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### **Ethnic Survival in Achebe's Novels: a Postcolonial Perspective**

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#### **Abstract**

*This article examines ethnic survival in three of Chinua Achebe's novels, using postcolonial theory. He depicts Igbo culture as transforming the impact of colonisation; the self-preservation of the natives as persistent; and colonisation as not being an unmitigated subjugation of the indigenous terrain. Igbo unity and integration challenges Africa's efforts at nation building. Is Igboland socio-politically stronger than the Kangan nation merely because of monogenic culture, smaller size, and cohesion? Do ethnic loyalty and modernisation hinder tribes from developing a sense of nationhood? Or, could fruitful nationalism be grown from the seeds of*

*ethnicity? How effective is Westernisation in transforming parochialism into patriotism? These are issues under discussion here.*

### **Introduction**

Chinua Achebe's well-known motive for embarking on novel writing was a corrective reacting to the general Western portrayal of Africans as infantile, inferior, and in need of European parenting, a thinking that gave impetus to the imperial "mythology of liberation" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen 1998, p. 46). However, Achebe's novels do not stop at righting the misrepresentation of his race. This article focuses on how Achebe's novels uphold and propagate Igbo (African) indigenous cultural values, thereby enabling them to overcome the empire's attempt at an "erasure of the colonial space" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen 1998, p.9) Based on postcolonial discourse (specifically, translation and transformation), this article is limited to three of Achebe's five published novels – *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964); and the later *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) The selection is considered representative and adequate for its purpose. Textual analysis centres on language, culture, and authorial viewpoint in the light of the earlier mentioned postcolonial discourse.

This topic could be seen as dealing with an aspect of social development, which Chinua Achebe himself recognises to be, "in a critical sense, a question of the mind and will. And the mind and the will belong first and foremost to the domain of stories. In the beginning was the word..." (Morell 1975, p.168). It follows that the supposed divide between the imaginative field of literature and those of architecture, developmental studies, or ethnography, should not create dissonance in the discussion of say ethnicity, language, or culture.

The perspective of postcolonialism stimulates fresh insights into the literature of formerly colonised people in a manner which, as rightly advanced by Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (1997, p.4) "can revitalize [critics'] engagement with texts". It is described by Young (2002, p. 9) as "a metacultural theory... [and] part of a radical, cultural politics among which the *literary* may be one significant form of representation". Hence, Third-World scholars and critics use it to promote the cause of people who had experienced colonialism and suffered its (post-independence) backlash. Their aim is "to enfranchise [their people] in the cultural politics of the contemporary period" (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 1997, p. 10).

### **Translation and Transformation**

The two elements of postcolonial discourse upon which this study is grounded are “translation” and “transformation”. Translation is derived from *transfere* (Latin for “to carry across”) and describes the process whereby a centre (empire) sought to transpose the construct of a developed Europe onto a colonial possession with the intention of recreating the former for its own purposes. Young explains that it involves the “linguistic, cultural and geographical transfer ... of positive and negative kinds, changing things into things that are not...” (2002, pp. 138-39). This is exemplified in the memorandum of the Lt.-General in *Arrow of God*, making clear his intention to “purge the native system of its abuses to build a higher civilization upon the soundly rooted native stock [...] moulding it and establishing it into lines consonant with modern ideas and higher standards...” (Achebe 1964, p. 56). Underlying this mission statement is the presupposition that the indigenous community lived a socio-culturally deficient life which the white man came to remedy.

However, indigenous culture evaded wholesale surrender to translation. One of its ways of resistance was for a subject person or persons to deliberately hide or distort information while interacting with colonial authority figures, with a view to frustrating the white man’s understanding of the situation. In postcolonial discourse, this process is also known as “false translation” or “duplomacy” (Young 2002:141). James C. Scott explains duplomacy in terms of the quotidian ways and means the ordinary indigene resisted colonial domination, but which resistance was not considered threatening enough to draw the colonialist’s attention. Scott elaborates that the process involves

the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents and interest from them. Most of the forms the struggle takes stops well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. (1985, p. 29)

Unlike translation, transformation was a more direct reversal of the coloniser’s attempt to transpose its identity and control on the subjected

people. The indigenes achieved this by converting the coloniser's language and technologies for their own purposes. Hence, Edward Said explains transformation as "the seizing of self-representation. The struggle over representation underlies all economic, political, and social resistance and occurs in language, writing and other forms of cultural production" (quoted in Ashcroft 1995, p.7). Transformation provided the indigenes opportunity to sieve through the demands of their status and resist or reject unwanted influences. It follows that both translation and transformation were means by which the colonial space survived the impact of colonialism.

### Textual Analysis

There are several instances in *Things Fall Apart* where religious indoctrination is used as a major tool of translation. One typical instance is when Mr. Smith assails the root belief of Umuofia<sup>1</sup> society that it serves a god. "[Mr. Smith] told them that they worshiped false gods, gods of wood and stone... 'we have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and come to him' " (Achebe 1958, p.102). Schooling was also a potent means of achieving translation. Accordingly, at Umuofia, children attend Mr. Brown's school after farm work in the mornings. Both schooling and church going are designed to bar the natives from imbibing most of their cultural values. Translation assumed that without consultation or needs assessment, the coloniser best knew the needs of the colonised; in the coloniser's supposed loco parentis, he (invariably, male) was certain as to what was good for the infant subject. This notion is demonstrated in the construction of the Umuro-Okperi road which the colonial authorities call a community project, but which the people call, "the white man's road" (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 1964:85-6).

### False Translation

The scenario of suicide with which *Things Fall Apart* ends is replete with instances of diplomacy, being that Umuofia literally set the District Commissioner (DC) on a dead trail. Instead of his purposed arrest of a live culprit, Okonkwo, he finds himself saddled with his corpse. He retreats in perplexity because he could never come to grips with these "primitive" Umuofians for burying Okonkwo "like a dog" (Achebe 1964:174). Yet, the

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<sup>1</sup> Umuofia refers to a cluster of nine villages on the lower Niger where most of the events in *Things Fall Apart* take place.

burial he so perceives, is the Igbo sanction against anyone who commits suicide. Elleke Boehmer explains a similar puzzlement in respect of Daniel Defoe's Robison Crusoe's, thus:

As colonial writing confirmed time and time again, significations transferred from England or Scotland were doomed to take on a different cast in a new context. No matter how much Crusoe, like the archetypal colonist he is, tries to assert his own reality and establish his rights to the island "kingdom" the unknown remains a constant anxiety. (2005, p.18)

Therefore, Gareth Griffiths (1978:68) is right in his viewpoint that the DC is "defeated by the impenetrability of the Ibo world". Yet, Griffiths goes on to undermine this defeat as a mere "linguistic exclusion"; thereby, missing the import of his earlier assessment. The suicide experience constitutes *diplomacy* in that Umuofia culture showed its intrinsic otherness from the white man's consciousness of the place and people. Achebe concludes this episode on a firm point of re-presentation and cultural survival: that the colonial space did not always yield itself to the extraneous influences of the imperial agent. He thereby achieves a degree of ethnic self-determination, in that Umuofia's stringent censorship on suicide deterred its people from the crime. This could be contrasted to Western society where the sacredness of life is much abused by the relatively rampant occurrence of suicide.

A smaller, but no less effective, case of false translation in *Arrow of God* is the humorous manner in which an Umuaro villager confused two policemen from District Headquarters who were on a mission to arrest their kinsman, Ezeulu. Even when the strangers had arrived at the correct destination, the rigmarole of feints continued for a while longer before they were able to arrest the man they sought (Achebe 1964, p. 151-153). Here, the process is achieved through the salutary African attitude of closing in on unexpected and supposedly ill-intentioned strangers who are deemed to be prying into community affairs, or trying to put a kinsman or woman in trouble.

### **Transformation**

Though the colonial master projected the west and its values as superior to the indigenes' own, Achebe leaves the reader in no doubt that the Igbo

community leaders are more honourable and more apparent in character than the white officers. He communicates this difference through a subtle use of authorial voice. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, Umuofia welcomes the DC, offering not to harm the person of Mr. Smth, a promise that bears the sacred seal of Ajofia, the chief masquerade. Subsequently, Umuofia attacks the white man's church building, but only to avenge itself of the white officers' destruction of its gods, the detention of its leaders, the bodily injuries inflicted on them, and the imposition of fines on the community members (pp. 137-39). In *Arrow of God* a similar case of duplicity is portrayed in Mr. Wright's paying of wages to the Okperi road workers, while subjecting those of Umuaro to forced labour, knowing well that Okperi and Umuaro are old rivals.

Achebe depicts Igbo people, not as defeated and helpless subjects of colonialism, but as victims of the white officers' posturing and subterfuge. This is transformation at work. In the foregoing examples, he presents the so-called primitive communities as more humane, morally superior, and more cultured or civilised than the colonialist. That way, he punctures the infant trope attached to the natives and exercises self-representation in a manner that suggests that colonial incursion into Igboland was by no means a walkover (Ikime 379-89). On the moral plain, the guile and gunboat victories of the empire were undermined by the relative transparency of the indigenes.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, transformation takes the form of cultural policies or, as puts it, "the ability to appropriate colonial technology [in the broadest sense] without being absorbed by it" (Ashcroft 1995:23). In the novel, Beatrice's early schooling so alienates her from Igbo traditions that she develops a split personality in childhood (Achebe 1987: 105). In spite of having suffered girl-child abuse and rejection, her sensibility eventually swings to Western values, which she puts to very good use. She stands up to the familial, social, and career challenges of her environment; and her tough personality questions chauvinism against the woman's role in society. The climax of her courageous sense of awareness is her attempted rescue of the Kangan Head of State from a drunken national shame at a party for foreigners.

Beatrice's case is a positive example of education as a tool of transformation, in that her alienation turns out to work for the benefit of her society. However, in the final analysis, Achebe works out the situation in a

manner that proves that the Igbo culture and spirit in Beatrice holds sway over other influences in her life. The transformative power of her Igbo psyche is conveyed in the proverb, "Water of God [baptism] is no antidote against possession by Agwu, the capricious god of diviners and artists" (1987:105). In other words, no degree of Western input can supersede the radical power of ethnicity which runs in the Igbo woman's veins – evidently the authorial viewpoint on the matter.

Thus, for all the feminist exploits Achebe credits to Beatrice, he goes on to use the copious essays of Ikem on Igbo traditional and Judeo-Christian mythologies of womanhood to underscore the real position of the woman in Igbo society. Whether as "the Mother of God" (1987:98); or, as "Nneka"—mother is supreme (1987:98); or, as "Idemili—Pillar of Water" (1987:102); or, as the archetypal burden bearer, the woman stays "in reserve until the ultimate crisis arrives and the waist is broken and hung over the fire, and the palm bears fruit at the tail of its leaf. Then, as the world crashes around man's ears, woman, in her supremacy will descend and sweep the shards together." (1995:98) In other words, supremacy in this context operates merely in a sarcastic sense; the woman remains on the sideline in perpetuity.

The conclusion of Ikem's essay – again, reflecting authorial voice – is merely a concessionary restating of the woman's double jeopardy as sufferer of double colonisation, as the downtrodden gender and as victim of general colonialism. Again, the authorial viewpoint here is that, in the final count, translation could not penetrate certain areas of the colonial space, thereby shoring up the woman's place as defined by her culture. Ikem, Achebe's mouthpiece, holds that a few women could attempt to forge above the norm, but cannot scratch beyond the surface of the woman's status quo in Igbo traditional society. This constitutes a survival of sorts, though by default.

### **The Survival of Language and Culture**

Achebe's deployment of language and culture similarly shows that they are indispensable tools of translation or ethnic survival. He customises his English usage in a manner that amounts to a linguistic coup that preserves the Igbo language. According to Kofi Awoonor, Achebe's usage is "an English which becomes internalized into our own cultural system... [an] internalized weapon of our self-assertion because what we are also doing in

the same process is to liberate ourselves from the stranglehold of western cultural structures” (qtd. in Morell 1974:149). Achebe’s proverb, that “the palm oil with which words are eaten”, is too well known to warrant more than one other example here of his manipulation of language and culture for self-definition. The proverb “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says ‘no’ to the other, let his wing break” (*Things Fall Apart* 1958:14) encapsulates the tenets of civilisation such as order, equity, social decorum, fairness, peaceful co-existence, and the sacredness of other people’s rights. Through the habitual infusion of proverbs into the people’s workaday life, traditional values are transmitted and imbibed as a matter of course and insulated against external influence.

Achebe also uses some cultural practices to project certain indigenous values towards achieving self-representation. He depicts the richness and warmth of how Africans relate to one another in a manner that brings out the reality of traditional confraternity and communalism. In Umuofia and Umuaro everybody is his/her brother’s/sister’s keeper as seen in the succour Okonkwo enjoys from his maternal relations under banishment from his paternal home. In Igbo community, fraternity and bonhomie also come alive whenever kinsmen and friends meet, as shown in the warm banter between Ezeulu and Akuebue (*Arrow of God*, 1964:93-4, 96-7). Their interaction contrasts with the typically stilted and insincere relationship between the Clarkes and Wrights on the one hand, and the Winterbottoms on the other hand.

Achebe’s use of folk wisdom equally highlights how the indigenes successfully coped with the challenges brought about by the white man’s incursion. One example, again in *Arrow of God*, is Ezeulu’s explanation to his son as to why he attaches him to the white man’s church:

“The world s changing,” he told him. “I do not like it. But I am like the bird, Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wings, he replied: ‘Men of today have learned to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching. I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share.’” (1964:45-6)

Elsewhere, Nweke makes a case as to why Umuaro community must cooperate with the colonial authorities on the Umuro-Okperi road project:

I know that many of us want to fight the white man. But only a foolish man can go after a leopard with his bare hands. The white man is like hot soup and we must take him slowly from the edge of the bowl. That is why we must hold our *ofo* ... and give him no cause to say that we did this or failed to do that. For, if we give him cause he will rejoice. Why? Because the house he has been seeking ways of pulling down will have caught fire of its own will. (1964:85-6)

This is as convincing as any argument can be, on how to circumvent the destructive effects of the colonial administration on indigenous language and culture.

### **Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates how, in righting Western misrepresentation of Africa and Africans, Achebe makes Igbo people and culture transform the colonisation process, thereby attenuating its impact. He not only shields indigenous culture against corrosion by foreign influences, but also takes it beyond the colonial era and raises cogent questions pertaining to the state of the nation. Despite all that can be said for Achebe's projection of indigenous culture, Obierika laments that "[t]he white man ... has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we [Umuofia] have fallen apart" (Achebe, 1958:124-25). Similarly, Ashcroft regrets that colonised "peoples, culture, and ultimately nations were denied the chance of evolving into the entities they would otherwise have attained" (1995:1). Whether for better or for worse, he does not speculate beyond this point. Be that as it may, in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe succeeds in his corrective and restorative mission. His portrayal of the indigenous terrain is such that colonisation cannot be regarded as an unmitigated defeat of the colonised, as also historically argued (Ikime 1980:379-89).

Notwithstanding, at the macro level of the nation and its sustainability, the question remains as to what the former colonies have done with their independence. Achebe's response is that "[t]he history of Nigeria from, say, 1970 to 1983 can be characterised by contrast as a snatching of defeat

from the jaws of victory” (*Hopes and Impediments*, 1989:156). In this respect, several issues arise from the resilient outlook of Igbo traditional society, particularly in Achebe’s early novels. For instance, are Umuofia and Umuaro societies morally, politically, and socially far more successful than the failed, multi-ethnic Kangan nation, solely because of their linguistic homogeneity, monogenic culture, smaller size, and social cohesion? Does ethnic loyalty necessarily preclude nationalism or do ethnic sensibilities bear the seeds of nationalism? Does modernisation, which Ashcroft arguably equates to “Westernization” (1995:23), impede the evolution of ethnic groups into nationhood, carrying along all that is positive in them? Or, could the tree of nationalism be grown from the healthy seeds of ethnicity in a manner that would ensure the survival of the nation-state? Considering the potency of ingrained ethnic culture in the likes of Beatrice Oko, what is the true transformative power of Western education and other modernising agencies on purely parochial, ethnic mindsets regarding nationalist thinking?

It is outside the scope of this article to attempt to open another page on these cogent matters arising. However, they could constitute future enquiries into the critical question of ethnicities within a pluralistic society and the quest for national stability or ongoing survival.

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