World in Flux: Achebe's Use of Folktale and Proverb

by
Julie A. Husak

When approaching a work of world literature one often assumes that the cultural understanding the reader initially brings to the work is sufficient to analyze the work on several levels. This is not true, however, for most Western readers of works from a non-Western culture; there a lack of cultural knowledge can lead to misunderstanding out of ignorance. Many times the student is at a loss to understand cultural or historical references that are central to the understanding of the work as a coherent whole.

The novels of Chinue Achebe illustrate the importance of gaining a working knowledge of the history and culture from which a work originates. His novels offer the Western reader the opportunity to delve deeper into Achebe's Ibo culture and thereby clarify the more subtle messages he encodes for the English-speaking audience.

One method of approaching a piece of world literature is to understand the use and importance of cultural lore and speech elements. In Achebe's Ibo culture, folktales and proverbs do not merely illustrate stories learned in childhood, but contain encoded messages about right and wrong action or though social commentary and observations on human nature and character.

Achebe relies heavily on the use of Ibo folktales and proverbs to transmit a true picture of his culture at any given time in its history. He does not, however, explain the picture he presents. The reader must actively search out the cultural connotations of these tales and proverbs to gain an understanding of characters and plot movement in the novels that is not otherwise apparent.

Although Achebe writes in English, he sees his role as a novelist as "helping my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (Morning Yet 71). Nigeria as a political entity did not really exist before the period of colonization. Even today the

country is primarily composed of differing ethnic groups with no strong central political unity. This fact is important in understanding Achebe's desire to unite the Ibo people with a heritage that is ethnic and not necessarily political.

In Ibo society the individual lives in a universe governed by complex relationships involving both the natural world and the community. These relationships must remain intact for society to function properly.

In Achebe's Ibo society storytellers and the art of storytelling are highly esteemed. This use of language is so important to the daily interactions of the society that, according to Rems Nna Umeasiegbu, a researcher into traditional Ibo stories, "any villager who wishes to become an elder may not do so until he can prove that he can speak well. Speaking well does not only mean making oneself understood. . . . It is the ability to know how to use speech markers, how to terminate the speech of an opponent, how to encourage a reticent person to talk, and how to hold a listener spellbound if one wants to be respected in the community" (6). It is not only professional storytellers who are expected to speak well. Every Ibo child participates in storytelling sessions either within the home or at public gatherings (8). Stories and proverbs are an integral part of the Ibo society, and Achebe uses them in his novels to reveal characterization.

One proverbial tale and that recurs in each of Achebe's novels, "The Wrestling Contest in the Land of Spirits," illustrates the concept of the man of action who must balance a sense of self with a sense of his responsibility to the community. The tale is common in collections of Ibo stories. However, since storytelling is an oral art, the tale exists in slightly different versions. Rems Nna Umeasiegbu has recorded several versions of the tale. The one appearing in his book Words Are Sweet: Igbo Stories and Storytelling is representative of the basic tale.

Briefly, the tale concerns a young boy who was considered a great wrestler by the entire village. As his fame went to his head and be became vain, he became preoccupied with the idea of wrestling with spirits. One day he left for the spirit land with his friend the lizard. There he encountered several spirits

and beat the all. Finally, they put forward their best wrestler— the ten-headed spirit, who soundly defeated the boy. Lizard revived the boy, and before the spirits could notice, they ran away. The spirits gave chase, and just as the boy reached the line separating the mortal and immortal worlds with freedom in sight, one of the spirits scratched the boy's back and tore his flesh— otherwise the boy was safe (Umeasiegbu 130-31).

This tale might appear to be nothing more than a child's tale. However, it contains information about the Ibo view of heroism and decision-making. Symbolically the boy's journey to the spirit land is an illustration of courage and knowledge gained both for the individual and the community. Since the Ibo regard the art of wrestling highly, the boy's courage is obvious. His defeat at the hands of the ten-headed spirit is symbolic of many life situations where the outcome is uncertain. His scar, the physical reminder of the match, bespeaks knowledge gained about his dreams, his fears, and his limitations.

Achebe himself alludes to this tale when speaking of Nigeria's colonial past, disturbed present, and unclear future. In his essay "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" he states, "We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today, but when I was a boy one could see and sense the peculiar quality and atmosphere of it more clearly. . . . But still the crossroads does have a certain dangerous potency—dangerous because a man might perish there wrestling with multiple-headed spirits, but also he might be lucky and return to his people with the boon of prophetic vision" (Morning Yet 119). This story is deeply ingrained within the traditional Ibo society, and Achebe's reference to it shows its importance to one's group destiny as well as one's individual destiny. In Ibo culture, each individual must consider the entire community in decision making.

Storytelling is not the only verbal skill held in high regard by the Ibo. The art of using the proverb also is deemed very important. According to D. Ibe Nwoga in Igbo Language and Culture, the proverb is "the experience of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression" (186). The proverb then is the concise distillation of societal morality and cultural philosophy compressed into one short phrase. Proverbs use images of daily life and natural phenomena to

discuss something which is far more difficult to describe. Within the proverb are encoded comments on human nature, socially acceptable behavior, or group and personal destiny.

One proverb that recurs frequently in Achebe's novels is "a man who brings ant-ridden faggots into the house should expect the visit of lizards." This proverb comments on the willfulness of men in having their own way regardless of the consequences. This interpretation makes no real sense to the Western reader until it is understood that the proverb refers to the time when homes were commonly heated with wood fires. If ant-ridden faggots were brought into the house and burned, the ants would try to escape and infest the room. Lizards would then arrive to eat the ants and create a bigger problem than before.

This is the world inhabited by Obi Okonkwo. He is the grandson of Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart and Obi's father Isaac is the son who has become a Christian and has risen to the position of catechist in the Church. Obi's father maintains a certain sense of his own cultural heritage. Obi, however, must function in a world different from his father's and dramatically different from his grandfather's.

The opening section of the novel shows Obi being sentenced for an unnamed crime and then flashes back in time to reveal the events leading up to his conviction for bribery. The structure of the novel echoes the form of the proverb of the ant-ridden faggots. If Obi had looked into his future and determined the possible outcomes of his actions, he could have avoided bringing ant-infested faggots, or problems, into his house. Obviously, he did not, and the lizards have arrived with a vengeance. Obi must live in a world that does not follow the traditional Ibo world view. He must determine how he will conduct himself at the center of two clashing cultures. The idea of balance in action as expressed in the tale of "The Wrestling Match in the Land of Spirits" is central to understanding Obi's precarious position. Allusions to similarities between Obi and the lad in the tale are apparent to someone with a knowledge of this tale.

One telling incident from his youth illustrates that Obi's journey between worlds begins many years before he leaves for England. As a boy he has been called up for the "Oral" session. It is a time he both hates and fears: "During this period the teacher called on any pupil to tell the class a fold story" (81). Since his father has forbidden his mother from telling the children traditional stories, Obi doesn't know any and is embarrassed in front of the class. He goes home and tells his mother about the incident. Out of his father's hearing she gives him a story for the class. Obi has spent his entire life between two cultures—the traditional one, which his mother to some extent still fosters, and the more Europeanized world of his father the catechist.

Obi leaves Nigeria to attend school in England, where ironically he receives a degree in English literature. Then he returns to Nigeria to take a post in the colonial government. At a gathering of clansmen after his return from England, someone refers to his physical resemblance to his grandfather Okonkwo, and guests remark on the distance between England and Nigeria, saying "without a doubt you have visited the land of spirits" and "here is a little boy returned from wrestling in the spirit world" (54). Like the boy in the tale, Obi too has been changed by his journey. But the changes in him are not physical. They are internal and are played out in the choices he makes.

Obi brings back from England the awareness that he does not truly belong to either the British or the traditional Ibo society. He does not see the British presence as negative in terms of Nigerian society; however, much that is seen as positive in the Ibo society has been distorted from its traditional intent. For example, the Ibo view of community, where it is acceptable for the individual to take from the group as long as no injury is caused to it, has turned into the wide-spread presence of bribery for self-advancement by individuals within the government and other social institutions.

Obi has no difficulty in accepting this distorted picture of the traditional view. He wholeheartedly accepts the perceived importance of owning a car and belonging to a country club. What Obi does not see are the advantages to be gained by operating within the traditional Ibo framework. This is further

illustrated by Obi's unwillingness to repay the Umofia Progressive Union that has paid for his education in England. Rather than ask for an extension, which would have been granted since he is a member of the clan, Obi decides to solve the problem himself. By disregarding the clan view of community, Obi distances himself even more from his traditional roots.

His alienation from the traditional clan group is further illustrated in his choice of a mate. Obi wishes to marry Clara, an Ibo woman trained in England to be a nurse. However, her family, is "osu," or a family that by tradition has been dedicated to the gods, and she is therefore taboo. Obi's father, in a rare instance of upholding the traditional view, tells him that if he persists in marrying Clara,"You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children" (127). He steadfastly refuses to consider this possible future outcome. Soon Obi, in his struggle to belong to something, loses everything. Obi's journey to the land of spirits ends in his total alienation from either cultural group.

Through the knowledge of traditional Ibo tales and proverbs, the informed reader makes the journey with Obi. Unlike Obi, the thoughtful reader who has taken the time to acquaint himself with the cultural importance of the traditional elements in the novel makes a journey of discovery that ends in a more respectful and illuminating understanding of another culture—not isolation. It is to this reader that Achebe speaks. The clash of cultures is inevitable for all peoples, not just the Ibo.

Gaining an insight into the history and cultural makeup of a piece of literature is helpful in understanding other works besides Achebe's. Any work that deals with elements of culture and language foreign to the reader's own deserves to be given the respect and active participation available to the culturally aware reader. The challenge lies in taking the initiative to discover the cultural context and using that knowledge to look—not only at the specific work—but at the broader implications of that work for all of us.

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