

Chapter Twenty One

ART-LITERARY INTERFACE: THE CREATIVE MUSE OF UCHE OKEKE THROUGH CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract

*In this paper I approach art through some literary expositions of Uche Okeke. These expositions, I argue, are a direct influence of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which Okeke illustrated in 1958. The paper postulates that Uli could present as a dominant ideology in the artistic genre if one juxtaposes it with the Western paradigm of Picasso's cubism. While I attempt to underscore the importance of Igbo folklore to the creative enterprise, as exemplified by Achebe and Okeke, I also emphasize the role of Okeke's drawings and literary landmarks in the institutionalization of an art-literary tradition at the department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria Nsukka. This attitude, I argue, is largely determined by the singular act of Okeke's illustration of *Things Fall Apart*, an incident that would transform the creative trajectory of graduates of the department in many years to come.*

Introduction

Why painting? Why poetry? Why art? Why Nsukka School? Why Okeke? Why Achebe? These questions constantly bug my mind even before thinking of Okeke's epochal role in establishing this tradition of art-literary interface at the Nsukka School of Art. The reason for this is that as a fledgling neophyte in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria Nsukka, I had started envisaging this prognosis to sound poetic. I had also sniffed, albeit unconsciously, this virus of poetic contagion Chinua Achebe transmitted through the whole of the Nsukka landscape and which Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu successfully carried around the art department. It was then, in 1995, that I got wind of the two award-winning books of poetry – Obiora Udechukwu's *What the Madman Said* and Olu Oguibe's *A Gathering Fear*. That was when I started off and realised afterwards that in the words of Stevens Wallace, "the search for supreme truths has been a search for some supremely acceptable fiction" (Wallace, 152). Most recently as a relatively mature thinker, I concluded that Uche Okeke was a master artist whose ideas have formed part of what I have classified the 'poetics of *uli*' under his visual and verbal narratives. However, he was able to achieve this through his contact with Chinua Achebe in the event of his illustration of *Things Fall Apart*.

On Dominant Ideology and the Production of Artistic Knowledge

Most recently, to say that knowledge is constantly produced in various disciplines sounds more of a cliché than ordinary salutations of the day. That most of what humanity holds today as universal truth emerged from conceptions of producers of knowledge is well taken. Subjectivity, meaning, truth and history are materials of cultural politics and art being one of the most important aspects of a people's heritage is involved in all of these areas and especially in its interrelationships with power; the power to direct vision, to represent common sense, to create official versions, to represent the social world, and to establish an ideology¹. To say that *uli* was a form of artistic knowledge produced which successfully transformed into an ideology may not miss the point and we no longer need to question how artists arrive at their products; rather we tend to escape a vicious fragmentation of mental consciousness by asking less and accepting more. African oral tradition was one of the chief means early societies used to perpetuate themselves through such avenues as folklores and didactic chants. It was one of the early models of knowledge production which sought to represent aspects of the world in fictitious terms and oftentimes mistaken for reality by the unwary. Claude Wauthier has noted that "African intellectuals frequently stress the richness of this oral folklore" (Wauthier, 65). He went further to state that one of such intellectuals is Ahmadou Hampate Ba who

in a study of the Fulani poetry of the Massina, praises the diversity of literary genres, their precise codification, the variety of musical instruments and the dances accompanying them – all of which is indicative of the level of development reached by this poetry (65).

We could posit a simple parallelism with this poetry in Uche Okeke's creations, most of which are evocations from this oral tradition. It would be necessary to mention here that Chinua Achebe, upon completing *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, had consulted Uche Okeke for the illustrations and Okeke simply translated the Igbo society into folklorist images especially portraying the anxiety that visited Igbo nation with the arrival of the Christian missionaries. According to Chika Okeke-Agulu,

Achebe's work especially had a clear resonance, for it deepened Okeke's understanding of Igbo culture, notwithstanding that it is a work of fiction. But it was also a major literary contribution to the quest by Nigerian intellectuals to counter, if not reject, colonial constructions of African subjectivity (Okeke-Agulu, 2008)

According to Nwafor (49), "in *Things Fall Apart*, such statements as 'Okonkwo was deeply grieved,' 'he mourned for the clan' found an explanation in the furrowed brows in Okonkwo's forehead seen from the cover page of the first edition of *Things Fall Apart*,

which Okeke dramatised with intricate *uli* lines.” I shall come back to *Things Fall Apart* later to throw more light on Okeke-Agulu’s statement above.

It was in the same 1958 when *Things Fall Apart* was published that Uche Okeke and other left-wing students of Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology now Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, were gathering momentum for an eventual showdown with the colonial art tutors. These students also formed the ‘Zaria Rebels’² and declared a style of art which Okeke was to inscribe as “natural synthesis”. Apparently tired of the art knowledge propagated by the colonial teachers which tended to promote Western standards, ‘The Zaria Rebels’ sought to produce another type of knowledge that is predicated on the marriage of the traditional and the modern. Through this way they recreated the existing knowledge of art thus forming what has come to become the most historical epoch in the history of Nigerian art. According to Krydz Ikwemesi: “members of the Art Society, by challenging the art curricula and *status quo* through their works and a common Afrocentric ideology, were to become the vanguard of Nigerian modernism.” (10)

The colonial art tutelage in Nigeria then could be comparable to “dominant ideology thesis”(Tunbridge & Ashworth, 47) of the French Academy which saw the dictatorial triumph of the French elites in art exhibitions before the arrival of Edouard Manet’s painting, *Dejeuner sur l’herbe* exhibited in *Salon des Refuses*.³ Manet’s revolutionary spirit (which I liken to Okeke’s) marked the turning point in the history of modern painting. In this instance one may pander to Abercrombie’s view that “different groups can generate ideas which run counter to dominant ideologies.”⁴ Thus, Hunter noted that *Dejeuner sur l’herbe* which is a sharp deviation from the established style of the Salon immediately became a centre of dispute and the beginning of Manet’s widely acknowledged leadership of the vanguard of art. That Okeke and the Zaria group were leaders of the vanguard of Nigerian modernism is indisputable. In the manner in which Manet lead a revolution against the French Salon, in Nigeria Okeke and his Zaria group championed the shift from a western-dictated narrative towards paintings that wore folklorist imageries. This period also saw Okeke writing many poems and literatures based on these folklores. This gave birth to an emergent artistic production that is based on experimentation. Perhaps one important question to be asked here is “how is the artistic knowledge and vision formed and how does it inform the work of art?” (Rogers & Rogers, 24). The formation of artistic knowledge is seen in both Okeke’s poetry and *uli* painting. *Uli* was almost a moribund creative idiom in Nigeria before Okeke imported it into the domain of the academic intelligentsia at the Nsukka School of art. As hinted above, this type of knowledge formation could be likened to other forms in the history of modern art. For example while Okeke and the Zaria group may have produced a modern art knowledge in the Nigerian context, Picasso did the same in the Western art scene. This established the position of both Picasso and Okeke as inventors of knowledge. According to Leopold Sedar Senghor,

the lessons take on a deeper meaning if we consider that, to be an inventor of new forms, a creator of beauty and *producer of artistic knowledge*, yet above all of human emotion, Picasso began by going back to his racial roots, the mix that comes from the Mediterranean, the crossroads of all routes and races, and consequently the home of civilization (Senghor 148).

The above feat achieved by Picasso may have been paralleled by Okeke in his ever 'invention of new forms' that are peopled with folklorist images. It has been noted also that there was no singular modernism and that "a plurality of modernisms took root and flourished in different countries. Like its European counterpart, African modernism takes on many forms at the hands of individual artists in different countries" (Martin 157). The need for recognition of this plurality has necessitated a question by Bernard Dadie, "Are the dreams of other men in The West different from those of Africans?" (Quoted in Wauthier 157). One may, at this point, question the rationale behind the historical exclusion of Africa in such landmarks?

Okeke's Literary Influence at Nsukka

In Nigeria, the plurality of modernisms was represented by Uche Okeke and his contemporaries through their early folklore images. As will be shown in later discussions these folklore images were mainly developed after Okeke's illustration of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. It was also recorded that Okeke was not only an artist but a poet who left a legacy of art-poetry tradition in the Nsukka School of Art. Before assuming the headship of Fine and Applied Arts Department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1970, Okeke had already established himself as a poet, going by Emeka Agbayi's statement:

As a writer, Uche Okeke won first prize in poetry with "Young Munchi Rowers" in a national literary competition organized by the National Arts Council in 1960. He has been featured in many anthologies alongside Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J.P Clark, Gabriel Okara, Okogbule Wonodi, Mabel Segun and others. (4).

Agbayi notes also that in 1971, a year after his arrival at Nsukka, he "received a drama award from the African Studies Centre, University of California, USA, for *Ekeama: An Ogbanje Drama* (4). This idiosyncrasy was later planted by Okeke in the department of Fine and applied Arts at Nsukka. Art students organised themselves into literary groups and met during off-school hours to interact. On this, Nwafor has written that:

Between 1987 and 1988 Gbubemi Amas and a group of other artists started the Anthill. The Anthill was a poetry club where weekly nights of poetry reading resulted in the publication of an anthology in 1989. Like an affliction

of some sort, this tradition continued even with greater zest than ever known (169)

Beyond the university at Nsukka some graduates of the department indulged in poetry either as a pastime or serious vocation. For example Krydz Ikwemesi besides writing some poems has convened a forum where artists met at Enugu in poetry reading sessions. Mature Tanko Okoduwa and Okey Nwafor have published and edited books of poetry. Chika Okeke, Blaise Gundu Gbaden, Ozioma Onuzulike, Sylvester Ogbechie, Marcia Kure, Chijioke Onuora, Barthosa Nkurumeh, Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo, among others, were some of the artists who were influenced by the knowledge of Uche Okeke's art-poetry amalgam. Through this process these artists were able to build a corpus of work that would ever merge words and images in a style uniquely characteristic of the Nsukka School.

Okeke's Myth, *Things Fall Apart*, *Uli* and others

At a time in history, Western writers in their characteristic contemptuous manner towards African knowledge doubted the gift of myth-making by the Negro. Wauthier notes that "the anthropologist Hermann Baumann actually claims that the Negro is devoid of the gift of myth-making" (65). Again he notes that "even Frobenius' book, *African Genius* is most disappointing in this respect, because all the creation myths therein come from north of the Sahara." (Wauthier, 65). This false belief has been rejected by African writers and artists who have successfully demonstrated this through their works. For example Okeke's work, *Eri, the Morning of Creation* (1983 Gouache), was a mythical work based on the Igbo version of creation. Eri is believed by the Igbo to have been the first man in the Anambra River area, coming to earth from the home of Chukwu, the god of the heavens. This painting is a little different from Okeke's other imagery with its emphasis on the landscape. Another work *Nza the Smart* (pen and ink, 1958), again typically illustrates an idea inspired by Igbo thoughts and well embedded in a mythical interpretation of the Igbo worldview. There are so many such works by Uche Okeke such as *The Fabled Brute*, (oil on Board, 1959), and *Ubo Mbe* (gouache, 1970). A study of Okeke's style here approximates oral rhythm and rhyme if viewed from chorus songs surrounding most folktales and masquerade chants.

Historically, 1958 may have proven momentous to the flourishing of the arts in Nigeria given many concomitant developments in this regard. Apart from the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, there were analogous events in the high life music industry as the popular Igbo high life musician Osita Osadebe released his first album to public acclaim, admiration and acceptance. The year also saw another music legend, the Afro beat king, Fela Anikulakpo Kuti leaving for Trinity College of Music in London for studies. Also the year witnessed the acceptance of the Igbo artist Ben Enwonwu into the British mainstream with an honour of The Order of the British Empire. The world is large but time and space may have been compressed by a connectivity of events that suggest similitude in achievements in different parts of the world both in the arts and other disciplines. 1958 may have marked a

turning point in Okeke's thought patterns and thus dramatically re-directed his art towards folklore going by some of the tales Achebe told in *Things Fall Apart* which Okeke obviously read before illustrating. Before 1958 there was almost little or no animal forms in Okeke's works and the first to become visibly remarkable was *Nza the Smart*, (1958) and *Osa* (1958). These themes by Okeke have been inspired by Achebe's ubiquitous reference to animals in folk stories:

Okonkwo also told his children stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children - stories of tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* – who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat (Achebe 38).

This is one part of the tales that mentioned animals and the birds of which we shall see subsequently how this influenced Okeke's constant recourse to animals and birds in his art. Achebe continues:

He (Nwoye) remembered the story his mother often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth. At last Vulture was sent to plead with Sky, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of the sons of men....At last Sky was moved to pity, and he gave to Vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam (38).

Perhaps one would feel that Okeke's background as an Igbo would naturally arm him with a knowledge of such stories but by reading and illustrating *Things Fall Apart* he must have been creatively energized and fortified to launch a folkloric art. Achebe repeatedly mentions the birds particularly, '*Eneke*' and '*Nza*'. He describes Okonkwo as the "little *Nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi* (god) to a fight" (Achebe, 23). The continuous mention of such birds and other animals re-echoed in Okeke's drawings as '*Nza the Smart*', '*Osa*'(1958), '*Wrestling Beasts*', (1958), '*Animal heads with horn*'(1962), '*Okuku's Chicken* (1958) among others. Sometimes, in Okeke's works, the birds are rendered with lines creating fluid and exaggerated forms that appear to move in a circular motion. More lines are used to form rhythmic texture inside the bodies. It is on this folklore that the idea of *uli* took conception and hence metamorphosed into an ideology and a dominant one at that. From 1958, Okeke laboured further on *uli* and the whole of 1960's came with a style that brought out the linearity, decorations, asymmetrical rhythm, pithy finesse, and an abstract subtlety invoked through daily objects and entities found in Igbo land. Most of these

objects and entities frequently abound in *Things Fall Apart*, represented in mytho-poetic terms by Achebe. Okeke may have been inspired by this. The invention of *uli* motifs and symbols therefore represents a direct response of an inventive mind, a craving for organic revolution in the Igbo creative ideas and a yearning for introspective revision of African visual knowledge.

Again Okeke's recourse to forest and plant motifs reflects Achebe's continuous use of sentences such as, "the fear of the forest and the forces of nature" (23), "if a man dies during the week of peace, he is not buried but cast into the evil forest" (23), "the universal trill of a million million forest insects" (7) "he grew like yam tendrils in rainy season" (337), among others. After 1958 and perhaps in 1959, Okeke's works took the form of forest. Even figures were synthesized into marathon stylistics of leaves and twigs. Except from the titles in some of the works the forms may not be easily discerned from the running stems, crawling tendrils, and the leafy formations of the tropical rainforest⁵

Viewed from another perspective, poetic resonances are distilled from Okeke's works through such elements as repetition, rhythm, rhyme, and style. The interplay of negative and positive spaces unveils a poetic quality which could only remind one of the brevity and profundity encapsulated in Igbo proverb. Nwafor notes that "Uche Okeke, like Chinua Achebe creates imagery through the literal use of proverbs and figures of speech. Some metaphorical allusions like 'kpaza' in Okeke's poem "I will not go to Kpaza" does not contend the issue of Okeke accepting to borrow from Achebe's Enoch in *Things Fall Apart* (163). Indeed the Igbos have a gift of oratory just like most Africans; their creativity resonates between wit, recondite tell-telling and terseness of speech. Okeke translates this quality into *uli* in the style of line economy,⁶ convoluting whimsical forms and a perfect display of wit. One other very important feature which *uli* shares with poetry is lyricism and which Achebe's novel helped Okeke to develop further. According to Chris Afuba,

Okeke's illustration of the unfortunate confrontation between the people of Umuofia, with their masquerades, and the missionary with his interpreter at the village church in *Things Fall Apart* is a typical example of organic fusion. The house, the masquerades and the people are rendered with the same lyrical strokes. (Afuba 112).

In different stages of his artistic career, Okeke is fully engaged in the interpretation of folktale characters into *uli*. Such characters come in form of "supernatural beings, members of the animal kingdom, some magical objects, as well as inanimate objects" (Inegbeboh 39). No doubt *uli* replicates the traditional verbal phrase through the visual record of characters who live in fictitious world. In a similar vein, the continuous use of lines in *uli* drawings imitates some sonic sounds emitted by traditional musical instruments where the curiosity lies in the ingenuity of display by the artist. Nwafor (50) notes that "the poetic appurtenances

emitted by *Ogene* (gong) – with *kpo kpo kpo kpo gam kpo gam kpom kpom gam* – has an equivalent response in *uli*'s intermittent quivering as the artist draws it up or down.” When we consider the musical notes accompanying most folktales and the folktales themselves we are constantly reminded of entities whose forms found ready explanation in the art of some Igbo legends – visual artists and musicians alike. For example the mythic musical folk songs of Mike Ejeagha evoke a variant of the Orwellian cosmos where animals take over the role of humans.

Conclusion

Art cannot be divorced from literature, poetry or music. Uche Okeke has demonstrated that there is a possibility for verbal-visual dialogue in the creative enterprise. This paper may have established the fact that Uche Okeke is a visual poet whose career impacted the department of Fine and Applied Arts at Nsukka. His drawing, which is bifurcated on the genres of linearity and literarity, is an embodiment of Igbo traditional knowledge where folklore is used to impart a didactic lesson to successive generations. This paper, no doubt, has shown that *Things Fall Apart* ignited and nurtured this attitude in Uche Okeke. As noted above, after sowing this dual seed of art and poetry at Nsukka, generations of Nsukka artists have continued to benefit from its flowering. Scores of students have laboured to assume dual vocations in the course of their practice. Some have either convened a platform for the commune of creativity in different genres, while others have responded to a great literary yearning through publications in the form of poetry or prose or mere write ups in exhibition catalogues and elsewhere. Who said that visual artists are not writers? Such statement is understood in the ironical in the form of artists forming the greatest group of literary writers. Art is known as the condensed word and its inspiration is principally taken from the written word or, put differently, the spoken sound. Nsukka school may remain historical in the practice of art in Nigeria and indeed Africa, but its achievements may not be complete without a mention of Okeke's endeavours along with such bright minds as Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, Ola Oloidi, and El Anatsui, at entrenching a strong visual-verbal culture there; a practice heralded by Okeke's inspirations from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Notes

1. There are many variations of this discourse bordering on the production of knowledge. For example many authors have referenced Michel Foucault's models in exploring the workings of power in different domains of knowledge and practice. In this regard, Sharon Macdonald's version appeals to me: 'power and knowledge are thoroughly mutually implicated: power is involved in the construction of truths, and knowledge has implications for power. Again Eilean Hooper-Greenhill also remarks that "there are political implications to the ways of knowing"
2. There is a controversial contraption to the use of the 'Zaria Rebels' here. Although this was the first phrase adopted for this group in their defiance of their colonial tutors, the

rethinking of a more suitable word has replaced 'rebels' with 'revolutionaries'. The argument here is in the use of semantics and meanings. There is an aversion for a negative connotation ably reflected by 'rebels' but corrected by a perceived positive 'revolutionaries'. Obiora Udechukwu has also referred to their activities as 'Zaria Renaissance', a phrase reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance for which there are similarities.

3. The point I want to stress here is that the defeat of conservative spirit is the triumph of a dream for both Okeke and Manet. Sam Hunter detailed the story of the French Salon. The French Salon had been initiated by decree of Emperor Napoleon¹¹¹, after numerous complaints about the official biennial Salon's severe admissions policy were brought to his attention; in 1863 alone more than four thousand paintings had been turned down by the ultra-conservative jury. *Salon des Refuses* which translates 'Salon of the Rejected' represented the first organized protest by artists of progressive tendency against official art, and it was the rudimentary beginning of those exhibitions by "independents" that soon afterward punctuated the history of modern painting.

4. See <http://www.bloomsbury.com/ARC/detail.asp?EntryID=103273&bid=2> Assessed 10 march 2008 at 8 pm). See also further discussions below.

5. This characteristic was heralded with the illustration of *Things Fall Apart*. See the illustrations of *Things Fall Apart*, 1958 edition published by Heineman and understand more clearly this idiosyncrasy, then see the works after 1958, especially, for example "Head with Horn" pen 1962, "plant and Animal Forms" 1962, "Head of Prophet", 1962, "The Dawn", 1962, "Life" 1962, "From the wild Region" 1962,, "Palm Grove", 1962, Animal Heads with Horns" 1962, among others.

6. Although Okeke would take credit for the incipient *uli* experiment but this later style was further developed by Obiora Udechukwu and Chike Aniakor whose discipleship saw *uli* into shifting grounds of new character, radical formal modifications and thorough-bred conceptual import. Krydz Ikwemesi has actually remarked that "when we talk about Nsukka artists as social critics/commentators, it is not in the stable of Uche Okeke that we should look, but in the projects of his liveliest colleagues such as Udechukwu and Aniakor and their teeming students and followers in the 1980s and 1990s." Again this attitude reminds one of new agitations by some Nsukka artists towards deconstructing the "Dominant Ideology of *uli*" by forming 'alternative thesis' as suggested by K Walsh. According to Walsh, "Alternative thesis involves the re-interpreting individuals who reject the established didactic narrative and whose impact could as well form a dominant ideology." On the list of these alternative thesis initiators are Olu Oguibe who once remarked that he no longer works in *uli*. (see the Poetics of Line Catalogue by Smithsonian Institution). The extent of followership Oguibe's denunciation attracted is yet to be determined. Although El Anatsui could be said to be the first in the vanguard of the list of this 'alternative thesis' disciples through his sculptural experiments at Nsukka art School, my conclusion is that dominant ideology emerged at Nsukka to challenge *uli* through a more influential onslaught of globalization and internationalism. This actually saw the students initiating, albeit unconsciously, an ideology (through conceptual art) which has successfully challenged *uli* to this day.

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*Day in Day out, the African
continent is racked by afflictions,
disasters, macro-economic crisis and
dysfunctions, debt over-hang, corruptions,
high level illiteracy, squalor, disease, hunger
and negative and destabilizing conditions
thrown up by imperialism in cahoots
with greedy and unpatriotic
ruling class.*