

Rites of Self-Rebirth and the Palaver of Tears: Achebe's Cultural Novels and the Attitude of the West towards Africa on Global Justice*

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Abstract

By centralizing two of Achebe's cultural novels, this paper undertakes a theoretical exploration of the unfair attitude of the West towards Africa in matters of justice as a phenomenon that was colonially entrenched, arguing that the turn of colonial independence did not change this attitude. It affirms that this is why in the 21st century there is an aggravation of the condescending attitude in the dealings of Western powers towards Africa. While linking this to the International Criminal Court (ICC) activities, the paper ultimately dwells by way of conclusion on the implications of all these for Africa's development.

Among the Ogu-speaking people of South West Nigeria found specifically in Ogun and Lagos States, there is a folksong which illustrates the necessity of self-rebirth or the inevitability of tears for an individual in the gathering of kinsmen. The import of this analogy-- I suppose -- will not be difficult to grasp because as Africans, we all come from backgrounds of strong and extended family ties. From time to time we are summoned by the patriarchs

or matriarchs of our families. Such family heads could be grandfathers or grandmothers, uncles or aunts, fathers or mothers, etc. Usually various issues are raised about general family welfare among other things. Each member of the gathering is expected to make contributions towards the progress of the family. A family member who is forthright in matters of contributing towards the realization of the family progress is normally commended, celebrated and venerated. Such person who lives up to kinship expectations in metaphoric terms is said to have undergone the rites of self-rebirth and for which he is able to make contributions towards family/kinship progress. This self-rebirth finds expression in hard-work, focus, sobriety, dedication to family values and above all, a high level of productivity.

Conversely, a person who is always found wanting in matters of contributing towards the realization of the progressive values of the family is disesteemed. Even when he or she is the oldest in the family gathering, it would not be frowned upon if the youngest and most productive member of the gathering make jest of them and excoriate them for not living up to expectation. The ridicule, mockery and shame that are heaped upon them can result in a reaction of breaking down in tears. The low esteem and its consequences then illustrate the metaphor or palaver of tears.

Something similar is seen in the attitude of Umuofia towards Okonkwo and Unoka his father. Okonkwo is celebrated and venerated in all the nine villages and his fame is said to have obtained from his various productive activities which bring 'honour' to himself and Umuofia (*Things Fall Apart* 3). He is a great wrestler and as a teenager he throws Amalinze the Cat, a feat no other one has been able to achieve in seven years. He is a great and fearsome warrior and for this Umuofia is known to have recorded victory in many battles. What is more, he is a hardworking man who has large farms and able to take wives. In the final analysis, Okonkwo's productivity, and not his background, earns him the honour among

his kinsmen and women. Little wonder then that in the translation of *Things Fall Apart* into fifty languages (Lahoucine Ouzgane and Onookome Okome 2010: 135), a number of the translations simply bear Okonkwo in their titles. It is further arguable that in the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the text in 2008, what we experienced around the world was a three-pronged celebration: that of the author Achebe, then of the text *Things Fall Apart* and of course that of the life and times of the super hero Okonkwo. This convergence of celebrations in the animate and non-animate figures of the author, the hero and the text is an eloquent illustration of their respective productivity for which the world was compelled to stand still in 2008. Okonkwo's productivity with respect to Umuofia is particularly instructive for us in this discussion.

On the other hand, his father Unoka is unproductive and indolent and on account of this he is not taken seriously by anyone in Umuofia society. Even his son despises him and makes up his mind not to be spineless like his father. Unoka is moreover notorious for being a perpetual debtor precisely because his indolence brings upon him poor harvest and economic shame; needless to say, he is unable to make any meaningful contribution towards the progress of Umuofia, unlike his son. His manner of death further indicates that he dies a nonentity. In this case, we are able to affirm that his life and death embody and instantiate the metaphor or palaver of tears, while those of Okonkwo, in spite of his tragic death, are a fine illustration of the rites of self-rebirth. It is precisely for his self-rebirth that even his death, tragic as it is, has redemptive implications for the Umuofia community. This is precisely because by taking his own life, Okonkwo saves Umuofia the tragedy of being wiped out like Abame.

What is clear as we ponder the singling out of Africa for ridicule and tears in the comity of nations is that there appears not to be any regard for the African essence and humanity. A court was inaugurated about a decade ago with the mandate to adjudicate in

criminal matters arising from intra and international conflicts all over the world. For that matter, the court was named the International Criminal Court (ICC). But ten years on, only Africans have been brought before it from Côte d'Ivoire, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Libya, Sudan and Uganda. This exclusive African tragedy in the 21st is an indication that in the comity of nations/continents Africa is nothing but a reminder of the kinsman upon whom abuses are hurled at family meetings because he is found to be wanting in the area of productivity, precisely because he has refused to undergo the rites of self-rebirth. In natural consequence, he is faced notoriously with a situation of tears. In other words, what is clear is that the ICC appears to have been set up in disguise for Africans in order to prove that even in the 21st century we are still less than human and our barbaric activities – which in the western estimation are as dated as the memory of its contact with the continent – are still tenaciously held unto by us. Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are pointedly illustrative in this regard and the purported sub-text about the construction of the West as the transcendence of Africa.

What is, however, not clear is why Africa continues to face such ridicule and the lot of tears in the midst of other continents of the world. The poser above necessarily takes us back to the textual strategy of the West which had its foundation in the writings of Shakespeare and other writers whose intellection predated the Western European Industrial Revolution. Needless to say, the period of industrialization also served to advance western inscriptions about the fraught condition of African humanity; not the least because the breakthrough in the technology of print became one potent weapon in the prosecution of western colonialism on the continent. The textual strategy became even more potent when it came to writing on Africa and other colonial spaces (Elleke Boehmer 1995: 13-15). Colonialism ended, the

western world continues, even in the 21st century to relate with Africa in a way that suggests that the continent and her people do not matter. The media as well as a considerable amount of academic writing on Africa in the post-colonial time continue to inscribe Africa in incapability or negative, non-developmental exceptionalism (Thandika Mkandawire 2010: 11). As Mkandawire (ibid. 2) reveals further, 'only some years ago the *Economist* declared that were Africa to disappear nobody would notice.' There are worse things imagined and said about Africa by the West. In considering the temporal transition of these sentiments and animadversions about Africa, I elect to refer to them as betraying what I term the Hegelian syndrome. This is precisely because Hegel's verdict on Africa straddles the generations before him and those after him. This verdict, though coming from a second remove from the author, is worth contextualizing. In Robert Bernasconi's account:

Hegel called world history a court of judgment (*Gericht*), a world court (*Weltgericht*), and in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* he took Africans before that court and found them to be barbaric, cannibalistic, preoccupied with fetishes, without history, and without any consciousness of freedom (2001: 41). Yet considering German aggression and racial chauvinism across the world, it is clear that by beginning the charity of our criticism of Hegel from his home, nothing could be farther from the truth with respect to his judgment of Africa. Such critique could begin with the memory of the near elimination of a whole race in then South West Africa (now Namibia) by German colonial aggression. We can additionally register the hate obsession which led to the genocide of about six million Jews during the Second World War, to say nothing of Hitler's refusal to shake hands with Jesse Owens, the fastest man on earth in 1936 simply because he was black (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2010:29). There is clearly in the narratives strewn together above on Germany alone, a conviction that the

barbarism Hegel accuses Africa of is more palpable in European attitude towards Africans and other races than it is true of Africa. Nevertheless, the German attitude incarnated in the Hegelian philosophy is a syndrome from which those before and after him have suffered once they adopt a condescending attitude towards the rendition of the African condition. Words such as barbarism, backwardness, and doom, among others, have been used in describing Africa through a methodology of colonial and post-colonial gaze, like say, Conrad's hero, looking from River Congo without any interaction with the people, yet concluding that the people are 'not inhuman' (*Heart of Darkness* 1899). It is a form of gaze that is intended to provide a shallow understanding of Africa and Africans, but more importantly because Conrad's writing suffers first and foremost from the Hegelian syndrome. Western press and intellection in Africa's post-colonial era are still directed at singling Africa out for ridicule in the comity of continents. This they continue to do because there is a legacy of Hegelian syndrome which finds it hard to give Africa a chance to express itself or come to the negotiation table in the midst of other continents on her own terms. This explains why African internal dynamics are more often than not vulnerable to a form of exogenous determinism for which, it goes without saying, the West is indicted.

Much as the above is so, and much as the attitude of the West has resulted in a legacy of tears for Africa in the midst of other nations/continents, Africa is yet to articulate for itself terms and conditions based on the framework of productivity to undergo its own rites of self-rebirth. Like every other continent, we have had our natural birth, a situation in which we were helpless. This is exactly why the rites of rebirth during which custom-made attire is fashioned out for our outing with all the pomp and pageantry, must carefully be articulated and well thought-out. Besides, we must be able to afford what it takes to do so. This is thus the sure way by which honour will come to us. Doing this, has again been difficult

primarily because every right step Africa attempts to take is done with a certain form of hesitancy and consciousness about what the West has to say. Put differently, part of why we have been unable to undergo successful rites of rebirth is because Africa continues to seek endorsement of her actions from the West. Self-rebirth is in this context construed to mean self-reinvention. Western Europe for instance in challenging Greco-Roman hegemony had to completely ignore the judgmental and snide assumptions about the inferiority of languages like English and French in the articulation and invention of a new evolutionary epoch beginning with the Renaissance and Enlightenment in the wake of Roman suzerainty and linguistic imposition of Latin. We know that Western Europe's radical break with the Roman cultural and ontological hegemony ultimately led to what became the Industrial Revolution. It invented with it the imperialist instrument of modernity through intellection and vigorously pursued it to justify the idea of progress as inherently Western, even when there are credible claims to the contrary from other parts of the world. It was this teleology of progress that became the basis for the prosecution of colonization agenda couched in the teleology of an altruistic civilizing mission which turned out to be less civilizing in Africa than brutalizing. Nevertheless, it was for them a perfect alibi to exploit the rest of the world precisely because they had industrialization to show for it. How did Europe achieve it, or how come Western Europe achieved all this but Africa is yet to articulate its own unique mode of progress?

At this juncture, I would like to liken Africa's condition of tears to the immobilization of the unfortunate gecko in Andrea Levy's award-winning novel *Small Island*. In this novel, a dog tracks a gecko and decides to restrict its movement by constantly moving round it and focusing in fearful gaze on the poor gecko all day. Having made several attempts to move and having been stopped as often, the gecko becomes permanently immobilized, to the extent that it

considers subsequent attempts unnecessary because of the consciousness that it is under surveillance by the dog. It is, according to the narrative, a nearly all-day long encounter before the gecko manages to escape towards evening (136). It is interesting that this Jamaican experience between two animals is ultimately comparable with the experience of black Caribbean RAF volunteers in the British village of Hunmanby during the Second World War (137). At some point during their efforts to save the mother country from the aggression of Hitler, these black fighters of the Royal Air Force discover they are literally immobilized on a particular British street because of the white gaze of the British people upon their black colour.

Africa's case has been like the one above; our mobility has been hampered for so long on account of western gaze, we have come to the conclusion that we have nothing to offer the rest of the world in terms of productivity to extend progress. It is like each time we are trying to make an epic move in contribution of our quota to global progress, we suddenly become shy or immobilized because, like the lizard, we are conscious of the canine gaze which comes in the form of negative criticism from the West. For instance, constantly the West reminds Africa of not having a pedigree of technology, in order to discourage our African researchers from inventing an essentially African technology. By always listening to such negative criticisms, and giving up on our various endogenously inspired activities, we confirm the various western prejudices which betray their vulnerability to the Hegelian syndrome. Unknown to Africa and Africans, those criticisms are meant to permanently keep Africa in a position of weakness in order that the West can always relate with Africa from a position of strength. In a BBC magazine feature on Africa some years ago, the

claim of certain Nigerian medical practitioners to a HIV/AIDS cure came under scrutiny and the only reason, according to BBC, the claim should not be taken seriously was that Nigeria, like the rest of Africa, had no pedigree of scientific inventions. Like the timid lizard after several hostile attacks from the dog, the Nigerian government considered the curative claim and other such claims as lacking scientific credibility all because the West had declared them discredited. In a similar vein, the efforts of President Yahya Jammeh of Gambia in finding a cure to the scourge of HIV/AIDS have been ridiculed by the West; not the least because his methodology does not conform to the methodology of western orthodox medical practice. This is what I call the performance of epistemic absolutism. Who says the cure can only come from the West or that it is only through orthodox medicine that the cure for HIV/AIDS can be obtained? Such methodological finality in the articulation of western agenda of absolutism has rendered Africa practically immobilized, as she is made to remain a helpless space whose condition can only be leveraged, improved and mitigated by western intervention. This mode of western paternalism has been on for centuries to the extent that we now seem to be comfortable with it. But we need to be reminded that there is no paternalism without its hidden price tag. If we must wait till the West comes up with a cure for HIV/AIDS, then we are still unfortunately consigned to a helpless condition that can only be understood in terms of the tears that it continues to provoke on the continent.

This takes us to the implications of using western paradigms to decide what is good for Africa. Statistics continue to show that the continent is the most affected by the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS; yet Africa continues to wait for the cure to come from the West. If we

so wait, the cure may come after a large chunk of our productive population may have gone to the moths. During slavery, Africa's population was decimated by the same West. After slave revolts in the Americas and other parts of the world beginning from the continent led to the abolition of the trade, African population bounced back and it did appear that such evil would never be perpetrated against us again. But we are wrong again, because imperialism does not adopt the same strategy twice, lest the formerly exploited be wise, and refuse to fall for the bait. So this continual condemnation by the West of curative efforts of African medical practitioners may just be a new imperialist strategy to decimate our population as in the centuries of slavery without anybody suspecting it.

The palaver of tears that Africa is constantly confronted with in the comity of nations and continents is thus a case of double tragedy. This is because the same nations, that is, Western powers that through a process of unsolicited paternalism and condescension prevent her from making progress are the same that also stand in the gathering of nations/continents to ridicule Africa to tears. To what end is their discouragement of Africa from pursuing her own unique developmental agenda? Is it simply to the end of keeping Africa permanently under so that we can continually constitute the bulk of western market and consumer of their products. Africa for the past several centuries has been made the main source of raw materials for industrialization and technology in the West. Any attempt by Africa to change this status is vehemently resisted by the West. For, it means that Africa's status is about to change from a consumerist continent to a producing continent, which has the prospect of reducing the market frontiers of Western nations. Nigeria is a typical illustration of what the West has continued to do to Africa in respect of this. Even when the country has one of the largest deposits of crude oil in the world, the western economic verdict is simply that refining oil for local

consumption in the country is not sustainable unless the country imports refined petroleum products from the West. Sadly the Nigerian government has bought into this advice and for the past almost ten years now has been importing refined petroleum products from the West, while abandoning her local refineries to rust. Yet, it is in refusing to accept the status of raw material supplier and consumer of western products that we can become technologically advanced while realizing our creative potentials for development as a continent.

Therefore, what we need is the willpower to move ahead with our developmental agenda, knowing that the success we make of it will invest the continent with honour and dignity in the gathering of nations and continents. This is how to confront our palaver of tears and become the celebrated and respected continent. For, according to Mongane Serote (2004:22), the South African poet, there is nothing we bring into the global village except what we bring from home. In other words, development must be internally inspired, even when we must tap from the resources of other nations of the world. There must be something that we can say is authentically African as we move on in the 21st century. Such contribution to overall global progress in the 21st century is therefore what we need to earn honour in Africa. Take India for instance. Some time in the 20th century Gandhi predicted that India's relationship with Africa would exclusively be that of exchange of ideas and services as against the exchange of manufactured goods and raw materials which defined Africa's relations with the West (Mathew in Senjukta Bhattacharya 2010: 63). When Gandhi made this prediction both Africa and India were on the same plane as consumers of Western products. But not satisfied with that status, India took a decisive step in the 1990s towards the transformation of her economy by seeking the elixir of industrialization. That decision has not only paid off, it has also made India move to the level of one of the most industrialized

nations of the world. And today India no longer exchanges only ideas with Africa; she has become a force to reckon with in matters of industrialization and African nations are now enthusiastic consumers of Indian technology.

Put in clearer terms, there is a sense in which the notion of global justice and fairness is tied to the question of development and productivity. But that is not to say that once we address our developmental challenges we will automatically witness a decrease in the biased prosecution of Africans at the ICC. Again, this is why development must be given a holistic construal. That is, when Africa undergoes the authentic process of self-rebirth, it will begin to produce leaders whose passion for true development will moderate their corrupt and tyrannical excesses which often result in the various internecine wars that we continue to witness on the African continent. It also goes without saying that one is advocating for the end to the governance of African countries by brigands who see their countries as their property or a neighbouring country as an extension of their empire. Those African leaders—whether as democratically elected or as rebel leaders—who have been dragged to the ICC have—to face the fact—been guilty one way or the other. The question then is why would they go to that extent of afflicting pains on their own people, fellow citizens and Africans? There is need for a change of psychology of governance which should be driven less by what a potential leader stands to gain than by what progress he or she stands to facilitate in their country, the continent and the world at large.

It is also necessary to remind ourselves that there is a pre-figuration of the ICC in the literary reflections of Achebe especially in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In *Things Fall Apart* for instance, the build-up and climax to the tragedy of Okonkwo—as the tragedy of the entire community—starts when the people of Umuofia, especially the overzealous Christian converts abandon the village square arbitration for the colonial courts. It is only at this point that

we begin to witness the desecration of the African justice system. Prior to the advent of European characters in the narrative there have been several criminal cases including the Mbaino murder of a citizen of Umuofia. We all know that an amicable solution is sought between Umuofia and Mbaino. The man whose wife is killed is provided with another wife, and instead of a full blown-war between the two villages that could have led to the death of many people, only one soul, in the person of Ikemefuna, is lost. Again, when Okonkwo inadvertently shoots dead the son of Ezeudu at the latter's funeral ceremony, a communal crisis is avoided when there is a resort to the exilic template that sees Okonkwo, powerful as he is, spending seven years outside Umuofia. That for me is the logic of traditional African justice system. It is moreover fascinating to know that when he breaks the Week of Peace, he is fined and seriously excoriated by the priest of the earth goddess, who among other things, ties the peace of the week to the sustenance of climate stability and the desecration of which can result in serious ecological crisis that could manifest in the goddess refusing to give good harvest, which is suggestive of extreme floods or droughts. This in itself shows that the question of justice goes beyond the legal to include the environmental, both of which have their African templates, but which we have unfortunately abandoned. It is thus the disregard for the African template of justice that results in the incarceration of the Umuofia council of elders in *Things Fall Apart* by the colonial court/administration. It is also this disregard for what is authentic African justice system that makes the court messenger confront the assembly of elders, demanding that the meeting should stop because of the order from the white man whose power is supposed to by now have been known too well (163). That audacious comment from the court messenger references the tragedy of Abame where a whole village is wiped out by the colonial authority because of the murder of just one anonymous white man. It is in the avoidance of the repetition of the Abame fate in Umuofia

that Okonkwo takes his own life, making his death communally redemptive.

In comparison with the traditional justice system in Umuofia, it is already clear the colonial and western system since inception has never meant to be fair to Africa and Africans. The Umuaro community in *Arrow of God* is ultimately thrown into tragedy when the symbol of spiritual authority and justice in the person of Ezeulu is incarcerated for refusing to be imposed on his people as a Warrant Chief. Yet during this period, the Chief of Okperi has already accepted to assume a tyrannical power over his people. Again this points to how the various crises in post-colonial Africa which end up in the ICC also indict western powers one way or another. Whether in the Congo DRC, Libya, or Sudan, we have seen that the various wars and conflicts have in most cases been fought as proxy wars and it is those that the Western media brand as monsters that eventually get punished. What is more, the weapons for fighting the wars and committing the war crimes are bought from the West. When Ezeulu returns and the period of the consumption of the new yam becomes an issue, the church quickly takes advantage of the situation by asking its converts to proceed with the eating, which leaves the African justice system in disarray, ridicule and tears with the insanity of Ezeulu (*Arrow of God* 230). The ridiculing of the African justice system by the West that we witness in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* is still with us today. By abandoning our justice system to trust in the external legal paradigms as embodied in the ICC, we repeat the errors of Umuofia and Mbaino. At this junction, the AU represents the contemporary African justice system. How come it is abandoned for the ICC? The rush to the ICC strikes one as if justice could no longer be dispensed in Africa. In the end, those who thought that the ICC is for the whole world have now seen that it is another ploy to put Africa up for ridicule, tragedy and tears. This is what we have witnessed in Africa in the past ten years at the ICC. The development at ICC points to

the latest style in the western affirmation of the Hegelian assumptions about Africa – the incarceration, trial and conviction of indicted Africans not being different from those of the council of elders in *Things Fall Apart* or Ezeulu's in *Arrow of God*.

What then is the way out for Africa in all this? As I have argued earlier, the task before Africa is how to undergo the rites of self-rebirth which will facilitate credible processes of self-re-invention in all spheres. While doing this, it is also necessarily needful to construe technological productivity as germane to this process of self-rebirth, without which the palaver of tears cannot be done with. It must begin with a determination to transcend the resource wars and conflicts for which most of the cases are before the ICC. Productivity for Africa in the 21st century should keep technology at the centre. This is a sure way of transcending the Western target of paternalism and condescension. Put differently, development from within that is driven by a genuine sense of invention and not resource exploration will definitely sway global justice system in favour of Africa. Therefore Africa's challenge in the 21st century is in the necessary transformation of our astrology into astronomy, our alchemy into chemistry and our witchcraft into aircraft.

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