

FOLK ELEMENTS IN ACHEBE

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IBO CULTURE
AND TENYIMIA CULTURE

EASTERINE IRALU



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URA ACADEMY
KOHIMA, NAGALAND

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Contents

Preface	iii
Introduction	1
The Socio-Cultural Background	14
(1) The hierarchical setup	15
(2) The village layout	22
(3) Tenyimia customary laws	26
(4) The Tenyimia system	28
(5) Title Taking-the Tenyimia system	37
(6) The Ibo titles	43
(7) Social obligations	45
(8) The idea of manliness	49
(9) Rituals of marriage	55
(10) Funeral rites	61
(11) Burial	65
(12) The idea of becoming an ancestor	70

The religious background	72
(1) The Tenyimia and the taboo factor	72
(2) Spirit worship among the Tenyimia	78
(3) Gods of the Ibo	80
(4) Spirit signifiers	82
(5) Feasts and their religious meaning	89
(6) Oracles, medicine men, dreams, omens	94
The psycho-linguistic factor	97
(1) Linguistic taboos	100
(2) Proverbs, Metaphors in <i>Arrow of God</i>	104
(3) Proverbs, Metaphors in <i>Things fall Apart</i>	114
(4) Proverbs, Metaphors in <i>No longer at Ease</i>	121
(5) Songs	123
(6) Biculturalism in <i>No longer at Ease</i>	131
(7) Culture in Achebe's work	138

Introduction

Susan Bassnett, in her book, *Comparative Literature: a critical introduction* (Oxford 1993) states emphatically that Comparative studies as a discipline has had its day. Translation Studies, long regarded as a category of Comparative literature is now being looked upon as the principal discipline with Comparative literature as “a valued but subsidiary subject area”, she adds. In the present decade and the decade before that, attention had shifted to crosscultural work in a) Women’s studies b) Post colonial theory and c) Cultural studies.

The present study falls into that category of Comparative literature which concerns itself with a cultural study of selected works of Chinua Achebe and brings out a comparison between Ibo culture (of the Ibos of Central Nigeria) and Tenyimia culture (of the Tenyimia Nagas in North-east India). The objective of the study is to draw out the similarity between cultural practices of the two societies which is remarkably striking. Secondly, the study attempts to give directions to Tenyimia writers in English on the incorporation of folk elements in modern literary forms which also contributes to the preservation of cultures that are fast disappearing. Finally, the study looks at Achebe’s use of language and his enriching contribution to English language translation, by the innovative approaches he uses to translate cultural concepts into the target language, English.

As the project at hand is a comparative study, it is interesting to look at the evolution of Comparative literature. The term Comparative literature aroused strong reactions both in support of it and opposing it as a discipline. In 1903, Benedetto Croce contemptuously dismissed it as a subject warranting the need to be considered as a separate discipline. He suggested that the proper object of study should be literary history. Croce was claiming that he could not distinguish between literary his-

tory pure and simple and Comparative literary history and felt that the term Comparative had no substance to it. On the other hand, scholars who supported it like Wellek and Warren suggested that; 'comparative literature asks for a widening of perspectives, a suppression of local and provincial sentiments, not easy to achieve' (*Jonathan Cape* 1949:44). Francois Jost also supported it claiming that Comparative literature was able to represent "a vision of the cultural universe, inclusive and comprehensive" (*Introduction to Comparative literature* 1974: 29 - 30).

Bassnett informs us that while Comparative literature was a popular, because it was considered a radical, subject in the 1950s and the 1960s, by the late 1970s it was supplanted by Literary theory, Women's Studies, Semiotics, Film and media including Cultural studies as the radical subject choices . At the same time, the European concept of Comparative literature being different from the Third world concept, Comparative literature has begun to gain ground in the rest of the world. In countries like China, Taiwan, Japan and other Asian countries, Comparative literature programmes emerged based on "the very aspect of literary study many western comparatists had sought to deny; the specificity of nationalism" (Bassnett 1993: 5). The French view of Comparative literature was that of the defining and tracing of 'national characteristics' (Ferdinand Brunetiere(1900) cited in Bassnett 1993: 24). The German scholars could not agree on whether folklore could be included as an area of Comparative literary history with some considering it a fertile and extensive area and others who felt folklore was not art because it belonged to 'anonymous traditions whose nature is to remain personal' (Van Tieghem 1931:57). Macaulay in 1835 was negatively assured of the superiority of his own culture and stated ; "I have never found one among them (Orientalists) who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (quoted in Bassnett 1993:17). Cultural comparison did not feature optimistically or positively where comparisons, it was

insisted, take place between equals to be considered as Comparative literature. At the initial stages therefore, the idea of Comparative literature was paradoxical with some nations highlighting the 'national' in national literature or 'comparing' literatures only to show up the inferiority of the one to the other if at all it took place. Paul Van Tieghem proclaimed that comparative literature "comprises the mutual relations between Greek and Latin literature, the debt of modern literature (since the Middle ages) to ancient literature and finally, the links connecting the various modern literatures. The latter field of investigation, which is the most extensive and complex of the three, is the one which Comparative literature, in the sense in which it is generally understood, takes for its province." (quoted in Bassnett 1993: 23). Van Tieghem was proposing that modern literatures were best suited to comparative analysis but says Bassnett, "he also set oral culture, folklore and pre-Renaissance literature outside the boundaries of his Comparative literature and formulated the notion of binary studies that has served the subject so ill for so long" (1993:24).

The binary approach did not work, one reason, among many other reasons, being that it ignored the fact that language and culture are intrinsically bound together and establishing linguistic boundaries as a basis for comparative study was bound to fail. The binary approach remained the western approach to Comparative literature for a long time with its insistence on comparison between literatures from two separate languages. The concept of Comparative literature in the third world contrasts with the western concept. Comparative literature in India seeks to assert "the importance of tradition and the creation of a literary history constructed upon Indian models" (Bassnett 1993:39). The African comparatists use Comparative literature almost as a political activity -reconstructing and reasserting culture and national identity in the post colonial world. Theorists of Comparative literature, among whom Bassnett is the most vociferous are recognising a post-European model of Comparative literature, a model which replaces the French

school and its emphasis on positivism, its fondness of narrowing down the criteria for comparing texts and the German school with its emphasis on *Zeitgeist* and on racial and ethnic roots as well as the American school's interdisciplinary approach emphasising the universal values of literature. This post European model is "one that reconsiders key questions of cultural identity, literary canons, the political implications of cultural influence, periodization and literary history and finally rejects the historicity of the American school and the formalist approach" (Bassnett 1993:41).

The new model is a dynamic one which is seen by her as reinforcing "the cultural starting point." (41). Henry Gifford feels that the most useful comparisons "are those that writers have accepted or challenged their readers to make - those that spring from the 'shock of recognition' where one writer has become conscious that an affinity exists between himself and another" (*Comparative literature*, 1969:73). The cultural basis of comparison between texts is bound to produce many of these shocks of recognition.

The new emphasis on cultural translation in translation studies has helped to establish the importance of cultural studies by its insistence on the fact that faithful translation means the faithful translation of the culture of the source text. Andre Lefevere and Susan Bassnett consider "translation as a discipline in its own right with a methodology that draws on comparatistics and cultural history" (*Translation, history and culture* London 1990:12. Comparative studies of cultures are contributing to producing 'shocks of recognition' between cultures and literatures and at the same time, highlighting national and regional cultures in studies that attempt to shed shared meaning on cultural practices.

Cultural Studies and African writing

African literature has taken a momentous step in moving out of the Eurocentric approach to the study of literature. Ngugi wa Thiong'o with a small group of colleagues, substituted the English Department with two broadly based Comparative departments, one for the study of language and the other for the study of linguistics. Ngugi states that the aim of African writers should be to orient ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in "their relevance to our situation, and their contribution towards understanding ourselves" (*Homecoming: essays on African and Caribbean literature*, London 1972).

Ngugi finds, along with Sole Woyinka a way out of the African literary crisis of becoming an extension of the west in comparative studies. A writer like Chinua Achebe has delved deep into his ethnic roots to produce an African-centred literary world which draws largely from its oral traditions. The aim of African writers is, as Nadine Gordimer puts it, to make writers "look at the world from Africa, to be an African writer, not look upon Africa from the world" (*The Black interpreters* 1973 p. 5). The African literary situation is one where attempts are directed towards constructing a culture. As Ashcroft says, "post colonial theory has begun to deal with the problems of transmuting time into space, with the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature, it attempts to construct a future. The post-colonial world is one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing into an acceptance of difference on equal terms. Both literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognize cross culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation. The strength of post-colonial theory may well lie in its inherently comparative methodology and the hybridized and syncretic view of the modern world which this implies." (cited in Bassnett 1993:75-76). Bassnett also finds many points of contact

between writers from post colonial culture, the most prominent among these being the theme of exile, "of belonging and non belonging" and the "problematics of language and national identity" (1993:76). African literature offers itself as a model for writers from other Third world cultures in its struggle to root itself in an African tradition that gives it a sense of "belonging" and rootedness.

In the novels of Chinua Achebe that are being surveyed for the present study the writer's choice to situate himself in the African tradition and primarily the Ibo tradition is brought out as the most prominent feature of Achebe's writing. The study focuses on a cultural analysis of the Ibo culture and the Tenyimia culture by a process of comparison which brings out points of similarity as well as dissimilarity in the two cultures. In the process of comparative study, it also looks at Achebe's use of the oral tradition as a fictional technique whereby the folk elements come together to weave out the plot of the novels and reveal the underlying layers of cultural meaning without which a proper understanding of his work is not possible.

The three sections into which the book is divided for comparison looks at **(1) The socio-cultural background, (2) The factor of religion and (3) The psycho- linguistic factor.** The socio-cultural section looks at the set up of the village societies of the Ibos of Nigeria and the Tenyimia of Nagaland and compares the structures of both. The section on religion examines the religious practices and the beliefs of the Tenyimia focusing on similarity with the religious rituals and beliefs of the Ibos and bringing out the significance behind the rituals that are observed. The third section considers language as an effective means of revealing the consciousness of a people. It pays attention to the techniques of translating proverbs and sayings used by Achebe, especially the technique of nativising language to effect authentic cultural translation. The sections have been broken up in this manner to facilitate easy reading. However, the division does not imply that, there-

fore, these aspects are distinct from one another and can be placed in watertight compartments. Cultural practices have their roots in religion. The religions of tribal peoples, Harold Turner states, are "linked with real human needs, and have the hallmarks of true religion. They have a realistic view of life, a humble view of human nature and a sense of depending on the spirit world" (*The world's major religions* 1982:129). Further, what is identified or labelled as cultural is actually traceable to religious beliefs and their rituals. Thus the three sections will sometimes overlap into one another because of the factor of religion that runs, thread-like, through all these folk elements giving them significance and unity.

Achebe and the oral tradition

More than any other African writer, Chinua Achebe emerges as a model for writers interested in drawing from the oral tradition. *Things fall apart* and *Arrow of God*, among his novels are the two works that contain a profusion of folk elements because it is in these novels that he has rooted himself in the oral tradition and written from it. They incorporate the elements of oral literature, those elements that are popularly known as the "folk elements" into a written form of literature. In the two works, the necessity for the writer to affiliate himself with the oral tradition arose from the fact that Achebe was writing about the Ibo culture and its participants and further, delineating the gradual disintegration of that culture when it failed to withstand confrontation by another culture. Achebe's use of myth is commented upon by S.A. Khayyoom in the book, *Indian response to African writing* (eds A R. Rao and C R V Rao). He says "Every community has a rich mythological heritage and every creative writer uses the native myths to narrate contemporary events, to expose public follies, and to explain the problems and mysteries of life and death. Achebe, working from his mixed heritage of Ibo birth and Christian upbringing and interpreting Ibo myths and their relevance to contemporary living, attempts

to rehabilitate the African psyche damaged in its cultural encounter with the west" (1993:7). Beyond narrating the life and inevitable death of a culture is added the dimension of rehabilitation of the damaged African psyche to Achebe's reasons for using myth. Another use of myth in Achebe is the portrayal of "the African myth of the man of two worlds suffering from intolerable internal stresses, liable to desert his career and virtues at a crisis" (Khayyoom 1993:72). While Achebe celebrates the oral tradition, his approach is realistic enough to encompass a vision of its disintegration which is an internal disintegration facilitated by the external infringement of another culture.

The "centre" no longer can hold because it did not have the power to hold together in the first place is one interpretation of the falling apart of Ibo culture, beautiful but not without flaws and loopholes through which another culture can make inroads. The other view points to weakness on the part of the participants to rally round and uphold their culture in the face of offences committed against it. In embracing the other culture - Christian education, western ways of administration and western morality - the Ibo tragically discover the values that their old culture upheld die first- values of moral integrity and character. These conflicts are brought out, even commented upon by the use of traditional myths and folk elements. The situation of the Ibo is well illustrated in *Arrow of God* by Ofoke, an outspoken elder who says "We are like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw" (1964 : 188). Befriending the white man and his culture and, at the same time, attempting to confront his cultural encroachment has broken the jaw of Ibo culture.

Khayyoom also finds Achebe employing symbol so that his characters are "symbolic of the age, society and country" (1993 :78) with flatly drawn white characters standing symbolically for forces of an alien culture. At the same time, he feels that Achebe's use of myth such as "native folk tales and legends woven into the novel do not have much

relevance to the plot but create the atmosphere to strengthen the traditional life " (75). However, such an opinion is probably expressed due to a poor reading of the novels. The folk elements in the story are not superfluous as Khayyoom suggests nor are they there only to create an atmosphere but they have an integral role in the unravelling of the plots. The story of the mother kite and her daughter is applied as a warning which cautions: never kill a man who says nothing. The destruction of Abame takes place because they failed to heed this warning presented by the folktale. The role of tales in the oral tradition is to educate by way of providing moral lessons in stories that are easily received on young minds. Achebe's proverbs pass an ironical commentary on the events unfolding in the novels. So the oral tradition, as used by Achebe, is a delineation of Ibo culture to the non-native reader as well as a proud assertion of the value system of Ibo life. At the same time he employs it to prophesy the falling apart of the Ibo society. So Achebe's use of the folk elements in his works acquaints us with the cultural practice and beliefs of the Ibo in a process of initiation.

The second effect that Achebe aims at and also succeeds in is to reveal the psychology of the native Ibo mind - its responses as shaped by its cultural beliefs and more relevantly its response to the white man's culture so sadly misconstrued in a series of "cultural shocks" that the ultimate result of the encounter can only be the destruction of the Ibo culture instead of a harmonious co-existence of the two.

Achebe's motive in using the elements of oral tradition is one of illustrating what Ibo culture is. So he allows his characters to use the native idiom of speech which makes generous use of the proverbs. The idea of conformity as essential to the continued life of the society is expressed in the following proverb, "When two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest" (*Arrow of God* 1964 :131). It is an ironical comment on the Ibo situation as well where rivalries between priests have disturbed the harmony of clan life and allowed the breaking up of the

clan from inside. Conforming to socially prescribed norms of life and behaviour and attitude contributes to harmonious existence. Non conformity causes dissension, rivalries promote non-conformism and leave the clan vulnerable to takeover by strangers. The idea of conformity and harmony lie behind most of the customary laws which administer justice and exact punishment for offences. Punishment needs to be exacted for offences because "if one finger brought oil it soiled the others" (*Things fall apart* 1958 :114). At the same time the idea of toleration is also introduced as a factor essential to promoting harmonious survival. In *Arrow of God* Ezeulu wants his to be a great compound where there will be "people of all minds - some good, some bad, some fearless and some cowardly, those who bring in wealth and those who scatter it , those who give good advice and those who only speak the words of palm wine. That is why we say that whatever tune you play in the compound of a great man there is always someone to dance to it" (1964 : 100). Integral to the plot of *Things fall apart* and *Arrow of God* is the idea of conformity. Achebe seems to be espousing tolerance rather than conformity as the more vital factor for survival. These are ideas contrary to one another and, in a manner of speaking the Ibo gods cannot be expected to tolerate Okonkwo's carrying out of his idea of manliness and strength which amounts to an abomination, nor can it tolerate Ezeulu's manipulation of the eating of the sacred yams to exact his revenge and destroy the harvest. The idea of tolerance that Ezeulu mouths for Achebe is rather one that seems to approach accommodation of individualistic opinions which will nevertheless cause no harm to societal life and is preferable to an intolerant conformity.

The fact that Ibo culture falls apart in the encounter with an alien culture attests to internal weakness of this sort in its culture and not so much the use of force and militancy on the part of the other. The missionary activities portrayed in the novels are not aggressive. They have the backing of the white administration when its churches and establishment are demolished by a clan outraged by the zealous Enoch's abomi-

nation of unmasking an ancestral spirit (at the masquerade). Otherwise the white administration is not seen using militancy to cause the Ibos to give up their religion in *Arrow of God*. It is more Ezeulu's obdurate individualism that destroys Umuaro for "No man however great can win judgement against a clan" (131). In *Things fall apart* Okonkwo, who rigidly defends his culture is completely isolated in the end and driven to suicide. His isolation comes because Umuofia breaks into "tumult instead of action" (184) when he kills the court messenger and the aftermath of this is the falling apart of things. In both novels the protagonists stand alone at the end unable to stand against the judgement of a whole clan. The proverb helps Achebe to state that non conformity can destroy a man. One is tempted to ironically read between the lines (of the proverb) and conclude that non conforming also destroys the clan that refuses to stand united against another culture.

Achebe's use of the oral tradition also reveals the native patterns of life and their world-view essentially : by this revelation of a world-view and value system that is almost in complete contrast to the world view and value system of the invading culture, the novelist shows the impossibility of the two cultures in the novels co-existing peacefully especially when its propagators are, on one side, insensitive people like Wright and the Reverend James Smith and on the other side, terribly individualistic men like Ezeulu and Okonkwo. The African world view can be further comprehended by the linguistic method employed by the author, of nativising the language he writes in ,English. Nativising language is a process that indigenises the medium of narration. For example, African and Indian writers for whom English is a second language, often resort to introducing indigenous or native terms to convey cultural ideas that do not have an equivalent in western culture. This explains the abundance of proverbs and sayings and use of metaphors in a distinctly Ibo context in Achebe's novels. We also find instances of it in translations of novels from Indian languages as well as in the more widely read novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. In Achebe's novels the

plot is worked out by proverbial sayings that explain the processes of native life, and the do's and don'ts that govern it, the religious rituals and their observances, the violations of culture and consequent punishment of those violations and more significantly the contributing roles of all these events to the plot. In this sense the oral tradition is integral to Achebe's novels because he uses it as an aid in unravelling the plot. Pride or overweening arrogance in a man is checked by sayings like this : "He who would swallow udala seeds must consider the size of his anus" (*Arrow of God* : 226).

Achebe uses proverbial sayings to reveal the thinking processes of his characters. For instance Ezeulu sends his son Oduche to the mission school for the reason that "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place" (*Arrow of God* : 46). But Oduche ceases to be Ezeulu's 'eyes and ears' at the Mission School when he becomes converted to Christianity and commits the abomination of locking the sacred python in his box with the intention of killing it. The conversion of Oduche and his consequent shifting of loyalties, the interference of White administration in the Umuaro-Okperi war are all incidents which lead Ezeulu's opponents to comment : " a man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should expect the visit of lizards" (178). The native mind is being revealed by this approach and the reader is enabled to understand the Ibo world-view further : it is a view that, man to a large extent controls his own destiny and the clan can come apart due to the misuse of those powers. Achebe integrates these elements of myth into his narrative to achieve the desired effect of looking at the world from Africa as is recommended by Nadine Gordimer.

Stith Thompson's idea of myth is that which ' concerns the world as it was in some past age before the present conditions were established. It treats creation and origin legends. Where it handles adventures of the gods, it may well be identified with the fairy tale' (quoted in

Kirk (1970:35-36). Thompson finds the division between mythology and folklore quite artificial. It is this idea of myth which looks at the use of myth in Achebe's novels where almost any setting is a setting for relating one of the many folktales or hinting at tales that try to explain natural phenomena. Achebe has made references to the Ibo-creation myths, its many gods and goddesses and the concept of the *chi* or personal spirit and Chukwu, the high god or creator. The presence of these myths explain the Ibo view of how the world came to be and what directions are to be followed to ensure the continued existence of the Ibo world. From that angle the myths that are related, though appearing to bear little reference to the plot, are important because Achebe, appropriating the native idiom of speech, is faithfully reproducing the cultural context in the inclusions of tales that are the Ibo's teaching aids used between adult and child and even between adult and adult. A close friend, desiring to warn a man against behaviour that could have disastrous consequences may begin, "don't you remember the story that is told of...", and proceed to relate a relevant folktale which his hearer, if he is not irredeemably obtuse will recognise as a check on his present behaviour or course of action. Comment on clan action is also being given by the narration of tales which are parallels to the clan but which teach and caution because as stories they already have a conclusion or end.

In Achebe's use of the oral tradition another effort can be seen which is the effort of African writers on the whole who "propose an African centred consciousness, and a study of literature that starts with Africa" as Susan Bassnett assesses in the book *Comparative literature* (1993:75). The overwhelming presence of myth in Achebe's works can also be perceived as an effort to reveal the African consciousness from within and show how different it is from the stereotyped 'heart of darkness' image that many western readers have of it. But the use of the word overwhelming does not hint at a weakness in the narrative technique. Rather it is to be understood as a statement on the essential

position myth and the oral tradition occupy in African literature where its proper understanding would be irreparably disabled by the removal of these elements. In the novel, *A man of the people*, Achebe depicts the post colonial situation in a modern African state fast moving away from its traditional past. Cynicism is more apparent in his delineation of the new Nigerian society which has abandoned the old order and all the traditional practices that had held it together. Understandably the folk elements of the oral tradition are not drawn upon as abundantly as in the earlier two novels.

Section one

The socio cultural background

Eugene A Nida in the book *Customs and Culture* says that the anthropologist's definition of culture is "all learned behaviour which is socially acquired, that is, the material and non material traits which are passed on from one generation to another" (1954:28). For most tribal societies, culture is synonymous with religion. Culture, that elusive term, is an aspect of life with many definitions to it but for our purpose one can express it as the manifestations of the religious beliefs and practices of a people. At its simplest, this is what culture is and cultures differ as the religious beliefs of people differ from place to place. So culture is the lifestyle of a people as determined by those beliefs in practice. All cultural practices are highly religious in nature. Concern for the survival of the tribe forms the primary basis of these cultures. It is culture that prescribes the code of conduct for the tribe to live by and it is a code guided by moral principles that touch every sphere of life - the social, the economic, the political - because the influence of religion is all permeating. Harmonious living being the aim of many or all cultures, social laws operate to remove obstacles to the harmonious life of the society.