

WITCHCRAFT AS A SYSTEM OF SOCIAL ORDER IN *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract

*Colonialism was a total system of oppression which found force in its various argument of superiority and classifications and did various reclassifications of African ways because of its agency of power backed by its military might and economic power. The first casualty of such colonialist classification is the belief system of the traditional African people and their religion, a representation of their indigenous gods was redefined through the agency of language. Witchcraft is reappropriated by the colonialist having the agency of power and language in an attempt to reduce African religious practices as a narrow reality of evil and harm without the possibility of such religious social practices having varied interpretation beyond this restricted imposition of meaning. Through the application of postcolonial theory this paper observes that Witchcraft performs the function of social order in *Things Fall Apart*. This concept of social order is multiple dimensional, which is interrogated from such concepts as: political, economic, socio-religious structures of the indigenous African society within the world of the novel. It accounts for various meanings of witchcraft within in the Igbo traditional society. This paper further observes that the dawn of colonialism disrupted traditional belief that has guided the African society as seen in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.*

Keywords: Witchcraft, Social Order, Politics of Classification, Colonialism, Deconstruction.

Introduction

Literature is a product of the society in the sense that the creative artist is conditioned by the norms and belief systems that are prevalent in his time and this is implicated in the artist portrayal of reality that is influenced by a certain form of national consciousness. Witchcraft, which is a traditional spiritual craft aids the art of governance and social relations within the Igbo society as depicted in the world of the novel, a notation of the material world in which the writer is a product of and assert a certain form of difference from the imperialist centre. Rebecca L. Stein and Philip L. Stein Through functional definition of what was practiced in Umuofia to a few negative feelings, Philip L. Stein observes that "...functional approaches are reductionist, reducing religion to a few feelings and behaviors and that are not, in and of themselves religious" (51). An essentialist definition of religion looks at what the essential nature of religion is. It emphasizes the fact that religion is the domain of the extraordinary-things beyond the commonplace and the natural. They note that: "...a religion is a system of beliefs and behaviors that deal with the relationship between humans and sacred supernatural" (52). And witchcraft fits into such conceptualization. Witchcraft is a form of social order in Umuofia and it is the illustration of the hierarchical structures and ranks within the society and, to some extent, it is also a code of conduct that determines what is good or bad in the traditional Igbo society. Arinze Agbanusi sees witchcraft as a concept of power

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when he states that; "Witchcraft is defined as the use of magic powers" (117). Although magical power seems to be extra-ordinary, it is a conflict classification in the sense that all religious activities associated with the imperialist religion is referred to as divine and this is an illustration of the power of classification. Northrop Frye in the *Anatomy of Criticism* in his "Theory of Archetypal Meaning..." captures the structure of social order thus: "divine world which is made of society of gods and one God, human world which is society of men which is one man, animal world which is sheepfold etc." (141). What this demonstrates is that there are constant interaction within the various worlds which he has highlighted and in this, supernatural powers becomes a communicative link among the various forces that find meaning within their relating to themselves in the human and spiritual environment. Friday Mufuzi's definition of witchcraft is implicated in the foregoing postulation that: "...witchcraft is a theory of power and authority and practitioners believed that it possessed energies that could protect them against any kind of harm from their perceived enemies, and that it had the power to protect whatever wealth had been accumulated from destruction by supposed enemies who in general were either their...kin or close friends" (1). Witchcraft is a political religious system of protection, which results from the relationship and interaction between man and spirits and that innate desire to seek for something great than man himself. This constitutes a form of social order that protect man from his immediate society and in the supreme natural world from all forces of the unknown that might potent evil. Tonia Umoren corroborated the foregoing in her definition of social order as: "...a patterned way of behavior among people in a community. It is an order based on the collective consciousness of a people. Consequently, the regularities and similarities in behavior among a group transcend the action of individual. Social Order, thus has to do with the role-play by individual members of the society in their interaction with the accustomed social restraints" (1). What Umoren did not highlight is the cyclical nature of the interaction of the world of the living and the dead as a singular presentation of dualism within the traditional Umuofia society. This pattern of behavior is seen in the world of the supernatural which is closely linked to the material world of the living. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* affirms this concept of the intertwining existence of the world of the living and the dead when he observes that: "Land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at the festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (97). This interaction is that which occurs between mortals and the spirit and the medium of this interaction is spiritual which witchcraft is functional and an indication of a form of religious, political and social practice in Umuofia before the imposition of the imperialist methods of classification. Nyabwani et al notes about traditional power thus, "...this power can be used to protect home, steads, families, fields, cattle, and other property...Some people spend a great deal of wealth and effort to obtain magical protection ad property. Among those who tap these magical powers for good or provide this protective gear are medicine men, diviners and rainmakers" (10). Traditional system of power was for protection.

The postcolonial criticism is concerned with the narratives emanating from the empire as a result of the collapse of colonialism. This theory accounts for how the Empire, appropriating the continuum of the English language, fashioned it within the traditional

ideological instead of cultural practices that was alien to the English language and the colonial experience. The postcolonial models which emphasize national model or regional model of criticism to be applied in the analysis of the literatures that are produced by the Empire at the end of colonialism becomes handy in our alternate narratives against the demonization of witchcraft, which is as a result of the ignorance of the European models of classification in its attempt to understand indigenous religious practices which it failed to properly account for. Bill Ashcroft et al observe that, "Post-colonial literatures developed through several stages which can be seen to correspond to stages both of national or regional consciousness and of the project of asserting difference from the imperial centre" (4). The portrayal of difference and a form of religious national consciousness is illustrated in the Umuofia religious system that is quite different from the imperialist religion as highlighted in *Things Fall Apart*. The portrayal of the religious system of Umuofia and appropriating Igbo syntax to narrating this spiritual system is a means by which Achebe seized the language of the centre and did much injustice to the language to the extent that the language was enabled to carry his own colonial experience. Ashcroft et al observe that,

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' becomes established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice. For this reason, the discussion of post-colonial writing which follows is largely a discussion of the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture (8).

Achebe through language establishes the religious, economic and political systems of Umuofia consistently different from the narrative of the imperialist centre. He portrays a worldview where the gods and humans share a form of consistent fluid spaces which one or the other makes a transition to the other in a continuous communing with the spirits and human.

Witchcraft And Imperialist Classification

The systems of classification, using a strange format of naming, contaminate the actual essence of what is and what has classified. The imperialist incursion into Africa was a complete one, having various ideological substructures as seen in the government, economics and religion of the colonialist execution in Africa. Simona Hevesioia observes that: "Both imperialism and colonialism were driven and supported by an impressive ideological platform that sustained and fed the system" (43). These platforms were used as elements of classification and exploitation to enslave the natives in Africa as part of the imperialist ideology to completely take control of the humanity of the colonized by inferiorizing it with their own concept of a superior god in Europe which has a cultural reflection of white and lives in a place lined with the metaphor of whiteness. The conversation between Mr. Brown and Akunna is revealing: 'There are no other gods,' said Mr. Brown. 'Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carved a piece of wood- like that one' (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved Ikenga hung), 'and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood' (143). Colonialism, as represented by Mr. Brown, started the imperialist activities first by reclassifying the sacred ways of the people in the society and as such witchcraft was the first victim of the imperialist

activities in Africa. Mr. Brown, the agent of the imperialist government, based on the philosophy of colonialism, started a system of classification that demonized everything that is associated with indigenous practices in which witchcraft is an item of social practice. Hevesioia highlights the temperament of colonialism thus: "The nightfulness associated with the expansivity of colonial powers was conveniently derived from the notions of inferiority and backwardness that were attributed to the populations of the newly acquired territories. These in fact, not only helped to justify the massive geographical extension of the empire but also created the illusion of legitimacy of the whole process" (43). Hevesioia identifies "inferiority" as a political tool of the imperialist government and the indigenous ways became victims. Hevesioia continues: "The self-imposed right to execute a civilizing mission in Third World countries, conducted in order to enlighten and humanize indigenous communities, thus logically presupposed the cultural, economic, political and even moral superiority of the colonizer" (43). Witchcraft like Greco-Roman religion has negative and positive colorations. However the imposing presence of the foreign religion and its emphasis on the exclusive nature of its form of worship of her God without any attempt for Him to share, made a reclassification of African ways of life, thereby breaking its institutions as a means of making a case for the imperialist Christ and a certain form of God as a representation of moral light and survival. Before the emergence of the imperialist religion and its argument of a superior belief and economic system, witchcraft in Africa in general and the Igbo traditional system in particular was a system of order that regulates man's activities with his family within his immediate environment. Todd Sanders corroborates the foregoing submission about witchcraft thus: "African notion of witchcraft are neither archaic nor static but are highly flexible and deeply attuned to the conundrums of our contemporary world" (1). However, the viewing of witchcraft from the lenses of colonialism even at its end contaminates the function of witchcraft in the tradition society of Umuofia. Negotiated portrayal of witchcraft is a western creation and fetishism of African practice of its belief system as well as its reduction to evil for the glorification of western belief systems. Witchcraft in *Things Fall Apart* is practiced by those who are literate in their ways and understand the economics, politics and social workings of their people which are linked to the spirit world. Arinze Agbanusi affirms this thus, "... there is the experience of an immaterial invisible reality. Witchcraft is part of such reality" (116). And man needs to communicate with this immaterial invisible reality and this invisible reality is a cultural production which is perceived within a cultural system.

The Role of Witchcraft Security in Umuofia Society

Witchcraft played a pivotal role in curbing security concerns in the Ibo society of Umuofia. This is reflected in Achebe's vivid description of the nighttime void of any form of activities. Irrespective of whether the intentions are ill or good, parents paid attention to using certain terminologies to get the children to be composed, adults avoiding activities of the nighttime and certain instructions regarding night activities, as the society was dominated by the fear of the unknown. The foregoing is illustrated by the authorial voice thus:

"Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for the fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string" (8).

The night held many stories for the people of Umuofia. Its effect on the security concerns assisted in checkmating the ills that could have been perpetrated at odd hours. Noticeably, Achebe emphasizes on the fact that the fear of the spirits at night helped in preventing even the bravest, whether at heroic acts or the ungodly ones, it allowed for peace and quiet once the sun set and darkness came in Umuofia. There could have also been the possibility that there may not have been the necessary need for them to have night watches as the spirits of the land had a protective shield over the people. The fear of the spirits at nighttime also gave room for the children in the community to be cultured with what they spoke at night as they lived in fear that whatever was spoken could become reality.

The Judicial Role in the Umuofia Society

Witchcraft was seen as a legal decision making sense of reason in Umuofia. It served as a voice of conscience to the people, such that they did not err in decision making especially when it came to judicial matters. This is reflected during times of war with neighboring communities. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves portrayed justice in the land as it, through "*agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call *a fight of blame*" (10). It is safe to say that the Oracle of Umuofia kingdom advocated for peace in the land and would not support the people if they fought with their neighbors unjustly. Thus, when Okonkwo violates the week of peace, a week instructed by the gods, he was punished for it (24). The gods of Umuofia, such as Ani, defined an integral part of the lives of the people in terms of how they lived their lives in peace. As much as Umuofia was feared among other clans, they avoided using this unique support as a means to override and oppress other smaller clans, knowing that the Oracle of the Hills and Caves would turn its back if that was the case (pg. 10). Another example of the Witchcraft playing the role of a just judge in Umuofia society is seen in the confrontation between Uzowulu and his wife Mgbafo. Uzowulu, who had been accused of beating his wife, had been summoned by the Seven Masked Spirits of Egwugwu. The Seven Masked Spirit of Egwugwu, in their just way of settling disputes, allow for a fair hearing from both parties, including the brothers of Mgbafo who beat up Uzowulu and take to their home, his wife and children. Rather than apportion blames on any sides, they in their wisdom, strive to settle the dispute between the two families (72-75). This reflects a sense of justice and a fair hearing on the part of the Witchcraft society as against the biased standpoint that African Witchcraft shows concern to only those who have been offended.

The Effect of Witchcraft on the Commercial and Agricultural Life Pattern of the Umuofia People

Achebe takes time, also, to focus on the agricultural perspective of the effect witchcraft plays in the Umuofia society. Just as the gods of Umuofia protect and justly balance the society, they also ensure that the people are adequately taken care of. Ani, the earth goddess and source of all fertility, ensured that the people have farm produce in abundance. She is highly regarded as being responsible for the reason why the Feast of the New Yam Festival is celebrated with so much pomp and pageantry (29). Due to the connection between the people and the gods of the land, the people have implicit trust in the ability of the gods to bless them with bountiful harvest. Even Unoka knew the ability of the gods in blessing the earth. This is seen when he consults Agbala "to find out why he always had a miserable harvest (13). From Unoka's visit to

Agbala, one can deduce that the gods of Umuofia do not condone laziness on the path of its subjects. It is believed among the Ibo people that "when a man says yes, his chi says yes also" (21). Thus, as Okonkwo puts in his best foot forward in working hard, as against what his father stood for, even when things become difficult for him, the gods are quick to blessing his work as they however advise Unoka to put all hands on deck.

Witchcraft and the Religious life of the Umuofia People

The gods in the Umuofia society are revered with high regard. The religious life of the people and the gods are intertwined, as there is the constant belief in the protection of the people by their ancestors. This is illustrated succinctly thus, "The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani...And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth" (29). The typical abode of the people of Umuofia shows categorically the place of religion in the lives of the people, with Okonkwo's house as the descriptive yardstick;

"Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or *obi*, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the *obi*. The barn was built against one end of the red walls...near the barn was a small house, the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children" (12).

The society revolved round the fact that the gods were at their beck and call to answer their prayers if the need arose. Okonkwo keeps the altar of his personal god and his ancestral spirits and continually feeding them with the hope that they would enrich him and protect his children. Unoka spoke of sacrificing to *Ifejioku*, the god of yams just to get good farm produce. The nine masked spirits of *Egwugwu* represents not just the nine villages of the clan, but a spiritual concept of what the society religiously adore to come to their aid in times of distress (71). When the Evil Forest, one of the masked spirit, asks the people who came to consult them over the family dispute, if they know them, as much as the people know that they are humans who wear masks and costumes, the humans respect the spiritual implication of being in the presence of the representation of the spiritual aspect of their lives (73-75). Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, shows the prowess of the gods of the land when she tells Ekwefi that Agbala wants to see his daughter, when Ezinma falls seriously ill. When Okonkwo tries to question Chielo and make excuses, the respond shows the clear distinction between man and god: "Beware Okonkwo! ...Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks?" (80). This is a reflection of the level of religious exultation of the gods in Umuofia society

Witchcraft and Personal Decision making of the Umuofia People

The people of Umuofia regarded their gods in high esteem. These gods shaped how they thought, acted and even spoke. Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility, is reflected in the narrative as "the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (pg. 29). Bernard GeclikoNyabwani and Dickson NkongeKagena opine; "Good magic is accepted esteemed, used mainly by specialists such as medicine men, diviners and rainmakers. These practitioners use their knowledge or tap into this power for the benefit of the community. Examples of

beneficial use of magic power, include the treatment of diseases, counteracting misfortune, neutralizing or destroying evil power or witchcraft" (10). Therefore, the people of Umuofia wove their life pattern and decisions round the fact that the consequences of their actions was not unnoticed by the gods of the land. This could be seen in the actions of Obiako, a palm wine tapper who suddenly decides to give up his trade just because " the Oracle warned him that he would fall off a palm tree and kill himself" (16). The gods play the role of conscience, sometimes using a character in the narrative to warn the protagonist from taking certain steps or decisions that could affect the protagonist negatively. For example, OgbuefiEzeude, the oldest man in Umuofia, warns Okonkwo about actively participating in the death of Ikemefuna; "...that boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (45).

When Okonkwo starts to suffer from guilt of conscience, Obierika, as if by divine intervention, chastises him for being directly involved in it. "...if the Oracle said that my son should be killed, I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (53). Thus, even Obierika understands the will of the gods and is seen to be careful in ensuring that he takes shrewd steps. Okonkwo, on the other hand, makes hasty decisions, ignores the warning of OgbuefiEzeudu and is made to suffer the consequences of his actions.

The Deploation Of Language In Witchcraft

Within the context of Umuofia society, one sees that the gods as well as the temporal construct of the society and its representation as aptly done by means of expanded language. The language is a cultural imperative that accounts for the use of words and codes which may not be translated within the story but have static forms in the native language such as Egwugwu, Chi, Ilo, Ekwe. The implication this language uses, that is, the retention of indigenous codes, allow for a close appraisal of culture within the context of the work. The power of most of the sentences in respect to the witchcraft retains its indigenous originality. In the song:

Eze elina, elina!
Sala
Eze ilikeway
Ikwabaakwaoligboli
EbeDandanechieze
EbeUzuzu nete egwu
Sala (48)

The foregoing is the manifestation of the spiritual by means of the reenactment of the oral tradition in the song. The song is a method by which language is used to create a portal to "Chukwu, or God's house" (48). Furthermore, language is used to create an atmosphere of tension and power dimension that is able to carry the spiritual forces existent within the construct of Umuofia such as "Aru oyim de dededediei!" which creates a comfortable atmosphere for the Egwugwu. So language, at this point, materializes into a harbinger of presence of the gods which is implicated in the religious narrative of witchcraft in Umuofia society.

The Social Life

The social lives of the people of Umuofia were defined based on spiritual concept that involves the celebration of new yam festival and the concept of the week of peace which Okonkwo desecrate by beating his wife.

Conclusion

Witchcraft is a spiritual craft in traditional Igbo society of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* but the negative classification of colonialism limited its scope to the single story of evil. Witchcraft was a means of protection and intersection between man and his maker as it is obtainable in traditional society until the dawn of exclusivist Christianity displaced it with negative tag as evil.

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