ORAL TRADITION, A PANACEA TO LAND IDENTITY CRISES: ISSUES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S TEXTS

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Abstract
Land identity crisis in contemporary communal setting has taken a toll in the peace and tranquility of the society. Issues and facts surrounding land ownership have become more complex owing to unidentifiable false claims to such disputed lands. Usually there are claims and counter claims which eventually escalate and lead to eventual crises. To maintain a healthy and peaceful society is of the essence in a traditional African setting. African traditional society has provided a channel of transmitting facts about land ownership, respect and rules on issues of communal existence. However, this tradition seems to be neglected, hence leaving a culture of recklessness and impunity. Chinua Achebe in his novels Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God chronicles situations and events depicting African cultural heritage, norms and regulations that protected the peace and sanity of the land, even in the face of crises. African Oral tradition has a rich repertoire of regulations, and channels of reviving and reinventing the old long tradition, including story telling. Using Storytelling as a framework of analysis, this essay makes a literary analysis of the use of oral tradition in the transmission of the cultural values and facts in relation to land ownership, communal and inter-communal coexistence. Specifically, the paper investigates the impact of storytelling in mitigating instances of land disputes and crises. The paper observes that reviving oral tradition is sacrosanct as a veritable means of sustaining cultural harmony and peace in the society.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Land Identity, Crises, Ownership, Storytelling.

Introduction

Literary tradition has explored the wide repertoire of its elements in the sustenance of cultural values and norms including, folktales, myths and legends. Storytelling as a literary act and an oral tradition is a device of transmitting human experiences of different peoples of the world. Various traditions therefore, including the African tradition employ storytelling to pass across their old long facts to their generations. Hence the article, "The Lasting Power of Oral Tradition" observes that "there is a similarity of intent within oral traditions around the world. In American Indian traditions, a story has at least two purposes. The first is to entertain, ensuring it will be heard. This requires awareness and knowledge of the audience an awareness lacking in any form of recording. Secondly a story must convey a lesson, one deeply appropriate to the needs of the listeners (Joseph Bruchac Online). Oral tradition all over the world serves the purposes of entertaining and educating its people on their values and needs.

Issues of land identity and ownership are of a paramount significance to the African world. Communities and individuals need land for survival, making the land identity system a generational and cultural affair. Land tenure in Africa is said to 'have gradually evolved from the simple to the complex, from the communal types to those where there is more tight control over allocation of land, suggesting more individual control of land" (Gear M Kajoba 2). The complex nature of land ownership stems from greater demands for land use and acquisition. With greater demands, land acquisition becomes increasingly susceptible to struggle and eventual crises. Further observation indicates "that due to land shortage, commercialization of land as a saleable commodity was quite marked. Transfer of land to persons outside a lineage for a cash consideration began to take place

and was quite common" (Kajoba 2). This system of land commercialization and transfer further compounds the lack of identity and originality in ownership and consequently creates contention and competition. This situation of competition over land and its resources said John Bruce "is at the center of the nexus between land and conflict" (John Bruce Online). Competition over land and eventual claims and counter claims usually degenerate into disputes and crises. Such crises are represented in Chinua Achebe's, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God under study. Scholars have variously dissected these texts of this great author along the lines of cultural studies, post-colonial literature, even as politics and history. The essay "History as Project and Source in Achebe's Things Fall Apart" chronicles all that constitute history and historical knowledge in Things Fall Apart. The writer describes Things Fall Apart as having "a potent pedagogical qualities, and as an effective tool for rethinking disciplinary and canonical boundaries" (Emad Mirmotahail 374). Things Fall Apart is projected as a congregation of history and experiences. The article further addresses the narrative and formal strategies which "generates historiographic knowledge. The novel is multi discursive, which means that it takes stock of and performs the various sources that constitute what we call history and historical knowledge" (375). The essay portrays Things Fall Apart as having multiple themes. The essay "The Form and Function of the Folk Tradition in Achebe's Novels", establishes "the many ways Achebe uses Igbo folklores in his novels in which Igbo tradition has the pride of place" (Charles Nnoli 47). Furthermore, Onyeamuche A. Ejesu in "Achebe's Arrow of God, the Anti-Promethean Figure and Lukac's Sociological Approach to Tragedy" observes that "the most frequent reaction to Arrow of God is to treat it as a treatise against Western imperialism in the forms of colonialism and Christianity" (Okike 52 258). Thus issues of colonialism are center stage in Arrow of God. While the essay "Igbo Cosmology in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God: An Evaluative Analysis" expresses Arrow of God as the Igbo traditional Cosmology of which is the basis of indigenous Igbo political and religious attitude to life as well as its relevance to the contemporary world. The essay reveals that "there is indeed great repository of oral and pre-literary tradition which our forbears have left behind for us to transmit to other generations as well as use as the moral-social pedestal and foundation for engineering new paradigm structures for internally motivated African development" (Marcel Onyibor 118). The essay captures and highlights African philosophical ethos and ethics originating from the material world of oral tradition. There are however unaccountable works done already on these texts which have not dealt on the importance of oral tradition in resolving land crises, hence the import of this paper. This essay therefore makes a literary study of Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God using oral tradition as a veritable tool of analyzing and identifying incidents of land communal clashes and the level of awareness and interventions using storytelling. Specifically, the paper seeks to highlight the need for oral tradition in transmitting cultural values of the past in the contemporary world.

Conceptual Analysis, Land Use and Crises

Literature plays an uncommon role in providing the long-lived heritage of our forefathers in the form of fictional prose. Thus in "African Literature and Orality: A Reading of Ngugi Wa Throngo's Wizard of the Crow", the novel is depicted as "a poetic medium that occupies an important place in African literary landscape. Hence, "The novel more than poetry and drama has arguably become a semiotic platform for interrogating African values, beliefs and ideologies. It thus becomes a formidable tool for self-critique by many African writers that appropriate its performative dialectic especially in challenging social, political and economic misdeeds of the people in general and tyrannical regimes in particular" (Mustapha Bala Ruma 195). Literary artists depict the rich culture of African life, values and ideologies, pre-existing the influx of the Western influence. A.N. Akwanya in Literary Criticism: From Formal to

Question of Method observes that "Literary writers reinterpret aspects of cultural history in pursuit of the essential function of representing the totality of human experience …" (171). While highlighting the importance of literature, Charles Nnolim posits that "Literature still tills its crop in many virgin forests and art continues to speak in many voices. It is now common place knowledge that contemporary African literature cannot be properly understood and appreciated as an isolated expression but rather must be viewed as parts of the totality of human experience" (Nnoli 35). Literature creates the enabling standpoint to relay the experiences of the people. Literary artists such as Chinua Achebe has taken up this task as a leading voice in this project using the tool of oral tradition and folklore, the ideologies of the people over a long time are retained. Folklore is defined as "the unrecorded traditions of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstition, and proverbial sayings. Folklore also includes myths, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells find among a homogenous group of people, it is a major component in the total folk culture of such a homogenous group of people" (Nnoli 35).Folklore being a totality of the belief and customs and traditions is transmitted through folktales and storytelling from generation to generation. This becomes a platform of keeping alive these oral traditions. Oral tradition refers to "the body of tale told both in the home by the fireside and in the wider community in African villages. Traditional storytelling flourished in the home as well as in the schools" (Ode Ogede Online). Storytelling, as a common aspect of oral tradition is employed by Achebe in his historical texts, Things Fall Apart (1958) and Arrow of God (1964). Both texts relay interesting stories on the life of the people.

The issues of land crises, and respect for land are told as stories in the texts. They project the fact that African tradition holds land and its ownership and use very dearly. Therefore, the people do not take lightly to any act of intimidation on or threat pointing to possible dispossession of the land. Hence, "in Sub-haran Africa, the vast majority of the black population have limited access to land ownership and related natural resources, resulting in high levels of vulnerability and resultant conflicts over land" (Urmilla Bob Online). Land related crises are as a result of importance and values placed on the land. This is because in "traditional African communities, land is a birthright of every African indigenous person. It has a communal dimension whereby all members of the community are expected to share its resources, especially in the rural areas under some forms of traditional authority" (Jauro Adamu 2). This usually brings competition and contestations among the people, hence, "Land is the object of competition in a number of potentially overlapping ways as an economic asset, as a connection with identity and social legitimacy and as a territory" (John Bruce Online). Such conflict over land identity and boundary is represented in Arrow of God. The land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi is a prominent example of the incidence of land dispute and identity. The dialogue, arguments and claims are narrated as references to stories told by their forefather. In trying to stop Umuaro from waging a war with Okperi over a piece of disputed land, Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu during the meeting tries to dissuade his people from going to war over the land belonging to the Okperi, he says:

> My father said thus to me that when our village first came here to live, the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of land to live in. they also gave us their deities – their Udo and their Ogwugwu. But they said to our ancestors. Mark my words, the people of Opkeri said to our fathers: We give you our Udo and our Ogwugwu; but you must call the deity we give you not Udo but the son of Udo, and not Ogwugwu but the son of Ogwugwu. This is the story as I heard if from my father. (Arrow of God 15).

Ezeulu as much as possible transmitted the story as he heard it from his own father. Ezeulu's story is supported by the fact that in the issue of land,

"individual families within a given village usually acquired land by clearing virgin bush, by land transfer, and by inheritance" (Gear M. Kajoba 2). Here, the claim by Ezeulu is that Umuaro acquired the land by transfer.

However, there are counter claims and ideas as represented by Nwaka and a group of opposition, Nwaka countering Ezeulu's submission tells his own story as told to him by his own father:

My father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers. He told me three or four different places where they sojourned for a while and moved on again. They were driven away by Umuofia, then by Abame and Aninta. Would they go today and claim all those sites? Would they have laid claims on our farmland in the days before the white man turned us upside down? Elders and Ndichie of Umuaro, let everyone return to his house if we have no heart in the fight" (Arrow of God 16).

This counter claim may perhaps have risen out of mere show of wits by Nwaka who is known for his eloquence of speech. It equally follows that individual style of rendition may vary even with the intention of the story teller. Nwaka has the intention of welding power and authority over the people and hence he uses eloquence to incite the people challenging the powers and authority of the Chief Priest, Ezeulu. The consequences of his conviction of his people who later embarked on war is felt so grievously by Umuaro. Yet Ezeulu's insistence on the right account of the story and expression of disappointment on the three oldest men, including Ogbuefi Egonwanne who refused to speak up to the truth, is asserted, "Others have spoken the way they spoke because they are hungry for war…. If in truth the farmland is ours, Ulu will fight on our side. But if it is not we shall know soon enough. I would not have spoken again today if I had not seen adults in the house neglecting their duties. Ogbuefi Egonwanne, as one of the three oldest men in Umuaro should have reminded us that our fathers did not fight a war of blame" (Arrow of God 18). The scenario surrounding Ezeulu and Nwaka's different accounts are part of the age long oral tradition as there is room for divergent opinions and attitudes. This situation is highlighted in Tradition and Modernity stating that:

The consciousness of a people of their cultural past, that is, of the cultural values, practices, institutions, and achievements of their forebears, evokes diverse, even opposing, sentiments among them. For, while some of them, with nostalgic sentiments, would, as we have seen, argue for and urge the revival of the indigenous cultural past, others may evince totally negative attitude – attitudes almost disdainful and condemnatory of most, if not all of the inherited ancestral cultural values and practices. (Kwame Cyekye 233).

This situation is further described by the influence of time considering the fact of the time and space of the narrative. Hence, A. N. Akwanya views it as an irony of time, Arrow of God being a later novel. He says:

Achebe's two great historical novels Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God both map the site of the collision of colonialism with the isolated traditional communities. That collision still reverberates today and repeats itself in diverse ways. Nigeria today is the legacy of the events of the novel …There is also a way in which the contemporary world impinges upon that past time, through functioning as an interpretive framework. (Akwanya 181).

This influence waters down the strong belief of the people of Umuaro in their history as relayed by their Chief Priest who in all ramifications is the repository of their cultural heritage. The consequences of the influence of false belief is the venture of Umuaro going to war with Okperi was very unfavourable to them, thus, "On the day it began Umuaro killed two men of Okperi on the two following days, Eke and Oye, the fighting grew fierce. Umuaro killed four men and Okperi replied with three … the next day, Afo, saw the war brought to a sudden close. The white man, Winterbottom brought soldiers to Umuaro and stopped it. The story of what these soldiers did in Abam was still told with fear, and so Umuaro made no effort to resist but laid down their arms" (Arrow of God 28).

This shows the triumph of oral tradition over false claims and mere eloquence of speech. Perhaps the people to oral tradition in Things Fall Apart the earlier text, is devoid of any modern influence.

Hence, Things Fall Apart portrays reverence and respect to rules guiding conduct and affairs of living in the family and neighbourhood. There are traditions that are strictly observed to show reverence to the land as inherited from the ancestors portrayed in the text. For example, Okonkwo violated the sacred week of peace by beating his wife Ojiugo for not making his afternoon food available on time. The narrative captures the fact that "Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his younger wife who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger, he had forgotten that it was the week of peace …" (Things Fall Apart 21). By this singular act of beating his wife, Okonkwo desecrates the earth and incurs the wrath of the earth goddess. Hence, before long he is to face a charge as the priest of the earth goddess calls on Okonkwo in his Obi to chastise him, reminding Okonkwo the long tradition of the people thus:

Listen to me … you are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crop in the earth, we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil … (Things.Fall.Apart 22).

This is the extent to which oral tradition is being held in high esteem and the people conform to it in other to create peace and harmonious community. It is unheard off among the people such insolence in the land, hence, this singular act by Okonkwo becomes topic of discussion and gossip in the community as a taboo and nso-ani and is being made a reference point. "It was the first time for many years that a man had broken the sacred peace" … Even the oldest men could only remember one or two other occasions somewhere in the dim past" (22) yet the effect keeps reverberating. The remote incidents and stories from the forefathers about the punishment for not keeping the earth sacred is told by Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the eldest man in the village. He recounts that "My father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died" (22). Though this seems so harsh a remedy but the consciousness of carrying on the generational sanity and value is of paramount importance. These values were transmitted by words of mouth and are accepted and upheld.

The reverence for the earth is further highlighted in the celebration of new yam festival "which is an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity" (Things Fall Apart 26). The activities following the celebration of the New Yam festival are that of conviviality and atmosphere of harmony as against crises and disputes. There are aesthetic preparations and beautifications of the environment such that as "The festival was only three days away, Okonkwo's wives had scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. They had then drawn patterns on them in white, yellow and dark green … Then they set about painting themselves with cam wood and drawing beautiful patterns" (27). This highlights the beauty of the traditional conduct and attitudes that are sacrosanct for communal living.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe has provided a standpoint of storytelling as a reference point to cultural harmony. Conflicts of all types among people in communities have regulations and codes of conduct to counter them. From our observation, disputes come as a result of selfishness and inability to adhere to accepted set rules. One of such factors of land identity dispute in communities is identified as "(alleged) neglect or denigration or subversion of the traditional cultural values of African societies in matters of development and the creation of African modernity … And to arrest

further decline in the African life, they would advocate a return to the cultural past of African" (Gyekye 233). This submission for a return to oral tradition is further highlighted in this assertion that "a return to Nature and its Surpassing by selflessness had led the community to the recovery of the ways of their ancestors of the distant past" (Akwanya 185). This is deemed to bring about sanity and harmony in the community. The need for oral tradition as remedy to incessant communal clashes especially, land related disputes cannot be overlooked. Hence, a return to storytelling in upholding the key values and codes of acceptable conducts of oral traditions are recommended.

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