

Unoka: The Gentleman Ill-at-Ease with the Code
of Traditional Society in Chinua Achebe's *Things
Fall Apart*

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Abstract

In fiction, character flaw is the author's technique for representing the limitations, imperfections, problems, phobias, and deficiencies in a character. Through this medium the author exhibit problems that directly affect the character's actions and abilities. These may be simple foibles or personality defects, which affect the character's motives and social interactions. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe's Unoka has been imbued with major flaws that mark him out as the historical Igbo underdog, a nonentity and the scorn of his society. He is a character invested with so much hateful hindrances which actually impair his real personality and eccentricity. Through a number of bibliographical enquiries and multitudes of theoretical rejoinders this treatise offers insight into the true nature and eccentric worth of this character by arguing that the major character flaws of Unoka in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are not merely fictive depictions

of the author but a gross misplacement of professional values by the Igbo contemporary society.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an apt description of the daily domestic habits of the traditional Igbo societies before the intrusion of the white man. Describing the powerful force of 'daily domestic habit' in a literary work, Elizabeth Gaskell claimed that 'the daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise.' It is the novelist's task to chronicle 'the traditions of bygone times, even to the smallest social particular' in order to 'enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of a character' (2). This obviously was the task Achebe focused on achieving as he methodically chronicled the traditions of Igbo society, the effect of Christian influences, and the clash of Western and traditional African values during and after the colonial era.

It would be pertinent at this introductory stage to wade a little into the universal theories delineating the constricting habits of social prejudice in a fictive character as well as the theories outlining the quaint details of domestic routines in an author's characterization. Gaskell outlines a theory of habit as a guiding psychological mechanism of social structure that was shared widely by her contemporaries and debated extensively in nineteenth-century psychology. This philosophical dialogue on the function and implications of habitual behaviour in characterisation dated back to the Associationist philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, David Hartley, and Dugald Stewart, and continued in later-nineteenth-century psychological

writings by, among others, George Henry Lewes, John Stuart Mill, James Sully, G. F. Stout, William Carpenter, Henry Maudsley, Alexander Bain, and William James.

Ordinarily, theories of habit made further appearance in nineteenth-century advice literature, and were discussed extensively in popular works such as Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* (1838) and Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859) as well as in magazine articles, religious tracts, sanitary reports, treatises on character formation, and eccentric biographies of the period. Influenced in part by discoveries in thermodynamics in the 1840s, and grounded in physiological conceptions of mental relations, nineteenth-century theories of habit affirmed a widespread view of the mind as an economy, subject to spatial limitations, energy exchange, and complex patterns of displacement and interdependency. The conservation of energy or 'force' – that is, the idea that there was a stable amount of energy in the universe which could be neither increased nor destroyed, only redistributed – was used to describe a wide variety of relationships between mental processes that, in turn, shaped the most basic frameworks of consciousness.

At the centre of this debate, as it took form in the writings of mid- to late-nineteenth-century England and America, were questions about the status of individual agency in biologically based theories of mind. After the 1840s, theories of habit relied on the conservation of energy to explain the tendency of the mind to reinforce mental patterns, pathways, channels, or, to use Gaskell's suggestive term, 'chains.' While these patterns traced the flow of thought and were seen as the structural mechanisms for all learning, they could also induce a later form of development in which the individual rehearsed characteristic behaviours rather than evolving new ones.

In later-nineteenth century discussions of habit, this potential rigidification of human character appeared to pose a threat of psychological stasis that was often linked to deterministic forces of production and consumption in modern industrial society. Theories of habit conceptualized the mind as a closed system, driven to repetitive, automatic behaviours in order to conserve energy for more difficult or novel tasks. Yet many feared that if the human psyche was biologically compelled to repeat mental experiences, and thus to trap the individual in predictable and inflexible patterns of behaviour, this compulsion constrained possibilities for change and challenged conceptions of free will. The very capacity for moral transformation was problematized in the nineteenth century by writings on habit, as habit became a contested area of psychological debate. It evoked concerns about the status of the individual in an increasingly modern, mechanized culture in which human behaviour, like industrial objects, might be mass-produced. The psychology of repetition thus came to be understood not only as the basis of individual eccentricity, but as evidence of larger cultural routines.

Bringing all these to bear in the focus of this paper, it became apparent that in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the character Unoka, was systematically imbued with the fragmentation of individuality that affected a citizen who was far more developed than his society and contemporary social practices. The author imbued this character with a philosophy of greater depth than his immediate contemporary found difficult to fathom. Achebe, unknowingly had created an archetypal character, a prototypical philosopher, more modern, more advanced, more intellectual than his society, who attempted to live his life irrespective of his society's ignorance of his worth. This character spent his life

fighting for his misinterpreted self, fuelled by his desire to participate effectively in his contemporary society.

Unoka pushed his self-esteem through a number of systematic defence mechanisms misconstrued as diversified forms of weakness by his people. We really begin to pity this character when he is forced by societal ordinances to wear the toga of humility by visiting Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. He has gone to ask why he always has a miserable harvest, despite his prayers and offerings to the gods. The Oracle tells him that the fault lay not with the gods, but in his laziness. Chika, the priestess speaking as the voice of her society totally misconstrues the man who has come to her for divination. She adjudges him with the narrow mindedness of a society wallowing in total ignorance. Her statement betrays her total immersion in the value system of that society:

You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your matchet and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farm; you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil (14).

In this community, prowess at manual work is therefore the yardstick for measuring success and Unoka with his superb unrecognized talent in music has to compulsorily adopt mechanisms that would enable him live up to the standards of his society. These mechanisms highlighted the existence of a highly intellectual and advanced mind that suffers deep fragmentation and still manages to maintain a solid veneer of self-control. This paper provokes a multitude of theoretical responses, and offers critical insight into the reconceptualization of notions of human

psychological identity and societal placement of characters as it affects Achebe's Unoka.

Inequitable Societal Categorization of Professionalism

To many readers of *Things Fall Apart*, the character Unoka would appear as the worst specimen of manhood as perceived by his society. This name has acquired for itself, a near dictionary meaning in the Igbo language. Unoka simply means indolence to all and sundry in this society! Ordinarily, this character is tagged an irresponsible man, with the worst reputation of laziness. He is culturally painted as a great debtor with a long list of unpaid debts; who as a young man, plays the flute at festivals and enjoyed the attention he received, feasts, and good company while other well-meaning citizens busied themselves tilling the ground for a good harvest. He is portrayed as a coward who has a morbid fear of the sight of blood and warfare. He is regarded as a worthless man who is unable to give his very promising son any sort of inheritance, an embarrassment in the eyes of the community and his son.

A close examination of this character however generates some questions demanding explanation. If Unoka is a lazy man, how is he able to compose the tunes he played in his flute? How many people could handle the flute that efficiently? To whom does he play his flute? As he played this flute, some people must have listened, who then should be classified lazy, the people that leisurely listen or the man working hard to display the best of his talent? Again, if Unoka is such an acclaimed borrower, why does she succeed in borrowing more? If Unoka is denounced because he hates war and the sight of blood, how many of us love the sight of blood? How many love war?

It would be no understatement to assert that in Unoka, Achebe created a psychological profile of a man grossly misunderstood by his society, a talent not adequately appreciated, of philosophy nipped in the bud, crushed by cultural expectations and values. Achebe's character Unoka is a bundle of complexities that carries us beyond the conceptual dichotomies that modernity, enlightenment, and science are thought to have imposed on the African culture. While his contemporary society wallows in ignorance and unthinking acceptance of the imperfections traditional society, he rises far above them in appreciating the true essence of human existence.

A physical description of Unoka, though meant to castigate this character, rather reveals a man of aristocrat stature, a sportsman, and an intellectual: 'He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute' (4). So many of us take workouts for hours, straining to reduce the cushion syndrome in our midsection and maintaining a slim look could be capital intensive these days. Unoka however is bound to a society where the fatness is acknowledged as the more accomplished without a single idea of the health implications of storing up body fat.

As a talented musician, Unoka is unbeatable. A culture's music is influenced by all other aspects of that culture, including social and economic organization and experience, climate, and access to technology. This character was a master of the social, economic, experiences and the art of his society which enables him to explore the emotions and ideas he expresses in his music. Even the author gives him maximum credit for his expertise:

He was very good on the flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above



the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three to four markets, making music and feasting. Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship (4).

The fact however remains that music is a fundamental constituent of human existence. Unoka, Okonkwo's father, a talented musician probably spends his youth developing this talent in a society that is blind to the true aesthetic nature of his profession. His passion for music becomes manifest as he converses with Okoye, a fellow musician:

He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene*, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colourful and plaintive tune. The total effect was gay and brisk, but if one picked out the flute as it went up and down and then broke up into short snatches, one saw that there was sorrow and grief there (5).

His society's misconstruing of his talent for gross laziness and irresponsibility not only portrays them as unjust and unfair but also lacking in life's most sensitive tones. Duke Orsino memorable lines in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, 'If music be the food of love/play on' (Act 1:1), not only lays claim to the idea of music as the universal language of the soul but also that it is an intrinsic part of every community of people. Unoka is a professional who loves his work and dies defending it; even at the point of death, he asks for nothing from this whole world except his flute.

Symbolically, the story of Unoka and his flute provoke a sense of history and the esoteric associated with the flute all over the

world. In recent years, there have been arresting stories of ancient flutes excavated by archaeologists. The oldest flute that has been discovered is the Divje Babe flute, found in the Slovenian cave Divje Babe in 1995. The discovery caused quite a stir in the fields of archaeology. The item in question is a fragment of the femur of a juvenile cave bear, and had been dated to about 43,000 years. However, whether it was truly a musical instrument or simply a carnivore-chewed bone is a matter of ongoing debate. In 2012 some flutes, that were discovered years earlier in the Geißenklösterle cave, received a new high resolution radio-carbon dating examination yielding an age of 42,000 to 43,000 years.

Again, in 2008, archaeologists discovered a bone flute in the Hohle Fels cave near Ulm, Germany. The five-holed flute had a V-shaped mouthpiece and was made from a vulture wing bone. The researchers involved in the discovery officially published their findings in the journal *Nature* in June 2009. It was one of several similar instruments found in the area, which date to at least 35,000 years ago, making this one of the oldest confirmed find of any musical instruments in history. The Hohle Fels flute was found next to the Venus of Hohle Fels and a short distance from the oldest known human carving. On announcing the discovery, scientists suggested that the ‘finds demonstrate the presence of a well-established musical tradition at the time when modern humans colonized Europe’. Scientists had also suggested that the discovery of the flute may help to explain why early humans survived, while Neanderthals became extinct.

What is more, the oldest known wooden pipes were discovered in Wicklow, Ireland, in the winter of 2003. A wood-lined pit contained a group of six flutes made from yew wood, between 30 and 50 cm long, tapered at one end, but without any finger holes. They may once have been strapped together.

Furthermore, in 1986 several gudi (literally ‘bone flutes’) were found in Jiahu in Henan Province, China. They date to about 6000 BCE. They have between 5 and 8 holes each and were made from the hollow bones of a bird, the red-crowned crane. At the time of the discovery, one was found to be still playable. The bone flute plays both the five- or seven-note scale of Xia Zhi and six-note scale of Qing Shang of the ancient Chinese musical system.

All this buttresses the importance attached to the flute as a musical instrument all over the world. Unoka must have a sense the true value of this flute. He is despised and scorned by his society despite his superb mastery of fluting. Unoka’s flute is disregarded by his society and consequently found a resting place with him in the evil forest.

Another weak point highlighted against this character is his inclination to seek the comforts of peaceful existence. Unoka is a man of peace and this is not in line with the so-called masculine code of his society. Yet, for decades, the United Nations Organisation has been searching for the right panacea for peace. It is pertinent to point out at this juncture that decades before the UNO declarations of the year 1986 as the year of peace, in the heart of Africa, Unoka had taken his stand on the side of peace. The author says of this character, ‘Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood (5).’

He hated the sight of blood, war, violence and terror. This implies that he has utmost reverence for the sanctity of the human life. It is striking that every year since 1901 the Nobel Prize for peace has been awarded to individuals who directly promoted peace in the world. The world has been in constant search for the best way to promote and sustain peace in the universe but perhaps Unoka must have discovered that the best way to

promote peace was to maintain it within ourselves. He must have discovered that peace comes about as a gradual and wonderful event that occurs because compassionate people are inspired to help others discover the joy of peace! He must have discovered that one of the many bonuses that comes from sharing kindness with fellow human beings is peace. The author explains this character's disposition:

If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime (4).

Ironically this character remains the only intellectual in his society. He has the lucidity to figure out how nature works. He observes scientifically the movement of the sunrays and even tries to instruct his ignorant neighbour Okoye when he says to him, 'Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them (6).'

Unoka has a superb mathematical sense. His apt use of the Pie Chart and tally system to record the money borrowed and from whom and when almost equalled Einstein's equation $E=mc^2$ of 1905 which states that neutrinos can move faster than the speed of light. His interaction with Okoye reveals a high sense of summation, addition and multiplication:

Look at that wall,' he said pointing at the far wall of his hut, which was rubbed with red earth so that it shone. 'Look at those lines of chalk;' and Okoye saw groups of short perpendicular lines drawn in chalk. There were five groups, and the smallest group had ten lines. Unoka had a sense of the dramatic and so he allowed a pause, in which he took a pinch of snuff and sneezed noisily, and then he continued: 'Each



group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you but not today (6).

In the above quotation one could see the genius in Unoka. He is a superb and sincere accountant. He not only keeps accurate records of his transactions with people, he has improvised a wonderful ledger, 'the far wall of his hut, which was rubbed with red earth so that it shone (6).' His ability to know how much he owed and who to repay first make him a grade 'A' banker and a prudent financial manager. While his society still wallows in ignorance, Unoka has imbibed and displayed banking and finance with finesse.

While the world celebrated the 18th century philosopher and author, Adam Smith as the founder of economics, Unoka had, without western education demonstrated an outstanding knowledge of economics and statistics. Unoka exhibits rationalization which is more than just mental acuity. He intelligently displays his knowledge of banking and accounting system years before the onset of real commercial banking in the whole of African Continent.

What is even more striking about this character is his demeanour of self-control and latent consciousness. Although he was caught up in diverse forms of fragmentation, he never really allows himself to be bowled over by his predicaments. His reactions to Okoye's demand for repayment of the money he lent him points to the inner control of this character:

As soon as Unoka understood what his friend was driving at, he burst out laughing. He laughed loud and long and his voice rang out clear as the *ogene*, and tears stood in his eyes. His

visitor was amazed, and sat speechless. At the end, Unoka was able to give an answer between fresh outbursts of mirth (6). Unoka's inability to fit into the society of his time could be attributed to what one might term *the literary fragment*; this is the natural medium of the anguished romantic. McFarland refers to this as the quintessential features of romantic literature and biography that offer ways to interpret romantic texts and the tortured artists (e.g., Edgar Allan Poe, George Lippard, Herman Melville, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley) who all but killed themselves in the feverish process of making their marks in creative writing. Unoka is a romantic and a naturalist to the core. His appreciation of the marvels of nature is notable:

He loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty. And it was not too hot either, because the cold and dry harmattan wind was blowing down from the North. Some years the harmattan was very severe and a dense haze hung on the atmosphere. Old men and women would then sit round log fires, warming their bodies. Unoka loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wondered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one, he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any length of cloth (5).

He must have been a master of rhetoric and as eloquent as Cicero for him to have had the persuasive power to convince more people to lend him money even as he does not pay back.

Unoka is said to lack a sense of responsibility. He is portrayed as poor, lazy, and neglectful of his wife, yet he had the presence

of mind to stand by and offer advice to Okonkwo when he has a misfortune. His actions mark him out as a good counsellor, judging from his encouraging and advisory words to his hot headed son:

His father, Unoka, who was then an ailing man, had said to him during that terrible harvest month: 'Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and bitter when a man fails alone.' Unoka was like that in his last days. His love of talk had grown with age and sickness. It tried Okonkwo's patience beyond words. (30)

Conclusion

So far, this paper has tried to analyse Unoka in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a man grossly misunderstood by his society, an endowment shattered by cultural subjugations, a highly philosophical mind left untapped because of erroneous cultural expectations and inhumane ideals. Unoka has been found to transcend his society both in modernity and enlightenment. Suffice it to say that he found himself in a society far beneath him in intelligence and acumen. He found himself in a society quite ignorant of his professional worth. His principles were divergent to the codes of Igbo culture and he was caught up in the tension between the human tendency to seek value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any. His society refused to accept him for what he was. He existed in a rather near 'humanly impossible condition. His problems arose from the contradictory nature of his true self existing and simultaneously trying to keep pace with his society's standards. Like all Absurdist characters, his efforts are overshadowed by the tenets of his society and he

ultimately fails. Yet he is able to embrace his absurd condition and continue exploring and searching for meaning to the very last.

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