



Let the Sleeping Dogs Lie: A Discourse Analysis of Myth in Achebe's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Myth is a linguistic component. Features of myth are replete in every speech community, in the literatures of every land and clime. It is also a salient feature of the culture of a people. As a cultural element, myth straddles ideological and sociological culture of every speech community. We yield to the mythic issues of our culture willingly or unwillingly. Like *akaraka*-predetermination in the Igbo world view, myth cannot be erased from the psyche of a people, no matter their religious fervour or profession of faith. A study or a reading of the literature of a people is an investigation into their linguistic heritage, since language, we assert, exists basically in literature. In the light of the above, this essay attempts to excavate mythic features documented in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. In doing this, it will probe to ascertain the author's motivation through authorial comments and pronouncements. The outcome of our speculation will enable us to reach an informed guess whether the author's advocacy on the mythic issues espouses let the sleeping dogs lie, that is, let the status quo remain.

INTRODUCTION

A literary writer, through characterization, may not always be overt to make categorical statement on controversial or sensitive issues that touch or border on public morality. Adult characters in fiction at times withhold information; they tend to stammer to avoid telling a lie, for as the Igbo put it, if the elderly fellow fails to stammer, he will tell a lie! *O buru na okenye a sughi nsu, o kwo okwu asi!* They may even achieve this by resorting to proverbial

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renditions or anecdotes. All we are alluding to are issues that often revolve around myth. Such mythic issues have to do with human relations and forging of alliance through marriage or blood oath. How has the author of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, (hereafter referred to as *TFA* and *NLAE*, respectively), been able to handle issues of myth in his fiction? What position has he taken on myth? Let us now enquire into those mythic features implicated in the two novels. The mythic components documented in the novel which will be investigated are ancestor worship, *ogbanje*, *iyi uwa*, *osu*, reincarnation and consistent or persistent loss of children soon after birth. This essay, it must be noted, has not handled all the mythic issues raised in the two novels.

Reincarnation is among the mythic issues documented in Achebe's fiction. Reincarnation fuels as, it were, ancestor worship. In ancestor worship, it is believed that our ancestors are alive in the next world, called the Great Beyond. Reincarnation, in the Igbo traditional religion and cosmology, refers to the belief in life after death, whereby a person dies and comes back to life or reincarnates another person. This belief holds that an individual can reincarnate one or more persons at a time in his next world. It is plausible also that a person can reincarnate while yet alive. Talking about this belief system, Anyachonkeya (2006:118,119) reveals that reincarnation is central in the (Igbo) world view. He adds that it is seriously viewed in ascertaining the deceased relation, and who reincarnated their new born baby. He elaborates by stating that a dead relation may reincarnate one or more persons simultaneously. This fact has some serious implication in the event of death of any of the dead relations.

Belief in reincarnation is brought to the forecourt of the audience when the elders of Umuofia gathered at Isaac Okonkwo's house to receive "Michael Obi Okonkwo", who has returned from the United Kingdom in quest of the Golden Fleece. They are proud of their son, as Umuofia "could now join the comity of other towns in their march towards political irredentism, social equality and economic emancipation" (*NLAE* 28; Chapter Four). Elated in Obi Okonkwo's intellectual exploit, Ogbuefi Odogwu addresses Obi:

He is the son of Iguedo,...He is the grandson of Ogbuefi Okonkwo, who faced the white man single-handed and died in the fight. Stand up! Obi stood up obediently. 'Remark him', said Odogwu. 'He is Ogbuefi' Okonkwo come back. He is Okonkwo *kpom kwem*, exact and perfect'. Obi's father cleared his throat in embarrassment. 'Dead men do not come back', he said. 'I tell you this is Okonkwo. As it was in the beginning so it will be in the end. That is what your religion tells us'. 'It does not tell you that dead men return' (*NLAE* 48, 49; Chapter Five).

That is our linguistic heritage, language being culture-carrier, the DNA of culture.

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As stated earlier, ancestor worship is another mythic feature brought to the fore in Achebe's fiction. Okonkwo is bitterly upset with his son, Nwoye, when he joined the white man's religion. Nwoye left his father's house; his father placed a curse on him because he had joined an abominable gang. Okonkwo, the "flaming fire", ruminates what the situation would be for him and his ancestors in the Great Beyond when his male children follow the footsteps of Nwoye. Authorial voice probes into the recesses of Okonkwo's psyche and reports:

Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his father crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. If such a thing were to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth....

He sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smouldering log also sighed. (*TFA*, 110, 111; Chapter Seventeen).

Belief in ancestor worship and reincarnation accounts for the elaborate burial rites accorded to the dead among the Igbo and in continental Africa by surviving relatives, most of whom profess Christianity. African literary writers capture this experience in fiction. A readily available example is in the funeral of Barrister Ikenna Ofoma, SAN, documented by Chukwuemeka Ike (2001) in his novel, *Conspiracy of Silence* 144 – 172; Chapters 18, 19, 20).

Another issue of myth documented by Achebe is *ogbanje* and *iyi-uwa*. It will be germane to explain *ogbanje* by way of exposition so that our non-Igbo audience may be carried along in this discourse. Chukwuemeka Ike (1973:218) says that *ogbanje* refers to "a child believed capable of being born over and over again, to the same parents or to different parents. Literally, he who goes and comes several times". Achebe (1986:152), who also admits that *ogbanje* is "changeling", defines the term as "a child who repeatedly dies and returns to its mother to be reborn". He intones further, for clarification: "It is almost impossible to bring up an *ogbanje* child without it dying, unless its *iyi-uwa* is first found and destroyed".

Iyi-uwa, as a matter of fact, is another mythic element that encases *ogbanje*. Chukwuemeka Ike (1973:46,47) calls *iyi-uwa* "*ogbanje* stone." *Ogbanje* and *iyi-uwa* mythic components come to the limelight in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in the case of Ezimma, the only surviving child and daughter of Ekwefi, who is found to be *ogbanje*. To frustrate her from further tormenting her mother and to make her stay without dying again, a famous medicine-man, *dibia*, Okagbue Uyanwa, was invited to trace, exhume and destroy Ezimma's *iyi-uwa*. (*TFA* 54-62; Chapter Nine). It is even believed that an *ogbanje* child, to discourage her from returning, her corpse is mutilated and buried (*TFA* 132; Chapter Twenty-Two)

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Consistent loss of children at birth is yet another mythic component raised in this novel. At times, it is linked with predestination, what the Igbo call *akaraka*. Even though persistent child loss may have some scientific interpretation, yet, it does baffle an Igbo born, that he goes into witchcraft, the religion of his ancestors for solution. Ekwefi is the heroine in *Things Fall Apart*, who has suffered severe tribulation in losing her nine children soon after birth. Achebe's persona and authorial voice captures the emotional trauma of Ekwefi and says:

Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three. As she buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to despair and then to grim resignation. The birth of her children, which should be a woman's crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise. The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual. Her deepening despair found expression in the names she gave her children. One of them was a pathetic cry, Owumbiko- 'Death, I implore you'. But death took no notice. Onwumbiko died in his fifteenth month. The next child was a girl, Ozoemena - 'May it not happen again'. She died in her eleventh month and two others after her. Ekwefi became defiant and called her next child Onwuma - 'Death may please himself.' And he did. (*TFA* 54; Chapter Nine).

Owing to the preliterate society of the Igbo of yore, such a real life experience, as persistent or consistent loss of children soon after birth, could have scientific explanation. A similar experience is where a woman gives birth to female children continuously without male children or has not given birth at all. The African wife or husband will query the cause. He will either seek panacea in another wife, - or another man, in the case of a woman - or will go to his traditional beliefs for solution. This is exactly the case with Chief Olabisi, who decides to marry a second wife, because his first wife keeps "giving (him) girl, girl, girl like that", in Chukwuemeka Ike's (1996 *Our Children Are Coming!* 9; Chapter 2).

Consistent child loss could be attributed to sickle cell, a genetic malady from parents. But for the Igbo African, it is more than that. Our people say that when life becomes precarious for the Christian Igbo, he consults the oracle for panacea. This is exactly the case with Amobi, in Chukwuemeka Ike's (1985) *The Bottled Leopard*. Oguzie (1991:81) reports that when "the education system fails to investigate and help Amobi grapple with his environment, he clings to the traditional beliefs and practices of his people".

As a solution to Ekwefi's imbroglio, Okonkwo falls back on his traditional beliefs and practices. Like Amobi, authorial voice tells us that:

...Okonkwo had gone to a medicine-man, who was also a diviner of the Afa Oracle, to inquire what was amiss. This man told him that the child was an *ogbanje*, one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mothers' wombs to be born again. (*TFA* 55; (Chapter Nine).

This mythic feature of our linguistic and cultural heritage is still in vogue today. The author, by implication, seems to affirm that the status quo remain for some of the myths of our heritage. Myth is an indelible aspect of our ideological culture. Oguzie, earlier cited, says that some of our traditional beliefs are still held today by both uneducated and educated Christians. Besides, exorcism is accepted now in Europe, even by the church. Even witchcraft appears to have gained international recognition.

This does suggest that *ogbanje*, is, indeed, an existential reality in many speech communities. For example, Wole Soyinka (1969: 28, 29), who is of the Yoruba speech community, calls *ogbanje* “abiku” in his poem, “Abiku.” He explains that *abiku* (*ogbanje*) is a “wanderer child...the same child who dies and returns again to plague the mother – Yoruba belief”

Anyachonkeya (2006:48) enriches our literature on *ogbanje* by way of what it is called in a number of cultures in Africa, South of the Sahara. Amina, a character in Anyachonkeya’s play, *A Grain of Rice*, educates her daughter on what *ogbanje* is and what names it has been given and known in a number of speech communities in the North East of Nigeria. According to Amina:

Ogbanje are...those wicked and treacherous children born, but soon they died enter their mothers’ womb to be born again. In the process, they torment their mothers. The Igbo call (them) *Ogbanje*; the Yoruba, *Abiku*. In Gongola State, my State of birth, *Ogbanje* is known by various names among different ethnic groups. For instance, the Fulani, who speak Fulfude, call (them) *Wabi*; the Nyandang, *Risa*; the Mumunye, *Tori*; the Koma, *Jobi* and the Chamba refer to (them) as *Urum*. Even down South, Cross River and Akwa Ibom States, *Ogbanje* is called *Esseimana* among the Efik, Ibibio and Eket, while the Annag refer to (them) as *Okponsanha*.

From the above, we observe that persistent or consistent loss of children especially at tender age is viewed essentially mythic and can give rise to a number of speculations by the African parent, be he educated or not, for which he could turn to his traditional beliefs and practices for solution. That strong urge to seek

solace elsewhere is indelible in his psyche. It is *akaraka*, predestination, which cannot be expunged by medication.

Another mythic issue documented in Achebe’s fiction is *osu*. If we may delve into history, *Osu Caste* system was outlawed in Eastern Nigeria on May 10, 1956. Yet the stench remains till this day. In *Things Fall Apart*, we read that the new religion headed by the white priest, Mr. Kiaga, “was ... deeply absorbed in its own troubles to annoy the clan. It all began over the question of admitting outcasts” (*TFA* 111: Chapter Eighteen). Achebe’s authorial voice captures the position of the novelist on the matter in the following contentious dialogue between one of the new converts to Christianity in Mbata, who elects to speak on behalf of the whole Church in protest, and Mr. Kiaga, the priest:

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The whole church raised a protest and were about to drive these people out, when Mr Kiaga stopped them and began to explain. 'Before God...there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers.' 'You do not understand, said one of the converts. What will the heathen say of us when they hear that we receive *osu* into our midst? They will laugh.' Let them laugh. God will laugh at them on the judgment day....' 'You do not understand', the convert maintained. You are our teacher and you can teach us the things of the new faith. But this is a matter we know and he told him what an *osu* is. He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart-taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Whenever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden cast-long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An *osu* could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they in turn could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? He needs Christ more than you and I. Then I shall go back to the clan....And he went (*TFA* 111; Chapter Eighteen).

"And he went"! – Authorial endorsement? Events will tell.

A careful reading of the novel shows that Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son, was captivated by the poetry of the new religion. He left his father's house and his father placed a curse on him, because he joined an abominable gang – *Christianity!* It is *this* Nwoye that became Isaac, a devout Christian and catechist in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. Did Isaac Nwoye Okonkwo jettison this belief system? *Hardly!*

Michael Obi Okonkwo, Nwoye's son, decides to marry Clara Okeke from Mbaino and informs his father. The following dialogue – presented as play sketch – informs us the stand and position of Obi's father on this myth called *osu* in the Igbo world view:

[Isaac]: You wrote me sometime ago about a girl you had seen. How does the matter stand now?

[Obi]: That is the reason why I came. I want us to go and meet her people and start negotiations. I have no money now, but at least we can begin to talk

[Isaac]: Yes ... that is the best way (*He thought a little and again said*) yes, it was the best way. (*Then a new thought seemed to occur to him*). Do we know who this girl is and where she comes from?

[Obi]: (*Obi hesitated just enough for his father to ask the question again in a different way*).

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[Isaac]: What is her name?

[Obi]: She is the daughter of Okeke, a native of Mbaino.

[Isaac]: Which Okeke? I know about three. One is a retired teacher, but it would not be that one.

[Obi]: That is the one.

[Isaac]: Josiah Okeke?

[Obi]: Yes that was his name.

[Isaac]: (*Laughed, it was the kind of laughter one sometimes heard from a masked ancestral spirit....His laughter vanished as it had come-without warning, leaving no footprints*). You cannot marry the girl (*He said quite simply*).

[Obi]: Eh?

[Isaac]: I said you cannot marry the girl.

[Obi]: But why father?

[Isaac]: Why? I shall tell you why. But first tell me this. Did you find out anything about this girl?

[Obi]: Yes.

[Isaac]: What did you find out?

[Obi]: That they are *osu*.

[Isaac]: You mean to tell me that you know, and you ask me why?

[Obi]: I don't think it matters. We are Christians ...

[Isaac]: We are Christians ... but that is no reason to marry an *osu*.

[Obi]: The Bible says that in Christ there are no bond or free.

[Isaac]: My son ... I understand what you say. But this thing is deeper than you think. (*NLAE 119, 120; Chapter Fourteen*)

The excerpt above evinces that myth, a linguistic feature, is a salient component of culture – “that entire range of human conduct and capacities

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which is learned and shared within society but not biologically determined". Culture is what flavours our animal nature. In effect, *osu* is among the issues at stake enquired after in marriage process. Anyachonkeya (2006: 98) concurs and says that "no parents ... would want their son or daughter to marry from a family that is of lower status...." He argues that we are not wiser than our parents or forefathers especially when it comes to the "*no go areas* in marriage contraction". That Michael Obi Okonkwo could not convince his father and mother in his desire to marry Clara, an *osu*, simply confirms the position of the author and society that, by implication, the status quo remain.

Language is DNA of culture and language, besides serving communicative purposes among social groups; it does more than that as a means of expression and communication of thought; "it cannot stand alone but must be taken in relation to the whole background of tribal and natural life – in relation to a whole culture" (Lewis 1978:198).

Achebe, the *Isinka* (the artistic purpose and *Omenka* – the master artist – has in no small way demonstrated that African traditional religion is neither strange nor barbaric as misinterpreted by the western world (Emenyonu and Uko 2004) and (Emenyonu 2004). What the African does practice and believe in is parallel in the western cultures and religions. That is why Achebe, through psychoanalysis, has built into the genetic code, as it were, of his adult Christian converts the overwhelming influence of African traditional religious beliefs and practices in their fledging minds, a view shared by Omiegbe (2004:198,199). According to him:

Achebe's writings show that African traditional religion is deeply rooted in the minds of the elderly Igbo people more than the younger ones that such beliefs and practices can hardly be removed completely from the people. At times, such 'pagan' influences would be displayed when they are pushed to the wall.

The essayist agrees completely with Omiegbe and Achebe. That is why he argues and expresses strong optimism that it is only when the Kingdom proclaimed by *Jesu Kristi* comes here on Earth that the "former things shall have passed away" (*Revelation* 21:4). But until then, *Nwanne m*, (my brother and sister), *o mele e mee* – it happened, *life!* The influence of our traditional religious practices is strong and indelible in our psyche, like the stench that exudes from the anus of the he-goat.

There are a number of phenomena and ailments which the western orthodox medicine and religion have no answer. But more often than not our traditional religious practices handle with remarkable ease. So the educated African, in all his education, takes memory lane to his roots when pushed to the wall or when assailed with inexplicable challenges. Chukwuemeka Ike (2000:370) corroborates this fact of the Igbo, why he ventures into the supernatural of the African world view in his fiction. Ike declares:

It is an attempt to use fiction to explore some of our traditional beliefs in the supernatural, those beliefs which the white man and our western education made us sweep under the carpet but which continue to influence the lives of our people, including PhD holders in the sciences.

Mythic elements are part and parcel of ethnographic thought investigated in the criticism of a literary text which yields on the level of analysis, what is referred to as “structural hermeneutics” (Benson 1993:258). Such mythic variables are not directly grasped with language. All of this brings to bear on the names the Igbo person gives his children, as we note in the names Ekwefi has given her children as a result of her agonizing experiences at childbirth. Akwanya (2004:104) captures this assertion quite vividly. According to him:

(T)he relationship that language holds with myth has (been) argued that language, metaphor, and myth are so many directions in which what was one and the same impulse had developed. Myth or mythic thought is this common basic impulse- which means that the nature of literature can hardly be grasped, without first mastering the movements of mythic thought. The connection between language and myth is brought out in the role that names play in the transmission of myth.

As admitted above, there are certain phenomena of myth which are not quite grasped directly with language, except by symbolic language; such phenomena hinge on myth which are alien to western religions on the African soil and which they appear incompetent to handle. Again, Akwanya (2004:103) elaborates on this. He, for example, says that there are

Primal experiences which cannot be directly named or got hold of by language, unless by the form which signifies by ‘pointing to a certain situation of man’ in respect to realities beyond his compass, namely *symbolic language*. Such is the experience of *evil*, of *guilt*, of the *sacred*, and of *power*.

In the light of the above, myth is a linguistic component and an amalgam of a literary work. We focus on it in hermeneutic and phenomenological criticisms of literary works which constitutes an embodiment of the author Anyachonkeya (2005). Achebe has amply demonstrated all of this in his fiction.

CONCLUSION

Language and culture are intricately inseparable. Language is culture-carrier and a subset of culture. In other words, language and culture, according to Casson (1981), are not independent or mutually exclusive cognitive systems

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composed of analogous structures and processes. He stresses that culture is a wider system that completely includes language as a subsystem. He intones by stating that linguistic competence is one variety of cultural competence, and speech behaviour. He adds that the relation of language to culture is thus a relation of part to whole. Not wonder then that Achebe in his unique consciousness has made a purposeful documentation of those mythic features of our language and culture in his fiction. And in this way, probably, advocates that we let the sleeping dogs lie.

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