



# The Impact of the Ibo Clan Traditions on Okonkwo's Heroism

## KEYWORDS

Chiaa Achebe, Things Fall Apart, Ibo clan, traditions, Okonkwo, Umuofia, Ikemefuna, herbal, exile, epitaph.

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**ABSTRACT** *Okonkwo is the hero of the story, Things Fall Apart, whom Achebe portrays as the brave warrior, honorable, rigorous and a self-reliable tribesman of action. Consequently, this tragic character emerges with great controversy traits, despite his obligations towards the clan traditions in both social and individual stature.*

*The paper presents a cluster of the most prominent Ibo traditions which the hero clings to, and a list of some of the major traditions. And it will reveal the consequences if he violates or breaks them. Also, it conveys Okonkwo's personal victimization, the reasons and the consequences of his tragic downfall. Therefore, the entire intention of the paper is to show the extent that the hero adheres to the bulk of legacy and conforms to them with great determination. He bears in mind that applying these traditions is the steering force of his entire life. But he may not know the impact of breaking and violating them, deliberately or otherwise.*

## 1.0 Introduction

The dominant features of the Ibo clan at the opening of "Things Fall Apart" are marked by unity, integrity, solidarity and harmony in ethics, traditions, customs, institutions, war and peace, festivals, religious rites and ceremonies. Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, this is his full name, portrays Okonkwo as a genuine representative of the Ibo clan member who faithfully and strictly adheres to his ethnic group's legacy and traditions.

The setting, where he first appears, was his large compound in Umuofia which was the biggest of the nine villages. Okonkwo has a remarkable patriarchal and marital status with three wives, a 'worthless' eldest son whom he is at odds with, because the latter converts and accepts the name Isaac (Nwoye), a sick daughter (Ezinma) and an indebted, drunkard, easygoing father (Unoka). His household was governed by him with great agitation, harsh attitude, aggression and unjustified toughness. His worried temperament reflects on the way he runs his family. With reason or otherwise, he beats his wives and upbrings his children with different attitudes. While he treats his son so roughly, he shows great kindness and compassion towards his favorite daughter. The author of the novel highlights the Igbo clan's background, its tightly interwoven ties and the strong linkage of its tribal parts. He describes the hero's clan as follows:

Similarly, those hundreds of autonomous Igbo villages and towns, so deeply suspicious of political amalgamation, would be stretched to the limit should they ever face an enemy able to wield the resources of a centralized military power, acting directly or through local surrogates. The Igbo have always lived in a world of continual struggle, emotion and change... a feature conspicuous in the tautness, overreach and torsion of their art, it is like a tight-rope walk, a hairbreadth brush with the boundaries of anarchy. This world does not produce easygoing people. Those who visit the Igbo in their homes run into them abroad or in literature are not always prepared for their tense and cocky temperament. The British called them argumentative. (Achebe, 2000: pp.17-18).

Achebe puts his hero between two parallel perspectives. He shows him as a man of solid personality and great achievements. But despite his glory, he is obsessed by two inner-self forces. Firstly, his psychological dimension which he leads a life dominated and motivated by fear of failure and weakness like his lazy father, and fear of his wealth would be passed to and wasted by his good-for-nothing boy. Secondly, his physical strength covers a wide range of this stage. The narrator shows him as the honorable and undefeated wrestler who won several titles and with high reputation throughout the clan. Moreover, Okonkwo moves within the limits of the clan standards which govern its being and clings to its principles.

The Ibo clan has a cluster of ancestral traditions and customs regarded as sacred moral dictums which all its members, including Okonkwo, ought to commit themselves to. In spite of his devotion to his physical strength and suitability of his personal idiosyncrasy, he has been captivated by two opposed inner forces. Firstly, his conform and devotion to the clan's strong traditional faith to the extent of divine indispensable beliefs. Secondly, his violation of these traditions, the causes and the consequences. Hence, it tries to reveal the 'things' which held the clan unified and the reasons that caused this solidarity and unity to shatter into pieces.

## 2.0 Discussion

### 2.1 Okonkwo's Heroism versus Colonialism

The turning point of the novel begins at the impending arrival of the colonialists who invaded the Ibo land and started to impose the imperial policies on the clan. The overwhelming changes covered, almost, all the intact and fixed factors which were abided by the tribal allegiance. The white man came with a manifesto of means he employed to change completely the Ibo society. These new factors are: language (English), religion (Christianity), missionaries, trade and administration. He rendered these tools to reform and uproot the indigenous people's traditions and means of life. This policy is the crux of the whole matter behind undermining, devastating and disassociating the clan; that is what Obierika says to Okonkwo when he visits the latter in his exile. Okonkwo draws a rhetorical and

proportional comparison between two affinities which indicate the white man's invasion when conquering his Ibo-land. Bitterly he says:

'Let us not reason like cowards,' said Okonkwo. 'If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No, I take a sick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are daily pouring filth over us, and Okeke says we should pretend not to see.' Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia. (Achebe, 1996:113).

The study sheds light on the protagonist's reaction when he witnesses his land, people and everything in the clan deteriorating. Okonkwo refers all that to his people's betrayal and shame to abdicate their long maintained abiding traditions and ancestors' legacy or to succumb. Hence, he leads contravention against the antagonistic regime. He establishes his dominant mood and began to assemble the Ibo fighters' historical sedulous bravery. In high morale, full of enthusiasm and boiling with agitation to confront the intruders, the hero starts to disclose and declare his determination of retaliation within his tribesmen and then the compatibility against the colonials. In so doing, Okonkwo has to collect the ardent, ebullient reliable warriors. But he discovers that the majority of his people have deserted their inheritance, converted to Christianity and followed the settlers. With them was his son Nwoye whom he humiliates and dislikes for that reason. That is what Obierika states in deep grief:

How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Higo, 1965: ix).

Okonkwo instigates and calls the Ibo warriors for resistance, but he reveals that all the clan can neither work together as before, nor can have the courage to defend their ethnicity and anarchy. Therefore, he demands to revenge. Because, with his eye witness, he feels that his homeland's freedom has been confiscated by the invaders. Really he is wholly disappointed. So, he decides to fight alone. He shoots one of the white men and kills him. Then he comes to conclude that 'Things Fall Apart' and that he can no longer cope with or bear such a meaningless life.

One can assemble the causes which led the hero to commit suicide in the following respects:

2.1.1 He laments himself for the unacceptable betrayal of his people and their inevitable submissive subjugation.

2.1.2 He is unable to bear the betrayal of his own son converting and following the white man.

1.0.3 His banishment and the consequences of his exile.

1.0.4 His bitterness and disappointment, and becoming dire and despair.

1.0.5 His inability of fighting alone against the colonial power intrusion.

1.0.6 He strongly believes that the white man is the one

who menaced violating his clan's traditions. So, he decides to avenge.

For all these reasons, and for fear of being arrested, imprisoned or executed, he decides to put an end to his life by committing suicide. Okonkwo's last image has been illuminated where his corpse was dangling from the branch of the biggest tree can be regarded as an act of hopelessness, depression and disappointment. But in terms of patriotism, he would also be considered as the national hero who gallantly tried to defend his people and territories from tyranny of colonization. It is worth mentioning that Okonkwo may have been an example of the patriot who gallantly fights and dies seeking independence not for his Ibo clan, but later on for the whole Nigeria.

Some critics consider Okonkwo as loving, sympathetic and a great African man. But they all believe that colonization was the cause of disassociation of the Ibo society.

### 3.0 Okonkwo and the Ibo Traditions:

The purpose of this section is mainly concerned with availing most of the Ibo ancestors' legacy of traditions, which are employed by Okonkwo throughout his lifespan in faithful loyalty and sincerity. They are in the following respects:

#### 3.1 Market Days:

In the Ibo land, market days are considered as a kind of traditional conference where people from various villages discuss different issues. Market Days extend for four days and seven weeks. The newly born children are named after according to the market day it was born. Also, in them Okonkwo participates and discusses, with others, political and social issues based on the fixed traditions.

#### 3.4 The Manhood:

In traditional norms, a teenager boy is given a new status in family and clan. He is going to have new responsibilities as a warrior, defender in peace and war and a traditional tribesman who is ready to marry a girl from the clan and deliver a lot of children.

#### 3.5 Marriage and Divorce:

Marriage is of highly significance for the family and the clan. The groom must pay his bride's dowry in animals and crops. The couple provides the clan with warriors and the ancestors' continuation and values. The new generation is regarded as the unit which pleases the society and gods. On the one hand Okonkwo, like his kinsmen, is polygamous according to the traditions. On the other hand, divorce in the Ibo culture, is not prohibited among the Ibos, polygamy is adopted for several reasons such as economic, social and sexual needs. And the woman who deserts her husband and elopes to another man's household can be welcome and accepted by the latter as a wife. These traditions are apparent in one of Okonkwo's marital cases

#### 3.6 The Twins:

In the Ibo culture and traditions, twins are considered as bad omen from gods and magical or curse, which will bring disaster to both family and clan. Therefore, they should be taken to the evil forest and killed in religious rituals.

#### 3.7 The Obanje Child:

The Ibo people define such a child 'as the one who keeps dying and continually re-entering its mother's womb, only

to die'. It is classified as an evil spirit and a wicked child hated by the society. The Ibo clan believes that only the female circumcision would stop the Obanje child phenomenon.

### 3.8 Titles of the Leaders:

Titles of the leaders are very significant in the tribe's construction. They are awarded to the brave and strong men like Okonkwo whose physical built brought him success, fame and reputation in wrestling contests. The ancestor's legacy is recalled and applied by the newer generations to adopt their heroic deeds.

### 3.9 Ancestral Festivals:

At the beginning of the New Year, the Ibo people hold the festival of the New Yam which symbolizes rebirth of the year. This feast was always held in Umuofia, Okonkwo's village. Their tradition is to throw the old food by the elders. In every feast, the spirits of the ancestors are present. Okonkwo participates in all the ceremonies and festivals throughout his lifespan.

### 3.10 The Funeral Ceremony:

There are a lot of customs in funeral ceremony for a male or female. It starts with beating drums, firing guns, violent dancing and striking their machetes as a sign of salute. The dead person's peers and fellows color themselves with ash, chalk and charcoal. They recall their ancestor's spirits. The dead man's son would dance and the corpse is buried at darkness.

### 3.11 Types of Crimes:

There are a lot of communal crimes in the Ibo traditions. Most of them are attributed to their gods' interference in human affairs. Other crimes are ascribed to man's personal mistakes with association of fate and destiny. Crimes which are regarded as violation. They are like killing a woman, suicide, killing a boy like Ikemefuna, or killing the divine python.

### 3.12 The Herbal Treatment:

The herbal treatment is an access to the Ibo clan's traditional remedy of diseases conducted by some men and women in the society famous of their talent. For instance, in Ezinma's illness, her father diagnoses it as a fever. Okonkwo goes inside the jungle and brings some plants and leaves. He boils them and the girl inhales the steam. She sweats and the fever breaks off. Likewise, the medicine person is capable of curing the sick people in the time no hospitals were heard about.

### 3.13 Proverbs:

Proverbs are significant in the Ibo culture, because they sweeten the conversations. Therefore, they are highly regarded by the aborigines in serious and comic contexts.

### 3.14 Tribal Gods:

Achebe displays a considerable data about the powerful gods which the Ibos believe in. These metaphysical elements are dreadful like the Oracle, Chielo Agbala and other spirits.

### 4.0 Okonkwo's Violation of his clan Traditions:

The significance of this section attributes to the reasons which led the protagonist violate the long kept traditions. Also, it conveys the cases and the occasions of these violations and the consequences that follow this act. The destruction of the tribal institutions, traditions and the ancestral legacy led to great social and cultural voids.

Okonkwo becomes very conscious and aware in applying these traditions appropriately. His commitment to virtual deeds, and all the obligatory values and traditions was utterly incredible.

Yet, despite all these efforts, he undergoes several social and psychological pressures which undetermined his enthusiasm and pushed him hard towards violating the major traditions such as the Week of Peace, killing a woman, participating in killing Ikemefuna, beating Ojuigo, his young wife, attempting to kill his second wife, killing the twentieth years boy and finally his committing suicide. According to the Ibo traditions his way of death can be regarded the punishment of fate and Divine justice by the gods as Amadoraoon him for breaking their reserved traditions. For the penalty which the person who breaks these traditions would face.

The novel conceals the direct reason for Okonkwo's tragic death, but the rising of the events in the structure of the plot points out the hero at the brink of his downfall. That is quite apparent in the way the protagonist ends his life. But Okonkwo's society, according to their traditions, know the reason behind this anti-clockwise of the traditions. He has paid highly the price for his rapid declination towards his end. In this sense, Arlene A. Edler asks a question about Okonkwo in her critical essay entitled "The Paradoxical Characterization of Okonkwo," and answers it as follows:

Why does Okonkwo end tragically? This question haunts every reader of *Things Fall Apart*, for we sense that a satisfactory answer would explain not only Chinua Achebe's complex protagonist but also the writer's larger consent about the destruction of traditional African society during the period of colonization. Students used to typical Western protagonist struggle to classify Okonkwo as either a hero or an antihero and to discover the tragic flaw that leads to his defeat. (Edler, 1991:58).

### Conclusion

The paper concludes that 'The Impact of the Ibo Traditions in Okonkwo's Heroism' is so noticeable and of great significant. Because it caused change of fortune for the hero. His character development pledged in his early stages when he was presented conforming strictly to the traditions. Accordingly, he does not know the price he would pay if he breaks the line on adherence by violating these traditions. The hero's psychological status covers a wide area in the story. The paper has rendered the most prominent traditions which the protagonist has, conservatively, conformed.

Okonkwo moves within the limits of his human psychocultural boundaries. Despite his gallantry and charismatic fame, he was captivated by a syndrome of an implied fear of being considered weak like his father. Therefore, when one applies psychoanalysis on Achebe's presentation of his hero, she will discover high degrees of overwhelming moral instability tendencies in the hero's drastic and intricate self. But he collides with a bulk of reasons which keep him bewildered and tensioned all the time. He bears in mind the moral values, ethics, the dreadful traditional gods and other supernatural beings which all the clan fears their curse and punishments. In socio-cultural aspects, Okonkwo leads life with a strict and conservative way of respecting and applying all norms of clan's institutional traditions.

But in spite of all these efforts, he concludes that all the things which kept the clan together are break-

ing down. Hence, in human weakness associated with psychological defeatism and avoidance of succumb; he violates his Ibo traditions and suddenly hangs himself. The Ibos regard such act as the worse taboo. Therefore, even after his tragic death, negative traditions such as humiliation, abomination and disgrace appeared in the way his corpse was treated.

Okonkwo's tragic death resembles the end of the classical Greek hero who must, necessarily, have 'hamartia', a tragic flaw or some weakness in his character which will lead him to his downfall. That trait is also evident in Shakespeare's elevated hero. Likewise, the American hero is mainly a layman presented with a bulk of cracks which will drag him to his devastated end without surrender. The image of Okonkwo's corpse swinging down from the branch of the tree and the way he would be buried denote several values. That is what the narrator remarks at the closing of the story:

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself. And now he will be buried like a dog." (Achebe, 1958:147).

#### Recommendations:

The Impact of the Ibo Traditions in Okonkwo's Heroism is a vast area to be dealt with in a single paper. Because traditions in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* had been widely tackled by academicians, researchers, critics and scholars. Yet, there remain uncovered or undiscovered areas waiting for more efforts to convey their sublime literary fields. Therefore, the paper recommends for more efforts to be carried out to reveal other rich implied areas which have not been dealt with.

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