

There Was a Country: Achebe's Ijele

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Abstract

Achebe's *There Was a Country* can be seen as his final word to his people of Nigeria. The work is an extraordinary achievement in which a variety of subjects, interests, experiences and skills have been put together. Most importantly, Achebe seems to have employed the platform of a historical narrative as a viable instrument for the revelation of some inner sides of himself and his country. He reveals the process of his 'initiation' into the fullness of traditional Igbo life and thought system. This is visibly the source of his creative thoughts, and probably, the perception of masquerade art as an important form in the life of the Igbo. This paper attempts to trace the trends of Achebe's initiation into the tribal life of his people, his creative thoughts and his conception of the 'art of the masquerade' in his works, especially, in *There Was a Country*. It is the view upheld in this paper that if Achebe sees works of art as masquerades (masks), then, *There Was a Country* must be seen as the IJELE. The paper seeks to

identify the *Ijele* qualities in the narrative, hence the description of the work as ACHEBE'S IJELE.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe is an artist whose literary works have gained wide recognition and spread almost all over the globe. He has shown in most of these works the depths of his concern and love for the culture of his people. He has lived his life embodying true African, and particularly, Igbo spiritual essence. Though he was a product (by birth and upbringing) of the era of great socio-cultural upheaval informed by the spread of the Christian religion in most parts of the South East of Nigeria, Achebe sought through the traditional African social institutions and structures surrounding him (especially the extended family system through extended blood relationships) and acquired the vital aspects of his tribal philosophies and sensibilities. He lived and interacted very sensitively and receptively with that social environment of his upbringing. These powerful formative agents have been revealed by Achebe in his last production, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*.

He refers to his upbringing as 'initiation into the complicated world of Ndi Igbo' (8). He carefully reveals the influence of his mother as well as his older sister – Zinobia in the initiation process. His great-uncle Udoh Osinyi educated him on Igbo cosmology, ancient traditions and religion as against his father's Christian teaching. According to him, he inherited this dialectic (13). Achebe acknowledges his fascination for Igbo ancient traditions which inform his resolve to seek 'alternative education outside the classroom from the local villagers' (18). That was how he got introduced to *mbari*, and the sophistication of Igbo phenomenological thought.

Achebe utilises the benefits of his upbringing artistically in responding to the challenges that confront him and his country. All his novels attest eloquently to this—*Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*. That is why each of the novels addresses different developmental stages of the country with sufficient instructive notes for guidance. However, Achebe's last work—*There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* is very significant and extraordinary in this and many other ways. Firstly, the work may be seen as a single master-stroke and attempt to integrate almost all his previous works into a magnificent monument. He has also wittingly or otherwise opened a new vista to literary fiction-writing by crafting fiction and history, autobiography and memoir, philosophy and art into one monumental edifice. Most importantly, Achebe seems to divulge in this narrative, a lot about his personal creative faculty and his innermost essence. He seems to reveal in a confessional mood the roots of his life's formation and their influence on his whole being all his lifetime. This probably provides a better inroad into his novels and a surer means of coming out with the real kernel of his creative thoughts.

It should be well understood that Achebe thinks and lives typically an African, a Nigerian and an Igbo. His language of writing, which has attracted a lot of attention and comments, reveals that. This is also documented in *Time's* comment that 'this giant of modern letters has left the authentic imprint of African cultures across the globe'.

Achebe's use of masquerade scenes in some of his novels depicts his complete alignment with the Igbo worldview about man and his existence on earth as posited by Ebo and Nwosu. They say that:



The celestial world is inhabited by cosmic beings recognised by the Africans as gods, spirits, ancestors and supernatural beings. The African co-exists with these beings in a thinly divided but one spatial orbit. For the African to define self and make a meaningful existence, he must take cognisance of these material and immaterial worlds (200).

In one of his revelations in *There Was a Country*, Achebe says that 'The Igbo believe that art, religion, everything, the whole of life are embodied in the art of the masquerade. It is dynamic. It is not allowed to remain stationary' (59). This statement has a lot of implications for Achebe's use of the masquerade motif in some of his novels. It is the intention of the author here to explore the implications and application of the concept of 'the art of the masquerade' in Achebe's works especially his last, *There Was a Country*.

The Masquerade in Igbo Culture

The masquerade is a highly revered and strictly respected socio-cultural institution of the Igbo. The important position it occupies in Igbo society stems from two important factors; namely, the belief that masquerades are the masked spirits of the ancestors and secondly, the multifarious functions and responsibilities allotted to it. It serves for entertainment, enforcement/maintenance of law and order, religious rites, information dissemination, education, even judiciary. These different functions necessitate the creation of different forms of masquerade as has been vividly illustrated by Achebe. For example, there is the youthful, entertaining *agaba* masquerade as shown in *Arrow of God* (199) and also the special but restricted night masquerade (223). There is also the awful, eerie *egwugwu* in *Things Fall Apart* (80). Achebe probably uses the appearance and

participation of the masked spirit of the ancestors in the regular social life of the people to emphasise the Igbo worldview of ‘the thin wall’ between the ancestral world and the world of the living.

The Art of the Masquerade

By ‘the art of the masquerade’, Achebe may be implying that masquerade comprehends art in various dimensions. He may be suggesting too that the mask may be seen to be the artistic instrument for shuttling between the two worlds separated by ‘the thin wall’. This is perceivable in the *egwugwu* judicial scene of *Things Fall Apart* (80-85) and *ogbazulobobo* in *Arrow of God* (223-227). Achebe has also illustrated, especially in those scenes, that the masquerade is a rallying point of all the segments of Igbo traditional society. The masquerade scenes in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* portray clearly the various groups of spectators and their roles in the demonstration of the social bonding brought about by the presence of the masquerade in every aspect of Igbo tribal life. That seemingly elevates the masquerade to the level of assuming the masked spirit of the community. Thirdly, and most importantly, art works, Achebe may have implied could be better understood if ‘the art of the masquerade’ in them can be discovered and carefully revealed. In fact, Achebe may be suggesting that art works are masks. As such, his novels can be seen as the masks with which he embodies the Igbo spiritual essence. Perceived from this perspective, and sustained by ample evidence depicted by the incidents in his works, Achebe’s very last publication, *There Was a Country* can be considered under the form of masquerade called IJELE. The work may then be described as ACHEBE’S IJELE.

The Ijele Masquerade

The Ijele masquerade is unique in concept and extraordinary in appearance and character. It is always a magnificent and elegant piece of art, massive in size and very expensive to build. Its expansive and cylindrical structure connotes the global conception attached to it. The whole body is composed and decorated with a variety of brightly coloured materials made into various shapes and attractive designs and patterns. Objects of various concepts, origins, sizes and forms find their places in the massive body of the Ijele either carved, sewn or drawn. Ijele attempts to epitomise the global world by attracting/accommodating all humanly conceivable and perceivable phenomena on its body—all manner of humans, animals, trees, tools, gadgets, shapes and figures; all carefully and aesthetically arranged. Ijele masquerade appears and performs only on great and very special occasions.

Ascribing the title of Ijele to *There Was a Country*, has been considered appropriate for some traditional and critical reasons. First of all, in Igbo, Ijele is a paragon of excellence, beauty and outstanding accomplishment. This compliment is well deserved by the book, which has received both national and international acclamation. Secondly, it is an Igbo worldview that any man who lived as a great man translated into a great ancestor. Achebe's place among his peers as a great ancestor cannot be doubted. He deserves it, and should be masked with nothing less than Ijele. It is also a rare but great honour for an individual to acquire an Ijele. It is usually a group or community asset because no single person can ever be considered wealthy enough to embark on such a colossal task. Finally, *There Was a Country* possesses many features of the Ijele masquerade in concept and appearance.

The Ijele Qualities in *There Was a Country*

Some of the comments by literary critics have set the scene for the exploration of the Ijele qualities and features in this book. Nadine Gordimer says that it 'is extraordinary ... (and) exceeds all expectations'. She further describes it as 'a new genre of literature in which politico-historical evidence, the power of storytelling and revelations from the depth of human subconscious are one'. Gordimer has unwittingly presented in her critical view, the structural sketch of an Ijele - its extraordinary size, craft and beauty. Margaret Artwood describes the author as 'a magical writer' while *Time* says the book is a 'giant of modern letters'. The mask really fits the spirit that carries it. The work, like the Ijele, is extraordinary in its complexity of structure, contents, and style. It has a multiple plot structure; not just complex, but also episodic. There is a variety of subjects that build up into the body of the story. The subject of narration is neither restricted to the history of the Nigeria/Biafra war, nor the biography or memoir of the author. The four-part structure of the work attempts to integrate biography, history, essay, literary criticism, policy analysis and comments into one whole super structure. The historical aspect of the narrative subtly displays different colours, sizes and shapes of personal, national and international histories. Apart from the biographical sketch of the author himself, smaller sizes and shapes of those of the Okolis (31-33), the Okigbos (23) and J.O.C. Ezeilo (29) are also shown. The national level of the history sketches some foundational errors which are fundamental to the nation's present-day complex problems. These developmental problems include the British government's diabolic plot to put in place a deformed Nigeria; and, the colonial masters' failure to perceive the future danger in not enforcing uniform educational and intellectual development in all the

regions of the country simultaneously. Compare the maiden admission list of Nigeria's premier university (27-28). At the continental level, Africa's political and economic woes have been historically traced to the partitioning of Africa by Europe. The work is now presented as history book of different levels of humanity. It is evident that the book also veers into various areas outside the scenes and settings of war to bring in critical views and comments spanning various continents of the world. For instance, the comment on Soviet interest in Nigeria goes this way:

There were other reasons for the ever-growing Soviet presence in Nigeria in 1969. The Soviets had announced their intention to expand their bilateral trade agreements with Nigeria to include military and economic assistance. They had their eyes on a truly large prize: a contract to build one of the largest steel mills in all of Africa at a cost of then astonishing \$120million. That steel investment later became the Ajaokuta Steel Mill in northern Nigeria—the poster child of corruption and white elephant projects in Africa – that went on to gulp over \$4.6 billion of the Nigerian taxpayers' money, although very little steel was produced (104)

Other comments on philosophical and ideological viewpoints find prominent places in the narrative. The elaborate discussions on 'The Role of the Writer in Africa' (52-61) are beyond the story of the genesis of Nigeria's literary creativity. Also, 'The Fight to the Finish' (209) and 'The Igbo Spirit' (246) reflect philosophical viewpoints. The narration is also regularly interlaced with poetry. Achebe's deliberate design to give the work a global and multifaceted coverage is a reflection of the conception of universality of the Ijele masquerade.

The Language and Voice of the Masquerade in *There Was a Country*

The masquerade speaks in various levels of language. The language always carries dignity and an air of finality, and the voice awful. The language may sound esoteric to some people at certain times and places depending on the status of the masquerade and the audience in the context. The language of the *egwugwu* in *Things Fall Apart* (80-85) depicts the level of respect and authority it commands. Evil Forest addresses the human beings in the scene as bodies – ‘Uzowulu’s body, I salute you’. There is emphasis here on status and hierarchy of existence. The masks are the spirits of the land while the humans are mere bodies. This explains the authority and finality in the voice of the masquerade. The night masquerade is another type of masquerade with a different language level. Because of its social function of sanitising society through social criticism, (by divulging evils done or intended to be done in secret) the night masquerade adopts various levels of language. Ohaeto says. ‘It is a cultural tradition in my part of the world that when abominations become unbearable; when the truth must be told with courage, the night masquerade appears’ (8).

Ebo and Nwosu corroborate Ohaeto, with the view that it is

The quietude that characterises a typical African night (that) motivates masquerades – ancestral spirits—to appear and talk to humans, teach, correct and inspire soul-searching exercise in men. (203)

The language of *There Was a Country* bears evidence of that of the masquerade. There is a subtle combination of the dignity and finality of the voice of the *egwugwu* (the custodian ancestral spirits of the land) and that of the night masquerade (the social sanitizer) in the novel. That is why ‘The moment has come for



Nigerians and the world to ask the proper questions and draw the right inferences about what happened in those terrible years' (107). Achebe then explains that 'It is for the sake of the future of Nigeria, for our children and grandchildren that I feel it is important to tell Nigeria's story, Biafra's story, our story, my story' (3).

It is only the ears of the initiated that can hear the voice of the Ijele addressing 'the body of Nigeria' in *There Was a Country*.

'The body of Nigeria, you did the wrong thing to accept 'independence' served in a gold-coated earthen ware instead of fighting and winning your own gold-quality independence.

'Now that you have seen all your past mistakes and their repercussions, fought and struggled for the past fifty years, you are now mature enough to consider yourself ripe for true independence. 'We can involve the west positively in African affairs, this time not by imposing themselves or their self-selected rulers on a desperate continent.'" (247).

Body of Naija, 'This is not a time to bemoan all the challenges ahead. It is time to work at developing, nurturing, sustaining and protecting democracy and democratic institutions.' (247).

'Body of Nigeria, you should stop playing hide and seek with the destiny and future of your children and children's children. Tell them the truth about their country and show them the right path of corrections and recovery'.

The voice of the night masquerade is also evident in these lines:

'(Body of Naija!) Within six years of this (your) tragic colonial manipulation Nigeria (became) a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely with the nation's wealth. Elections were rigged. The

subsequent national census was outrageously stage-managed... (51)

Nigeria's federal government has always tolerated terrorism. For over half a century, the federal government has turned a blind eye to waves of ferocious and savage massacres of its citizens.... Even in cases where their hands were found dripping in blood, the perpetrators have many a time evaded capture and punishment. Nigeria has been doomed to witness endless cycles of inter-ethnic, inter-religious violence because the Nigerian government has failed woefully to enforce laws protecting its citizens from wanton violence (251).

This is a fearless and objective voice. It is expected to teach the people and correct their myopic vision. It is the language that conveys the message of the ancestors. It is the voice of the masquerade.

Ijele and Spectators

Spectators constitute a very important factor in the masquerade display arena. They are usually segmented according to social status. The elders and the initiated members are nearer the centre of the action than others. It is also noteworthy that spectators come into the arena with various motives. Achebe portrays this in both the *Egwugwu* scene in *Things Fall Apart* and the *Agaba* outing in *Arrow of God* (197-200). In the *Agaba* scene, the motives of two outstanding spectators are displayed—the diabolical and dangerous *Otakekpele* as well as *Edogo* the artist (carver). While *Edogo* was preoccupied with a search for a better position to assess his craft, *Otakekpele* was perfecting his position for mischief. *Ijele* is a rarer and more prestigious masquerade, and as such, is expected to attract wider spectators. It is said in Igbo that

a masquerade is better appreciated if viewed from different positions. This justifies Edogo's continuous search for more suitable position to view the new mask for more objective assessment of his craft. Ijele always dances in a kind of rotatory style, probably, to give its spectators the advantage of seeing all the sides and beauty of its massive body. Being such a huge mask, Ijele's beauty of variety of interest-arresting colours and shapes can only be perceived from an appreciable distance. For those spectators who come to watch the Ijele with dubious and diabolic intentions, their fate may not be different from that of Otakekpele (*Arrow of God* 198). For the ones who are blinded or obscured by ethnic biases, or have mischievous intentions they may see only the legs of the Ijele and not the beauty. Their comments cannot be anything better than those of the ethnicity-blinded apologists.

Ijele and Performance

The appearance of Achebe's Ilele at this time in the history of Nigeria and even Africa is significant. Barely five months after the publication of *There Was a Country*, Achebe joined his ancestors. So, *There Was a Country* is not just telling Nigeria's story and using Achebe as a vehicle as suggested by Nwonu and cited in Nwosu (56). To some western cultures too, the work may be seen as Achebe's swan song. In Igbo worldview, it is something greater than these. In traditional Igbo worldview, it is believed that an accomplished traditional Igbo man should know when to call his sons/children together and give them his final words before his departure. It is called *ike ekpe*. It is regarded as a moment of truth. The statements received at such a time are viewed as sacrosanct and sacred. *There Was a Country* is Achebe's *ike ekpe* to Nigeria.

Secondly, considering Achebe's idea of 'the art of the masquerade', *There Was a Country* can be seen as Achebe's Ijele

doing its final parting performance at the funeral of the generic great African country – Nigeria/Biafra. The echoes of the lyrics of the funeral dirge span almost all the pages of the ‘parting performance’. For Nigeria, it is the death of a country overwhelmed by a catalogue of self-inflicted scourges of jealousy, visionless leadership and self-deceit. The following are remarkable indicators of degeneration, death and decay:

The schools during the colonial days were better endowed financially, had excellent amenities and were staffed with first-rate teachers, custodians, instructors, cooks and librarians. Of course today, under Nigerian control, these schools have fallen into disrepair...’ (20).

Akpuda would aptly put it this way in his poem ‘Killing the Future Today’ (15)

...Yes indeed, to prepare coffins for our youth
 We cram them into cells that brim with hate...
 Because schools and factories are no more
 cells must become permanent hostels
 to keep our children in rent-free accommodation.

In the area of government administration, the colonial masters put in place ‘a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country’ (43). In place of this, Nigeria now ushers in ‘all sorts of banality, ineptitude, corruption and debauchery ... enshrines mediocrity as modus operandi, and create[s] the fertile ground for the rise of tyrants and other base elements of the society’ (236). It is seen as the birth of ‘a new era of decadence and decline’ which is ‘plagued by a home-grown enemy: the political ineptitude, mediocrity, indiscipline, ethnic bigotry, and corruption of the ruling class’ (143). Nigeria is represented as being fatally



gripped and strangulated by corruption (249), and finally pronounced a failed state (250), in other words, a dead country.

On the side of Biafra, there is the portrayal of a pathetic picture of a promising vibrant nation whose life was snuffed out before it could come into full life. Stanley Diamond calls it 'the ruining of a rare and genuine national culture at the moment of its birth' (106). The British journalist, Richard West is quoted to say that 'Biafra was the first place I had been to in Africa where the Africans themselves were truly in charge'. He lamented that 'Biafra is more than a human tragedy' and expressed his belief that 'Its defeat would mark the end of African independence' (172). In a similar statement, Ezenwa-Ohaeto echoes O'Brien's conviction that 'the 'survival of Biafra' would be 'a victory for African courage, endurance, and skill, and an opportunity for the further development of African creativity'' (107). Unfortunately, Biafra's early signs of greatness attracted a lot of envy from some world powers like Britain. The BBC reporter, Rick Fountain is credited with the report that: 'At first Biafra was successful and this alarmed Britain, the former colonial power, anxious for its oil holdings' (100).

The death of Biafra is summarised in this way:

At the end of the thirty-month war Biafra was a vast smouldering rubble. The head count at the end of the war was perhaps three million dead, which was approximately 20 percent of the entire population. This high population was mostly children. The cost in human life made it one of the bloodiest civil wars in human history.... Entire towns and villages, schools and farms in Biafra were destroyed (227).

Ijele as a great masquerade performs on very special occasions and places like the funeral of great men. Achebe's Ijele has performed its funeral rites and obligation to this great country;

but not without leaving appropriate ancestral pieces of advice for the offspring.

Conclusion

There Was a Country is Achebe's invaluable parting gift to his country – Nigeria. It is unique in its historical contents and value as well as literary creativity and criticism. It has delved skilfully into different families', communities', tribes' even the nation's histories and traditions. The social, political, economic and intellectual development of various sections of the nation, in addition to international influences on the country have featured prominently in the novel. This paper has attempted to approach the novel from the perceived perspective of Achebe's traditional Igbo sensibility. This reading is merely an outline sketch of the mask that houses/conceals the spiritual essence of Achebe's inexhaustible well of traditional Igbo wisdom, intellect and accumulated knowledge. Ijele is the befitting title for the concept. It is the name of a great masquerade in Igbo. It is Achebe's Ijele.

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