

CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART : NARRATING LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL ORDER

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ملخص

أشياء تتلاشى لـ CHINUA ACHEBE (شينو أشيبي): سرد الزعامة والقانون الاجتماعي. أعاد CHINUA ACHEBE في الوثائق الحديثة التركيز على حاجة الكتاب الأفارقة لحكاية قصصهم الاجتماعية، والإشارة إلى التقاليد التي جعلتهم يقفون معا. إن أعماله الخيالية تدل على أن مجموعة الهوية والتطور لا يمكنهما أن يكتملا من غير معرفة صحيحة وحقيقية للمجموعة التاريخية والهوية السياسية. وراء النقاش الدائم المناهض للإستعمار "أشياء تتلاشى"، تظهر الريادة في السرد عن إفريقيا، وتتمين الأشياء الروحية مع عقل القارئ الإفريقي، وبخاصة أن الرواية تظهر الثنائية "الزعامة والتماسك" الاجتماعي الذي لديه أهمية كبيرة في تاريخ أي شعب. ولفهم هذا الموضوع حاول CHINUA ACHEBE تحويل الصورة البطولية إلى مجموعة من الأسئلة، ومنها: كيف يمكن للبطل أن يظهر؟ وكيف يمكنه الحفاظ على مركزه أمام الرأي الاجتماعي؟ يشير ACHEBE إلى أن البطل يمكن أن يسقط بسهولة من موقعه ما دام هو الإله ولا يمكن تعويضه بألهة مناسبة.

من خلال قصص، فإننا نجدهم يساعدون القارئ على إدراك القواعد التي تؤكد التماسك الاجتماعي، كما تشير الرواية إلى ذلك

التماسك والإتحاد السائدين في القبيلة قبل حدوث التغيير لإظهاره بعد ذلك كيف أصبح هشا، وكم هو ضروري على البطل أن يكون فنانا وقويا فكريا للدفاع عن قيم القبيلة من خلال التطور التاريخي والسياسي.

ونتساءل إلى أي مدى هو مهم كل من المراقبة الذاتية والحكمة لمواصلة التصدي في وجه المعارف الكبيرة؟ وإلى أي مدى تستطيع القبيلة الجمع بين قواعد التغيير والبقاء بصفة متحدة؟ إن الرواية التالية لـ CHINUA ACHEBE أظهرت أن الزعيم المثالي بعد Okonkwo Obierika, Uchendu لم يأت فيما بعد للتفاعل مع الأحداث فقط، وإنما لارساء الحكم الجيد في افريقيا.

*Things Fall Apart*¹ appears as a master text narrating African mores and customs, a text that has been a model of writing for numerous other works of fiction in the African continent. Still, what distinguishes this novel from other so-called anthropological novels, most of which being set in Nigeria, is its design to make culture and history intersect, and to empower the story with ideological significance. For Achebe, it was important fifty years ago to dramatise the period of contact between Africa and the West, by showing what it meant for an Ibo man to move brutally from a recognisable and codified cultural universe to an imposed and incomprehensible mode of life coming from overseas. Much of the descriptive parts of TFA about Ibo customs displays Achebe's "counter-discursive agency" (Ashcroft, 2000:5) in re-examining the African image that has been severely distorted and "Orientalised" (Said, 1978) by the imperial sources of information, sources which include literary texts.

This project is actually supplemented by the numerous statements made by Achebe to criticise the Manichaeian approach of Empire in dealing with subject races. However, beyond his eulogy of the ancestral traditional way of life, Achebe has taken the challenge in this work to address the complexity of Ibo social structures, because, as he insists, "Africa is very complex" (Bacon, 2000), and to disclose some important problems relating to internal cohesion and to the seeming "democracy" with which Ibo affairs were conducted. Beyond the apparent stability, the strictures of the Ibo socio-cultural and political makeup are apparent. They are catalysed by an individual, here Okonkwo, with his ardent desire to make a significant impact on the course of events in his community, notably by commanding strict and rigid adherence to the Ibo code of conduct. By failing to make his people agree with his views and ultimately to make them resist colonisation, Okonkwo exemplifies the fact that "no one can rise above his people", the more so when he no longer represents these people's ideals. At the same time, his univocal attitude poses the problem of adequacy and coherence in ruling systems, i.e. the extent to which a socio-political entity can operate without impairing its identity and integrity.

The problem actually reverberates beyond the period evoked in TFA, and the rest of Achebe's novels have shown that the colonial experience, although inevitable, has thrown into bold relief the question of fair leadership and good governance in African countries.

1. Apparent Cohesion and Unity

I will turn first to Achebe's emphatic dealing with socio-cultural elements which underscore cohesion and unity in Ibo society, even if this cohesion concerns Umuofia, a grouping of nine villages with a common politico-religious system. It is important here for Achebe to detail a rural mode of life whose realities were far removed from either the "primitivist" portraits of Carey's *Mister Johnson* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or the "sentimental" depictions of Paul Hazoumé, Camara Laye and others before him.

Several scenes appear in the narrative to illustrate the stable and cogent organisation of life among Ibos. Different ceremonies, meetings and recreational events are thus depicted to reinforce the idea of stability, even if some of the incidents described do indicate that life in Umuofia is not all that idyllic. The ethos directing the social life and social relationships is emphasised by a code of etiquette featuring forms of courtesy related to specific circumstances. The ritual of breaking the kola nut, the art of conversation which proscribes bluntness in dealing with sensitive issues are some of the elements of discourse emphasised. The proverbs and aphorisms are valued, just because we are told that "among the Ibos proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten"(p.6). This theme is dealt with notably by Bernth Lindfors (Lindfors, 1968:2-18) and Austin Shelton (Shelton, 1985:86-111). Given such descriptions cutting across different spheres of activities in Umuofia, one can agree with Carey Snyder, among others, that *Things Fall Apart* is an example of "anthropologised narrative"(Snyder,2008). Moments of tension are also realistically reported: they involve the illness of Ezinma, thought to be an *ogbanje*, and the intervention of a dibia who is able to find the pebble, the *iyi uwa* supposed to make her stay among the living. In a later development, Chielo the priestess cures her from a fever, presumably malaria. More dramatic is the story Unoka, abandoned in the Evil Forest because he was hit by an incurable

illness, or the casting of newborn twins in the same forest, as those reveal an intransigent mode of treatment of situations thought to be harmful to the clan.

A significant element pointing to an orderly community, it seems, is the apparently sound system by which the division of labour and the social hierarchy are arranged, depending on skill and talent in different activities. Examples abound: Ogbuefi Ezeugo's talent as powerful orator is exercised when he passionately urges Umuofia to seek revenge from the neighbouring Mbaino after one of its members has killed Ogbuefi Udo's wife. (pp.11-12). At the end of the novel, Okika is another "great man and orator"(p.182) who asks Umuofia to "root out this evil"(p.185) of territorial occupation by the white man. Success in farming is particularly valued. The significant example for this occupation is Nwakibie, the very rich man who lends 800 seed-yams to Okonkwo to start off his farming trade. The signs of his wealth are his three huge barns, his nine wives and thirty children. The titles which he has bought also help to situate his authoritative position and win him respect. Gradually, Achebe puts into place the different elements of a codified system which shows how in this enclosed space, the community has been able to get over a number of crises through time.

Achebe lays particular emphasis on the role of the elders, the assembly of old men who, in the words of Lynn Innes, are "a group who share decision making, who are trusted by the people, and whose primary concern is the maintenance of a peaceful, prosperous and respectable community"(Innes, 1990:24). They are those who impart wisdom and generate harmony in the group. For instance, Ezeudu is the elder who tells Okonkwo not to bear a hand in the sacrifice of Ikemefuna (p.51), thus warning him against any excess of zeal in carrying out the orders of the priests. At this juncture, it is apposite to comment here on the overlapping spaces of power between the elders and the priests, whose decisions, seemingly induced by the gods they officiate to, are irrevocable and must be accepted by the elders. It is the mighty Oracle of the Hills and the Caves that actually orders the killing of Ikemefuna, and it is for the group of elders to carry out the execution, even if this time, Okonkwo, despite Ezeudu's warning, takes the rash decision to deal him the death blow. The reasons for the execution are not actually clear,

the more so that Umuofia had received reparation from Mbaino for the murder of Udo's wife, and Ikemefuna the hostage boy has been brought up by Okonkwo as if he were his son.

The possible interpretation behind the 'unsaid' of Ikemefuna's tragedy is in association with the power of magic, signalled early as a paradigm of the clan's primordial element of survival: Umuofia received the boy as war trophy, as it were. By killing him, it would use his body through a magic process to further increase its protective power, and psychologically warn potential enemies against any hostile moves against its community. Actually, Achebe's narrator explains the reasons why Umuofia was feared by neighbouring localities, which always prefer negotiation to war with it in case of a dispute:

It was powerful in war and magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war- medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was general agreement- the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadi- nwayi*, or old woman (p.11)

Another element of strength in the town is its inhabitant's great skill in the art of wrestling. The tournaments that are organised are devised to reveal the fighting capacity of Umuofia's youth, but also another way for it to establish its predominance over the surrounding localities. We note that the power of Umuofia is enhanced further by Okonkwo's historic victory in his youth over the hitherto invincible Amalinze the Cat.

Without making Umuofia a power with hegemonic intentions, Achebe still emphasises its predominant military position over the neighbouring clans. As implied, if this town can compare its power with other ones across a relatively wide geographic zone, it is unable to consider itself as part of a larger human grouping sharing common cultural features. In plain terms, there are no other is unstable- than those of rivalry and suspicion. During his time in exile in Mbanta, Okonkwo learns part of the Ibo story from his uncle

Uchendu when he laments the slackening relationships between Ibo towns:

Those were good days when a man had friends in distant clans. Your generation does not know that. You stay at home, afraid of your next-door neighbour. Even a man's motherland is strange to him nowadays (p.124).

Uchendu thus approximates a closeness of ties between elements of the same human grouping, which Achebe prefers to call the "Ibo nation" instead of "tribe" (BBC radio interview, 31/6/2008). Uchendu's discourse of unity deserves attention, particularly when he teaches Okonwo an important aspect of Ibo gnosis relating to the place of the mother, and the sense of the *nneka*, 'mother is supreme'. He reprimands his nephew for not knowing why he finds refuge in his motherland to spend his seven years' exile after offending Ani, the earth goddess:

"you do not know the answer? So you see that you are a child. You have many wives and many children- more children than I have. You are a great man in your clan. But you are still a child, my child (p.121).

Then the old man stresses the protective function assumed by the mother, even after her death and burial in her birth place:

"A man belongs to his father when things are good and life is sweet.

but when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you.

She is buried there.

and that is why we say mother is supreme" (p.122).

Uchendu is here empowered with a discourse emphasising the need for unity and giving reasons to the younger generation to reconsider more carefully their 'Ibo-ness', as it were. What is explained intuitively by Uchendu might amount to criticism of individualism among the Ibo in general, and thus an absence of a holistic vision of their group as people having similar cultural traits and a common language, and who may see greater benefit in closing ranks. The culture of nationhood is thus lacking here, while in other places of present Nigeria, this culture has existed.

Basil Davidson mentions the example of the Yoruba state of Oyo, which flourished 200 years before the colonial period, during which time this "democratic monarchy" was controlled by the Ogboni, who were, Davidson writes:

A public and popular means of keeping rulers in check, being open to wide membership and endowed with appropriate authority. It appears to have worked well as a means of popular control of the use and abuse of executive power (Davidson, 1983:267)

As it stands, the town of Umuofia appears as a microcosm of Iboland, with an order which relies on the wise ruling of the elders, but whose secular form of power, as seen, is limited by decisions of religious nature, which can order human sacrifices at will, throw people dangerously ill in the evil forest and forbid any contact with the *osu* group. On the other hand, this is a society which prioritises individual achievements, particularly when they combine socio-economic success and martial capability, which is the case of the protagonist. Not only has Okonkwo become a good farmer, having taken Nwakibie as his model, but his fame acquired during wartime can compare with that of the old Ezeudu, the warrior who collected three titles during his lifetime, and is to be buried like a great man. Indeed his funeral is carried out with pomp and popular participation: this was, Achebe tells us, "a great funeral, such as befitted a noble warrior" (p.111). But as for Okonkwo's destiny, we note the irony in the narrator's qualification of him as a man "cut out for great things" (p.7), in view of the series of dramas that lead him in the end to commit suicide, when the 'great things' he achieved cease to conform to the paradigmatic values of the doxa of Umuofia.

2. Prominence and Exemplary Conduct

Achebe in no way intends to present his main character as an epic hero, whose various exploits would win him reverence and admiration, and who would fall gloriously in battle. His story is that of a man of valour who gradually loses his prestige among his people for endogenous as well as exogenous reasons. That he is a prominent and respected member of Umuofia leaves no doubt, by the laudatory way he is first introduced to us, and by being referred to as a great man

among his people. His stature as a man of action is prioritised over his other qualities. He is a formidable fighter and wrestling champion who has brought honour to his clan, and his physical achievements are a source of inspiration for the younger generation. When the young Ikezue overcomes Okafor in a wrestling match, the praise song made up for him after his victory contains the words "he has thrown a thousand cats" (p.46), which metonymically give a mythical dimension to the victory of Okonkwo, in his youth, over Amalinze the Cat. Okonkwo himself is attentive to the progress made in wrestling by budding champions. The wrestling talent of Maduka, Obierika's son, meets his approval:

"He will do great things, Okonkwo said. If I had a son like him, I should be happy. I'm worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match... If Ezinma had been a boy, I would have been happier. She has the right spirit" (pp.59-60).

Over the major part of the novel, the narrative is laudatory regarding Okonkwo's exploits not only as a very good wrestler, but as a fierce warrior, having "shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars" (p.7), and killed five enemies. To emphasize his formidable character, Achebe's physical portrait of him suggests both strength and sternness. He is "tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look." (p.3). Clearly, the protagonist belongs to a group of valiant individuals in whom the town trusts to maintain security and stability. However, if we consider the hagiography of heroes in Umuofia, we note that for the elder Ezeudu, the narrator indicates no blemishes or offences committed against the clan. In contrast to him, as his "stern look" and his "springy walk" showing his preparedness "to pounce" on people may suggest, Okonkwo has an impulsive and unpredictable character.

Even if the narrator's tone remains neutral and objective in his reports on his dealings with his homestead, we sense an abnormality in his "(ruling) his household with a heavy hand" (p.12) and in his family's "perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (p.12). The terms "heavy hand" and "fear" indeed connote an authoritarian conduct, and are at odds with his being "a great man". Another trait of his character is and arrogance towards weaker individuals,

a hubris that is noted and reproved by an elder. Okonkwo indeed is rebuked for insulting a man without title during a meeting. We read: "the man that had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he has called him a woman" (p24). Actually, the man's presence reminds him of his own father's unsuccessful life, that of an *agbala*, that had left a deep impact of shame on him. The term 'fear' is recurrent to describe the compulsive anxiety with which the protagonist wants to erase whatever shame Unoka has brought to his family by not being an industrious and courageous man in the public eye. The outward appearance of Okonkwo as the "roaring flame" that despises the weak thus contrasts sharply with this *angst* of not being on a par with his prestigious and manly image. This hidden lack of confidence is, avowedly, worsened by his son Nwoye's aversion to follow the community's precepts and his resemblance with his grandfather Unoka in his dislike of martial activities and his lack of ambition.

Thus, there is a dialectics of duality, as Anthonia Kaluu suggests, which exerts itself here through Okonkwo's uneasy struggle against his inner tensions (Kalu, 2002). While physical force and manly activities such as yam growing, wrestling and other outdoor occupations are related to men, signs of weakness and fear are generally repressed, and relegated to the domain of women. Feminist critics such as Florence Stratton and Linda Strongleek consider that Achebe's gender roles, as described in TFA, exemplify the "exclusionary practices"(Stratton, 1994; Strongleek, 2008)) that can be noted in many African male writers' fiction. One can still argue in response to this that the realities reported by Achebe's narrator (who does not necessarily represent the author) are related to a preponderance of male activities in traditional Ibo society, a social feature which has a direct impact on his hero. Okonkwo thinks he must always do more than required by custom, must show brutality and brusqueness instead of moderation and modesty to keep at arm's length from the *agbala* "sickness". The tragic unfolding of Okonkwo's life, as several critics have argued (Griffiths, 1971:88-103; Sibley, 1975:359-373; Irele, 1978:10-21; Jabbi, 2003:201-219), comes in large measure from his inability to solve the equation of withstanding social pressures and acting with self-restraint, that is the hamartia that causes him to over-react to benign crises and

commit blunders. Even his accidental killing of Ezeudu's son at the funeral results from negligence, for Okonkwo knows full well that, owing to his lack of expertise with firearms, he should not have carried his gun.

The irony sustained all along in the novel is that the heroic stature acquired by Okonwo is persistently undermined by incidents which associate him with the female universe, in the sense that he repeatedly offends the prevalent deity of Umuofia, Ani, that is the earth goddess. The last reported incident in actual fact signals his gradual decline in the public eye, with his departure for Mbanta. As Isidore Okpewho notes, there is in TFA "a studied ontological balance between male and female principles, especially in respect of the major divinities of the land"(Okpewho, 2003:26). Achebe plays on the influence of these divinities and their priests to emphasise the nature of Okonkwo's predicament, and to bring out his struggle with the misfortunes that befall him as well as the colonial penetration which further blurs his heroic image.

3. The Question of Influence and Leadership

The tragedy of the main character in TFA occurs for complex reasons, as suggested by the numerous twists of fate which gradually bring him down from fame to the virtual erasure of his authority and his eventual suicide. The marks of his prominence are his leading position during wars, his appointment by elders as envoy to Mbaino to seek reparation for Udo's wife's killing, and his two customary titles which enable him to join the group of elders. His belonging to the *egwugwu*, as masked representative of the ancestors of his village is another mark of honour. But these insignias of leadership are withdrawn from him as soon as he is banished from the clan; and when he returns from his seven year's exile, "Umuofia did not appear to have taken any special notice of the warrior's return" (p.165). The epistemic break in time during his absence from Umuofia suggests a lack of absorption on his part of the changes that have taken place there with the dual action of the white man's church and his military occupation. The term "warrior" affixed to him becomes tainted with irony, almost without meaning, given the fact that Umuofians are no longer prepared for any war.

The anti- colonial position of Okonkwo is nonetheless unequivocal, as much as he also disapproves of those (including his son Nwoye) who have embraced the foreigners' religion. When Okonkwo criticises the Abame group for not resisting the thrust of territorial occupation, he still believes in the strength of Umuofia, and trusts that their own land will not be raped:

"Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and matchets? We would be cowards to compare ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land (p.159).

The problem is that the new situation has initiated rifts in the clan. Nwoye's conversion to Christianity is no doubt caused by his rejection of human sacrifices and the killing of Ikemefuna. Furthermore, twins are now saved when their parents have become Christians and the sick people who convert are entitled to medical treatment. Another group, which includes Okonkwo, Obierika and Akueke, senses that the fundamental principles and tenets of their culture are at stake. Still, the motor of change might well be economic. Achebe writes:

There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm- oil and kernel became things of great price and much money flowed into Umuofia (p.161).

Simon Gikandi poses the question in an article: "Now that Umuofia is being challenged and transformed by the forces of colonialism, what exactly is the authority of custom and what spaces sustain it?" (Gikandi, 1993 :8-9). Isidore Okpewho also thinks that TFA implies "an interrogation of the kind of leaders by whom a society allows itself to be governed"(Okpewho, 2003: 11). We indeed register no significant decision being made by the elders after the white man has invested the location and the foreign priests have started to evangelise the local people. The local clergy is at a loss to find efficient "medicine" to counter the effects of an obviously superior power, since the burning of the church by the *egwugwu* results only in retaliatory measures taken by the British authority. Okonkwo

for his part can still gather enough support in his plan to avenge the humiliation of imprisonment inflicted on him and on five other clansmen after the church burning incident.

Parts of the novel reflect a clear-sighted apprehension of Okonkwo regarding the spectacular consequences that would result from the dislocation of his people's socio-cultural makeup. We find him "shuddering" at the prospect of his religion being annihilated by the foreigners (p.139), and elsewhere, "he mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia who had so unaccountably become soft like women" (p.165). While Obierika more realistically imagines no reversal in the course of history, Okonkwo's belief in his capacity to lead a rebellion to expel the invaders makes him stand as an anti-colonial resister. With some justification, Chidi Amuta considers Okonkwo as a "revolutionary", and goes on to say:

When he stands up in arrogant defiance of the colonialists, he is not defending culture as a superstructural proposition, but the totality of the socio-economic formation and therefore cultural identity of his people (Amuta, 1989: 134).

It would be far-fetched to vest Okonkwo with any capacity to assess the global phenomenon of colonisation and its socio-economic repercussions on the enclosed Umuofian space. Nonetheless, his reaction is due to a clear feeling that his fatherland is being brutally occupied and his people subjugated by a hostile power. In the absence of concerted resolutions from a silenced council of elders, and the failure of spiritual forces to preserve custom, Achebe's hero comes as the nearest proposition for leadership to restore the traditional order.

Through his somewhat authoritarian manner of dealing with communal matters, as noted above, Okonkwo may bear the features of the abhorred leader of modern times in Africa. While he conforms to the Fanonian "revolutionary" principle of armed resistance against colonialism, his inflexible attitude has shown forms of extremism that even the traditionalist Obierika rejects. Okonkwo simply refuses to accept his people's pragmatic compromise with

"the new dispensation". If compared with Sam, the head of the imaginary modern state of Kangan in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Okonwo has some of his arrogance and unwillingness to listen to others, and to quote Neil ten Kortenaar, "wants to be universal and to govern all situations"(Kortenaar, 2003:142). On the other hand, he shares features with the combined characters of Chris and Ikem in his belief that no power should take away from the people their right to safeguard their cultural and economic welfare.

Without being top of Achebe's agenda in TFA, the issue of leadership and political governance can be seen as a significant factor of the story. It is one of the elements of the tragedy which unfolds, and which is marked by crises leading to the violent deaths of significant actors. As observed, the apparent order kept in place by the body of elders and the traditional priests who interpret the gods' rulings, shows less stability and more vulnerability than suggested at first. The leading role attempted by Okonkwo to maintain group unity and its failure in the face of greater opposition and personal misapprehension poses the problem of political awareness and of the appropriate strategies to work out to keep or restore self- rule. Though written during the transitional period leading to Nigeria's independence, the novel obliquely addresses the issue of wisdom and clairvoyance in the exercise of authority and leadership, given the need to adapt to the changes that are actually part and parcel of the story of a nation. This issue continues to be a prevalent theme in the remaining novels of Chinua Achebe.

NOTES:

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1. London: Heinemann, 1958. Reset, 1972. The novel will be referred to as TFA. Page numbers will be indicated within brackets in the text.

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