

## Re-reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Moral Ambivalence and the Politics of Cultural Hegemony

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In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, there are two central arguments that frame the internal logic of the novel. The first revolves around the encounter between the people of Umuofia and the presumptuous British Commissioner showcasing the complex dialectic of vision and voice, which, Achebe suggests, is shaped not by naive appeal to unexamined universalism but by the special history and normative patterns of rhetoric and thought of a region and a landscape. The second entails the moral argument necessitated by Okonkwo's complicity or culpability in Ikemefuna's killing and the complicated efforts to launch some kind of moral intervention or mediation. The paper posits that Achebe, through the majesty of simple eloquence, demonstrates the illogic of cultural hegemony and points up in stark, unmistakable terms that whoever controls, or attempts to control, language and the act of interpretation—cultural

interpretation, that is, the process of meaning and definition—aims ultimately to control in imperial fashion historic memory, culture and people. The paper also posits that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, with respect to Okonkwo's complicity in Ikemefuna's killing lends itself more to measured intervention or mediation than outright expression of moral indignation and/or application of swift retributive justice.

The simple eloquence of difference which the novel represents opposes and destabilizes the morbid penchant in western epistemology to view Africa as a central problematic. Of all the passages in the novel that strike us as infinitely significant, none is more poignant than the cluster of passages that comprises two chapters that open and close this incredible book. They account for why *Things Fall Apart* has become such a delightful and critically insightful read, attaining almost vertiginous, fetishistic heights, and becoming truly one of the most engaging books not only in western and nonwestern academes, but also in the entire World Masterpieces and Great Books canon.

Long before Edward Said, in his 1978 groundbreaking study of postcolonial aesthetics in *Orientalism*, long before the emergence of the postcolonial theory school, Chinua Achebe has been on record twenty years earlier railing against the mismeasure of Africa, and by extension the peoples of nonwestern societies. Scholars of African literary history will readily acknowledge that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* revolutionized the entire study of Africa and helped create and shape postcolonial theory in the continent. *Things Fall Apart* asks the simple but important question: why when we think of Africa, for example, we have preconceived notions of what kind of people live there or what they believe? The central argument of *Things Fall Apart* is that the way we acquire knowledge, including cultural knowledge is hardly

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innocent, but instead is highly motivated and skewed. Specifically, the novel zeroes in on the way the Western world looks at Africa through a lens that distorts the actual reality of peoples of Africa, oftentimes through a framework which seeks to understand them in terms of the strange, the unfamiliar and the bizarre. The writings of Joyce Cary, Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, Gustave Flaubert and Daniel Defoe, to mention just a few, come readily to mind.

*Things Fall Apart* is significant because it represents the most memorable account in English of an African culture and the impact upon it of white European encroachment. The first part of the novel (a little less than two-thirds) points up a sensibility rooted in Igbo tribal culture in which the reader has been privileged throughout the novel, and whose world, for all intents and purposes, has therefore become familiar, rich—salaciously rich—full, vigorous, and above all real, as real as any lived experience can be. But in the last third of the novel, there is a sudden jarring jolt as the reader is brutally forced to see all that fullness and vigor and traditional richness reduced by the magistral language of the conqueror. Look at the following exchange between the District Commissioner and some of the elders of Umuofia:

“The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs.

“Why can’t you take him down yourselves?” he asked.

“It is against our custom,” said one of the men. . .

“Will you bury him like any other man?” asked the Commissioner.

“We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. . .”



Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog. . . ." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words.

"Shut up!" shouted one of the messengers, quite unnecessarily.

"Take down the body," the Commissioner ordered his chief messenger, "and bring it and all these people to the court."

"Yes, sah," the messenger said, saluting (207-08)

For one thing it forces us to confront this much about human experience—that things look different to different observers, and that one's very perceptions are shaped ultimately by the social and cultural context out of which one operates. But more importantly, Achebe seeks to demonstrate, in its stark, unmistakable horridness, that whoever controls, or attempts to control, language and the act of interpretation—cultural interpretation, that is the process of meaning and definition—aims ultimately to control in imperial fashion historic memory, culture, and people. This fact is at the center of the adversarial politics of cultural memory. It is also one of the central keys to unlocking the allegorical frame of Achebe's latter novel, *A Man of the People*, where language is employed by politicians as an instrument of manipulation.

Achebe also demonstrates the illogic of hegemony, British hegemony, that is, through the character of the British Commissioner. By taking the words out of their (traditional people's) mouths, as it were, and substituting their (British) own words, cultural dominance of a particular group, class, nation is summarily established and legitimated. The reason Achebe

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devotes the first two-thirds of the novel to the traditional order has to do with the whole struggle to retain or recover or invent out of an acculturated existence—the historic reality of the subordination of many peoples and groups to dominant cultural ideals. And this passion, this struggle involves, at the very least, over and over again the recovery of a voice—in the case of Achebe's *Umuofia*, the articulated embodiment of experience that is authentically and legitimately Igbo. Thus the critical shift pointed up by the two clusters of passages (the first and last chapters of the novel) is essentially the shift from community voice predicated upon shared values to the voice of the conqueror predicated upon cultural dominance and reductionism.

Achebe also lambastes western concept of universalism by ventillating one other important lesson. And that is that one's own vision and voice are shaped by the special history and normative patterns of rhetoric and thought of a region and a landscape; by the race, gender, and ethnic group one is born into. Therefore, when, as is often the case with the British Commissioner, matters of such magnitude such as Okonkwo's heroic stature in traditional *Umuofia* society, are relegated to positions of marginality or inconsequentiality in the larger quest for hegemonic racial ego or conceit, there is clearly a serious distortion at work. But Achebe falls short of decentering or deconstructing the British and their structures of meaning and imperial approach to knowledge. Our sense is that he is merely interested at this stage in this novel in showing the destructive impact of such inconsequentialization.

The second central argument in *Things Fall Apart* is the moral dialectic between those who might be inclined to support Okonkwo's participation in Ikemefuna's killing ordered by the clan



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and those who might be against it. Arguments in support of Okonkwo's participation in Ikemefuna's killing must begin with his life and experience as an Igbo clansman. As psychologist Charles Tart has observed, each of us is simultaneously the beneficiary of his or her cultural heritage and the victim and slave of cultural narrowness. Achebe makes it clear that traditional Igbo life requires cooperation and submission to a council of elders and to the precepts, laws and obligations which are understood to be beneficial for the community. Fulfilling one's social obligations demands commitment and loyalty to the cultural world view. Okonkwo is warned early in the novel to "beware of challenging the gods." When he does challenge out of his characteristic impulsiveness, he makes the appropriate sacrifices and rituals to appease them. Umuofia is clearly depicted as a warrior culture as well, able to be harsh to its own people and cruel towards those considered outsider or "other." We are told that Okonkwo uses one of the five heads he has collected from war to drink from on ceremonial occasions. For the Umuofians, sacrifice, even human sacrifice is part of life, part of the culture. As in other cultures which practice human sacrifice, the rationality supporting the practice lay in the premise that submission to capricious and powerful gods demands it. When Ikemefuna is to be sacrificed, it is not a killing of rage, revenge or defense, but an act ordered by the deities and sanctioned by the community with the purpose of maintaining balance. As a beneficiary of Igbo culture, it was Okonkwo's duty to participate in Ikemefuna's killing.

Several Western philosophical approaches deal with the ethics of warrior culture. The approaches usually refer to the perspective referred to as functionalism, which affirms that people or societies act in particular ways because it serves a function. Killing as sacrifice serves a function in Ibo society. In this

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view there is a basic right for individuals or communities to uphold the perceived integrity of the community by the taking of a life. Saint Augustine of Hippo, Catholic bishop, philosopher, theologian, declares that there are times when it is morally right to kill (see his “just war theory”), when in fact, killing is the lesser of two evils. St Augustine’s thought was instituted as part of church law and was part of the rationality supporting the Inquisition. Augustine suggested that this kind of action is the reality of this world compared with the perfect world of heaven. American culture would argue that life, heritage, culture, prosperity and property are defended and upheld by the killing in war and by capital punishment. Timothy McVeigh will be killed for committing murder and as a society, Americans have something in common with him; in this perspective there are acceptable reasons to kill. As in Umuofia, killing from this perspective is justified for whatever quality is perceived as other in the victim that allows them to be killed. Whether viewed in terms of clan, class, nation, tribe, guilt, innocence, race, religious affiliation, sexual preference of political alliance, all have been used to define the standards of the worth of a human life. Once categorized, it becomes possible to kill a non-clansman, non-innocent, non-white, non-American, non-Christian, enemy, threat, other. From this perspective there are, *just* causes for killing, *just* sacrifices, *just* wars. Okonkwo did the right thing.

Now we turn to the opposing argument. Bertrand Russell observes that judgments about violent action and war tend to be the outcome of emotion rather than rational thought consideration. One view of the argument against Okonkwo’s participation in Ikemefuna’s killing considers it to be a more rational decision to act with compassion towards someone who had, for all intents and purposes, become a family member. After



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informing him that the oracle has decreed it, Okonkwo's clansman Ogbuefi Ezeudu advises Okonkwo not to participate. He tells Okonkwo, "But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father." Ogbuefi Ezeudu is a respected man in the clan, a wise man, whose counsel offers what Henry Odera Oruka has referred to as sagely advice. Oruka avers that communal consensus, a fact typical of most traditional societies, should not be seen as a hindrance for individual critical reflection. Just as religion and all kinds of dogmatic fanaticism did not kill philosophy in the West, traditional African folk wisdoms and taboos left room for real philosophical thought processes. The problem is that Okonkwo is incapable of critical thinking. Later in the novel, Okonkwo criticizes his best friend Obierika for not participating in the killing. Obierika responds by saying, "If I were you, I would have stayed home. What you have done will not please the Earth. If the Oracle said that my son should be killed, I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it." We are informed as well that "something broke" in Okonkwo's son Nwoye upon realizing that his father had participated in sacrificing Ikemefuna.

In conjunction with these Umuofians' sensibilities, Western philosophers of ethics declare that there is a fundamental, intrinsic value of persons and personal identity. Moral action from this perspective requires that persons never negate the personhood or self of another. Fundamental respect for life requires that a person should never be treated as a thing. Each human being has sanctity, agency, consciousness, personhood and this fact cherishes her or his life as inviolate. Murder therefore is always inexcusable. Every human wisdom tradition affirms some version of the altruism suggested in, for example, the golden rule, the fifth commandment, or the code of Hammurabi which, in 1700 BCE exhorted simply that "The strong shall not

oppress the weak.” Advocates of these general injunctions against harming have observed that depersonalizing the other is typically involved in acts of violence against them. Ikemefuna's tragic fate begins with the fact that he is of another clan. However, the other is conceived, as savage or barbarian, the “other” is expendable. From an ethical perspective, if personal life is expendable then ethics is expendable. It is therefore simply wrong to threaten others, to kill powerless, defenseless, and innocent folks. This argument, however, does not propose or recommend an ethic of passivity. Appropriate action when necessary is vital. Nevertheless, one can defend self, others and community without the intent to kill the aggressors. Various ancient schools of self-defence as well as cultural practices have developed around the world based on the principle that it is possible to disable an aggressor without (to use a recent example) putting forty bullets in them.

In his book *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James Rachels outlines the core set of values which ethics declares as universal and common to all societies:

1. We should care for children
2. We should tell the truth
3. We should not murder.

By participating in Ikemefuna's killing, Okonkwo violates two of these three core injunctions.

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