level of symbols. Cassier points out that symbols make up propositional speech which ultimately expresses propositional thought. Propositional speech makes man to have propositional language. He further writes in *An Essay on Man* "the symbolic function is not restricted to particular cases but is a principle of universal applicability, which encompasses the whole field of human thought" (34).

Men, world over, have always couched their thoughts and beliefs, be they sapiential or religious in deep symbolism that call for decodation, a venture which necessitates going beyond the first naivete. This current venture is geared towards establishing the fact that methodologically, African philosophy can follow the hermeneutic gateway to get at the meaning of their texts which are generally obscure and symbolic. An African philosopher, Kwesi Wiredu, in *Philosophy and an African Culture* asserts:

Every traditional philosophy is essentially prescientific and every people has its own traditional philosophy, a stock of originally unwritten proverbs, maxims usages, etc. passed on through successive generations from times when societies were simpler and organised science was as yet unknown (29). He argues for the rational universal need for the elucidation of all cultural concepts. Paul Ricoeur equally argues that everything a philosopher could say have been said enigmatically, pre-philosophically in the complete language of myth and symbol. Since as Ricoeur in *Symbolism of Evil* pointed out “all the symbols...all the myths...speaks of the situation of the being of man in the being of the world”(352), the hermeneutic enterprise becomes a very consoling exercise in philosophy. It must be pointed out initially that as interpretation, hermeneutics has always remained a great problem. This is because of the unavailability of a pre-suppositionless point of view (351-7). The implication of presupposition in interpretation is made more evident in the fact that our interpretation of a given symbol or proverb may differ widely and may even contradict one another. This is not itself negative. The conflict of interpretation does not only demonstrate the multivalence of symbolism and its richness but also show that every interpretation deals with the same symbol or proverb and evidently expresses something significant to the peculiar set of meaning they convey and the intentions which went into their production and use. In short, there is no symbol, no proverb without exegesis and no exegesis without contestation. This leads to the existence of the various schools of thought in philosophy.

### **Hermeneutic Understanding of Symbol**

The philosophic examination of chi symbolism in Igbo context is hinged on fictional text of the great Igbo novelist and thinker, the Igbo biographer Chinua Achebe. Achebe is the bases of my emphasis due to the fact that he is a more universally accepted literary authority on Igbo person. The attempt in effect is to philosophically examine what chi symbolism is from Achebe’s fictionalized articulation of the Igbo life. Fiction is always fiction but the idea conveyed is far from being regarded

as fiction. When fiction becomes logically established and weighed on the balance of reality, they could stand for philosophy.

Etymologically, hermeneutics suggests a sacred origin, being derived from the Greek word "hermeneia" which is related to the name of the god Hermes and the verb "hermeneuein". These words have three directions of meaning:

To express/expression, to explain/explanation and to translate/translation. All the three shades of meaning are rendered in English by to interpret/interpretation which in general, means "bring to understanding." In Greek mythology, Hermes is the messenger of the gods, the go-between between gods and men. Hermes, the wing-footed messenger-god, functions significantly, to render what was beyond human understanding into a form that the human mind could grasp. In order to accomplish his tasks, Hermes had to be conversant with the idioms of both gods and men. He makes manifest the divine thought, translates the infinite to the finite, the divine spirit into sensory phenomenon and therefore he denotes analysis, measure and particularity. On this issue, Ralph Madu says Hermes had to understand and interpret to himself what the gods wanted to convey before he could proceed to translate, articulate and explicate their intention to mortals (11).

Paul Ricoeur sees the history of modern hermeneutics as dominated by two movements, one epistemological and the other ontological. The first is the act of understanding as a mode of knowing and the second as a way of being and a way of relating to being.

An important figure in the development of philosophical hermeneutics is Martin Heidegger. His ontology of human existence or Dasein's *Analitik* expounded in *Being and Time* serves as conceptual framework and inspiration to philosophical hermeneutics in delimiting his own task as a philosopher. The principal task of *Being and Time* was to offer an analysis of human existence so that the horizon could be established for an interpretation of the meaning of being. Thus, understanding of being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's being. To understand, in Heidegger's primordial sense, is to understand

one's position within being by projecting one's ownmost possibilities. That is, to display the constitution of being is not at all to ground by derivation as in the methodology of the human sciences, but to unfold the foundation by clarification. In other words, the phenomenological task discoverable in *Being and Time* is fundamentally a hermeneutic one. Therefore K. Muller-Volmer in *The Hermeneutic Reader* says in the phenomenology of being, there is hermeneutics in the original sense of the word. This is because it signifies the business of interpretation (34). The entire project of philosophy is guided by a hermeneutic concern, by the unalloyed attempts to make sense of the world of cultures as a coherent project of human reason and imagination.

Symbol, Paul Ricoeur says in *Hermeneutics*, is "any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates in addition another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first" (12.) Thus, one can say that a symbol is any expression which refers to some intuited universal meaning. Symbols are characterized by multiple meaning. They are signs with double references of which the first meaning points analogically to a second which is not given in any other way. There is always a natural link between the signifying and the signified.

The Igbo concept, *Chi*, has a religious background even though it occupies an enviable position in Igbo sapiential framework. It is used in various forms. Ralph Madu postulates two forms: it could mean simply day as in *chi abola* (it is day break); from a more sacred origin, it means personal god—divine afflatus—the spirit that animates human beings (33). Theophilus Okere corroborates that *chi* is really a personal god. It is the supreme God shared by each individual but more specifically in his aspect as giver and author of destiny (142). For Madu, destiny is the philosophy and belief of the traditional sage that every life is unique in significant way and is subject to series of unforeseeable hazards and unexpected rewards all mapped out by *chi* (34).

On his part, Justin N. Ekennia sees *chi* as the third element of the Igbo metaphysical understanding of person. This

is an additional element to western understanding (27). For him, chi 'is a unique life force, which each person possesses. No two persons have the same chi. It is regarded as the Igbo principle of individualisation.... each person is unique and irreplaceable' (27). Arinze regards it as an emanation or participation of the supreme God (80). Arinze calls chi a personal god. Chi is seen as the supreme God as shared by each individual but more especially in his aspect as giver and author of destiny. In another articulation, Mbonu Ojike in his work *My Africa* asserts: 'No one chi is like another because no two persons are identical. A rich man's chi is rich and a poor man's chi is poor. A man's chi is masculine and a woman's chi is feminine. A man's chi is equal to that man' (183).

The core conflict of individual versus community in *Things Fall Apart* revolves around the Igbo conception of chi that Achebe rendered as personal god. The chi often comes up in this common saying – *onye kwe chi ya ekwe* – meaning he who consents, the god will also consent or in several variants involving the little bird, *nza* (22)

- (a) *nza rijue afo o makwagh onye kere ya*
- (b) *nza rijue afo ya echefue chi ya*

meaning:

- (a) a well-fed little bird does not remember its creator
- (b) a well-fed little bird forgets its god

These chi-based adages can be traced not only in *Things Fall Apart* (13, 19, 92) but also in *Arrow of God*. For Okonkwo's breaking of the communal bond may be compared to the village Umuaro's conceit when going to war against another village.

The spectrum of Igbo application of the chi reveals that it is used to denote destiny. This is shown thus in *chim*—my fate, my destiny, my portion; *chi ojo*—bad fate, bad destiny. Hence, chi is by implication both destiny and dispenser of destiny. Igbo sage use of chi both as single word and as sentence-form symbols generates ambiguities and paradoxes. Their proper meaning will continue to escape one's vigilance as long as one continues to search for them only in the domain of ordinary language. The truth of its meaning is only sought in the symbolic language family within the concepts used. Even at that R. E.

Palmer in his book *Hermeneutics* asserts “to focus purely on the positivity of what a text explicitly says is to do an injustice to the hermeneutical task. Thus, it is necessary to go behind the text to find what the text did not, and perhaps could not say”(234). And since every assertion may be seen as the answer to a question, the interpreter must thus step into the question horizon within which the text moves. Cognizant of this fact, Ricoeur in his article *The Language of Faith*, says all symbolic language is a language which says something other than what it seems to say, and by its double meaning, releases further signification.

Raph Madu enunciates *chi* metonymically (35), in interpreting *chi* as both destiny and dispenser of destiny. In metonymic symbolization, effect can stand for its cause and vice versa because of the intimate relationship between the two: destiny (effect) and dispenser of destiny (cause). Besides the cause and effect relationship which sounds rather fatalistic, one could imagine other metonymic relationship.

Equally, the ambiguities and paradoxes that characterize the application of *chi* (*onye kwe chi ya ekwe* and *onye kwe ma chi ekweghi*) can be approached from a largely cultural perspective, that also suggests some deep coherence. Hence, the conflicting views will be different responses or approaches to, maybe, the same or similar thought-provoking events at different moments and situations in life. Man’s singular encounter with the numerous hazards of life notably death and failure, does not loan itself to simple enunciation, to a concise or precise formulation which will precede a purely formal deduction. Hence, though nature or life may not be contradictory per se it can and does become easily so in view of the particular human activities that interpret it. In this perspective, some of the ambiguities and paradoxes evident in the signification of the *chi* are conflicting yet complementary life experiences, each of which is true in its own right. *Chi* is a good example of a symbol with accumulative intention, a traditional sapiential and religious symbol which has taken on so many contradictory values that tend to neutralize one another. The *chi* symbol also demonstrates the potentiality of some symbols to

acquire oppositional values and function that make polysemy one of the prime problems of semantics.

### **Chi Symbolism in *Things Fall Apart***

A good illustration of the problems of chi/personal identity relationship is the interesting account of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo, the son of the lazy and unsuccessful Unoka, by dint of his industry, rose to power and prominence in his community. He became a successful farmer and thereby acquired wealth, and so took traditional Igbo titles. In his observation with important implications for both Okonkwo and his chi, Achebe argues that: any one who knows his grim struggle against poverty and misfortune cannot say he has been lucky. If ever a man deserves his success that man is Okonkwo. At an early age, he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At most, one could say that his chi or personal god was good... Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his chi agreed (19). But like the little bird nza who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his chi, Okonkwo began to lose fame through arrogance and brusqueness in dealing with less successful men (22). In one incident, he had called a fellow clansman a 'woman' because the man in question had merely contradicted him at a village meeting. This meeting is for men, Okonkwo had said. In another instance, he beat his wife during the week of peace when such an act was an abomination—*nso ani*. For this, Okonkwo had to placate the earth goddess by offering a she-goat, a hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries. In yet another incident, Okonkwo defied the warning from Ezeudu and took part in the killing of Ikemefuna ( a slave entrusted to his care for more than three years and who like his children grew to regard him as a father), thus committing a second offence against sacred laws and tradition of his clan (40-3).

Finally, at the funeral of Ezeudu (the oldest man in his village), Okonkwo's gun had exploded, killing the sixteen years old son of the deceased. For the traditional Igbo, this is 'a point of no return'. To spill a clansman's blood or to take his life accidentally or otherwise is an abomination against the earth



goddess. Okonkwo had to flee to return after seven years. He fled with his family to Mbanta (his maternal land) and his house was burned. Achebe tells us that while Okonkwo was in exile, he gradually lost the taste of work. The once popular and respected Okonkwo became an impotent, social nobody. The seven years in exile was like beginning life anew without vigor and enthusiasm of youth, like learning to become left-handed in old age. Work no longer had for him the pleasure it used to have, and when there was no work to do, he sat in a silent half-sleep (12).

While Okonkwo was in exile, a Christian fellowship had arrived in his village. The knowledge of this, on his return from exile, choked him with hate. He planned and saw to the execution of the conspiracy to burn down the whiteman's church. Because of this, Okonkwo and five elders were arrested, detained and maltreated at the district commissioner's order. After their release, a village meeting was called for the six elders to report their experiences. But no sooner had the meeting began than five messengers arrived from the district commissioner ordering that the meeting be stopped. Infuriated and boiling with revenge, Okonkwo challenged and beheaded the head messenger. Immediately, the meeting broke up in confusion. Okonkwo, knowing that Umuofia would not go to war, and afraid of the commissioner's reprisals, went and hung self. With this he had committed another abomination. Only strangers could bury him. And as Obierka, Okonkwo's best friend complained to the district commissioner, 'that man (Okonkwo) was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog' (147).

As is evident from the above account Okonkwo's life was filled with ups and downs, climax and anticlimax, praise and dejection and finally shameful death. How best can one interpret Okonkwo's fate vis-à-vis his chi? As his life was characterized by contradictions –success and failure, greatness and shameful death–could one say that he had two chis or only one that was both successful and unsuccessful? Here what is important is not the raising of particular philosophical problems but the spotting of the general philosophical orientation of the chi/personal destiny issue in Igbo culture. Like most African tradition, the

Igbo have a participatory culture. To have created man, God is to bear a hand in his cause and be involved.

### **Conclusion**

This work has exposed principles and postulates of the order of critical, rational and intellectual interplay in projecting African philosophical enterprise. Based on the intentionality of the human mind, African philosophical hermeneutics seeks to articulate meaning in what is said (terms, language, concepts, beliefs, proverbs, songs, signs and symbols etc..). And generally through the meaning of what is said attempts also to articulate meaning in what is most profound in being.

Symbols as we have seen are any structure of signification and also any expression referring to some intuited universal meaning. Thus, chi symbolism with its religious background occupies an enviable position in Igbo sapiential framework. As life is a struggle, one's chi leads him in the war of survival. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, butere chi ya uzo nke mere oji gbagbuo onwe ya n'oso.

It must be borne in mind that philosophy is first and foremost a question of meaning and interpretation. Hermeneutics offers an adequate method for understanding the symbols and institutions of the Igbo culture. I have tried to reveal or render explicit the hidden meaning and signification in Igbo culture. I have tried also to articulate the concept of chi symbolism in Igbo experience using the fiction in the novel, *Things Fall Apart* which is Achebe's insight into Igbo culture. It also projects the fact that in pre-colonial time philosophy existed in Africa.

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