Throwing away the Bathwater and Saving the Baby: Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo and Qu Yuan of the Dragon-Boat Festival

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Abstract
This paper compares two cultural personages, namely Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's defining book entitled Things Fall Apart, and Qu Yuan (or Chu Yuan), a character at the centre of the Duanwu Festival (the Dragon Boat Festival). An analysis of both characters shows them to be consummate patriots but who are let down by the larger community of their time. Using a comparative anthropological approach drawn from John Mbiti's adumbration of an "African" worldview, explicitly referring to African attitudes towards suicide, and Sing Lee and Arthur Kleinman's views regarding suicide as sometimes legitimate resistance in Chinese culture, the paper looks at their similarities and differences. On the one hand, the paper argues that an unqualified celebration of Qu Yuan could be problematic for some sections of African audiences. On the other hand, a sweeping condemnation of Okonkwo on account of his suicide amounts to throwing away the baby together with the bathwater.

Keywords
Cultural convergence, Cultural divergence, *Things Fall Apart*, Duanwu Festival, Suicide

Introduction

This paper is defending two similar and prominent personages from two continents, namely Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo and Qu Yuan of the dragon-boat (Duanwu) festival. The defence is premised on the understanding that to build credible, holistic and lasting social-cultural bridges, it is fundamental that studies on Sino Africa relations strive to be as comparative as possible and should aim to deepen understanding between the peoples of China and Africa. They should also

seek to provide an intellectual basis to relations between China and other countries worldwide. And cultural comparisons come in handy here. The paper introduces the broader anthropological issues on how best to negotiate intercultural contact. It then zeroes in on an anthropological comparison between African and Chinese cultures on their respective attitudes towards the question of suicide. Finally, the paper appeals to Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* (1958/1986) of an Igbo tribe in Nigeria and Qu Yuan of the Dragon Boat Festival from the Chinese side. Here, points of both convergence and divergence between the two personages are discussed, and recommendations for mutually satisfactory cooperation in this respect are put forward[1].

Anthropologically speaking, if one culture wants to make friends with another, there are at least two areas that both sides must consider, namely their similarities and differences. Similarities are the best place to start from because these provide the initial basis for establishing the relationship. In that regard, there are specific values and vices, emotions, and states of being that seem universal to human beings which could be used as points of comparison: love, affection, sexual urges and drives, envy, jealousy, hunger, thirst, pain, respect, power, ambition, courage, hatred, fear, selfishness, meanness, the consciousness of the human being as a social animal, justice, fairness, reciprocity, patriotism, selflessness, and altruism. Secondly, the two cultures also need to consider their possible differences. Differences are essential for at least two reasons. Firstly, differences are a site for potential conflict and need to be handled with sensitivity and care to prevent them from leading to the outbreak of actual conflict. Secondly, differences, interestingly, are a site for possible complementary engagements through what is called 'comparative advantage' – no single people "have got it all".

In this connection, it is common knowledge that the economic and social fabrics run on "mutual exchange" following a realisation that no single human being or one society can be an entirely self-sufficient entity: one human or society will be good in one area both as a result of their internal or environing resources

1 To justify the comparison between these two personages, one fictional and another historical cum legend, we will have to go to Chinua Achebe who conceived the character we know as Okonkwo.

(an area of advantage) and be not so good or as well-endowed in another area (an area of disadvantage). By capitalising on an area of comparative advantage, one individual or society becomes mutually socially and economically valuable for another. China's foreign policy of 'win-win', and Africa's communalistic (in some places known as *Ubuntu*) philosophy are rooted partly in this realisation of varying forms of different peoples' areas of comparative advantage. As such, difference is not always a bad thing; besides, as an axiomatic ontological fact, difference "just is," and the best way to approach it is to manage it, via sublimation, to minimise conflict, and for purposes of mutual benefit based on comparative advantage. The ultimate desirable ontological goal in all this outlook and process is to enable and allow for a third cultural unit (a synthesis) to emerge from the contact of the initial two cultures[2].

Given the preceding, similarities between Chinese and African cultures have been widely recognised, such as certain forms of etiquette and largely age-based hierarchical organisation of society, masked dances, and traditional forms of worship with both centring on ancestors. The Dragon Boat Festival (also known as Danwu) revolves around a cluster of mythologised accounts about a supposedly actual historical figure called Qu Yuan (343-278BC).[3] What struck this author most about this festival is the close similarity that the personage whose life and virtues it celebrates shares with a well-known Igbo character we know as Okonkwo. The importance of the Dragon Boat Festival cannot be stated sufficiently enough. From our knowledge of Chinese cultural festivals, the Dragon Boat Festival can be ranked second only to the Chinese Spring Festival both in scale and in volumes of mercantile activity associated with the "economic industries" that have developed around Chinese cultural festivals over the years.

A close analysis of Okonkwo and Qu Yuan shows them both to be consummate patriots but who feel let down by the larger community of their time.

2 Cross-cultural studies have evolved from the initial US/THEM binary constructions, through various notions of tolerance of multiculturalism and on to cultural hybridity of many kinds such as those posited by Homi Bhabha (1984).

3 https://www.britannica.com/biography/Qu-Yuan

However, while Qu Yuan experiences a saving grace in the form of villagers who try to save his body from being eaten by fish following his suicide by drowning and subsequently celebrate/worship his spirit in a yearly festival of recognition, Okonkwo has no one to mourn him. Instead, the latter becomes to his people the ultimate pariah and anathema in death, and only strangers can bury his remains. Moreover, his compatriots are deeply scandalised by his kind of death.

Using insights from John Mbiti (1990), this paper looks at these similarities and also explores and accounts for the fundamental differences in the Chinese and African people's attitudes, respectively, towards Qu Yuan and Okonkwo. Ultimately, given the fundamental differences, what would an unqualified celebration of Qu Yuan, as currently obtains during the dragon boat festival, as championed by the Confucius Institutes and Chinese embassies spread across the African continent, mean to the broader African continent audiences? And, as a learning point, is there something that Africans can do to celebrate Okonkwo, despite what they perceive as his shortcomings both in his life and, more particularly, in his controversial manner of death?

Chinua Achebe is widely recognised as the father of modern African literature. Like his famous character Okonkwo, this reputation rests mainly on his solid achievement called *Things Fall Apart*, a canonical novel that is almost certainly read and taught in perhaps departments of literature wherever these exist in universities across the African continent and on other continents as well. There is no better-known novel in Africa than Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – that is how vital this one novel is to Africa and the world. Published more than sixty years ago, it has reportedly been translated into more than forty-five languages worldwide by 1986 and by the same year, it had sold over eight million copies globally.[4] Being this old, in terms of scholarly criticism, the temptation has been to dismiss Achebe's debut novel as utterly exhausted. But, in the process of cultural dynamism and in a typical "Pliny the Elder's quip about Africa" (out of Africa something new always comes), the time comes when something new always seems to come out of

4 And these figures must have been surpassed by far now for this best-selling book of all time.

this novel as well. For example, when feminism started sweeping across Africa, a feminist critic called Florence Stratton (1994) came up with biting criticism of the gender insensitivity that one finds in this African literature.

Stratton accuses Achebe of subscribing to the male chauvinism of his era in the way he presents female characters in this world-famous novel. She goes so far as to aver that whatever it is that Achebe sought to argue for regarding the falling apart of the Umofia society had its seeds within Umofia itself first and foremost. As far as gender relations went, she argues, the Umofian men and women were not together in the first place! In other words, Umofian men and women (and, by extension, their society) had already fallen apart long before the first European arrived in their midst. When Stratton published this article, it was already widely accepted that Achebe's novel had become a tired text. So, thanks to the feminist challenge, there was still something new that could be said about this supposedly tired text after all.[5] Even as recently as 2018, in a slight but searching monograph, one Mzati Nkolokosa conducted a stylistic analysis of Achebe's famous novel entitled *Thread of Continuity*, in which he traces Achebe's closely-knit and dogged narrative weaving techniques. Regarding the current effort, the legend of Qu Yuan has provided yet another opportunity to take a fresh look at Achebe's magnum opum.

The stories of Okonkwo and Qu Yuan

In Achebe's novel, Okonkwo, a passionate patriot in his society of Umofia (patently of the Igbo tribe), lives an illustrious and decorated life. By sheer personal dint, inheriting nothing from his improvident father, Unoka, Okonkwo rises from the bottom of his society right to its apex where he is revered (and, even feared) by most, both in the domestic sphere of his polygamous household as well as the court of the Umofians. All appears stable while Okonkwo's society is governed by itself and operating on a socio-cultural dynamism built into within itself - this

5 Of course, Stratton could be charged with a "lack of civility" for publishing her attack in 1994 when Achebe had already made up for his earlier lapses in this area in a 1987 novel, his last, entitled Anthills of the Savannah.

until the coming of the Western colonialists at a time when Okonkwo is away in his mother's village of Mbanta where he had been exiled for a mandatory seven years for an accidental killing of a compatriot during a gun-salute event which is a part of a funeral ceremony of a departed Umofian dignitary. In his seven-year absence, the colonialist has arrived at the threshold of Umofian society. They appear to have been accommodated to a point where they now threaten the age-old integrity and sanctity of Umofians in all spheres – socially, culturally, legally, and religiously. On returning to his society, Okonkwo is shocked to notice all these sweeping and wide-ranging changes in his community. So, being the patriot that he has always been, he feels let down by his compatriots whom he realised had given more ground than they should have done in their newfound relationship with a colonising power, the latter which had disguised itself, presumptuously and arrogantly, as a "civilising" force. After killing one of the colonisers' messengers in a moment of extreme anger, but also hoping to precipitate an uprising among his compatriots to help reverse the unwelcome tide (which uprising was nowhere to be seen), Okonkwo heads off to the bush where he kills himself by hanging.

On the Chinese side, there is a cluster of accounts in popular lore surrounding the personage of one Qu Yuan, an ultra-patriotic poet and government high ranking official during the Warring States period (475-221BC).[6] While the first parts of these accounts seem to be historical, the latter parts come across as largely mythical typical of the process of legend-making, thereby linking him to his fictional African counterpart Okonkwo who is under consideration in this paper. His state being ruled by a not so wise Emperor at the time, and with a neighbouring state bent on an expansionist agenda, Qu Yuan (like Okonkwo's dismay about the presence of colonialists in Umofia), feared the increasingly-looming possibility of the disintegration, defeat and incorporation of his state into the enemy's state. And when what he had feared comes to pass, its reality becomes too much for him to bear, and so he commits a supposedly "ritual" suicide of protest by throwing himself into the Miluo River. When he does so, the local people who have become so fond of him and what he stands for, race to try and save his life by paddling

6 https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Qu_Yuan.

in small boats, beating the water to scare away fish from eating Qu Yuan's body and drive away evil spirits believed to reside in the river's waters. One of these spirits is believed to be a dragon – following Qu Yuan's revelation of the "fact" during an apparition – after that, a potent liqueur is poured into the river to kill it. The dragon's body subsequently floats on the water following its poisoning. Thenceforth his life and principles are celebrated every year on the 5th day of the 5th month of the lunar calendar, which we know as the Dragon Boat Festival when rice zongzi and liqueur are "offered" to his spirit. Some accounts even have it that following his death by suicide, he joined a pantheon of distinguished spirits, as can be seen from the sacrifices offered to him on this day.[7]

Points of convergence, divergence, and a reflection

From the accounts above, it is clear that the two characters in question, namely Okonkwo and Qu Yuan, share many similarities. They are both patriots to the marrow. They both rise through the ranks of their respective societies by dint of personal effort and worth of their characters. For both, it is a profound disappointment, more with their people - whom they believe have betrayed them - rather than fear of the enemy - that drives them to take their own lives. However, before their deaths - and throughout their lives - they are both dominated by fear; in the one case, Okonkwo, the Spartan that he is, fears being thought of as weakling (1986, pp.20, 43, 129); while Qu Yuan feared the possibility of an aggressive neighbouring state invading and taking over his beloved state. Their fears are not precisely unfounded – according to the account of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's father had been a cowardly, improvident, and lazy man who subjected his family to slings of poverty and so was a source of shame not a good role model to his son (1986, pp. 3-6). Okonkwo did not need to have taken the step he did in killing the messenger of the colonizer. The Oracle, whose voice would have been sought in the circumstances as was the Umofian custom, had not yet sanctioned war against the colonialists at that point and so his act was a rash one, driven, as we have already remarked, by his abiding fear of being thought weak. That being the

7 https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/dragon-boat-festival-00225.

case, his disappointment with his people was somewhat premature. Bear in mind that these people had very recently put up a show of force against the missionaries when Enoch, an overzealous new convert, had desecrated one of the egwugwus by exposing its face (Chapter 22). After all, they had not entirely become weak Umofians, despite all his fears to the contrary. On the other hand, Qu Yuan had seen what the belligerent neighbouring state had done to other surrounding states and so surmised that it was just a matter of time before this hostile and rapacious state invaded his own. And when this fear of his indeed comes to pass, and his impassioned, persistent and insistent counsel at the royal court before the event having been ignored by a weak and morally corrupt Emperor, driven by anger and deep disappointment, he decides to end his life.

From the accounts of their lives, it is evident that Okonkwo's and Qu Yuan's approaches to taming their personalities were both mistaken, totally taken over as they were by their fears, to the point of obsession. Okonkwo needed to have settled for a golden mean by simply avoiding the blind spots in his father's character rather than succumbing to an all-consuming fear of these flaws. Okonkwo's father had some positive aspects, too, such as his ability to socialise and enjoy a good time – a matter in which Okonkwo, the philistine man that he had become, is wholly incompetent.[8] "Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it was the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (1986, pp.4-6 & 20). On the other hand, despite the recalcitrance of those at court, Qu Yuan should have sought other diplomatic means of meeting the looming danger. Such standards could have involved the possibility of self-exile, for example. As we shall see below in drawing from John Mbiti's (1990) extensive study of African religions and philosophy, in the broad outlines of African ontology, save for isolated instances of ritual (self) sacrifice, even patriotism adequately considered, no cause is big enough to take your own life for.[9]

8 Unlike Okonkwo who appears to have no time for the arts and anything that appeals to the softer, philosophical part of humans, Qu Yuan happened to have been a poet of note.

9 Of course, suicides of desperate people (such as those by Africans captured and sold into the trans-Atlantic slavery) take place everywhere in the world, even in those societies where such acts are

As for the Chinese, in this regard, some information points to a certain socio-cultural tolerance and even justification for certain suicides. For example, sing Lee and Arthur Kleinman (2003) observe that:

> For complex historical, political and social reasons, suicide in China has not gone through a period of critical social science inquiry as in the West. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence that suicide has a long history and ancient provenance in Chinese culture. In a scholarly dissertation on suicide in pre-modern China, Lin (1990) suggested that 'suicide is a hallmark of Chinese culture.' For example, suicide was connected with defeated generals and princes during the changing of dynasties (*gai huan dai)*, with wars, corrupt emperors and inauspicious family situations. It was variously described as an act of ardent loyalty towards an emperor (*Zhong Chen bu shi er zhu*), a moral protest, and a strategy for dealing with exploitative and oppressive social relations. Mass suicide, involving hundreds and even thousands of people, and affirming amoral commitment to a kind was part of the record of Chinese history… This moral grounding of suicide is salient for social analysis because it illuminates the downside of society that some suicides may be criticising.

This view of suicide marks a fundamental difference between the two worldviews, the Chinese and the African. Elsewhere, concerning tolerance of suicide in certain situations, in India, too, a widow was expected to immolate herself following the death of her husband in a ceremony called *sati*. In Greek philosophy, Socrates becomes a martyr by being *forced* by the presiding authorities of Athens to drink the poison hemlock. However, commenting directly on Qu Yuan's suicide Lee and Kleinman, quoted earlier, affirm why Yuan's suicide bid received widespread social-cultural-political praise and admiration from the people of the time, hence the Dragon Boat festival that soon came into being in his honour. Since their incisive observations directly shed light on the philosophy that underpins the Dragon Boat Festival, which is the subject of this paper, their primary and direct viewpoints on this matter will be necessary to quote at some length:

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frowned upon and for such cases there is no helping it. What is the point in this paper is whether or not a suicide is sanctioned by the wider society of the person who commits it.

> …[T]here are . . . various historical examples of suicide as resistance in the Chinese tradition. Of course, this is one of the many different kinds of suicide among the Chinese (Lin, 1990). Thus, the suicide of Qu Yuan (340-278BC), as told in *Li Sao,* maybe a quintessentially Chinese example of the right of a scholar-bureaucrat to criticise the policies of a government by taking his life. Compared to the adversarial style of fault-finding, by drowning himself in the Miluo River (on 5 May, lunar calendar), Qu Yuan was engaging in a mode of criticism that did not upset the rules of social harmony and social hierarchy so much underscored in Chinese society.

As the perspective above demonstrates, Qu Yuan's suicide appears to have been entirely in keeping with the Chinese worldview of the time – and possibly even now – hence the somewhat unqualified celebration of his life and death then as now.[10] This tolerance for suicide, however, is not something that would come readily to the more significant section of the African audience – it is not even conceivable or desirable that Africans be persuaded to begin to tolerate suicide of whatever nature and for whatever cause. However, such a view does not necessarily forestall the occurrences of suicides among them. And so, when such do take place, how should Africans then approach these? It was after noticing the "discomfort" among Malawian audiences who are invited to attend the annual Dragon Boat Festival, where they are called upon to celebrate the life of someone they would perhaps instead not think about in the first place on account of how they died, that this paper was conceived.[11] The purpose, then, was to explore possible alternatives to this troubling debate, and this is where the postulations in this paper re-looking at the suicide of a once upon a time people's hero, Okonkwo, and his ignominious treatment by the Umofians in its wake, come in. Although the discomfort has been

10 Lee and Kleinman further observe as follows, in this regard: Chinese history also has many examples of scholar-bureaucrats who withdrew from public life, with excuses such as age, sickness, madness, and eccentricity because they did not want to serve a particular emperor or his regime. These acts could be considered social resistance as well, and might even become examples of 'dying to achieve virtue' (sha shen cheng ren), as when officials of the last Ming emperor refused to serve the new Qing dynasty.

11 The Confucius Institute at the University of Malawi, in collaboration with the Chinese embassy, have held the Dagon Boat festival every year since the year 2016. Each time this event takes place there are expressions of disquiet among some self-conscious members of the audience regarding the festival's import.

observed among Malawian audiences, what obtains within the Umofian society of the Igbo extraction in *Things Fall Apart* provides a salutary point of reference and comparison, striking in their similarities within the otherwise heterogeneous African cultural matrix, and across the cultures with the Chinese.

In this connection, just as Umofians dismiss Okonkwo offhand and wish to consign him to cultural amnesia on account of his having taken his own life, on the same grounds, for the Chinese to expect an unqualified celebration of Qu Yuan during the dragon boat festival would not be fair to those who may be Umofia-like-minded in African audiences. But, as the famous saying goes, "you do not throw away the baby together with the bathwater" what can both the African and Chinese populations do to both condemn and celebrate such tragic heroes in their midst? From this paper's perspective, emphasis on both the personages of Okonkwo and Qu Yuan is their enduring sense of patriotism, dedication and selfless commitment to civic duty. And what needs condemning in both are their obsessions, primarily, and what these obsessions led them to do to themselves, ultimately. That double-pronged and contextualised take is what would balance and sanitise our celebration of their lives.

As we shall see when drawing from John Mbiti's (1990) extensive study of African traditional religions and African philosophy generally, while allowing for possible variations across the continent, because they both die by taking their own lives, some sections of African audiences may find it difficult to un-problematically regard both Okonkwo and Qu Yuan as martyrs in the proper sense. For Okonkwo, the shame and fear with which his peers regard him in death have their roots, not in Christianity – which by the time of this event in the story has not as yet taken deep root among them – but, most certainly, are rooted in their traditional religion. Bear in mind that the evil forest where they instruct the foreigners to bury him is also where they dispose of all they regarded with disdain or suspicion, such as twins (Chapter17). For this reason, when the missionaries arrived in Mbanta, they were not given prime land. However, a portion of the same evil forest was given the missionaries to use as their first mission station, in the secret hope that the

evil spirits that are believed to reside in this forest would deal with these intruders on their behalf – an expectation which, sadly, and to their dismay, does not come to fruition, and may have gone a long way towards winning most of them over to the new religion and the colonialism that came in its wake not long after (Chapter 17). Indeed, one would say that it is this "non-occurrence" that initiates the contemporary existential crisis among the Mbantans at the time of the events surrounding Okonkwo's suicide because being contrary to general expectation, it points to the possibility that the missionaries are welcome, after all, or that the spirits have forsaken them on account of some grave wrong on their part or, indeed, that the spirits are themselves impotent in the face of this new threat. Whatever the case may be, it is to African traditional religions and philosophy that we have to turn for explanations of why, hero though he had been in life, Okonkwo, unlike Qu Yuan, is treated by his people as a reject and an anathema in his death.

In this regard, John Mbiti (1990, p.1) claims: "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its religious system with its own set of beliefs and practices. Moreover, religion permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to always isolate it." Further on, Mbiti amplifies this assertion by highlighting the all-encompassing nature of this religiosity when he says about the African that "where the individual is there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being" (3). Mbiti's book was first published in 1969 - having previously been delivered as lectures at Makerere (Uganda) and Hamburg (Germany) Universities for a decade or so previous to their publication - but it is clear that the status quo largely remains, if only that now the religiosity in question is more of a blend of Christianity, Islam and traditional religions.12 Therefore, it is imperative that this existential aspect of some Africans needs to be considered when dealing with them on any matter whatsoever, including celebrations and festivals, be they local or foreign such as that of the Chinese dragon boat festival.

12 John Mbiti passed away on 6th October, 2019, at the age of 86. Illustrious a man himself, just like Okonkwo, his life, too, deserves a celebration.

What is most crucial about celebrating the dragon boat festival on the African soil is that, according to John Mbiti, in African traditional religions – which the Umofians could be said to subscribe to – every person who dies potentially begins the process of occupying the elevated and coveted position of being an intermediary between his or her people and God (1990, p. 25-27). The Chinese have a similar traditional belief as we saw earlier in accounts of Qu Yuan. Sadly, in most of Africa, both Okonkwo and Qu Yuan would have to be excluded from the word go from the possibility of ever attaining such an elevated position of an intermediary. Mbiti, quoted earlier, mentions that members of an African religious community are very particular about who can occupy such a position and play such a role as that of intermediary: "This is almost a matter of life and death, and African peoples are not mistaken about the worth of the intermediaries" (1990, p.70). For those who die with grudges, or through suicide as Okonkwo does, the spirits of such community members are "greatly feared" (1990, p.84). Mbiti observes that among the Abaluiya, "if a man has died through unusual causes such as lightning or suicide, people fear to dig the grave for him as this would infect them with impurities; and his gravediggers must be paid a goat, which they kill and wash the impurities with its blood" (1990, p.149). Whereas graves of distinguished members (heroes) are dug within the compound, for humpbacks or suicides or witches are dug at "the back of the compound… and without any ceremony" (ibid. p.149-150 & 154). Obierika (who had been Okonkwo's closest friend in life) and his compatriots put this matter this way following the death of the former's friend and in answering queries from the District Commissioner who had come with his men to arrest Okonkwo for his killing of a court messenger:

> Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead.
>
> 'Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him,' said Obierika. 'We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming.'
>
> 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. 'It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clan members. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down because you are strangers.' (1986, p.146-147)

Given the above, when you look at the circumstances surrounding the deaths of both Okonkwo and Qu Yuan, it is more than apparent that there is much which some sections of African audiences would profoundly disagree with in celebrating either of them without qualification. However, even without the strictly religious aspect, in the broad outlines of African philosophy or worldview, the preservation and celebration of life are far more critical than any other consideration. In Malawi, for example, you find this deep value for all human life captured in expressions such as "bola moyo", which translates as "whatever the situation, life is of paramount importance". Another saying goes "zonse ndi moyo", translating as "everything else whatsoever depends on being alive". This is not to say that Africans are a cowardly race but that if they have to give up their lives, the cause should justify it and, even then, it does not necessarily have to be by one's hand.[13]

The dragon: cultural musings

Further, what this author found intriguing in his research on the Qu Yuan story is the dragon's role. What is the role, how does it manifest, and why? In some versions of the Qu Yuan legend, his body is believed to have been eaten by a dragon. Yet, in China, you quickly discover what a central symbol the dragon is in that country – even lions and other animals may be presented as they are, but their heads would be dragon-like. Many cultural artefacts in China have allusions to the dragon – there is even a thriving airline named after it called "Dragon Air". Perhaps only insiders can explain this seeming paradox in their metaphysics. Just to

13 Take note that, apart from instances of ritual suicide in isolated societies, other African societies have practiced human sacrifice in certain situations such as upon the death of a revered member of a community who would need to have someone to accompany them on their onward journey to the next life..

point out that, as in the original reason for scaring away the river dragon using the fabricated dragon in various versions of the Qu Yuan's accounts, the world over the dragon does not carry positive connotations. In Christendom, for example, the dragon is associated with an evil spirit bent on snatching a royal baby from the hold of its queenly mother (*Revelation 12*). There is a danger that through China's valorisation of the symbol of the dragon, other people around the world might become both suspicious of that country or become scared to associate too closely with it, which means that, at least on this cultural symbol, China has her work cut out for her, namely China's cultural pundits need to clarify and justify their country's choice of their national symbol – food for thought.[14]

Of course, one possible explanation for the presence of the dragon in the dragon-boat festival, and in Chinese society at large, is that the crafted dragons serve to scare away the real live ones, which would then imply that all the crafted dragons one sees in China are deployed to this purpose, which would be quite a comforting artefact on a metaphysical plane. In that regard, there is a parallel to this spiritual role of the Chinese dragon in the biblical bronze serpent that Moses had crafted and hoisted on a pole so that anyone who was bitten by the real serpents if they looked at the bronze one, would get healed and live (*Num. 21*)[15] – it is in an allusion to events surrounding these biblical incidents that the World Health Organisation (W.H.O.) adopted their famous symbol currently in use which comprises an image of a colossal snake hoisted on a pole.

Conclusion

This paper has dilated upon the inescapability, if also the desirability altogether, of one society encountering another and the potential benefits that

14 In Malawi, a counterpart to the dragon would be the mythical serpent named Napolo which is believed to reside under mountains and is periodically responsible for landslides and other natural catastrophes. This serpent has been popularized by the poet Steve Chimombo who used it as his leitmotif (see also Magalasi 2000, Molande 2014). It would be unthinkable for Malawians to choose Napolo as a fitting national symbol as the Chinese have chosen the dragon which suggests that there is something deeper at play in this Chinese choice.

15 A further parallel is drawn in this regard between the Mosaic bronze serpent and the crucified Christ of the New Testament – both in the symbolism as well as the acclaimed saving roles both play.

might accrue following such contact if approached in a mutually beneficial way. A properly balanced hybridity is the ultimate desired outcome for such encounters instead of one that yields mimicry. But such hybridity can be achieved only if both of the encountering partners do so from a position of strength, enabling each to integrate aspects of the other from its vantage point. Through the examples of Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo and China's Qu Yuan, we have noted that cultural similarities are a fruitful starting point towards achieving cultural hybridity. However, cultural difference, too, need to be considered, far more seriously for that matter, because here is where lies not just complementarity, but troublingly, potential conflict – the latter which would damage prospects of a continued relationship. Through a discussion of Okonkwo and Qu Yuan, this author has provided an example of how such a hybrid cultural outcome can be achieved by looking at points of convergence and divergence in these two accounts and what these bring to our attention – similar attempts are encouraged in other fields of contact as well such as science, economy, architecture, cuisine, and hospitality.

Using John Mbiti's studies into African traditional religions and philosophy as an intellectual anchorage, especially about Africans' view of the worlds of both the "living-living" and of the "living-dead", the paper has laid bare potential areas of cultural conflict between Africans and the Chinese which the latter need to be mindful of when they celebrate their cultural festivals on the African soil. Not only this, however; the broader expectation is that with the Chinese gaining another perspective (the African one) on their worldview, that will lead to possible transformations in their celebration of their hero henceforth, both in Africa and at home in China. Similarly, Africans might borrow a leaf from the Chinese festival of Qu Yuan and re-examine their wholesale dismissal of Okonkwo on account of the manner of his death, as do Okonkwo's compatriots in Umofia.

In this connection, this paper proposes that Africa should also find ways of celebrating its heroes through festivals alongside Chinese heroes. For example, as a continent, it would come up with an "Okonkwo festival" to be celebrated along the lines suggested above – with wrestling matches and other displays of patriotism

and valour, since personal distinction and heroism are highly prized both in Africa as well as in China. Just as it was in his life when he was famous both in Umofia and beyond for staging one of the most audacious wins in a wrestling match (1986, p.3), and his subsequent ambition and industriousness, in academia, Okonkwo is a well-known figure throughout Africa and beyond, and so learned Africans would probably find no problem celebrating his mythical life, for the positive cultural values that it embodies and projects – while properly questioning and avoiding his excesses and rashness, all in the spirit of preserving the baby while throwing away the bathwater.

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