

## Ethnographic and Communication Components of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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### **Abstract**

*"Things Fall Apart" is a multifaceted work, which traverses many subject areas, as it narrates the sudden encounter between a hitherto closed Igbo society and the colonists, and the inevitable culture shock it engendered. It portrays the actual and ideal African society as one with undiluted or unadulterated cultural values prior to western impact. Indeed, the narrative began with pre-colonial times and navigated through the point when the missionaries and colonial masters came and 'polluted' the African society, destroying the very things that make us who we are and mark us out at the international scene. The work has been aptly described as an ethnographic masterpiece. Another area covered by Achebe, and which forms a significant part of this paper is traditional communication, which has long been part of the life of the African people. This was lucidly captured, as far back as the 1950s, in various parts of the novel. This work looks at the*

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*ethnographic contents of 'Things Fall Apart', with a view to understanding those inherent values that make us Africans. It further examines the communication components of the book; the essence of which is to showcase the traditional modes of communication and how they served the needs of an African society prior to colonization. The work uses an exploratory research method to study the subject matter so as to highlight its very relevance in today's African society.*

**Keywords:** Ethnography, culture, African cultural values, indigenous communication, Igbo community, traditional communication

### **Introduction**

The novel is centered on an ethnic group in southeast Nigeria known as the Igbo. Igbo society is well known for its rich culture and united lifestyle, which was bastardized as a result of the coming of the white man with his foreign religion and culture towards the end of the nineteenth century. This innovative creative work revolves around a fictional town called 'Umuofia' which is well known and feared far and near for its great war exploits and strong warriors. The tragic hero is known as Okonkwo, who had many exploits as a young man, including defeating Amalinze the cat (who was previously undefeated) in a wrestling bout. Unlike Unoka his father, who was a weakling, Okonkwo was a great farmer with great wealth and achievement. He was a fearless man who represented a typical African character, a dominating figure both in his family and the community. However, he met his Waterloo with the coming of the white man, particularly after noticing the weakness exhibited by his

clansmen who no longer behaved like the men of war he used to know; hence, he killed himself rather than live with cowards who were afraid to face the intruders.

The novel portrayed virtually everything that had been developed by this unique people for survival in a manner reminiscent of a professional ethnographic narrative, albeit descriptive study of cultures. It portrayed the true Igbo community as one that had excelled in different areas of life, including agriculture, political system, beliefs, family and kinship systems and architecture. Among traditional Igbo people, agriculture was the chief occupation. A man was adjudged to be wealthy and successful by the number of yam barns he had as well as the number of wives and children he catered for. In essence, there was no room for the lazy in the community (as was the case with Unoka, Okonkwo's father). The political system was structured in such a way that there was law and order largely reigned in that society. The belief system was strong such that taboos were held sacrosanct, to be adhered to in all circumstances. They believed in appeasing the various gods that guided the community and their activities. Same was the case with their marriage system, kinship, family life, architectural patterns etc. They were all true reflections of who the people were.

Chinua Achebe also showcased the traditional modes of communication used by the fictitious Umuofia community. Communication, which is noted or referred to as exchange of information, ideas or meaning, is as old as the humanity. Historians are of the view that life began in Africa and this explains why Africa is regarded as the "cradle of civilisation, intellectualism and humanity" (Osho 2014). Consequently,

the earliest forms of communication have been traced to Africa, specifically Egypt. Although this proposition appears reasonable, a more plausible argument is that many African communities may not have waited for Egypt to develop their means of interaction or communication. In other words, they may have done that independent of Egypt. Prior to westernization, most African communities developed communication systems that were unique to their individual communities, disseminated information among themselves as they deemed fit, educated their young and entertained themselves.

African communication is embedded in the tradition and culture of the people. It is therefore unique, original and creative in character. This explains why it is highly effective and enduring in the dissemination of inter-personal and group information (Osho 2014). These characteristic strengths ensured its sustenance in the contemporary world in spite of the growing influence of modern mass communication channels like books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the social media. Indeed, the indigenous media has continued to be in use because of its uniqueness and ability to permeate the rural communities in contrast to the modern mass media of communication which appear to appeal more to the elite and urban communities (Osho 2014). This point has been aptly captured by Chinwe Okpoko (2009: 327) when she averred that:

in a country like Nigeria, where a majority of the population is rural dwellers, conventional mass media certainly have their limitations. These include inadequate power supply, high levels of illiteracy, low income, poor

accessibility, etc. These impediments restrict mass communicated messages to a particular class of the society.... Therefore, any means of communicating to them ... (must) utilize their indigenous knowledge and communication systems.

It is this form of communication along with the way of life of a people that had enjoyed their serene environment before colonialism bastardized it that Achebe tried to capture in his classic work. It is this same work that we are examining the ethnographic and communication contents.

### **Review of Related Concepts**

The following terms and concepts have been used throughout this work and therefore need to be clarified. They include ethnography, culture, traditional communication, oramedia and endogenous communication.

Ethnography is the branch of anthropology that scientifically describes specific human cultures and societies. It deals with the present in relation to the past. The word ethnography is derived from a Greek word "ethnos" meaning a people, nation and "graphy" meaning field of study (Microsoft Encarta 2009). Ethnographic studies focus on large cultural groups of people who interact over time. It can be seen as the scientific description of different races and cultures or the systematic study of people and cultures. It is designed to observe societies from a point of view of the subject of the study. Ethnography is a means of representing graphically and in writing the culture of a group (Microsoft Encarta 2009). Indeed, ethnographic study generally involves a holistic description of the life ways of a chosen community

or cultural group, including their beliefs and worldview, political and social structures, marriage and kinship patterns, architecture and technology, etc.

Culture on its part, is seen as a way of life acquired within the society and transmitted from generation to generation. It is the common denominator that makes the actions of a member of a society understandable to other members. Simply put, it is “the arts, customs, beliefs and all the other products of human thought made by a people at a particular time” (Emovon 1990:10). Culture could be material or non-material. Examples of the former include art and craft, and monuments. The latter include poems, riddles, dances, folklore, and festivals. Malinowski (1944:36) sees it as “the integrated whole consisting of implements and consumer goods of constitutional charters for the various social groupings of human ideas, and crafts, beliefs and customs.”

With respect to communication, three key terms, namely traditional, oramedia and indigenous communication have been commonly used in this work, and sometimes interchangeably. Traditional communication is a term that has become synonymous with African means of communication such as African traditional media, communal media, folk media, indigenous media and oramedia. There are varying definitions of traditional communication, just as there are several schools of thought and scholars with idiosyncratic views. However, most of them basically point in the same direction, and that is, a form of communication that is not only culture-oriented, but also rooted in rural areas. Ugboajah (1985) defines oramedia as grounded on indigenous culture,

produced and consumed by members of a group. Also Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998 in Odunlami 2006), defines it as:

Any form of endogenous communication system, which by virtue of its origin, form, and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilization of the values, symbolism, institution and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualities and attributes.

For Akpabio (2003) traditional communication refers to “process and systems which utilize symbols, values and institutions which directly appeal and readily connect with the people and thus enhance the variety and effectiveness of messages that circulate in the community”. Olulade (1998 in Emerenu 2015) stated that traditional communication as used in Africa is an admixture of social conventions and practice that have become sharpened and blended into veritable communication modes and systems which have almost become standard practices for society. It is a complex system of communication, which pervades all aspects of rural African life. Ogwezzy (2016) listed some aspects of the uniqueness of African communication systems as follows:

- It is understood by members of a community;
- It readily appeals and connects with the people’s language, culture, beliefs, myths, legends, and customs, enhancing effectiveness of communication (since it relates to values, norms, ethos and culture of Africans);
- It uses symbols, values and indigenous institutions, which enhance message effectiveness;

- It projects African historical past (traditions);
- It is derived from the culture, beliefs, and the way of life of Africans;
- It is rooted among the local people and respected by the people, especially the ruralites;
- It is embedded in the culture of the people, which is the driving force;
- It relies on indigenous technology, employs values and symbols that the people identify with.

Generally, therefore, traditional communication can be viewed as indigenous communication, well known to the people and commonly used to disseminate information in rural communities. African traditional channels of communication represent the most potent mechanism for communication among the various peoples of Nigeria and Africa at large.

### **Setting**

The setting is a fictitious Igbo community called Umuofia. The Igbo who are found in southeast Nigeria, are known for their unique customs, culture and tradition which they live to protect. This Umuofia community at the point in question was being infiltrated by westernization particularly missionaries and colonists. This infiltration brought about sudden psychological stress, or what Anthropologists call culture shock, on the Igbo community. Consequently, there was a revolutionary change in the way of life brought about by the visitors which Okonkwo and other indigenes saw as



abominable and to be resisted even to the extent of giving up one's life.

*Things Fall Apart* is a classic novel which portrayed the lifestyle of the Igbo during the pre-colonial era, how the people reacted and adapted to the coming of the colonial masters and the changes they brought with them. The novel cantered on the life of Okonkwo, a great man in Igbo traditional society who could not tolerate the profound changes brought about by British colonial rule which eventually led to his downfall. Okonkwo was an embodiment of Igbo culture, courage, masculinity who, by dint of hard work, braved the odds of his poor background and climbed the ladder of success. In the text the white man is portrayed as a destroyer, an invader who unleashes disintegration on the smoothness of the otherwise peaceful culture (Odunlami, 2006).

*Things Fall Apart* appears to have documented for posterity the cultural values, including the communication components of that community that held sway prior to westernization. Some of these communication components along with the ethnographic narratives and their individual significance within that fictive community, nay Igbo communities, are being identified and discussed here.

### **Ethnographic Contents of *Things Fall Apart***

Chinua Achebe has authored many books, but *Things Fall Apart* was his first novel. This novel portrays the typical atmosphere and way of life of an African society, drawing particularly from the Igbo of southeast Nigeria. Significantly, it shows how the African, particularly the Igbo lived

peacefully before the intrusion of the white men. This does not mean that the society was devoid of issues. Nevertheless, it was peaceful because the structures of an organized society were in place and adhered to. In other words, we had our civilization, our system of record keeping, religion, belief system, marriage system, indigenous technology, agriculture, means of communication etc., even before the coming of the colonists. As depicted in the novel, the coming of the white men brought more damage than good. Consequently, Okonkwo resisted them as well as the changes they brought with them, even to the extent of ending his own life. This work centres on the past with a view to understanding it. Some of the cultural practices reflected in the novel, which are still common within the present day Igbo society, are discussed hereunder.

### **Giving of Names**

The act of giving names to children in Igboland oftentimes reflects the circumstances surrounding their birth. Ekwefi had suffered a great deal in her life before she had her last child. She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three. As she buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to despair and then to grim resignation (61). Consequently, the names she gave her children pointed to her fear. She gave them such names as *Onwumbiko* (Death, I implore you), *Ozoemena* (May it not happen again), *Onwuma* (Death may please himself), in her attempts to supplicate to God and the gods to make them stay, but they all died (*Things Fall Apart* 2008). Even while in exile, Okonkwo who had two children gave them names that

reflected his circumstance, namely Nneka (mother is supreme) in remembrance of the benevolence of his maternal kinsmen; and Nwofia (a child of the bush) which depicted the fact that the child was born away from home. To the present, parents give their children names because of the events surrounding their birth; some are given *Somuadina* (Let me not live alone), because they were the only children born to their parents at that moment. *Chichetaram* (God has remembered me) if there was a long delay in conception and *Nwokeabia* (male has come) when a male child is born to a family that had always had female children, etc.

### Religion and Belief Systems

With respect to religion, Okonkwo, representing the African culture, already had a system of worship: he had his ancestors whom he worshiped; and even made it a point of duty to sacrifice items like yams and cocks to the gods. Umuofia people were so expressive and heedful of their gods that when the Oracle demanded a human being as a sacrificial item, they did not hesitate to sacrifice Ikemefuna. Pockets of adherents to African Traditional Religion are still found in the society.

The people of Umuofia held their ancestors in high regard. They believed that they were always with them, though physically dead; they protected them. Every morning they offered kola to their forefathers and poured libations on the altars which they individually erected for them. Each man had his own personal shrine in front or in a corner of his compound. They also believed that each person had his/her own personal *chi* (god) that controlled the affairs of the individual. In the novel Okonkwo was seen according to this

high regard to his personal 'chi' daily, by consulting and pouring libation to it, on behalf of himself and his family, thus representing the happenstance in a typical Igbo society where adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR) still thrive. The people also had Oracles such as Idemili, Ani, Ogwugwu, Amadiora, and so on which they revered (117). They believed that everything had a supernatural being in the form of a god attached to it, and when anyone desecrates the land he must appease the god controlling that sphere of life or else calamity would befall the individual. They also had totem animals such as pythons and crocodiles, which were seen as the emanation of their water god. This belief is still prevalent to this day, as some towns see animals like snail, fish, crocodile, tortoise and monkeys as sacred and not to be harmed.

Umuofia people adhered strictly to their custom and tradition and these were intricately tied to their beliefs that it is difficult to differentiate one from the other. A number of glaring examples can be seen in the novel. For instance, when Okonkwo mistakenly shot Ezeudu's sixteen year old son who was dancing the traditional farewell to their father with his siblings, he had to face the normal sanction. Despite Okonkwo's bravery and military achievements, he was still exiled for seven years according to their custom.

Other customary practices that guided Umuofia were recorded by Achebe as outlined below:

1. It was the custom to kill a goat for any woman who gave her husband three sons in succession.

2. It was a crime against the earth goddess for one, either knowingly or unknowingly, to kill his fellow clansman.
3. A husband was forbidden from sleeping with his pregnant wife.
4. Deceased married women were not buried in the land of their husbands, but were taken to their fathers' land.
5. Men inherited things like title, barn and even the younger wife of their father.
6. When anyone let loose his cow and people's crops were destroyed, the owner paid a fine.
7. Men with Ozo title were not allowed to climb the palm tree.
8. If a woman died when the deceased husband was yet to be buried, (as in the cases of Ndulue and Ozoemena, page 54) the funeral of the wife was first conducted before that of the husband.
9. If a sacred python was killed inadvertently, it must be buried like a respected man in the society.
10. A man that committed suicide was not brought down from the noose by the people of his kindred and clan; he was not committed to the mother earth, but was thrown into the evil forest.

Other beliefs shared by the people include:

1. It was abominable for a man that was afflicted with swellings in the stomach and the limbs to be allowed to die in his home. He was carried to the evil forest and left there to die so as not to incur the wrath of the earth goddess. (14)

2. The birth of twin children was also seen as an abomination and therefore the twins were cast into the evil forest to die.
3. People dedicated to the gods were called "Outcasts." They lived apart and were not allowed in the midst of the clansmen. They were also forbidden to shave their hair in order not to incur the wrath of the gods.
4. They believed that Ogbanje (or as some have called them "repeater children") were wicked children whose mission was to come to the world and die so as to cause pains to their mothers.
5. When people heard their names called out from without the compound, they did not answer 'yes' for fear it might be the evil spirit, rather they replied "is that me"?
6. They believed that children must not whistle at night for fear of the evil spirit. Furthermore, snake was not called by its name in the night (it was called a sting) because it was believed that it would thereby appear.

### **Governance and Social Stratification**

In the area of governance, gerontocracy held sway in Umuofia. The clan had a governing body or council of elders (Ndi ichie) headed by the eldest man in the society that presided over their affairs. The elders gathered together to debate communal issues and reached a consensus which was finally stamped by the eldest man. They had the three arms of government (parallel to the executive, legislature and judiciary of the present). The youths constituted the executive arm as they implemented the laws of the land. For instance,

when Okonkwo committed an abomination by killing his fellow clansman, the youth were sent to destroy his compound. The youths also went to war when the need arose. Ndi ichie, headed by the eldest man, were the legislative arm of government and they had the power to make law. Indeed, rules were made by the elders, who, in turn, were guided by the existing traditions, customs and values. Finally, the *Egwugwu* spirit along with the 'Ani' (the earth goddess and source of all fertility) constituted the judicial organ. Ani was also the ultimate judge with respect to morality and conduct. The case between Uzowulu and his brother's-in-law was settled by the *egwugwu* spirit. "Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman." (*Things Fall Apart* 1986).

The Umuofia clan also had a way they socially classified themselves. They had the upper, middle and lower classes. The criteria for determining one's social standing included the number of wives one had, the ability to provide for them all and their children, the quantity of yams in one's barns and the ability to attain the highest title in the community. Those who achieved a great height in society were seen as great men and therefore belonged to the upper echelon. Nwakibie was a good example of such persons, who Okonkwo respected. The middle class consisted of people like Okonkwo and Obierika who had enough yams, more than one wife and children, but were still climbing the ladder of greatness because they did not have the highest title of the land. Finally, the lower class is made up of people that did not belong to the above two categories. They had no titles; they might have more than one wife and many children, but did not have enough food to feed

them. This is the kind of man Unoka, the father of the tragic hero, was.

### **Mode of dressing**

From the novel we could see that not much was specified concerning their mode of dressing, but an elderly man especially a titled one could not go to a meeting or a ceremony without his goatskin bag on his shoulder and a rolled goatskin mat under his other shoulder. This was depicted when the men, in their full regalia, arrived and waited for the suitor of Obierika's daughter (*Things Fall Apart* 92). Also the females especially the young ones wore *jigida* on their waist and decorated their bodies with cam wood, *uli* etc. It must be noted that every symbol used in beautifying the body or a mud house had a level of significance and not merely for aesthetics.

### **Marriage and Entertainment of Visitors**

The people of Umuofia had a definite system of giving out their daughters in marriage unlike their neighbours. They determined the bride price with a set of sticks tied together, which was used in bargaining until a common ground was reached by the two families. Thereafter, they exchanged pleasantries, drank wine to their satisfaction and had a sumptuous feast. The in-laws paid the bride price either fully or in part before they departed for their home. They returned again to the girl's parent's home to complete the payment and then took their bride to stay with them for a period of twenty eight days. This practice was highlighted during the celebration of the *uri* (traditional marriage) of Obierika's



daughter. Having paid the greater part of the bride price the suitor along with his relations brought palm wine to the extended group of Obierika's kinsmen called *umunna*. Few days earlier, Obierika's *ndi ogo* (suitor and his people) had come to pay his daughter's bride price; thereby confirming their interest in his daughter's hand in marriage. Other ceremonies took place thereafter. The marriage system in contemporary Igboland does not deviate from this line; nevertheless, there are modifications in the process, items and other requirements expected from the in-laws.

Umuofia people had a unique way of welcoming and entertaining their visitors. Whenever they had a visitor, they first offered kola nut, prayed over the kola nut and then ate, after which the visitor was welcome to present the matter of the visit. They also had a tradition of not hurting their visitors except when the oracle demanded that they did so. The culture of hospitality is still common amongst contemporary Igbo, as they hold their guests in high esteem and ensured their comfort. They are always free with their visitors.

### **Architecture, Indigenous Technology and Record Keeping**

Prior to the arrival of the white men, Umuofia people had unique settlement patterns and architectural designs that served not just aesthetic values, but also had security implications. They also had metal technology and record keeping mechanisms that served their daily needs. The art of constructing and designing huts in Umuofia, as portrayed by Achebe, was very unique. The description of Okonkwo's building arrangement epitomizes this fact.

He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut or *obi* stood immediately behind the only gate to the entrance. 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, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for the goats, and each wife built a small attachment to her hut for her poultry. Near the barn was a small house, the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and those of his ancestral spirits (Achebe 1986: 10).

This arrangement portrayed his foresight and readiness to protect his household since no one could get to his household without passing through the *obi* where he stayed. The fact that the huts for the women formed a half moon round his, also signified that he was the head of the family.

Furthermore, the Umuofia clan had indigenous iron technology which served her needs. They hunted with guns, and had cutlasses and hoes they used for farming. They also used some of these as weapons of war. Lantern was said to be used in the night, which they refuelled as the need arose. Umuofia also had a planned system of record keeping and accounting prior to western intervention. Unoka's system of record keeping presents a classic example. He had a part of his wall where he drew strokes of lines to indicate the amount of money he owed. Longer lines indicated huge debt and shorter strokes smaller debts. This system appears to be current as some uneducated persons employ it in keeping track of their finances and other commitments.

### **Wrestling, New Yam and Masquerade Festivals**

Wrestling created an avenue for people from neighbouring villages to come and be entertained. Men and women moved from their homes to the *ilo* as they called the village square to watch the wrestlers perform. The novel described Okonkwo's wrestling skills; how he defeated Amalinze, the cat, whose back was said to have not touched the ground for once. The victory of Okonkwo over Amalinze paved way for his heroic exploits in the novel. To the present, wrestling is seen as a form of entertainment; people still pay to watch wrestling bouts during special events and they derive immense joy from it.

In Umuofia also, new yam festival was a period for celebrating and honouring the god of yam, as the king of crops. Men used this period to show their farming prowess. In the novel, the villagers always looked forward to this day not only because of the merriment, but significantly because neighbouring communities like Mbaino came to Umuofia for the festival.

The story was always told of a wealthy man who set before his guests a mound of yam (fufu) so high that those who sat on one side could not see what was happening on the other. It was not until evening when the mound had reduced that one of them saw for the first time his in-law who had arrived during the course of the meal and had fallen onto the opposite side. It was then they exchanged pleasantries and shook hands over what was left of the food (Achebe 1986: 26).

The above illustration was employed by the author to buttress the fact that the event marked a period of plenty and that the

people of Umuofia took pride in celebrating new yam festival in thanksgiving to God and as a sign of their farming prowess. This celebration not only attracted the villagers, but also other neighbouring villages.

Masquerade festival involved entertainment by masquerades. It was believed that the ancestors of the clan who had been committed to mother earth at their death emerged again as masquerades through ant holes (148). Occasionally, during important festivals these masquerades appeared to add colour and variation to the occasion. They came from all the quarters of the clan and even the neighbouring villages. The dreadful Otakagu came from Imo, while Ekwensu, dangling a white cock, arrived from Uli (149).

### **Proverbs and Witty Sayings**

Proverbs constitute a significant force in African languages. They help to inculcate customs and ethical standards in the young and ... prescribe the dos and don'ts of society and motivate people to strive for greater heights. The more proverbs a man has at his command, the better public speaker he is considered to be (Makyotto 2014). Among the Igbo, proverbs are regarded very highly and have been described by Achebe as "the palm oil with which words are eaten." Umuofia people were noted to have used proverbs extensively in their daily conversation.

Examples of some of such proverbs found in the text are:

1. 'A man who pays respect to the great paves way for his own greatness'.
2. 'A toad does not run in the day time for nothing.'

3. 'He who brings kola brings life.'
4. 'A child's finger is not hurt by a piece of hot yam his mother put into his hands.'
5. 'The lizard that jumps from the high Iroko tree to the ground said he will praise himself if no one else did.'
6. 'Those whose palm kernels are cracked by benevolent spirits should not forget to be humble'.
7. 'If a man says yes, his chi also affirms'.
8. 'A man cannot rise above his personal chi'.

In the days of our forefathers, it was an aberration in some places to explain proverbs, particularly to adults. It was believed that they should know. The situation is currently different as many do not even know proverbs, let alone their meanings.

### ***Things Fall Apart and communication***

Achebe made use of various traditional modes of communication to elucidate and create mental picture and dramatic effects in the novel. These traditional modes of communication are broadly grouped into verbal and non-verbal as well as a combination of the verbal and non-verbal modes of communication.

### **Verbal communication**

Verbal communication involves the use of language, spoken or sung to transmit information. It consists of songs, proverbs, riddles, folktales, narratives, simple commands, etc. Oral forms of communication played a significant role in Africa's indigenous communication, but its main function was to relay a message to one or more recipients. It could be used to

inform, inquire, argue and discuss topics of all kinds (Makyotto 2014, Okpoko 2009, Ukonu and Wogu 2008).

### **Songs and Proverbs**

Songs are associated with meaning in all African societies. Songs come in different forms and are associated with such occasions as birth, mourning, praise, war, work and festivity, etc. Birth song is used to announce the arrival of a new baby; work songs to convey messages of prowess, strength and the dignity of labour and war songs to encourage valour. Individual and group exploits and achievements are acknowledged using praise songs, while mourning and festive songs are used respectively during periods of grief and merriment. Songs played significant roles in the life of the people of Umuofia as exhibited in the novel.

Examples abound in the novel where praises were sang for Okafo for beating Ikezue in a wrestling match (30); Okudo used war song to encourage and spur men to war (141); festive song was used to celebrate Akueke's (Obierika's daughter's) marriage; death song was used to communicate the death of a woman in *Mbanta* community (108); song of nostalgia was sung by Ikemefuna when he remembered his mother (42). Song communication was also used to console Okonkwo in his moment of grief (95).

Africa's indigenous communication systems are rich in proverbs and aphorisms. Thus, as a form of verbal communication proverbs are an important mechanism for maintaining the stability and continuity of culture. They were used to advise, praise, commend, rebuke, acknowledge, predict, caution, lament, teach moral lessons, etc. As noted

earlier, Achebe saw proverbs as an essential component of conversation among Umuofia people and therefore literally translated them extensively. This singular factor accounts for the beauty of the text, a fact which explains the author's many awards. Although Achebe did not invent any of the proverbs, his mastery and presentation of such proverbs capture the main contents and contexts of typical Igbo conversations and help to spice up the narration.

### **Folktales, Narratives and Simple commands**

These forms of verbal communication were used extensively in *Things Fall Apart*. Folktales and narratives were usually told by an adult family member to children, mainly in the evening time to sharpen their understanding and perception of their environment as well as convey messages and information. The characters portrayed to have used these forms of communication in the text were Okonkwo's wives, who used them to teach morals and inculcate in their children values of the society, and Okonkwo who tried to instil in his sons, bravery and courage because he wanted them to be men of honour like himself (see pages 25, 53, 68, 69).

Simple commands were also used by those in authority, when required to convey messages, instil discipline and ensure obedience. Instances include when Ezeani the priest of the earth goddess, commanded Okonkwo to bring to the shrine of Ani, a she-goat, hen, cloth and cowries to appease the goddess for breaking the week of peace by beating his wife, Ojiugo (22); when Ezeudu visited Okonkwo and told him not to have a hand in Ikemefuna's death (40); and when

Uchendu ordered Okonkwo to let go of Nwoye, when he was beating him savagely (109).

### **Non-verbal communication**

Non-verbal communication refers to the mode of communication that does not involve the use of words; it is therefore non-linguistic in nature, and it is done with the human body. This includes gesture, body language or posture, facial expression and eye contact, adornment, and clothing. Non-verbal communication has been delineated into demonstrative, extra-mundane, iconographic, instrumental and institutional communication (Akpabio 2003, Makyotto 2014, Rothwell 2000 and Wilson 1998).

### **Demonstrative communication**

This class of communication involves the use of music, dance, symbolic displays, signs and signals to express messages to the people. Music played significant role in the life of the people of Umuofia. For instance, dance was used to choose a wrestling opponent when “a young man from one team danced across the centre to the other side and pointed at whomever he wanted to fight” (Achebe 1986: 35). It is worthy of note that many actions in the novel communicated one kind of message or another. This is further exemplified by the actions of other wives of Nwakibie, a wealthy man in Okonkwo’s village, who had to wait for Anasi, the first wife, to drink first before taking their turns to drink palm wine from their husband’s gourd (14). In like manner, Okonkwo handed over Ikemefuna to his first wife, depicting the level of respect and trust accorded the first wives in African society.



Furthermore, the fact that Okonkwo visited Nwakibie with a cock and a pot of palm-wine to ask for a favour, signified his unreserved respect for Nwakibie. The act of touching the ground before the Egwugwu meant that the person submitted and recognized the position of Egwugwu as an ancestral spirit (65). *Oji odu achu ijiji...* (The one that uses its tail to drive flies away) when shouted, signalled to the women in the community that a cow had been let loose, and every woman rushed out in the direction of the cry to chase the animal back to its owner and collect the stipulated fine from him.

Sounds of various kinds, from instruments, cannon shots and gestures served as communication signals in the text. On page 8, Ogbuefi Ezeugo used gestures to communicate with the people of Umuofia about the murder of Ogbuefi Udo's wife by Mbaino village. In an expression of anger, he gnashed and clenched his teeth as he pointed his fingers in the direction of Mbaino. Ikemefuna used facial expression to silence Nwoye's two younger brothers in order not to reveal to their mother the true story of Obiageli's broken water pot (31). The order of sitting of the Egwugwu masked spirits signified seniority (63). The news on the death of Ezeudu was made known to the people of Umuofia through the sounding of the cannon. Furthermore, the firing of guns and cannon, the acts of cutting down trees and animals, jumping over walls, dancing on the roof and the clanging of matchets during the period were all pointers to the fact that the dead man was a great warrior (87). Cockcrow in the text signified that a new dawn and another day of activities had come.

Friendship was cultivated and peace brokered using various forms of symbolic displays. Ikemefuna, the ill-fated

young lad, was for instance, depicted as a symbol of peace since he was sacrificed by Mbaino to avert war with Umuofia. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, felt highly dignified and respected when he was presented with a carved elephant tusk by his hosts (128). The use of white native chalk in the text had a number of connotations. For instance, Unoka used it as a sign of hospitality and welcome to Okoye when he arrived in his house (5), but he went on dramatically to show him short perpendicular lines of the same chalk on his wall, which represented the debt he owed different people and therefore requested him to come again (6). This happened after Okoye demanded the debt he had owed him for upwards of two years. Furthermore, a man was adjudged brave if he brought back human head as a spoil of war. Okonkwo accomplished this, and went on to use a human skull to drink. The silence and inaction shown by Umuofia people when Okonkwo killed a court messenger who had come to stop their meeting on the order of the white man, indicated their disapproval of the action, but more importantly a great sign of weakness by Umuofia people, hitherto known for their bravery and valour (146).

### **Extra-mundane communication**

This form of communication has been described as that which occurs “between spirits and the living ... the supernatural being and the living and between the various local deities, gods and goddesses and the living especially through oracles” (Kombol 2012:54).

There is an array of examples of this medium of traditional communication in the novel. Achebe established

through narratives the constant interplay between the living and the dead as typified in the customary consultation of the oracle in a misfortune. For instance, Unoka consulted Agbala about his fate, particularly his growing poverty and how he could surmount it (13). He was however berated by the priestess for being lazy. We see another manifestation of this mode of communication in the *egwugwu* and other deities in the community as well as in Chielo, the priestess of Agbala's regular prophecies. The shedding of the blood of hen and permitting the blood to fall on the ancestral staff indicated that a nuptial knot had been tied in the presence of both men and the gods (see 95). Another instance of extra mundane communication depicted in the text is the digging up of the *iyi uwa* (special stone) of Ezinma by Okagbue, which was believed to have permanently severed Ezinma's relationship with the Ogbanje world (61). Also the burning down of Okonkwo's house and barns and the killing of his animals were done to cleanse the land which Okonkwo had polluted by shedding the blood of a clansman (89). It was also believed, as shown earlier, that the personal god of a person dictated his success or otherwise in life. This was pronounced in Okonkwo's regret about his exile and his son's conversion to Christianity. He noted that his *chi* was aware of his sufferings thus underlining the interaction between human and the supernatural worlds (110). The presentation of kola nut in many parts of the novel and the usual invocation of the ancestors also portrayed extra-mundane communication (12, 31, 42, 132, etc). On the whole, spiritual consultations and invocations are obvious in the text as persons or members of the community sought information, guidance, advice or help

from the gods. On one of the occasions, the people of Abame consulted the oracle to ascertain the mission of the white man (111).

### **Iconographic communication**

This involves the use of items both animate and inanimate for communication purposes. Kombol (2012) sees iconographic communication as an objectified communication, in which concrete objects serve as signals and communicate some meaning to the audience. Such icons as kola nut, cock, camwood, palm frond, native white chalk, anklet and charcoal were used by Achebe in parts of the novel in a communicative context.

The kola nut is highly valued by Igbo communities, and this is epitomized in the adage that 'he who brings kola brings life'. It signifies hospitality and acceptance of a guest. In the novel, the kola nut was served with alligator pepper and was used in almost all occasions to show that a visitor was welcomed; it was also used to pray for blessings. But the guest could reject the kola if there existed ill will or a serious disagreement. Hence Okonkwo's kola nut was rejected by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess when he visited over the breach of the week of peace (nso ani).

Broomstick is another icon that was used in the novel. In page 51, Obierika and his prospective in-laws used a bundle of short broomsticks to negotiate the bride price for his daughter. Native white chalk represented peace and understanding and was used, in a number of instances, as a sign of welcome to a visitor. Palm fronds were used to cordon off an arena and to keep people away. It was also used to

signal the beginning of wrestling bouts when struck on the ground. Furthermore, in some ceremonial events in the novel, cam wood was used by women and children to draw patterns as well as decorate their bodies. Also the presentation of cock by Akueke to the dancer showed her appreciation to them (94). Okonkwo similarly presented a cock as a way of soliciting aid from Nwakibie (15), while a white chord around the ankle signified a title holder or his first wife. This was exemplified in Nwakibie's family.

### **Instrumental communication**

This involves the use of instruments to communicate. A number of instruments were used in *Things Fall Apart* to disseminate one form of information or another in Umuofia community. These instruments included *ogene* (metal gong), *ekwe* (wooden gong), flute and drum. The *Ogene* was used by the town crier to get people's attention as he summoned them to meetings (see pages 7, 63, 115, 140). It was also used to signal their arrival of *egwugwu* to a meeting or to indicate when they took a final decision on a case. The *ekwe* was used especially by religious societies to attract the attention of adherents before announcements. Elsewhere it was sounded to communicate and invite people to ozo title taking ceremony in the town (41). It was also used to announce the death of Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village (84, 96). The flute was another important instrument in Achebe's Umuofia community. Apart from its entertainment function, the flute was used to stir up the spirits of fighters (3). Along with *ogene* it signalled the arrival of the *egwugwu* to the stage (70 and 74). Furthermore, drums were widely used (pages 3 and

33), to spur on the wrestlers to fight harder or to show the intensity of the fight (35). They were also used during wrestling dance to excite the villagers (30).

On the whole these instrumental devices served varied communication functions in Umuofia community, as they were used to disseminate messages of various kinds. Achebe's expression that "the drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath... (3)" amply shows the kind of emotion sounds from instruments fired up in the people.

### **Institutional communication**

This entails the use of certain known traditional institutions in disseminating information in traditional African societies. In Achebe's Umuofia community, a number of institutions that helped in the maintenance of law and order were identified. They included the family and titled men/council of elders, masquerade cult, the women and of course the missionaries.

The family is the smallest unit of society consisting of parents, children and relations. The family as a channel of institutional communication was constantly used in the novel to instil discipline on young persons. Instances are found where children were taught moral lessons through moonlight tales and narratives in the family circle (67); through mother-daughter relationship as shown in Ekwefi's responses to Ezinma's inquisitiveness and adventurous questions (29); and how Okonkwo corrected his daughter by asking her to sit properly.

Titled men and council of elders were treated with high esteem in Umuofia. When missionaries first came to Mbanta,

they asked for the king of the community who could give them a plot of land to build their church. The villagers in response told them that there was no king, but that they had “men of high title and the chief priests and elders” (107). This illustrates the position of titled men in traditional African societies. The decision on whether or not to attack Mbaino was taken by the *Ndi ichie* as well as how to assign the virgin girl from Mbaino and Ikemefuna (9-10, 40). They also rendered support in traditional judicial system by settling dispute between two contending factions (63).

The institution of the *egwugwu*, although shrouded in secrecy, had communication significance. The masked spirits represented the nine villages of Umuofia. The *egwugwu* served as a medium for dispute resolution among villagers. A classic example was the case between Uzowulu and his in-laws (67). The presence of *egwugwu* in funerals signified that an elder, a great one and warrior had passed on (87). It also signified a message of decorum and the presence of the ancestors, as seen in the funeral of Ezeudu.

## Conclusion

Chinualumogu Achebe, through *Things Fall Apart* not only showed that he was a man of vast knowledge the workings of the Igbo system, but also that the people developed high cultural values that marked them out as ingenious people prior to European colonization. Through an insider perspective or what anthropologists refer to as emic approach, he presented the Igbo society to the outside world and proved that culture is not antithetical to development, and that our development did not start with the coming of the

white man. From personal, family to communal life, Achebe used Umuofia community to throw light on who we really are. Indeed, the novel was used as a weapon by the author to campaign for indigenous cultural revival, which was lost through western intervention. Furthermore, Chinua Achebe made judicious use of various modes of African traditional communication in the work to drive home his points. He lucidly employed the various forms of African traditional communication, namely verbal and non-verbal, delineated into different sub-sets to describe the fictitious Igbo community called Umuofia. These forms of communication and the associated instruments constitute veritable and important tools for disseminating information at the grassroots level up to this day. Apart from being culture-friendly, they communicate messages and information in the languages that the audience understands.

*Things Fall Apart* is therefore a true masterpiece with a strong didactic message to the Igbo to hold unto what they have and be proud of it. In the words of the late Nelson Mandela while in prison, '*Things Fall Apart* gave me hope and its words shook the walls of the prison'. Chinua Achebe himself once asserted that 'one of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised'. This novel is a clarion call to the Igbo, Nigeria and Africa in general to join hands together to project their culture to the world. Finally, the value of local media in the dissemination of messages was well captured by the novel. Traditional communication should therefore be adopted in our societies in order to promote grassroots development and cultural revival.



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