

Quodlibet:  
The Australian Journal of Trans-national Writing

Volume 2, April 2008

**Kenneth Usongo**  
*University of Dschang*  
*Cameroon*

### **The Impact of the Supernatural on Achebe's Characters**

One of the main concerns of West African Literature is the interdependence between man and forces that are somehow mysterious; the tragic heroes are generally portrayed as caught up in the dynamics of human responsibility and destiny. This intriguing relationship between character and external factors makes these heroes complex as the reader is compelled to be wary in appreciating character. Elechi Amadi, John Pepper Clark, Sédar Senghor, Bole Butake<sup>1</sup> and Chinua Achebe have all explored, to a certain degree, this theme which, it would seem, is the hallmark of Achebe's writings. In his novels, there is scarcely any sphere of human experience that is not linked to the supernatural and the people's sense of religion and religious piety. *Things Fall Apart (TFA)*, *Arrow of God (AOG)*, *No Longer At Ease (NLAE)*, and others, exemplify how these things are part and parcel of the ideological interpretation of experience in the traditional social context.<sup>2</sup>

This paper contends that the behaviour of most of the tragic heroes in Achebe's novels seems to be conditioned by forces beyond their control. A simple threat or a curse or even promise of evil can greatly impact on a character's thoughts and actions. His overall world view appears to be guided by forces or powers that cannot be explained by the laws of science and seem to involve gods or even magic. And this inclination towards the supernatural is in consonance with the human drive for achievement, autonomy, dominance, order or affiliation. This investigation, therefore, attempts to explain the actions of Okonkwo, Ezeulu and others within a historico-cultural perspective.

New Historicism appraises the literature and history of a people while emphasising the sense of incoherence and argument among such people. Began by the American critic, Stephen Greenblatt, this critical school generally refers to a renewed interest, initially among American critics in the early 1980s, in appreciating literary works in their historical and political context. Inclining somewhat towards feminism and Marxism, this approach takes a critical view of the past, and assesses the consumption and status of literary productions. Fundamental to New Historicism is the admission that the inquiry being done may not be objective, but the issue of the past is dictated by the concern with the present. In other words, New Historicism, unlike deconstruction which engages in philosophical abstraction and uncertainty, insists on the significance of the past in discussing texts. This is precisely because art is not created in a vacuum; it is not simply the creation of an individual, but that

individual is fixed in time and space, responding to a community of which he or she constitutes an important element.

The British equivalent of New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, seeks to examine how texts reflect or challenge an ideological position. Put simply, this approach looks at how a text relates to the specific institutions of cultural production. History, in this sense, embraces politics, ideology, power, authority and subversion. Unlike the American version of Cultural Materialism that sees texts as exemplifying conservative ideological positions, British Materialist Criticism examines texts as offering resistance to authority. Taken as a whole, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism take a holistic view of criticism by historicising literature or considering literary texts as part of a historical culture. Such a rethinking of history brings fluidity to literature by breaking down the artificial boundaries separating both. This interplay between history and literature makes both complement each other as each sheds light on the other.

### **Igbo Belief System**

The Igbos are essentially a profoundly religious people that embrace polytheism. They believe in three levels of being, namely, the supreme god or Chukwu; lesser gods or Umuagbara; and beneath them the spirits of dead people otherwise known as Ndi Ichie. In this regard, the idea of reincarnation is strongly upheld hence the argument that death is transient with some of the dead coming back to the world through the newly-born. This explains the phenomenon of obanje, a practice whereby a dead baby returns into its mother's womb multiple times if a ritual ceremony is not done to stop it. These ritualistic activities are handled by village priests and priestesses who, as diviners, ensure the spiritual health of the community.

As a cohesive society, the Igbos rigorously abide by precise tenets, for example, during the week of peace, the village is expected to resonate with joy and not hate. Any violator of this sanctity is punished regardless of his/her status. In addition, there are contending forces and spirits that nurture and regulate the society, for instance, the belief in osu or slave heritage, and the casting away of evil people into the Evil Forest. Traditional Igbo society disposed of fractious individuals, oracles or gods who threatened its well-being, thereby creating new avenues for success and the maintenance of individual and societal harmony.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, in order to enhance the community's or one's chances of success, supernatural forces are either invoked or appeased by using equally mysterious forces in the forms of charms or amulets called Ogwu which sometimes can be deified and propitiated as a god or goddess. Oracles can also be consulted to unravel a mystery or the future as seen in the oracle of the "Hills and Caves."<sup>4</sup> It is, therefore, incumbent on the subjects to strive for righteous lives following the dictates of societal ethics because failure to do so will result in excruciating consequences.

The above practices greatly impact on the characters and render them highly susceptible to the supernatural. It is against such a landscape of multifarious gods and belief systems that we can fully appreciate the behaviour and actions of Achebean characters. Only then can we understand their vulnerability to external forces.

While Achebe's *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart* are contrived along a colonial canvass, *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People* are predicated on a postcolonial matrix. However different the historical configuration of the stories may seem, the cultural denominator animating them remains essentially unadulterated. Put simply, Igbo pantheon and cosmology have not undergone radical transformation that can vitiate an appraisal of these stories against the backdrop of the

supernatural. Achebean novels portray heroes bedevilled with not only their minds, but with heroes who must wrestle with superior forces that, more often than not, are at variance with their thinking. They are constantly challenged to reconcile at times discordant opinions on different lines of action. And it is their ability to rise up in the face of bewildering circumstances that engages our sympathy and/ or admiration. Ezeulu, Okonkwo and others are always enjoined to resolve the puzzle between the inner voice and external interventions.

### **Ezeulu as a Paradigm of the Supernatural**

*Arrow of God* is the story of a headstrong priest who is confronted by the tussle for supremacy between tradition and Christianity in his native clan. Acting on his instinct for survival against a foreign way of life, he sends his son to the new school to inculcate the virtues of this new dispensation. In doing so, he has also alienated himself from his people who now see him as flirting with the colonial administration. A feeling of suspicion is bred between him and his subjects which culminates in the collapse of the Priest's authority and the birth of Christianity that progressively wins more followers from the hitherto traditional society. Throughout this altercation between tradition and the twin forces of Christianity and colonial administration, Ezeulu claims to have been guided by the god, Ulu, and not grudges nursed against his people. The ensuing discussion will demonstrate the extent that supernatural factors cloud the mind of the Chief Priest.

As the midwife of the people and their gods, Ezeulu is a concrete testimony of the supernatural principle ruling Umuaro. His role as priest is discernible in his power to name feast days; he bridges the gap between the real and supernatural worlds, between materialism and spiritualism. At moments when he communes with the gods, he is like a spirit, unknown and at times strange even to his cronies like Akuehue. His extraordinary dressing, especially on feast days like the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves, attests to his larger-than-life dimension and supernatural bent of mind. Indeed, Ezeulu's rule over the six villages as chief priest is ascribed, within Umuaro, not to his leadership acumen, but to a supernatural force:

It was true he named the day for  
the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves  
and for the New yam feast; but he  
did not choose it. He was merely  
a watchman. His power was no more  
than the power of a child over a  
goat that was said to be his. (Achebe *AOG* 3)

Therefore, he is not a man like any other in Umuaro. By virtue of the fact that he is the custodian of Ulu, one half of him is human and the other half spirit, and hence the paradox of his being known and unknowable. It is, as Jonathan Peters points out, this unknown quantity in him that helps make his actions, even when they seem inconsistent and on the verge of madness, largely inscrutable and incontestable.<sup>5</sup> A case in point is his insistence that in refusing to eat the remaining yams and convene the yam festival, he is guided by the god, Ulu, irrespective of the consensus among the village elders that he should act contrarily:

But why, he asked himself again and again, why  
had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him, to strike him  
down and then cover him with mud? What was his  
offence? Had he not divined the god's will and obeyed  
it? When was it ever heard that a child was scalded by

the piece of yam its own mother put in its palm? What man would send his son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbour's hut and then unleash rain on him?  
(Achebe *AOG* 229)

This monologue absolves him from blame of having triggered his downfall, ascribing it to a superior force. It is a clear admission of the influence of the supernatural in shaping his actions. And this is also the case of the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves whereby his exhaustion is attributed not to strenuous dancing and old age, but to the gravity of the sins that he trampled upon:

For who could trample the sins  
and abominations of all Umuaro into  
the dust and not bleed in the feet?  
Not even a priest as powerful as  
Ezeulu could hope to do that. (Achebe *AOG* 87)

When he rebuffs his appointment as warrant chief, the District Officer is astonished and orders for his arrest. The same day that Captain Winterbottom signs a summons for Ezeulu, he plummets into delirium and speaks like a mad man. Winterbottom's illness is dramatic and one can feel an invisible hand behind it. Why such coincidence? If one reasons that the priest is innocent and has the freedom to reject Winterbottom's appointment, then injustice is done to him when the District Officer plans to detain him. Ulu, through Ezeulu, is probably seeking revenge on the white officer for attempting to humiliate its priest. This view is strongly upheld by John Nwodika:

'Did I not say so?' he asked the other servants after their master had been removed to hospital. 'Was it for nothing I refused to follow the policemen? I told them that the Chief Priest of Umuaro is not a soup you can lick in a hurry.' His voice carried a note of pride 'Our master thinks that because he is a white man medicine cannot touch him.' (Achebe *AOG* 155)

The priest's esteem rises as long as Winterbottom is sick. This illness is simply a warning. After all, according to Nwodika, Ezeulu knew long ago about the failing health of Winterbottom. Ezeulu's sarcastic statement buttresses this: "If he is ill he will also be well" (Achebe 157). His extraordinary might is depicted in the fear nursed by Mathew Nweke who was sent to arrest him. Though this policeman has strong protective medicine on him, he is greatly afraid of Ezeulu's revenge. This explains his decision to seek further protection from a medicine man who extols Ezeulu's might:

'You have done right to come straight to me because you indeed walked into the mouth of a leopard. But there is something bigger than a leopard. That is why I say welcome to you because you have reached the final refuge'  
(Achebe *AOG* 158)

Nweke and his comrades are instructed not to eat anything they got from Umuaro. Again, they have to provide two cocks and medicine for a sacrifice. They are given something to drink and to pour in their bathing water. It is only after this intervention

that Nweke and his friends can attempt to sleep comfortably.

For his part, Winterbottom's health deteriorates during the time that Ezeulu is incarcerated. Surely, Ulu is acting vicariously through its priest:

[h]e had done no harm to the whiteman and could justifiably hold up his  
 ofo against him. In that position  
 whatever Ezeulu did in retaliation  
 was not only justified, it was bound  
 by its merit to have potency....  
 So he could not be blamed if he now  
 hit back by destroying his enemy's  
 sense or killing one side of his body  
 leaving the other side to squirm  
 in half life, which was worse than  
 total death. (Achebe AOG 178)

In fact, Ezeulu is an intriguing personality who subtly blends the ordinary and the extraordinary to the extent that it is difficult to identify which parts constitute the 'essentia;' him, and which parts are supernatural. Again, notice his argument that Ulu cannot accept his eating two yams at a time in order to avert starvation contrary to the suggestion of the elders that he does so. And when the new religion triumphs over tradition, while most Umuaro people maintain that Ulu has abandoned its priest, Ezeulu posits that the god has taken revenge on Umuaro for negligence. Ezeulu's downfall is probably the result of his arrogance and/or Ulu's retribution to Umuaro for disrespecting its laws. It is this difficulty of attributing blame in such bewildering circumstances that makes Ezeulu's character complex and fascinating.

The supernatural definitely colours the vision of Ezeulu when he attributes Akukalia's death to be the making of ikenga. Akukalia, in the eyes of Ezeulu, had refused to listen to his chi; his death is, therefore, inevitable: "...he has gone the way his chi ordained" (Achebe 27). This chi is a spirit or soul which one is given at conception and remains with one throughout one's life.<sup>6</sup> Among the Igbos, fate is preponderant; one's life is assumed to be already preordained. In addition, the gods of the land are discontented with the conduct of public of affairs in Umuaro: "The death of Akukalia and his brother in one and the same dispute showed that Ekwensu's hand was in it" (Achebe 28).

One other character believed to be goaded by a supernatural drive is Nwaka. He is rumoured to have defied the god, Ulu, because of a land dispute and survived. He does not suffer from headache or belly ache; his defiance is not the result of his boldness but, it is assumed that he gets protection from Idemili. After all, his praise-singer and instigator is said to be the Priest of Idemili whose deity is unhappy with the secondary role that it and other gods like Ogwugwu, Eru and Udo have been assigned. Idemili's superiority over Ulu possibly stems from the fact that unlike the latter god that is created by the six villages of Umuaro clan for the purpose of unity and can be disposed of when it fails in its mission, the former is a legitimate god.

Ezeulu is a study of a complex intellectual man, reminiscent of Hamlet, whose superstitious bent of mind can be explained in terms of his extraordinary function of Chief Priest, a role that is seemingly overwhelming in the sense that he communes with gods that may not be comprehensible to the uninitiated. He needs therefore, this distinctive quality for gaining authority and provoking awe in his detractors. His ability to communicate with somewhat mysterious forces also impacts on his character; he is unable at times to distinguish his voice from that of the supernatural[?]. A glaring illustration of this is his argument that the gods forbade him

from eating the remaining yams and, consequently, should be blamed for the break up of Umuaro. Viewed closely, there is the lingering doubt in him as to whether he had not been secretly nursing revenge on his people as evident in his strenuous attempt to justify his refusal to listen to the Umuaro conclave.

### **Okonkwo, Unoka and the Umuofia cosmos**

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* recounts the tragedy of Okonkwo, a somewhat self-made man and pride of Umuofia. As a prosperous and determined young man, Okonkwo strives to distance himself from the inglorious lifestyle of his father. Driven by the fear of failure, he attempts single-handedly to stop the encroachment of colonial administration on traditional authority. Ultimately, he commits suicide upon realizing that his community is not as committed as he is in fighting the colonial forces that are rife in Umuofia. Despite the thrust of this new dispensation, Okonkwo remains defiant, even in death.

The contribution of the supernatural in shaping character in this story is amply stated by Kalu Ogbaa in his submission that Okonkwo, for fear of being thought weak like his unmanly father, Unoka, worked hard to bring honor to himself and to his clan, Umuofia, and in the process committed criminal offenses and moral crimes (perhaps under the influence of the gods) which eventually resulted in his own downfall.<sup>7</sup>

In this regard, Okonkwo's demise can be said to have been meticulously plotted by the gods. In fact, when he inadvertently kills a man in a funeral ceremony, a killing that resulted in his exile, he seems to have been ominously trailed by the earth goddess that he offended in partaking of the murder of Ikemefuna. The fatal explosion of his gun that took away the life of this young man is remotely guided by a supernatural force. His long exile in Mbanta is sufficient time for his native land to undergo transformation, enough time to make him handy as prey for the vexatious earth goddess. Note how his incipient calamity, at the dawn of Ikemefuna's death, is presaged by Obierika, his confidant:

'You know very well that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.' (TFA 46)

Henceforth, Okonkwo, like Amadi's Ihuoma or Rotimi's Odewale, is fated for adversity as he seems to be an arrow in the bow of the god, subjected to the slings of an outrageous fortune.

Nevertheless, Okonkwo, in a sense, presents an interesting case in that he may not be deeply superstitious like many Umuofians. He believes in hard work and this is why he does not sympathise with lazy men and, therefore, may not fully subscribe to the belief that "one's palm nuts are cracked by a benevolent spirit." Proof of this is his constant dissociation from the indolent and sensual life of his father. As he combats the merry lifestyle of Unoka, it can be argued that, as the custodian of Umuofia ethos, he still needs some dose of superstition to guard against the unforeseen. He has to walk the delicate rope between hard work and the supernatural, ensuring a fine blend of both aspects, to build a solid, full man. He is also viewed as a man who responds in a very particular way to the gender codes that are prevalent in his patrilineal society as evinced in his relationship with Nwoye and Ezinma. Though he greatly loves the

latter because he sees her as his alter ego, he would have loved that Nwoye, the male child, incarnate manly qualities. He therefore has no patience for the feminine traits exhibited by Nwoye and, worst of all, adult men.

The Igbo respect for rank and prestige, bravery and success in war and wrestling, reverence for courage, and pride in material acquisition and social prosperity are all shared by Okonkwo. He is guided by his strong belief that the law of the land must be obeyed, and his actions are predicated on this conviction. Thus when he violates the week of peace, he humbly accepts his punishment, and admits that he broke the law. Unlike Obierika who questions some of the exigencies of his society like the ban on titled men climbing palm trees or the law authorizing twins to be thrown in an evil forest or the exile of men for accidentally killing a kinsman, Okonkwo rigorously submits himself to them. Thus he has a vibrant knowledge of his societal ethics. In fact, his recognition as a veritable upshot of his society is seen in the fact that he is chosen as emissary to Mbaino, and the guardian of Ikemefuna. He is also one of the nine *egwugwu* of Umuofia. In a sense, his downfall can also be explained in terms of his strict adherence to societal norms.

Clearly, in Umuofia, the fate of man is tied up with the gods that are held responsible for whatever fortune or misfortune befalls a person. This is the case of Unoka who consults the Oracle of the Hills to find out why he always has a miserable harvest. About this oracle, Achebe says that

people come from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers. (TFA 12)

Unoka is an ill-fated man; his misfortune has already been preordained by the gods and cannot be altered:

He had a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. (TFA 13)

It is because of the inglorious life of Unoka that Okonkwo sets out to 'right the wrongs' of his father. He works with drive and courage to carve a prosperous future for himself. Notwithstanding his devotion, Okonkwo's prosperity can be traced to the blessings that he received from Nwakibie for whom he worked to earn seed yams. As Okonkwo breaks a kola nut, he implores the gods to aid him:

We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the eagle perch too. (TFA 14)

Indeed, his personal god is in agreement with him since the Igbos hold that when a man says yes, his *chi* also says yes. In fact, according to Chinua Achebe, in an interview granted to D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu et al in 1981, a *chi* affirms what a person does, and a person confirms what his *chi* prompts.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, there is a fine link between the supernatural and character as the latter appears to be nurtured and sustained by the former. Apparently conscious of this, Kalu Ogbaa draws a parallel between Okonkwo and Henchard by intimating that both heroes die ignoble deaths, partly because of the roles of the gods.<sup>9</sup>

### **Obi Okonkwo, Clara, Josiah: The Axe of the Supernatural**

*No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People* are Achebe's later stories that are predominantly cast in an urban setting, one that is far removed from the traditional Igbo setup. Obi Okonkwo, the hero of the former novel and grandson of the conservative Okonkwo, falls prey to corruption in spite of his prestigious education in England. His misfortune, in the eyes of many Umuofians, is the lingering result of his social interaction with an osu, an outcast. In the latter novel, it is upheld that individuals such as Josiah can exploit supernatural practices to their advantage and to the detriment of others. The societies in both stories are characterized by the rivalry between tradition and modernism, among Christian groupings clamouring for space in a divergent and volatile religious landscape.

Obi's educational success in England is largely attributed to the gods; it is widely believed among his kinsmen that he earned a degree in the spirit world of the white man because of their encouragement. As a result, a traditional sacrifice is done in his honour as a sign of gratitude to the invisible spirits for keeping vigil over the living.

Obi's proposal of marriage to Clara is rejected by the latter on grounds that she is an osu, an outcast who will only bring misfortune to her husband. His friend, Joseph, shares Clara's opinion because "her great-great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god" (*NLAE* 65). Obi himself is aware that his Christian parents will also oppose his union with Clara because of the evil spell looming over her. His ultimate involvement in a bribery scandal that smears his reputation is viewed in his society as retribution for defying societal rejection of the caste system. By refusing to heed the advice of people, including even his father's, that he shuns the controversial Clara, Obi opens the floodgate of the supernatural to override him. As long as he flirts with the osu girl, the die is cast for him. He is clearly a victim of supreme arrogance in the face of Umuofia belief system.

Similarly, Elsie Mark's gap-tooth is associated with sexual potency; such girls are believed to be warm-blooded. Furthermore, Obi's financial mess, partly a result of family commitments and the absence of foresight, is due, in the eyes of most Umuofians, to a concoction made by Clara:

Do you know what medicine that osu  
woman may have put into his soup  
to turn his eyes and ears away  
from his people? (*NLAE*145)

Such medicine has blinded Obi to the extent that he cannot give his mother a decent and expensive burial reflective of his academic and social standing. Clara's osu status is seen as a catalyst for Obi's multiple misfortunes thereby crediting the societal belief that she is an agent of destruction and an instrument of darkness. Obi's apparent indifference to the death of his mother is said to be a replica of what Isaac Okonkwo did to his father, thus invoking the adage 'like father like son':

I say that his father did the  
same thing,...I am not guessing  
and I am not asking you not to  
mention it outside. When this  
boy's father-you all know him,  
Isaac Okonkwo-when Isaac Okon-  
kwo heard of the death of his fa-  
ther he said that those who kill  
with the machet must die by  
the machet. (*NLAE*145)

Josiah in *A Man of the People* is alleged to infuse supernatural practices in his business dealings. It is widely rumoured that he replaced a blind man's stick with another one in order to ensure that his (Josiah's) business prospers:

'So the beast is not satisfied with  
all the money he takes from us and  
must now make a medicine to turn us  
into blind buyers of his wares',  
said one old woman...She circled  
her head with her right hand and cast  
the evil towards the shop. (*MOTP* 85)

His progress in business is seen to be the result of reprehensible practices rather than good management. He has trampled on societal ethos, and justice has to be restored. The effect of the curses rained on him is swift and devastating as he winds up within a month his once buoyant commerce.

These last two novels vindicate a society at the crossroad of the supernatural, between its acceptance and disavowal, between tradition and modernism. In other words, there is a tendency of it being considered shibboleth by the likes of Obi Okonkwo who now increasingly explains events and actions scientifically, without recourse to the supernatural. Despite this proclivity, people are still impinged upon willy-nilly by extraneous forces. At the individual level, Obi Okonkwo and Josiah may not fully endorse the whim of the supernatural, but they live in communities anchored at the shore of supernatural forces. They are, consequently, affected in one way or the other by the overbearing pull of the supernatural as it rides on the crest of their societies.

### Conclusion

In his writings, Achebe richly illustrates the impact of the supernatural on character; the behaviour, actions and thinking of his characters are influenced by extraneous forces. As Martin Stephen and Philip Franks once said about Shakespearean tragedy, so too can one say of Achebean tragedy that it contains a supernatural element. There is a feeling that the action is being played out and in some cases provoked by forces or powers that come from beyond the pale of human activity—forces greater in their power and influence than humanity.<sup>10</sup> The hero is confronted by a situation with which the organisation of his being is unable to cope. He loses his moral bearings; he is at a loss; his whole personality seems to disintegrate more and more wilfully towards destruction.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, the thrust of the supernatural seems to be greatly felt by those who disregard social values and reject communal goals.

The Igbos exhibit their belief in the supernatural by creating deities, spirits and oracles to which they have given power over their daily and future life. They are fatalistic in the sense that they think that they are not masters of their own destiny because each individual has a chi that preordains the course of events.<sup>12</sup> In this light, Ezeulu disregards the advice given him and fails in the end because he is fated to be destroyed. He sought his personal glory and earned the wrath of Ulu. As Kalu Ogbaa rightly argues,

[t]he use that Achebe makes of chi  
is very crucial in characterization for it  
points to the Igbo belief in the notion  
of predestination and man's apparent  
helplessness in the face of his being

denied gifts such as children, wealth and good health by intransigent chi during the process of man's creation in the spirit world.<sup>13</sup>

However, the influence of the supernatural is hardly compulsive. It constitutes a crucial problem confronting the hero and does not completely annihilate his independence of mind. Consequently, Okonkwo is partly a victim of his intemperance and society that attached much importance to status and greatness; he is therefore driven into ruthlessness; and his death can be seen as the result of cumulative events. His public attitude and ideas on women, customs, children or wealth have been largely modulated by Igbo norms as well as his personal idiosyncrasies such as his impulsiveness, hot temper and nervousness.

It can be reasonably stated that Okonkwo's overindulgence in manly activities and ridicule for feminine ones have been conditioned by the Igbo society. For instance, at the betrothal of Obierika's daughter, when much palm wine is brought by the suitor's family, the host says that they are now behaving like men; it is strongly upheld in Umuofia that if one is unable to rule one's women and children, one is not really a man. As Ikemefuna is about to be killed, men of Umuofia say that the men that did not accompany them in this mission are effeminate; yams are considered a kingly and manly crop while cocoyam, beans and cassava are reserved for women; boys are encouraged to listen to war stories. Examples abound to illustrate the point that, within the Igbo society, manliness overrides womanliness. From these examples, it is evident that Okonkwo's society is male oriented and this penchant has greatly shaped his mindset. Eustace Palmer opines that Okonkwo is what his society has made him, and there is very little support in the text for the view that he is what he is because of a radical misunderstanding of the subtle shades of his society's codes.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Okonkwo's personal contribution to his demise can be attributed to his uncontrollable temper. It seems as though there is an overwhelming irrationality driving him into sudden fits of anger that often result in unpleasant consequences. For example, his vicious beating of his wife in the week of peace, his severe taunts on Ikemefuna for refusing to eat, and even his involuntary killing of Ezeudu's son is the culmination of a series of senseless acts, spurred on by impulsiveness. Thus Okonkwo's personal contribution to his downfall is the composite result of his restlessness, impatience with less successful men, and his unwavering love and faith in Umuofia. Therefore, he does not deviate from the dominant norms of his society. Again, in the words of Palmer, Okonkwo is a man with admirable qualities reflecting those of his society; his tragedy resides partly in the fact that the society which he has championed for so long is forced to change while he finds that he cannot.<sup>15</sup>

Ezeulu is blinded by his inordinate desire for revenge and distinction, a drive that catapults him towards a tragic end of being demented and losing authority. In a sense, his destruction is the combined result of the strife for personal aggrandisement and the great respect for power exhibited by his Umuaro society. His rebuff of Akuehue's desperate plea that he eat the remaining yams and convene a yam festival clearly testifies his paroxysm for revenge on Umuaro when it abandoned him in his conflict with Winterbottom. No one understands better the priest's self-seeking glory than Umuaro when it states that

Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors-no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgement against his clan. (AOG 230)

In fact, Achebe's protagonists are depicted as men with dignity and respect who are caught up in a web of fate that their character, whether in its inflexibility of will, set purpose or ambition, hurries on.<sup>16</sup> Stated differently, we have always been conscious of the fact that we are not masters of our fate in every respect—that there are many things which we cannot do and that nature is more powerful than we are.<sup>17</sup> This view is upheld by Damian Opata who affirms that Okonkwo appears to have been everywhere in the novel trailed by capricious fate and larger-than-life forces. This explains why the attribution of personal and moral responsibility to his actions cannot be critically sustained. Looking closely at the fates of Okonkwo and Ezeulu, there is the impression that their destinies had been fixed *ab initio*, no amount of personal striving would save such individuals. Such individuals are like the proverbial snake which said that it knew when it decided to hide its legs and hands in its stomach because if the hands did not bring it trouble, the legs would. Such characters then become like a sport in the hands of the gods.<sup>18</sup> Ezeulu is as much a victim of supernatural agents as Okonkwo, Obi Okonkwo and Josiah are of Igbo belief system. The topicality of the issue of the supernatural is not so much the experiences of Okonkwo and Ezeulu, but the timelessness of their actions to modern man. Many people today continue to wrestle with the supernatural as they firmly hold that extraneous factors still impinge on their lives. It is this belief that makes African Literature continuously fascinating, couched as it is in a (post)colonial timeframe.]

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Amadi's *The Concubine*, Clark's *Ozidi*, Butake's *Lake God* and Senghor's poetry vindicate this assertion.

<sup>2</sup>Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) 205.

<sup>3</sup>Anthonia C. Kalu, "Achebe and Duality in Igbo Thought." In *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*. Vol. 2. Eds. Ernest N. Emenyonu and Iniobong I. Uko (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004) 144.

<sup>4</sup>Victor S. Alumon, "Portrayal and Criticism of Culture and Societal Institutions in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." In *Journal of African Philosophy*. Eds. Femi Taiwo and Tunde Bewaji. Issue 3 (2003) 3.

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan A. Peters, *A Dance of Masks Senghor, Achebe, Soyinka* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978) 120.

<sup>6</sup>Oladele Taiwo, *An Introduction to West African Literature* (London: Trinity Press, 1967) 31.

<sup>7</sup>Kalu Ogbaa, *Gods, Oracles and Divinations* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc; 1992) 114.

<sup>8</sup>"Achebe Interviewed" by D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu et al in Bernth Lindfors' ed. *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977) 89.

<sup>9</sup>Kalu Ogbaa, *Gods, Oracles and Divinations* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc; 1992) 5.

<sup>10</sup>Martin Stephen and Philip Franks, *Studying Shakespeare* (Essex: Longman, 1984) 44.

<sup>11</sup>Arthur Sewall, *Character and Society in Shakespeare* (London: Oxford UP, 1951) 75.

<sup>12</sup>Christophe Tshikala Kambaji, *Chinua Achebe: A Novelist and a Portraitist of his*

*Society* (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1994) 38.

<sup>13</sup>Ogbaa 16.

<sup>14</sup>Eustace Palmer, "Character and Society in *Things Fall Apart*" in Harold Bloom's ed. *Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart'* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002) 154.

<sup>15</sup>Bloom 156.

<sup>16</sup>Peters 128.

<sup>17</sup>John Hospers, "Free-Will and Psychoanalysis" in E.D. Klemke et al *Philosophy The Basic Issues* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982) 132.

<sup>18</sup>Damian U. Opata, "Chinua Achebe: The Writer and a Sense of History" in Edith Ihekweazu ed. *Eagle on Iroko* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1996) 64-66.

## REFERENCES

Abraham, W.E. *The Mind of Africa*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1965.

Achebe, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann, 1974.

----- *A Man of the People*. London: Heinemann, 1966.

----- *No Longer At Ease*. London: Heinemann, 1960.

----- *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958.

----- *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975.

Achebe, Chinwe. *The World of the Ogbanje*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986.

Adegbola, E.A. *Ade Traditional Religion in West Africa*. Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1983.

Arinze, Francis A. *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*. Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1978

Baston, G.T. *Niger Ibos*. London: Cass, 1966.

Beier, Ulli ed. *Introduction to African Literature*, London: Longman, 1979.

Bloom, Harold ed. *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002.

Carroll, David. *Chinua Achebe*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970.

Chinweizu et al. *Toward The Decolonization of African Literature*. Vol. I. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980.

Cook, David. *African Literature*. London: Longman, 1977.

Duerden, Dennis and Cosmo Pieterse eds. *African Writers Talking* London: Heinemann, 1972.

Ejizu, Christopher. *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986.

Emenyonu, Ernest and Iniobong I. Uko eds. Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe. Vol. 2. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004.

Emenyonu, Ernest. *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*. Ibadan: Oxford UP, 1978.

Feldman, Roberts. *Social Psychology*. Caledonia: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1985.

Ihekweazu, Edith ed. *Eagle on Iroko*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1996.

Innes, C.L. and Bernth Lindfors eds. *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1978.

Jones, Eldred Durosimi ed. *African Literature Today* no. 5. London: Heinemann, 1971.

Kambaji, Christophe Tshikala. *Chinua Achebe: A Novelist and a Portraitist of his Society*. New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1994.

Killam, G.D. *The Novels of Chinua Achebe*. London: Heinemann, 1972.

- Lindfors, Bernth ed. *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.
- Mbiti, John S. *Introduction to African Religion*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1975.
- Moore, Gerald. *Twelve African Writers*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1980.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962.
- Ogbaa, Kalu. *Gods, Oracles and Divinations*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1992.
- Ohaeto, Ezenwa. *Chinua Achebe A Biography*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997.
- Ojinmah, Umelo. *Chinua Achebe: New Perspectives*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1991.
- Palmer, Eustace. *An Introduction to the African Novel*. London: Heinemann, 1972.
- Peters, Jonathan A. *A Dance of Masks Senghor, Achebe, Soyinka*. Washington, D.C. : Three Continents Press, 1978.
- Ramsaran, J. *Approaches to African Literature*. Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1959.
- Taiwo, Oladele. *An Introduction to West African Literature*. London: Trinity Press, 1967.
- Thomas, Nigel H. *From Folklore to Fiction*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1988.
- Turner, Harold. *Living Tribal Religions*. London: Ward Lock Educational, 1971.
- Uchendu, Victor C. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Weitin, Wayne. *Psychology*. California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1992.
- Wren, Robert M. *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980.