

## THEMATIC SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS LEGAL REGIME IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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### I

Things fall apart  
The centre cannot hold  
Mere **anarchy** is loose upon the world  
(Achebe: 1958; emphasis added)

Chinua Achebe's globally acclaimed classic, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) (*TFA* henceforth) represents the efflorescence of African literature. Coming on the eve of Nigeria's political independence, and of course at a period when most African countries attained nationhood, the novel is an emphatic statement about the African spirit. It is clear that *Things Fall Apart's* arrival heralded the much desired confidence and self determining spirit that the comity of nations expects from an emerging voice in global affairs. Quite expectedly, the nationalism engendered by the debut of the work in African literary firmament is a pointer to its enduring brilliance. As the classic is celebrated on its 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday, it is worthwhile to reexamine the significance of this work along fresh paradigms and most especially, within new constituencies. To this end, it is intended in this paper, to explore the indigenous epistemology as it relates to law and the administration of justice in the universe of the novel.

### II

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003:42) defines anarchy, which is at the heart of the epigraph which introduces this essay as , 'a situation in which there no effective government in a country or no order in an organization or situation. Since governments are synonymous with laws and effective laws ensures order in a given society, Achebe makes a brilliant attempt at plotting oppositional scenarios viable enough to assume a wider conflict as the novel gathers artistic momentum. As an author mindful of the realities of his cultural background, Achebe rallies indigenous forces and pitches them against those of colonial incursion. This appears early enough to show that confrontation and conflict is imminent. This has basically nothing to with Okonkwo or his character deficiencies or flaws.

As the above readily suggests, the coming of the colonial people is bound to alter the status quo. For Okonkwo, Achebe's central character, it is not likely to be business as usual. A new order is around and it is incumbent on him to adapt. But human adaptation hardly comes overnight as old habits die hard. Hence the stage for confrontation appears set early in *TFA*. The implications in respect of introduction of modern jurisprudence is therefore far-reaching especially for an Okonkwo whose rise to fame and affluence in Umuofia is legendary. Thus the coming of the European missionaries poses a serious challenge to both individual and communal essence in many ways than one.

This of course leads to a consideration of the socio-political structure of the Igbo society which the 'White Man' is coming to alter. The fact that power, control and judicial administration all flow from family headship through clan then to Elders' Council in traditional arrangement in the Igbo worldview, suggests early enough that the likes of Okonkwo are on their way to political and quasi-judicial oblivion.

This implies that, a new social psychology needs to be embraced. But the Okonkwos of Umuofia rarely ever contemplate this. As enshrined in the rich culture and tradition of the society, certain principles are sacred and sacrosanct. As such, the resistance put up by Okonkwo sprouts from his strong convictions on what presently exists. For example, the administration of justice is the sole responsibility of nine male masked spirits in Umuofia hence raising questions of charges of misogyny (Anyadike, 2005:6). Obviously, there is an absence of counterbalance, which in modern legal principles ensures equity, justice and fairness.

The point is that, *TFA*'s conflict assumes serious dimension when the protagonist faces issues that are culturally confounding and antithetical to the culture and traditions which Okonkwo strives to defend. How well he does this or how faithful he adheres to the ethics of the society is another dimension. Granted that Okonkwo's drive and ambition seem to blindfold him in wild pursuit of obedience to tradition, yet he rarely acts alone when it comes to observance of enshrined principles in Umuofia's indigenous worldview. Having stated the foregoing, culture should be appreciated as a process not a stasis; hence the imminent invasion of that society is not strange, rather it is a charge on the accommodating spirit of the self.

What is implied in our discussion, thus far, is that, *TFA* is dramatizes oppositional structures, not only of cultures as variously canvassed by literary critics, but of a new social, political and judicial order coming to obviously usurp what hitherto obtains. In other words, as desirable as the dawn of change might

be, it could only be successfully inculcated in the prevailing order if there are mutual areas of understanding.

Modern judicial system coming into Umuofia from Europe owes its existence to three major sources: received English Law, Judicial Precedents and Common Laws. Basically, these sources are from a different tradition that is alien and generally written. This is in contradistinction with origins of laws in traditional situations. In the latter case, culture and folk tradition belly laws, and indigenous judicial systems. Culture is also often regarded as the unwritten constitution of the indigenous society. Hence, there is bound to be irreconcilable differences once Umuofia's worldview hosts this foreign tradition.

This paper does not hold brief for Okonkwo or his community, Umuofia. Rather .Our focus is on Achebe's dexterity as a writer at identifying the thematic significance of indigenous epistemology in a skilful juxtaposition with emerging modern judicial and legal tradition. As a matter of fact, Okonkwo's hardly deserves pity since he is evidently as stereotyped by Achebe, destined as a tragic hero in the model of the Greek tragic character.

Obiechina (1992:205) summarizes his character:

He is a rash impetuous man in addition to being a strong man. In the end, his character weaknesses and the overwhelming force of the enemy combine to defeat him and the cause for which he struggled

Now to the world of Achebe in TFA .It is an indubitable fact that this indigenous Igbo worldview, if properly harnessed has lessons to hand down to the emerging order since, according to Ademoyo (2005) the African culture is deep and philosophically coherent and plausible. This extends to the understanding that the traditional arrangement though not necessarily perfect, is a fine testimony of a pre-colonial rancor free society.

Mark Pizzatto (2003:3) rightly observes:

Postcolonial cultures feel the loss of the past communal self- and - its uncanny return-in a more specific way caught between the postmodern lures of global capitalism, the modernist inscription of national identities and the pre-modern heritage of tribal communities

As a follow-up to the above, Abiola Irele also attests to the fact that TFA is a worthy testament to Africa's pre-colonial social and political order:

In the first place, the novel provided an image of an African society, reconstituted as a living entity and in its historic circumstance: an image of a coherent social structure forming the institutional fabric of a universe of meanings and values.

What the foregoing portends for our present endeavor is simple: there is convincing circumstantial and material evidence of a precursor indigenous judicial system among the people. Despite whatever imperfections, the thematic significance of conflict of interest between a Western /European mode and the subsisting tradition paves way for effective scenario build-up in Okonkwo's Umuofia. Two incidents shall be used to explicate the thesis that, TFA benefits immensely from this contrasting set-up by its author. Actually, it is definitely indubitable whether the novelists 'deserved success as a man of letters'(Lindsfors,2002:73) would have been easily achieved without this conscious philosophical-epistemological juxtaposition. Hence, anarchy may not have been a salient thematic impetus on which the unfolding drama of existential struggle is premised.

Okonkwo's banishment for the 'mistaken murder' of a clansman is our first reference point. The question here is not whether the banishment is in consonance with Umuofia tradition, since this is explicitly stated in the novel; rather one may pause to put this in the context of modern judicial system. Though this is akin to manslaughter in modern juristic thought, it is doubtful whether Okonkwo's punishment under Western law would have been as light banishment or exile in contemporary times. In fact, unless proven beyond reasonable doubt, such acts are generally as meriting capital punishment as grave as life imprisonment. The point therefore is that such is the socio milieu in which Achebe's novel thrives and survives.

The case of Ikemefuna is another significant example. It is not intended to probe such an act as either a ritual imperative or essence, and such excusing such a dastardly act on the alter of culture. Rather, it is contended that Achebe's Umuofia shares a collective guilt of perpetrating such a heinous crime. Of course, Achebe's strong Christian leaning and Western education frown at such. In terms of thematic significance, this singular event is the beginning of the end for Okonkwo, and indeed the penetration of Umuofia by the Europeans they loathe. Quite suggestive, the fact that human life is sacred is well foregrounded, and Ikemefuna's ritual murder portends grave repercussions on the community. This, the Yoruba of Western Nigeria would capture in the saying that '*eje alaise a*

*ja'* (the blood of the innocent shall avenge) and also captured by an English saying that 'those who live by the sword shall die by the sword'. Okonkwo's suicide by hanging thus demonstrate an African ethic as enshrined in the cultural worldview that no evil shall go unpunished. Okonkwo's death is therefore of no heroic stature but a culmination of the events in a lifetime characterized by impudence, rashness and brute force. As such, the oppositional structure, represented by the presence of white colonial administration, is on a rescue mission. It should be noted that this position is hinged on the comparison of the same situation under a modern judicial institution.

In the light of the foregoing, the position of Jare Oladosu(2005) can be well situated in our present discourse. This philosopher of law contends that traditional kingship institution have outlived their relevance. He bases his arguments on the fact that the desire of African nations to aspire to republican states which conforms to modern principles and engenders development cannot materialize as long as existing traditional order subsist. He fumes:

The institution of traditional kingship was unfounded either on the coercive imperatives of might and naked force, being the prize of war and conquest or on what we may describe as spiritual deception, the practical manifestation of a dubious theology

Obviously, though this philosopher critic denounces traditional fundamentalists, as he refers to cultural advocates, his position seems at another extreme. His arguments are however not without their merits and they clearly not lost on this discourse.

Kolawole (2005:11) throws some light:

Literature is an extended metaphor and a symbol whose intertextual interactions transcend literary transactions. It derives from the impact of a wider range of pretext - linguistic, cultural, philosophical, ideological, historical or political

It is therefore worthwhile to state that, far beyond cultural agency of Igbo culture, TFA is a classic on a mission of socio and philosophical reappraisal in the context of the milieu. It may well be positioned that TFA is an interventionist paradigm necessary at the crossroads of Africa's civilization. The place of law in the scheme of things becomes readily evident, not only in the examples previously cited, but runs through the universe of the novel. Furthermore, if the whole idea of culture understands a people's way of life in

its entirety, then the thematic direction seems enhanced by the penetrating influence of a new mode of governance strolling to the psyche of Umofians. In the history of human civilization, tradition has been a fulcrum of attention. This is because of its overbearing influence in the affairs of humanity. In other words, Igbo culture and tradition which Achebe foregrounds in TFA through the activities of Okonkwo and his ilk, opens naturally to an inevitable challenge of change.

### III

The place of law in the novelistic engagement of TFA has been the focus of this paper. It has been stated that, as an integral part of Umuofia culture and tradition, indigenous legal thought becomes a victim of the new order. This generally reflects on the conduct of the characters, especially the valorous Okonkwo, and the society at large. Cases in point have been the sanction of banishment on Okonkwo as well as the ritual murder of Ikemefuna. What this holds for the thematic build-up of TFA is a situation where conflict arises as a result of oppositional tussles.

Our thesis is that, TFA is a classic of multidisciplinary relevance. Its depth and enduring brilliance helps in foregrounding indigenous judicial administration while at the same time preparing the ground for dynamic change in a society obviously in transition. It is contended that by building the conflict in TFA on this judicial tangle, Achebe further establishes the utilitarian and responsive nature of African letters where society is the canvass of thematic, stylistic and aesthetic direction.

Finally, the overall impression from this endeavour is that interdisciplinary studies enhance the quality of knowledge production as instantiated in TFA multidisciplinary uniqueness. Specifically, even in present day society, modern law can be better disseminated when the creative energy ensures its reflection and adequate representation. This, as Achebe has demonstrated, ultimately benefits the cause of humanity.

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