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Literature, Language and Social Welfare in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

The concern of the paper is establishing the relationship of literature and language to other academic field, especially social welfare. The epicenter of the discourse is employing *Things Fall Apart* as a literature text in explaining and understanding traditional African welfare system in the social welfare curriculum. The paper argued that the issue of relevance of language and literature will be enhanced through the adoption of literature text in facilitating teaching as at relevant in diverse academic field.

Introduction

According to the Oxford advanced Learners Dictionary curriculum is subjects included in a course of study. Encarta Encyclopedia {2004}, describes curriculum as courses offer by an educational institution .It describes what a school, should teach .On the other hand, universities as the institution of higher learning that is university remain the acme of knowledge acquisition. Therefore curriculum at the university level should reflect this in areas that are pertinent to the well being of the society. From this perspective curriculum of universities should be addressing challenges as they emerge from the ever-changing social milieu. As the acme of knowledge acquisition and dissemination, university education should be the epicenter of manpower development .It involves trouble shooting and solution proffered to endemic, emerging and possible problems.

Consequently, curriculum in the university should be dynamic, proactive and versatile. Dynamics concern the curriculum being forceful and energetic in tackling diverse issues in the society. It demands speed and accuracy. Proactive relate to the university ability to forecast through research and inform policy makers in taking constructive decision necessary in making life more meaningful for the citizenry. The issue of versatility concerns university curriculum, being a tool in addressing issues as dictated by prevailing situations; university becoming more or less the society medical laboratory. Curriculum needs to have direct bearing to prevalent situation. Courses offered should have significant effect in addressing challenges posit by dominant and peripheral issues in the societies. This will revamp university curriculum in general and language and literature curriculum in particular in contributing to the need and development of the society.

The relevance of language and literature curriculum will strain and wean if academic in the field do not constantly review and search for new frontier .There is the need to transcend the present status of teaching the basic of the subjects but to develop and link the subject to other subjects, such as social work as demonstrated in this paper .This will transform the curriculum beyond the mundane ,as means of communication, but a potent generic academic domain that is indispensable to other academic fields. It is necessary to remap the terrain of language and literature curriculum to meet threat and opportunities as they emerge from time to time. This paper expatiates on the interface of literature in English text as course material in diverse academic field .One of such is using *Things Fall Apart* to teach traditional African welfare system. Literature in English either prose, poetry or drama do portray the social reality of the community which it concerns .*Things Fall Apart* as a novel, described a number of issues through which one can easily understand the social life in an African traditional community before colonialism.

The concern of this paper is adopting *Things Fall Apart* in the social work curricular in teaching traditional African welfare system. The adoption of literature text in related field as demonstrated and argued in this paper will make literature in English a generic subject that cut across disciplines, hence ensure its relevance as a field of study.

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Though it seems the concept of social welfare that has to do with meeting people needs whenever they can not meet the need on their own started with the Elizabethan poor law of 1601. According to Johnson et al {1997}, the law came to be as England changed from an agrarian society to an industrial society. Historically, this metamorphosis weakened the extended family structure through which individual needs were met. Furthermore, at that epoch vagrancy was abolished and the acceptance of Protestants in England abolished monasteries and other Catholics institutions that were being used to take care of the needy.

However, gathered information from *Things Fall Apart*, revealed the existence of a welfare system in Africa that predates the advent of the Europeans and colonialism. It was inherent in African traditional society and an integral part of the socio- economy system. In a nutshell, meeting human need in an emergency situation or assisting people to develop to their full potential was an obligation in African traditional society. From deduction in *Things Fall Apart* relative responsibility that refers to caring for people in one's family is an obligation and a right .An obligation to help those in need of help and a right to receive help. Therefore it is not derogatory to ask for help and not supremacy to help others.

The paper succeeded in establishing notable social welfare scheme in *Things Fall Apart*. The choice of *Things Fall Apart* for the study is informed by global acceptability of the book. Irrespective of race, religion and political ideology. It remains an enigma. The book being translated in to languages such as: German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Hebrew, French, Czech, and Hungarians and is among fifteen most read book in the world. The paper reveals *Things Fall Apart* as compendium of welfare state in African traditional society.

SOCIAL WELFARE

From a cursory look, social welfare concerns meeting peoples' need so they can live a functional life. Since all human need can not be met by individual effort alone, thus social welfare concerns it self with meeting human need whenever such needs can not be met by such an individual owing to a number of factors that are beyond the control of the individual.

In his submission, Ashford {1987}, view the idea of meeting need as a societal obligation and a social right of people in the society. Generally, social welfare concerns meeting human needs. Johnson et al {1997}, commenting on need, state:

Human need, those resource people need to survive as Individual and to function appropriately in their society.

From the foregoing, needs of man vary depending on the individual and specific situation. Every individual has specific need at different periods and if such needs are met the individual will function adequately in the society. In a nutshell human needs are not universal to individuals, groups, communities or countries. It changes from time to time and the changes are beyond what can be humanly controlled.

Owing to the generic nature of social welfare, it is an equipped field of study that can be used in addressing and ameliorating the problems being faced or to be faced by any section of the society. This is because social welfare has inherent elements that have equipped it to perform such functions. It can therefore be argued that social welfare is a topical field that cut across disciplines.

In summation, social welfare generally relates to voluntary programs that are designed to assist people.

However, social welfare does not refer to, or should be regarded as program for the unfortunate, because nobody is immuned to situation in which assistance is needed. For example, stigmatization in African traditional welfare system is anathema. Inability of an individual to meet his needs or inability to be wealthy is not perceived as abnormal in the African traditional society. This can be seen in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo was rebuked by the oldest man present in a meeting for calling 'Osugo a non title man a woman'.... that those whose palm kernel were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble 'pp19.

Commenting on social welfare. Wilensky and Lebeaux {1958}, identified two orientations in social welfare, these are, residual and institutional

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The residual identifies two sources through which human beings get their need these are the market economy and the family. But owing to a number of factors such as disability, unemployment, war and natural disaster, these institutions may not be able to meet these needs or individual cannot make use of them, in such an emergency situations social welfare has the capability to meet human needs. On the other hand, institutional social welfare refers to assisting individuals not in emergency situation, but helping individuals to actualize and explore their full potentials. It concerns assisting individual or group of people to attain satisfying standard of living. Omotayo {2001}, argued that social welfare is generic and means of meeting human needs that serves the common good .It is organize around all human interest such as child welfare or around population group such as older persons, to mention but few. Each specific area in social welfare is regarded as field of practice, which practically focused on specific problem or population group. The assertion is; social welfare is not only for the poor or the unfortunate in the society. But an arrangement that is out to help when necessary. Bare and Ellwood {1994}, describe it as ‘helping people to achieve self-sufficiency’ and a transitional program; time limited to assist those faced by period of unusual need. While Collier’ Encyclopedia {1996}, described it as a scheme that help people to replace lost income.In this discourse the different shades of social welfare as recorded in *Things Fall Apart* is presented in the paper.

Discourse

This segment of the paper identifies means of meeting human needs at individual, family and community level. Here the paper identifies residual and institutional forms of social welfare in the traditional African society as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. When the people of Mbaino killed a daughter of Umofia the wife of Udo the nine villages saw it as a collective responsibility and a joint decision was taken in demanding for compensation. A girl was given to replace the wife of Udo and Ikemefuna was given to the clan .The wife of Udo was called a daughter of Umofia .The word ‘daughter’ point to the fact that a single individual is the responsibility of the whole community. This reveals deep-rooted love and care people at this epoch had for one another. This is a typical example of

residual social welfare in which the need of an individual was met in an emergency situation.

Another form of welfare is the family bond and care in normal daily activity as portrayed in Okonkwo's family. This could be seen in the way Nwoye mother took care of Ikemefuna Pp20 and trying to make up for Ojuigo when the later failed to prepare Okonkwo's food Pp 21. Institutional welfare that concern helping people to achieve their full potential and not only in emergency situations but long time help was available at this period. This was portrayed when.

Okonkwo asked for his first yam seedlings from Nwakibie.

Nwakibie commented. 'It pleases me to see young man like you these days when our youth have gone so soft... 'Pp 16 .The statement revealed that the welfare system at this epoch did not condone laziness. Assistance was rendered to people that were genuinely in need of it. Laziness was not a parameter for help because the clan judged a man by the works of his hands. Pp19. On the other hand, seeking supernatural help to make up for laziness by consulting the oracle is not acceptable. When Chika, the priestess of Agbala was replying Unoka, Okankwo's father when he consulted the oracle because of poor harvest. Chika, said: 'when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his hands' Pp13. It was also the belief in hard work that took precedence when Nwakibie gave Okonkwo his first 'capital' of eight hundred yam seedlings.

When Okonkwo was banished from his village, there was a fusion of residual, mandatory institutional, and communal social welfare.

Residual social welfare was employed in the sudden need for Okonkwo to flee his clan after he inadvertently killed Ezeudu sixteen years old son during the burial of Ezeudu. His best friend, Obierika came with six others to console him and store Okonkwo's yams in Obierika's barn. The following morning after Okonkwo had fled, Obierika his greatest friend was among those that came to destroy his property. This was not done because of hate for Okonkwo but it was a painful exercise that was done to atone for the desecration Okonkwo committed by inadvertently killing a boy. The issue was captioned thus

They had no hatred in their heart against
Okonkwo they were merely cleansing the land

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which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of
a clan's man .Pp87

Assistance such as this is mandatory welfare. In which the assistance is given for the good of the whole community though it is painful as it involves lost of valuables like property such as in the case of Okonkwo.

Institutional welfare was used in rehabilitating Okonkwo. In the first instance, his mother kinsmen assisted him spiritually and materially. The spiritual assistance was the requisite rites and sacrifices for the death of the boy .The material help: a plot of land to build his compound, and two or three plots of land to farm. Each of his five cousins gave him three hundred seed yams to enable him plant a farm. This gesture started Okonkwo's rehabilitation. Obierika came to visit Okonkwo after two years in exile and brought proceeds from the sales of his yam. He also gave out his yam seed to share croppers to enhance Okonkwo's resettlement when he eventually returns to his clan.

From the above submission it can be deduced that assistance to one another in African traditional society is far reaching elaborate, sophisticated and advance.

A typical form of communal welfare in *Things Fall Apart* was described when Obierika's daughter was getting married .The whole village was willingly involved, it was described as.' difficult but happy task of cooking for a whole village'Pp77. Everybody has a role to play .For example, the three wives of Okonkwo contributed their share to the wedding. Nwoye's mother helped not only with her labour but she went with a basket of cocoyam; a cake of salt and smoked fish. Ojuigo went with basket of plantains, coco yam and small pot of oil. Ezinma went with a basket of cocoyam and fish. It summarized the contribution of the villagers. They all went with their children .It showed the warmth and togetherness. Infact everybody had a role to play it was captioned thus:

Some of the women cooked the yams and the cassava,
and others prepared vegetable soup. Young men pounded
the foo foo or split firewood .The children made endless
trip to the stream. Pp79

The communal welfare portrayed above involved happy and social occasion like wedding ceremony. Finally, this segment of the paper has identified four major modes of social welfare in traditional African society .These are, residual, institutional, mandatory and communal.

Characteristics of Traditional African Welfare System

The segment of the paper brought to the fore the peculiar features of African traditional welfare system using *Things Fall Apart* as the study tool.

In the first instance, African traditional welfare system is based on the need to make life more meaningful for one another .It is driven by selflessness and does not appropriate blame rather it empathizes. The welfare system recognized the fact that nobody was immuned to situations in which one will need help. For example, in Okonkwo's situation when he had to flee to his mother kinsmen it was not his fault that his gun exploded and killed the son of Ezeudu. His mother kinsmen took care of him and ensure he was rehabilitated. When Okonkwo's became dejected and refused to be comforted. His uncle, Uchendu called him and advised him against it that he should not allow his misfortune to over weigh him. Giving credence to this is the song:

For whom is it well, for whom is it well?
There is no one for whom it is well. Pp95

This point here is to the extent that the society realized that anybody could need help at one time or the other and nobody lives in a perfect condition. Furthermore, the welfare system abhors stigmatization. Okonkwo was rebuked for implying that Osugo is a woman because he had no title. On this occasion, the oldest man commented that whose palm kernels were cracked by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble. Implying that nobody wants to be poor and success despite hard work is ultimately determined by situation that is beyond human control. The African welfare system is rooted in togetherness with a lot of collective and relative responsibility. The former refers to responsibility of the society to take care of its members and the later is responsibility of the family members to take care of one another.

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For example, traditionally among the Ijebus ethnic group in Nigeria. When a woman dies her family is to buy the shroud, the husband family will buy the coffin, and the male in-laws are to dig the grave while the female in-laws are to provide the firewood. All these are to assist in the burial ceremony thereby reducing the burden. Such institutionalized assistance gives succour to people when they fail because they know help is readily available.

In African traditional welfare system there is boundary and limitations to assistance. When Okonkwo was to return after the mandatory seven years in exile. Though, he sent money for the building of two huts in his old compound. Nevertheless, his own Obi and the walls of his compound he had to build himself. This goes to show that not all assistance are culturally acceptable. This was captioned thus: 'Those things a man built for himself...' Pp115

The welfare system also includes intangible services and non pecuniary assistance such as advice and counselling. This could be seen when Okonkwo's father, Unoka consoled him when there was a poor harvest. This Okonkwo failed to realize. Okonkwo was described as somebody whose life was dominated by fear of failure and weakness. It was this fear that made him to join in the killing of Ikemefuna though he called him father. The African welfare system allows for collective decision through consultation that give room for decision making. Okonkwo also neglected this while in his rage he killed the head messenger. According to the book people were amazed by his action as they asked 'why did he do it' Pp145

Finally, the welfare system commands appreciation. Appreciation is neither demanded nor mandatory. Though the one offering the assistance does not demand appreciation meanwhile the helped does not take this for granted. Showing appreciation and accepting it is done with humility and honour. This was demonstrated when Okonkwo was thanking Obieriaka for his assistance after the later visited the former in exile. Okonkwo tried to quantify his friend's assistance and he told him to give him his life. This demand was made by Obieriaka to indirectly tell Okonkwo that they are one and that trying to thank him was tantamount to thanking one self, which practically is not possible. Showing his appreciation to his mother's kinsmen. Okonkwo had a feast. Despite how elaborate the feast was. Okonkwo demonstrated his humility:

I beg you to accept this little kola is not to pay you back for all you did for me in these seven years .A child cannot pay for its mother's milk I have only called you together because it is good for kinsmen to meet. Pp117.

In addition, showing appreciation was valued. Thanking Okonkwo for the feast –giving thanks for thank .The oldest member of the *Umunna* commented:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving .They all have food in their own homesWe come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.

Helping one another was seen as necessary to foster peace and unity, the peculiar features that distinguish us from other animals. Uchendu when breaking the kola remarked:

We are better than animals because we have kinsmen.
An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsmen to scratch him.Pp117

The assertion from the above is that it is honorable to assist and to receive assistance. It depicts love and respect for human relationship. Even in grief when the elders of Umofia were arrested the whole village was concerned. For the first time in Umofia the full moon was not a time of celebration but a time of collective grief an evidence of deep-rooted love, as it existed in the society. There was even provision to help the dead. Obierika remarked when Okonkwo hanged himself '... we will do our duty by him'. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land'.Pp147. It shows the bond in African culture, which is the beauty of it. African welfare system from the position of this paper was imbued with social solidarity, responsibility and devoid of individualism. The social welfare in this period was wholesome and linked to success of the entire society.

Conclusion

The paper succeeded in using a literature text *Things Fall Apart* in facilitating teaching in the social welfare curriculum in general especially African traditional welfare system. Through the adoption of *Things Fall Apart* five modes of traditional welfare system were

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identified. These are; residual, institutional, mandatory, spiritual and communal. Furthermore, the characteristics of African traditional welfare system such as appreciation and selflessness were also identified.

In conclusion the adoption of *Things Fall Apart* in the social welfare curriculum has demonstrated in this paper did facilitate understanding of traditional African welfare system.

Social welfare as means of meeting human needs, was well entrenched in the pre-colonial African society. The identifiable welfare systems are residual, institutional, communal and mandatory. From the submission above the concept of social welfare is an inherent African culture. It predates the Elizabethan poor law of 1601 which according to Johnson et al {1997}, is the foundation of the present day social welfare system.

In summation, social welfare as a means of assisting people in pre-colonial African society was seen as an obligation and a right. It is devoid of stigmatization or discrimination. It was well organized, constructive appreciative and beneficial to individuals and the society in general. It creates a mutual assurance of social exchanges, providing emotional and material assistance that gives every individual a sense of belonging and assurance of assistance whenever in need.

Recommendation

The theme of the conference stimulate the need for general appraisal of university curriculum. This allow for candid conclusion on whether university curriculum in diverse fields are still relevant and appropriate in meeting the demand as dictated by changes in the society. This is because with passage of time, couple with development in science and technology has affected societal functioning. Hence, it demands on the university as the acme of knowledge acquisition and dissemination to be proactive and functional in meeting the challenges of this ever changing world. This can only be achieved if university curriculum is responsive and adaptive in ensuring relevance to the need of the society. It may be necessary to have a complete overhaul, probable, inclusion or expansion of a curricular if such is obsolete or inadequate to impact

the required skills, training and knowledge necessary for professional in the particular field.

The position of this paper is networking a symbiosis relationship, it involved borrowing –using part of a curriculum to facilitate teaching in another curriculum as argued and demonstrated with *Things Fall Apart* and social welfare in this paper. This will revamp and open new frontier, exposing need, threat and challenges, provoking action and interest in developing a functional curriculum. Language and literature will remain relevant, owing to the fact that it is a major means of communication in the academic. Since it permeates others fields as means of communication, which is indispensable thus it will remain relevant.

However, its relevance as an academic field of study will depend largely on scholars in the field to constantly probe into new developments and review its usage in other fields such as economics, politics, history and social welfare as argued in this paper. Also, scholars in diverse field should probe into interface of literature in diverse curricula .In addition regular convivial among scholars is necessary in appraising the relevance of literature and language to academic in particular and human development in general. Finally, more studies should be done on other literature text in order to expatiate issues as relevant to other academic fields.

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