

Society and Cultural Iniquities: A Comparative Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Joseph Ngongwikuo's *Taboo Love*

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Abstract

*It is now common knowledge that the African novel was born as a response to the derogatory representation of the continent's cultural heritage by westerners like Joseph Conrad in his novel **Heart of Darkness**. The Nigerian prolific writer, Albert Chinualumogu Achebe is generally recognized as the father of modern African fiction with the publication of his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe's novel since its publication has served as a model to countless African writers. One of such writers who, from every indication must have been greatly influenced by Achebe is the Cameroonian born novelist Joseph Anchangnyouh Ngongwikuo. Achebe's sway on Ngongwikuo is very much evident in the latter's novel titled **Taboo Love** (1980). The central concern of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it aims at demonstrating through the sociological and intertextual approaches that the younger novelist J.A. Ngongwikuo was immensely influenced by the elderly novelist Achebe thematically and structurally and on the other hand, this inquiry sets out to fathom the fact that, although largely preoccupied with the revalorization or celebration of the rich cultural values of their respective societies, both authors however attribute the annihilation or near effortless infiltration of the African culture by the westerners to "the inherent weaknesses in traditional cultures" (Gakwandi: 11).*

Key words: cultural iniquities, inherent weaknesses, intertextual, Ngongwikuo, society.

1. **Introduction.**

According to the exponents of the sociological approach to the interpretation of literature, a work of art cannot be separated from the society in which it is created. In other words, literature is a reflection of the society in which it is created. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (1956) notes that "literature is a social institution using as its medium language, a social creation...literature represents life, and life is, in a large measure a social reality"(5)

Like Wellek and Warren, Ngugi WaThiongo (1994) states that:

Literature results from conscious acts of men and women in society. Being a product of their intellectual and imaginative activities, it is thoroughly social. The very act of writing even at the level of the individual implies social relationship....at the collective level, literature embodies in word images the tensions, conflict and contradictions at the heart of the community's being and becoming. It reflects on the aesthetic plane the community's wrestling with its environment to make it yield the means of food, clothes, shelter.(5-6)

Ngugi is therefore of the opinion that "literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society."(ibid 6). In short, literature has relevance to a given society at a given time. Put differently, African writers draw heavily from the sociology of their people in their literary productions. The informed critic must therefore bare this fact in mind if he must make any meaningful interpretation or analysis of African literature.

The sociological standpoint adopted for the interpretation of the texts at issue is the one set out by Ambanasom Shadrach (2009) namely, "the socio-artistic approach". For Ambanasom, "the socio-artistic approach is eclectic in nature and lays emphasis on the sociology of literature, the author's artistry and the historical context in which the work is produced"(8). In his words, "the socio-artistic approach requires the critic to evaluate the overall success of the writer's use of technique to express in

an artistic fashion some of the cultural, social, moral and ideological issues of his time, or for that matter of all times”(ibid 8

Corroborating Ambanasom’s views, Emmanuel Yenshu (2013) further notes that “the sociology of literature goes beyond the critic’s preoccupation with the issue of style and form.”(128) Yenshu intimates that “the sociology of literature also deals with the social origins, relevance of artistic creation, the status of the writer and his message to the society” (ibid128). Writing in support of the sociological approach to the interpretation of literature, Ofedayo Oshin (2004) opines that, “the study of the novel from the sociological point of view may be said to be relevant...because the sociology of the novel has been observed to show a deeper and more important concern for society than such literary forms like poetry or short story.”(6)

This study is equally informed by Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality which presupposes the interdependence of texts on one another. That is, an author can “draw from”, “build on” or be inspired by another text in the creation of his own. Elaine Martin (2011) quotes Kresteva’s essay titled, “Word dialogue and Novel”, in which she defines intertextuality as, “a mosaic of quotations.”(148) For Kristeva, “any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”(ibid 148). Text is not a unilinear entity but a heterogeneous combination of texts. Authors are said to be influenced by what they have read. In the words of Charles Bazerman (2004), intertextuality is, “the relation each text has to the texts surrounding it.” Bazerman goes on to note that, “we create our texts out of the sea of former texts that surround us, the sea of language we live in. And we understand the texts of others within that same sea.” I argue in this study that Ngongwikuo drew heavily from Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in the writing of *Taboo Love*.

Although brought up in strictly Christian religious traditions, both Achebe and Ngongwikuo learned about traditional African cultural practices from unconverted relatives who continued to worship the gods of their ancestors around them. Achebe’s father was an Evangelist and a church teacher. Odirin Omiegbe (2004) writes:

Although he grew up under the shadow of his father who tried to shepherded him from the supposedly inimical

influences of what Christians were taught to regard as pagan communities, young Achebe's curiosity could not be confined as he made surreptitious contacts with the traditional people in their works, their rituals and ceremonies and their vigorous masking tradition. He observed the men in their assemblies in which rhetorical and forensic skills were exhibited. Against the wishes of his parents, other relations told him stories from native folklore and history. All these influences crystalized in his fiction. (187)

Odirin goes further to quote Chinua Achebe who wrote in his autobiographical essay, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," stating that he was christened, Albert Chinualumogu by his devout protestant Christian parents. Achebe equally recollected his early childhood experiences in the following words, "on one arm of the crossroad we sang hymns and read the Bible night and day. On the other hand, my father's brother and his family blinded by heathenism offered food to idols."(ibid 187). Achebe therefore grew up at the crossroad of cultures.

Like Achebe, Joseph Ngongwikuo was brought up at the crossroad of traditional and Christian cultures. On the blurb (cover page) of *Taboo Love*, we are given to understand that, "his parents were the first of the Kom 'tribe' to 'be converted' to Christianity, but his grandfather-the tribe's chief, continued to worship the gods of his ancestors. In this way, the author learned of traditional and western concepts and mores that were later to shape his thinking." Ambanasom (2009) quotes Ngongwikuo to have once said:

I wanted to write something meaningful from my experiences, I knew I wanted to write about Kom people, their customs, their way of worship, religion, conflict...I wanted to show other people how my own people lived. I saw many of the customs myself and learned of others through the oral tradition(6)

One may conjecture here that Ngongwikuo certainly wanted, like Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* to show, probably to the mistaken westerners like Conrad that before their coming to

Africa, the people had a dignified culture of their own and that they did not hear about civilization and culture for the first time from their white colonial masters. Eustace Palmer (1999) quotes Achebe in his essay, "The Novelist as a Teacher," delivered in September 1964 at the University of Leeds during the first Commonwealth Conference, in which the pioneer African Literature theorist said:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse, to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement. And it is essentially a question of education in the best sense of the word. I would be quite satisfied if my novel (especially the one I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them(179)

As indicated earlier, and evident in the excerpt above, Achebe's main aim of writing *Things Fall Apart* was to help his people to regain their lost dignity hitherto denigrated by ignorant racists like Conrad. In a chat at the end of the Leeds conference with Donatus Nwoga as quoted by Ezenwa Ohaeto, (1997), Achebe further explained himself stating that he,

was using teacher there not in the narrow sense of teaching a scale or teaching to pass an examination. I was thinking primarily more of a deeper meaning of teaching and what I had in mind, what I think a novelist can teach is something very fundamental, namely to indicate to his readers, to put it crudely, that we in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans (103)

Achebe however recognized the fact that his people's past (culture) had "imperfections" but that must not give them an inferiority complex vis-a- vis the whites. He therefore called on his fellow African writers to commit themselves as educators to the task of rediscovering themselves as a people, refashioning

their literary and cultural institutions in a bid to assert their pride and human dignity. The skillful delineation of the rich cultural heritage of their respective societies notwithstanding, this study focuses on how Achebe and Ngongwikuo's works under discussion are 'records of the traumatic consequences of the impact of western capitalist colonialism on the traditional values and institutions of the African people', thanks to the 'imperfections' inherent in their cultures.

2. Thematic Analysis

By cultural iniquities, I mean the unfairness and weaknesses of the traditional cultural values of the societies Achebe and Ngongwikuo describe in the novels under study. That is to say, the Igbo tribe cultural values of Eastern Nigeria for Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and the Kom tribe cultural values of the North West Region of Cameroon for Ngongwikuo in *Taboo Love*. The Kom and Igbo traditional norms are described through the harrowing experiences of Okonkwo and Iyafi, the protagonists of *Things Fall Apart* and *Taboo Love* respectively.

To begin with, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* is a very important pillar of the clan who has risen to prominence through "solid personal achievement." He succeeds in defeating the most powerful and dreaded wrestler of the clan-Amalinze (the cat) at the tender age of eighteen. Okonkwo is a wealthy farmer with three wives and traditional titles to his credit. His hard earned reputation begins to dwindle when he accidentally kills a kinsman, the son of the late patriarch-Ezeudu during a farewell gun salute at the old man's action-packed funeral ceremony. The people of Umoufia in keeping with their age-old traditional rules, summarily exile him for seven years to his motherland-Mbanta. Ironically, and even surprisingly enough, no consideration is given to him as one of the most important pillars on which the stability and security of the society lies. He has committed the so-called "female crime" and since it is a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, he must flee from the land. His compound is stormed, set on fire and all the houses demolished by a crowd of angry men. His animals and barn are equally vandalized by the invaders who claim that they are acting under the dictates of the earth's goddess. The savage invaders intimate that they are only messengers who have been ordered by the

goddess to cleanse the land that has been polluted by Okonkwo with the blood of a kinsman. It is with a deep feeling of remorse that Okonkwo's bosom friend-Obierika rhetorically questions, "why... a man should suffer so grievously for an offence he committed "inadvertently" or, for want of a better term-unintentionally. Achebe through Obierika is seemingly saying that the traditional rules of the land are too dogmatic, unfair, cruel and unrealistic. Under normal circumstances, Okonkwo as an important corner stone on which the society stands should have been given a fair hearing by the traditional disciplinary council and his punishment mitigated.

It should be noted here that Okonkwo's long absence in Umoufia naturally works in favour of the white men who now easily penetrate the land with little or no resistance from the other less determined custodians of tradition. Prove is that shortly after his return from exile, Okonkwo ferociously resists the incursion of the colonizers in his community. As a stoic and no nonsense defender of his native traditional values, he murders the most insolent white messenger at the market place. Rather than allow himself to be captured and judged by the alien white man in his court, Okonkwo opts to do away with his life by committing suicide.

Other very primitive customs of the Igbo tribe exploited by the westerners in their supposed civilizing mission are; the consultation and reverence of oracles and soothsayers, the throwing into the evil forests, patients with swelling diseases like leprosy and those who die during the week of peace and the stigmatization or rejection of so-called outcasts.

The imperious oracle of the Hills and Caves pronounces a death sentence for Ikemefuna who was offered as a ransom by the people of Mbaino, Umoufia. Conditioned by his environment which equates masculinity to violence, Okonkwo brutally kills the boy who calls him 'father.' Okonkwo murders Ikemefuna for fear of being thought weak. What is however puzzling about the oracle's injunction is that no reason is given for the killing of the innocent young man. The death of Ikemefuna as Okonkwo puts it to his friend Obierika, is, as it were, "the authority and decision of the oracle" (46). This is all but a senseless manifestation of superstition, an unfair cultural value in the Igbo tribe that Achebe frowns at.

Like Achebe, J. A. Ngongwikuo in *Taboo Love* describes with admirable skills, the cultural norms of the Kom people in the fictional Cameroonian locality of Mukomangoc. At the centre of Ngongwikuo's satire is the practice of forced loveless polygamous marriages. Young girls are obliged to marry adults especially His Royal Highness-the Fon without their consent. The examples that readily come to mind are Iyafi and Nabi who are earmarked to marry the Fon and Timti respectively. Timti is the celebrated village hunter.

Once chosen as a *wintoc* (would be wife to His Royal Highness), a virgin girl is expected to remain chaste until the day her husband will disvirgin her. The obnoxious rules of the tribe forbid any young girl chosen by the lady queen of the palace for His Royal Highness to have sex with another man. Any betrothed girl who breaks this rule exposes herself and partner to a humiliating and merciless death penalty through poisoning. Wealthy men are forced to take titles by giving goats and fowls to already initiated title holders. Any well-to-do man who fails to take the imposed titles is equally doomed to die through poisoning.

In fact, Jam, the defiant lover of Iyafi in *Taboo Love* is condemned to die through poisoning for making love with His Royal Highness' would-be-wife. Iyafi is betrothed as one of the Fon's numerous wives but she elects to defy time-honoured tradition by making love with her childhood boyfriend, Jam. The young lovers are fully aware of the inescapable fate that awaits them for breaking tribal rules. When one of His royal Highness' messengers overzealously maintains that Jam should be immediately arrested and locked up in the palace "halled prison" so to prevent him from escaping death, Jam's partner in crime-Iyafi unceremoniously breaks in saying:

we cannot escape since something unknown will happen to us. so we had to stay rather than escape to end up the same way-dying somewhere, so we did not do that, because our death will shock the tribe and they will do something about growing out of their stiff rules of the tribe which allows for no exception, and death seems the best punishment for all who break the rules of the tribe
(36-37)

Iyafi further notes with determination that “we do not care for our lives when the rules of the tribe do not care for them” (37). Jam equally states unequivocally his willingness to die for the one he truly loves in the following words. “From the day I made love to you, you knew that I was, I am, and I shall always be ready to face my death with you.”(ibid 37). Ngongwikuo shows his indignation against the inhuman patriarchal tribal rules in the words of Iyafi when she fearlessly thunders out in the presence of the village elders saying: “I want to die for all the young girls of the tribe who face my fate. I love Jam and not His Highness. I therefore found it difficult to resist making love to the one I love!”(119). Iyafi’s statements resonate with feminist’s quest for female self-assertion and fulfillment. Iyafi is of the opinion that if marriage is the only opening for a woman in the patriarchal society in which she lives, then she should at least be allowed to do what she desires with her body. Forcing her to an old man she has no affection for, is tantamount to the violation of individual human rights. She opts to die as a martyr or scapegoat for the liberation of the female folk of her tribe.

What Ngongwikuo is seemingly saying about the institution of marriage is that, as the most sacred of human relationships, it should be contracted taking into consideration its most important ingredients, namely, mutual love and respect. Iyafi does not understand why in her tribe, people guilty of the type of ‘crime’ she has committed are not banished or asked “to pay a fine of goats and fowls to his Highness and elders as it is the case in other tribes.” (120). Iyafi’s steadfast decision to die for the one she truly loves is reminiscent of Echunjei and Jane Eyre’s attitude in Ambanasom’s *Son of the Native Soil* and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* respectively. These women all go against their parents’ wishes in choosing their life partners.

Unlike Jam, Iyafi’s life is temporarily spared because she is already pregnant for Jam. Kom tribal rules forbid the killing of a pregnant woman even if she is guilty of whatever crime. Jam on his part is judged and found guilty by the court of elders that does not hesitate to pronounce a death sentence for him. He “is condemned to die by the death of strokes.”(121). Jam faces death with a lot of courage. As a typical African traditionalist, he looks forward to meeting his fallen ancestors and lover (Iyafi) in the spirit world beyond. Iyafi at the end commits suicide by jumping

into a stream as a way through to her lover in the country of the death.

Another unfair cultural value on which Ngongwikuo turns his searchlight in *Taboo love* is the liberty of the Fon to marry as many as possible wives without the consent of the latter. The author clearly shows his indignation against this cultural practice in the words of the third person omniscient narrator in chapter twelve when he deliberately exaggerates saying, "according to the time table, it took one hundred days for a wife to have her turn, get a chance to be a bed partner for His Highness for a night." (60). The Fon as a matter of fact, had a countless number of wives. We are given to understand by the narrator that it was the daily duty of the lady queen of the palace to program which co-wife had to sleep with His Highness each night. The narrator says, "the only exception was for the young wives whom she allowed for three continuous days after her menses, so as to make sure that they pick up children from His Highness." (60). We are also told that the Fon did not know the total number of his children, let alone call them by their individual names. The Fon's wives are said to be highly adulterous given the long interval between one meeting and another with their husband (100 days minimum). The result is that the women bore many children out of wedlock but nobody dared criticize or expose them in public.

As indicated earlier, the loopholes inherent in the African cultural values were exploited to their advantage by the westerners in their colonizing enterprise on the continent. When the imperialist, referred to as the "red man" in *Taboo Love* first appears, the people of Umoufia and Mukomangoc(Kom) in *Things Fall Apart* and *Taboo Love* respectively, offer him lands they believe are inhabited by evil spirits. The villagers are strongly convinced that offering the missionaries the so-called evil lands will discourage the expatriates from settling in their communities. The leaders of Mbanta superstitiously conclude that the evil forest is "a real battle field in which the missionaries will show their victory or strength over traditional values." (105). The narrator says, "the inhabitants of Mbanta expected all the missionaries to be death in four days." (ibid). But ironically, all the four days pass and nothing happens to the missionaries and their new converts. Everyone is taken aback and it is once more sheepishly and

humorously concluded “that the whiteman’s fetish had unbelievable power.”(106).

1. Like their counterparts in *Things Fall Apart*, the people of Mukomangoc (Kom) in *Taboo Love* offer the missionaries land they are convinced is inhabited by evil spirits. The Ijinikom hill is warded off in a carefree manner to the evangelists with the hope that the church people will be unable to bear the disturbances of the witches and wizards who inhabit the area. It is with conviction that the chief priest says:

we all know that if they build there, the wizards and witches will never allow them to sleep even for a night. They will keep tormenting them to sleep even for a night by stopping their hearts from beating. The red man will not stand this and will go away quietly (173)

But to the greatest chagrin of the villagers, nothing happens with the missionaries and their followers at the Ijinikom hill when they establish their church there. Visibly defeated, the Fon shamelessly says, “we waited long enough for the witches and wizards to drive him away but it appears that his magic and witchcraft is far above that of those amongst whom he settled.”(117).

Upset by the news that one of his *wintocs* (would-be-wives), will be tying the knots or getting married to another man in the Whiteman’s church, His Royal Highness immediately plans to send his messengers to burn down the man of God’s residence and worship house (church). Unfortunately for the Fon, information about his diabolic plan leaks out and the Reverend father is informed well ahead of time. The man of God galvanizes the support of his catechist and new converts to puncture the Fon’s moves. The three loyal and very courageous messengers who show up to execute the Fon’s orders are arrested and given snake beatings. They are copiously and mercilessly lynched in such a manner that they barely or narrowly escape to their homes for their dear lives.

The point I am eager to make here is that blinded by their superstitious belief systems, the natives of Mbanta and Mukomangoc in the novels under analysis carefreely surrender

their lands to potential rivals who later effectively use the parcels of land to outsmart them. The people's sense of frustration and regret is remorsefully and pathetically summed up by Obierika at the end of chapter twenty one in *Things Fall Apart* when he declares:

The Whiteman is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (125)

If the indigenes of Mbanta and Mukomangoc had not been too short sighted and superstitious to think that the missionaries won't succeed in the so-called ill-fated forests, they wouldn't have so effortlessly thrown away their lands to strangers. The missionaries not only build churches on the land offered to them but they as well construct schools, trading stores hospitals and courtrooms in which they judge those who go against the law.

Although indicted for the adulteration of the African culture, the Whiteman however comes with development. The Whiteman comes along with better health facilities like the hospitals in which patients are given proper medical attention. Modern hospitals put an end to the throwing away of twins and patients suffering from swelling diseases like leprosy into the evil forests. The once dreaded evil forests now serves as sites for the modern health infrastructures in the hitherto provincial traditional set up.

The church on its part serves as a melting pot where everybody, irrespective of their social status can find refuge so to speak. Put differently, the Whiteman's religion does not discriminate as it accommodates twins and outcasts ostracized by the traditional society. Western Christian religion also comes as a panacea to forced loveless polygamous marriages in Umoufia and Mukomangoc (Kom). The church and colonial administrators preach the doctrine of one man, one woman (monogamy). Warning the all-powerful Fon through his interpreter in *Taboo love*, the British District officer says:

Tell him I have been told that he just collects girls from their parents and adds to his already big number of wives and that he gets boys for free to serve in his palace. Well tell him that I will not interfere if the girls like to be his wives or the boys his servants, but he must know that if the people complain, I will let them do what they want (184)

The District officer here warns the Fon against his patronizing attitude of forced marriages and selection of young boys for free labour. The administrator forewarns the Fon promising that he will stand by the people should they lay any complaint to him about His Majesty's unfair injunctions. Ngongwikuo's sympathy goes to women whom he thinks should be given a free hand to choose the men for whom their hearts beats. The novelist is seemingly advocating for the abrogation of societal norms that constraint individual behavior. Emmanuel Obiechina (1988) posits that, it is the writer's duty to:

Use his medium to affirm those values that give fullness to the quality of life as perceived in time and space and by the same necessity, to attack those negative values that undermines the sense of fullness of life and the realization of man's full potentials. (17)

This is exactly what Achebe and Ngongwikuo in *Things Fall Apart* and *Taboo Love* set out to do. They show us "the multiple infirmities" in our culture that "afflict us" and as well suggest the way forward.

The creation of powerful fictional characters like Futunga and Iyafi in *Taboo Love*, who make nonsense of traditional unrealistic norms, is paradigmatic of the author's message. Futunga and Iyafi in principle defy traditional tribal rules by marrying men that are not imposed on them. Funtunga receives baptism in the Whiteman's church where she weds with the man she sincerely loves, namely, Nkwi. This marriage throws open the floodgates of free and genuine matrimonial unions in the community. In fact, Reverend father Hans witnesses a significant increase in his flock of Christians after the ground-breaking

marriage. This is because the people now feel protected by the white man of God and his native brother, the District officer.

Apart from the thematic similarities of the two novels, Achebe's influence on Ngongwikuo as mentioned at the beginning of this paper can as well be noticed in terms of structure. Both novels are divided into three parts of easy to read chapters. Both writers in the first parts of their respective works focus, through the third person omniscient narrative point of view on the description of traditional African values before introducing the white man in the later parts.

3. Conclusion

We set out at the beginning of this investigation not only to demonstrate Achebe's sway on Ngongwikuo, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to show that though writing from different cultural backgrounds, both Achebe and Ngongwikuo in *Things Fall Apart* and *Taboo Love* respectively, are concerned amongst other issues with the negative aspects of African traditional values that acted as a leeway to the implantation of western values on the continent. By so skillfully exploring the weaknesses inherent in their indigenous cultures, both writers indirectly advocate their reevaluation. This view is equally expressed by Abba A. Abba (2020) in his article entitled "Rethinking the Slave as a Tragic Redeemer in Achebe *Things Fall Apart*" when he submits that:

Achebe's work offers us a moment of reflection on cultural practices that we are slaves to and through which we enslave others. In so many ways, it suggests that while we accuse the west of colonial injustice, we ought to pry inwards to see how we ourselves reproduce and perpetuate slavery in our cultural production(148) (my emphasis).

From the forgone discussion, we can safely conclude that Achebe and Ngongwikuo's implicitly stated message in *Things Fall Apart* and *Taboo Love* is that, while attacking the west for being responsible for the destruction of our cherished native values, we need to pause for a while for self-examination. This will enable us

to weed out the black sports we have in our cultures that open the way to uninvited haulty friends and strangers.

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