Storytelling as a Guide to the Past: A Reading of *Things Fall Apart*.

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“There is no story that is not true”

*Things Fall Apart* was meant to be a reconstruction of a lost past, Achebe had to interrupt the redaction of his novel and go back to Nigeria, where he took his time to refer to the Igbo elders who had a record of what the Igbo people’s life was like. The bits of the past he collected were skillfully used to write his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe’s account of the past was meant to be an authentic document that acquaints the reader with the history of the Ibo community. The novel’s claim to authenticity is not only limited to the world it represents, it relies a great deal on the manner or style in which that world is represented. Achebe’s attraction to stories made him opt for storytelling as a form for his first work of fiction. In an interview entitled “The Art of Fiction”, Achebe expresses his love for stories and says:

I knew I loved stories, stories told in our home, first by my mother, then by my elder sister—such as the story of the tortoise—whatever scraps of stories I could gather from conversations, just from hanging around, sitting around when my father had visitors.

The first part of this paper will explore the valuable tradition of storytelling in the African culture and deal with its features in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The second section will attempt to show how Achebe’s option for storytelling as a style allows him to bring back to memory images of the Nigerian lost past.
Bearing in mind that one of Achebe’s concerns is credibility, the paper will show that the Igbo past is not depicted as perfect and flawless; Achebe revealed its good as well as its bad sides.

Dealing with the past of his Igbo people was as important as the form in which he would tell their history. The oral tradition of telling stories is characteristic of African culture. Charles Long explains that in Africa, the oral art of telling stories is vital and constitutes the core of the African literature. The body of African folktales is collected and transformed from oral to written, as this proves to be the only way to preserve the oral forms and also to study the African history. In his article “The Study of African Oral Art”, Melville J. Herskovits explains that concomitant with archeological discoveries in Africa “has been the development of nationalistic movements, whose leaders are greatly interested in finding out their historic past. This has done much to encourage the study of oral tradition” (456). It is in this light that Achebe’s novel can be read. It takes the reader (whether African or Euro-American) in a journey to the Igbo past, to details about the Igbo people’s culture, way of life, gods and ancestors, their politics, and their norms.

Achebe’s choice of this literary form stems from his awareness of the Igbo people’s attachment to folktales and his aspiration to write a work of fiction that is as long-established and old as the past he tries to restore. His response to the colonial misrepresentations of Africa and the Africans is done through storytelling. Achebe is so influenced by the oral tradition of telling stories that he takes all the literatures of the world to be no more than stories, which is why he expresses his dislike and rejection to the colonial works by writing his own stories. He believes that “if you don’t like someone’s story, you write your own (Achebe). In this vein, Things Fall Apart is first and foremost a story. In “A
Mouth with which to Tell a Story,” Joseph R. Slaughter believes that “Things Fall Apart is, in part, a corrective to discourses structured by secrets and silence. It is not that Things Fall Apart fills out that which cannot be told in the colonial discourses, but rather that it explodes the very category of not telling” (191).

Oliver Lovesey explains that Achebe also “writes for a broadly-defined African audience, divorced from its history” (133). When things fell apart with the arrival of colonialism, Africans lost touch with their past. Only the educated nationalists (Achebe was one of them) who were aware of the importance of rooting themselves in their history cared about all aspects of their culture and tradition. Having had his education in a mission homestead, Achebe tells about his fascination with the adventure stories he used to read in English, he was too young to know that he was supposed to side with those characters, portrayed as savages, instead of the white man. Achebe explains that “that was the way I was introduced to the danger of not having your own stories (Achebe).” More precisely, Achebe wants to atone for this lack of awareness, his long silence and his detachment from his roots and the history of his country. He does so by claiming himself a “historian.” He would take the charge to tell the story of the “hunted lion” who symbolically refers to the African man “so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail—the bravery, even, of the lions” (Achebe).

Achebe believes that no form of literature compares to the oral stories but as it is no longer possible for him to tell a story by word of mouth; he has no choice but resort to the written. Yet he promised that he will try to “bring to the written story something of that energy of the story told by word of mouth (Achebe).” In fact, a careful reading of Things Fall Apart shows the glow of that energy Achebe talks about. Throughout the whole narrative, he keeps reminding his
readers that this work of fiction is essentially a tale that if it were possible, it would have been told orally.

Abdul Jan Mohamed notices that “Achebe is able to capture the flavor of an oral society in his style and narrative organization” (86). This is done through the recourse to the use of a simple and economical language, a slow-paced narration of the events of the story, which reflects a story that is in the process of being created. The third-person narrator becomes a guiding storyteller who informs the audience/the reader about the traditions of the Igbos and their significance. Repetition, which is another characteristic of Achebe’s narrative, is one of the storyteller’s techniques to put emphasis on specific ideas and make the reader aware of the details that they should remember in relation to the plot or to the theme of the story.

The manner of telling a story matters as much as the story told; Melville J. Herskovits explains that “in Africa tales are essentially modes of dramatic expression, even to the extent that in some instances stories are enacted by tellers for an audience.” For him “the presentation of a tale is a bit of acting in itself” (454). The storyteller involves his audience and uses techniques that emphasize a sense of drama and participation. Achebe has no means to suggest that in his narrative, so instead he includes traditional folktales performed by storytellers and shows the audience reacting to it. The story of the birds and the tortoise is actually the only folktale (among five mentioned in the novel) that is rendered to the reader in length and which comprehends all the features of folk stories.

The mother, Ekwefi--one of the wives of the protagonist Okonkwo-- is shown telling a story to her daughter who interrupts the narration from time to time to ask questions. This proves that storytelling involves interaction between
storyteller and audience. The patient replies of the mother teach the daughter that there are rules she should learn to listen to a story. Some of these rules consist in being patient, suspend one’s belief and learn that a story is meant to be an allegory of the human world. Once the story is told, Ezinma disappointed remarks that “that there is no song in the story” (90). In fact, Achebe hints that sometimes folktales are accompanied by songs. They enliven the story, entertain the audience and sustain their attention. In chapter seven of the novel, Nwoye remembers one of his mother’s tales, the story of the sky and the earth, the narrator implies that the story was sung, and so he explains that “whenever Nwoye’s mother sang this song he felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, Earth’s emissary, sang for mercy” (48). Achebe describes the emotional effect the sung story has on children and shows that people carry the tales they listen to with them in their journey to maturity, and the manner through which the story is rendered contributes to its memorization.

African folktales include aspects of the oral art of communication consisting essentially in riddles, songs and proverbs. Achebe’s story abounds with proverbs, and he tells us that “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (6). Melville J. Herskovits explains that “in African societies it is a mark of elegance to be able to interlard one’s speech with these aphorisms.” And that “the morals they point give insights into the basic values of society; they teach us what is held to be right and wrong. They are, indeed, an index to accepted canons of thought and action” (454).

Historians and scholars provided an in-depth study of the oral tradition and dealt with its aspects and its value and showed that storytelling is one of the most powerful forms of artistic production in the Igbo culture. Achebe’s Things Fall Apart attempted to convey this idea through the form that he gives to his novel
but also through the inclusion of significant folktales and proverbs. Their incorporation in his narrative testifies to Achebe’s loyalty to the cultural Igbo traditions.

In his essay “The Igbo Stories and Storytelling”, the Igbo critic Chukwuma Azuonye classifies the Igbo stories into four categories: “stories set in the animal world, stories set in the human world, stories set in the supernatural world and formulaic stories” (37). Besides the main story of his novel, Achebe mentions at least five other folktales. Some are provided in abstracts; they are used to illustrate or justify an idea, like the story of Mother Kite and her daughter or the story of the Mosquito and Ear.

The story of the tortoise and the birds is the only tale that is told in length and through which Achebe is capable to bring to our mind the Igbo folktale in its “full magnificence”, following the way it would have been told in a real situation. So first he provides the context:

Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives’huts as each woman and her children told folk stories. Ekwefi and her daughter, Ezinma, sat on a mat on the floor. It was Ekwefi’s turn to tell a story.

‘Once upon a time,’ she began, ‘all the birds were invited to a feast in the sky… (89)

Among the Igbo people, “folktales were usually told in the evening after the day’s chores, or on the way to or from the stream to fetch water, or the bush-farm to collect fire wood or farm produce”(Azuonye 37). The story includes all the features of folktales; we have a storyteller and an audience, mother and daughter who significantly represent two generations. In so doing, Achebe
shows how the African oral heritage was preserved through time. The story
starts by “once upon a time” which is the convention to tell a story and set the
audience in the world of imagination.

The reader /audience will be surprised to discover the tortoise is a trickster
figure in the African folktales, and that it embodies, differently from other
cultures, cunning, mischief, deception, dishonesty, greed and selfishness. The
tale is about a selfish and greedy tortoise who convinces the birds to take him
with them to the sky where a feast is held, there he tricks them and eats all the
food of the feast alone. The birds punish him by taking the feathers they lent
him, having no wings to fly back home, Tortoise lets himself fall and gets his
shell broken. The medicine man sticks the broken pieces together, but Tortoise
is going to hold for ever an ugly shell. The moral of the story is summarized by
Tortoise’s own statement that “a man who makes trouble for others is also
making trouble for himself” (90).

The story values virtues like generosity, the spirit of community and solidarity
and condemns vices like greed and selfishness. In traditional Africa, the welfare
and the good of the community are put above the individual interest. This is the
way a tribe’s survival and safety are ensured. The folktale reveals other details
about the Igbo culture. It shows the way Igbos adorn themselves for ceremonies.
Preparing for the feast in the sky, “the animals paint their faces with red wood
cam and drew beautiful patterns in them with uli”; in the same way the Igbo
women prepare themselves for festivities. Indeed, in a wedding ceremony in the
novel, Achebe informs us that the bride “wore a coiffure which was done up into
a crest in the middle of the head. Cam wood was rubbed lightly into her skin,
and all the body were black patterns drawn with uli “(64).
The feast described in the folktale includes a list of the traditional Igbo food consisting essentially of yam dishes like “pounded yam” and “yam pottage cooked with palm-oil and fresh fish” (70). Yam together with palm-wine constitute the main food and drink of the Igbos. Besides, we learn that presenting kola nuts for guests to break and eat at the beginning of every social occasion is one of the most cherished Igbo traditional customs. It is mentioned in the tortoise story and elsewhere in the novel.

In addition to the artistic value of the tale, Achebe shows that a folktale is not only a means of entertainment, it is also a book of history where all is recorded including the small details about the Igbo habits, traditions, food etc…which explains why among historians and anthropologists, collecting folktales and preserving them in printed documents is considered the first step towards finding out about the history of many African communities.

It is worth mentioning also that the Igbo’s understanding of a story might differ from what it is conceived to be; the Igbos take it to be the creation of imagination, it is meant to be a vehicle through which the heritage of the tribe, its ideals, laws and principles are handed down from one generation to another. But it also functions as a means of transmitting the news of people and tribes. In chapter fifteen, the news of the massacre of the village of Abame is brought in the form of a story. Obierika pays a visit to his exiled friend Okonkwo, and brings all the news in the way one would narrate a story:

"Have you heard," asked Obierika, "that Abame is no more?"
"How is that?" asked Uchendu and Okonkwo together.

"Abame has been wiped out," said Obierika. "It is a strange and terrible story. If I had not seen the few survivors with my own eyes
and heard their story with my own ears, I would not have believed. Was it not on an Eke day that they fled into Umuofia?” he asked his two companions, and they nodded their heads (124).

Obierika tells the news of Abame using the same strategies of a storyteller. His account of the massacre is slow, he gives some details about the events and then he stops to drink his palm-wine. He addresses his companions searching confirmation, and Okonkwo curiously interrupts him to ask questions to better understand what happened. The rendering of the massacre includes all the features of a folktale; performance and interaction. Further in the same chapter, Obierika mentions that the slave trade that was taking place in West African coast countries reached his ears in the form of stories. Expressing his worries about the danger the white man brings to their land, he says that they “have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true” (127). To this, the wise uncle of Okonkwo replies that “there is no story that is not true” (127). This hints to the Igbo belief in the reliability of stories as a sound source of information.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe attempts to provide his version of the African Igbo people in the same style Igbos told their stories. In his narrative, there is a unifying story which centers on the life of an Igbo man called Okonkwo and his tribe Umuofia. According to Azuonye’s classification, Okonkwo’s story falls into the second category. Azuonye explains that stories set in the human world “assumes the existence of a settled, civilized social order but one troubled by the perennial human foibles of greed, envy, rivalry, oppression and intolerance” (37). This means that concomitant with the themes of the story are revealed the social, religious, cultural and political aspects of the Igbo people. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is composed of three parts, and the first one is the longest.
Though this might imply an imbalanced plot, Achebe does not bother to provide the space that is sufficient enough to tell the story of a bygone Igbo tribe and its representative character Okonkwo. As the narrator unfolds his story, elements of the forgotten Igbo past are revealed.

Okonkwo is introduced as the village hero and warrior, and a man who rises from humble origins and who, thanks to his strong will and perseverance, has become a powerful leader. He incarnates his society’s ideal of manliness, and through the principles he values, the reader learns that among the Igbos, to be a man means to be strong, to be a farmer, to provide for one’s family, to be a brave warrior, have titles and respect the ways of the ancestors. To provide a better view of the protagonist, Achebe relies on digression, a technical device commonly used by storytellers. It consists in introducing what would be the antithesis of Okonkwo, his father. He represents all what the Igbos abhor, gentleness, lack of ambition, sensitivity, indebtedness and irresponsibility. He is at the root of his son’s fear and shame. One main function we deduce from the comparison drawn between father and son is to guide the reader or the audience to the profile of an ideal man for the Igbo people. It also implies that the Igbo society is built on patriarchy.

Chapter two reveals that the Igbos have developed a democratic political system that is efficient enough that no chief is needed. To our surprise, the Igbos have no central organizations or chiefs and they reject any inherited hierarchical system of authority. We are shown that tribal solidarity, respect of the collective values, loyalty, and equality constitute the tribe’s cohesion and unity. Many chapters of part one hint that the Igbos are an agrarian community, which explains the reason why a great deal of space is devoted to the description of agricultural activities like planting, harvesting, building barns and filling them with yam and the festivals which accompany them. (The Feast of the New Yam)
Throughout the thirteen chapters of the novel’s first part, Achebe introduces, whenever it is relevant, the spiritual world of the Igbo people. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves the Umuofians refer to whenever they need counsel and guidance. Chukwo is the supreme god. Ani is the most influential deity, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility; she is also “the ultimate judge of morality and conduct” (33). The Igbo’s ancestors are worshiped and they believe that if a person dies and his families perform the appropriate funeral rites, he will be able to join the ancestors and take interest in the living members of their family. Priests and priestesses play the role of the intermediary between men and their gods.

Rituals such as marriages and funerals were important details that Achebe did not miss to mention. Chapter eight provides a detailed description of the wedding ceremony and all the traditions it includes and chapter thirteen is completely devoted to the description of a funeral scene and all the rituals that accompany it.

Though the first chapters might suggest an ideal community free from faults, the late chapters of the first part (starting from chapter seven) mark the beginning of Achebe’s implicit criticism of his society’s abuses, shortcomings and injustice. Achebe relies on various technical devices to communicate his rejection of what he judges unjust and meaningless divine decrees which justify criminal acts like killing a child to make him pay for his parents mistake, or depriving mothers from their twins on the grounds that twins are magical or stripping a man from all his fortune and the titles he worked hard to get because of an inadvertent crime. In further chapters, Achebe reveals that the Igbo society is based on a racist system which excludes the sick and discriminates against the poor who cannot afford to get titles and calls them efulefu which means “worthless and empty men” (130). Strikingly, we discover that some Igbo people are treated as
slaves, born to be the servants of the gods and considered to be a “taboo forever” and their children after them. They have none of the rights free-bon men have. Throughout the whole narrative, Achebe does not hesitate to deal with what he takes to be one of the main factors that caused things to fall apart in his Igbo community.

In turning to storytelling, one of the most important elements of a tale is the moral or the lesson that the storyteller teaches to his audience. Achebe wrote his novel during the nationalist movement, at a time when Nigeria was close to get its independence, and the Nigerian social elite started to think of building for the future of an independent country. Through Okonkwo’s story, Achebe, the storyteller, invites his Nigerian countrymen to reconsider their forgotten past and learn lessons from it. There is much to retain and much to reject. In this regard, Achebe’s recourse to objectivity is guiding. It shows the Igbos the way to build for a better Nigeria.

In “The Novelist as Teacher”, Achebe explains that he will be satisfied if his novels “did no more than teach [his] readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them”(45). In the Igbo tradition, storytelling has a didactic function and here Achebe claims plainly that he is a teacher, more precisely, he is a storyteller whose mission is to teach his readers about Nigerian culture and history.
Works Cited


