

**Contextualizing ‘Philosophic Sagacity’ among the
Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria: An Examination of
Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart***

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ABSTRACT

This paper validates Odera Oruka's assertion that Philosophic Sagacity is a pervasive phenomenon among African peoples. It argues that whereas Oruka mostly focused on the Kenyan social environment in defense of his thesis, his observations are also applicable to African communities outside Kenya's borders, especially in their pre-colonial settings, where there were people who interrogated the rationale of their cultures' beliefs and practices. Towards this end, the paper deploys textual exegesis on Chinua Achebe's epic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, set among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria.

Key Words

Chinua Achebe, Igbo, philosophic sagacity, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

African philosophy has now overcome the need for definition. What is needed therefore is to identify fundamental concepts and principles within the African environment and to explain their philosophical character. The work of Odera Oruka represents an attempt to meet this need. However, a further need is to show in as many African communities as possible that these concepts and principles are indeed interrogated by philosophic sages. Critical thought is simply a rational activity on its own as pure thought, or in relation to action as praxis (Nwala 2010, 107).

Consequently, my aim in this paper is to contextualize philosophic sagacity among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria. My reflections focus on Chinua Achebe's celebrated novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which is a work chronicling the indigenous Igbo world, and the impact of missionary and colonial activities on it. Through the elders of the community in the novel such as Okonkwo, Obierika and Uchendu, I seek to illustrate that there were sages among the Igbo, but in addition, there were critical and logical thinkers among the sages, a vindication of Oruka's assertion that there were philosophically minded people in pre-colonial African communities.

While some might question the authenticity of this undertaking on the basis that *Things Fall Apart* is a novel and therefore fiction rather than fact, two considerations validate the present venture. *First*, novels and other creative literary works arise out of concrete socio-political realities, in Achebe's case, the reality of an indigenous African culture subdued by Western colonialism. *Second*, the use of creative writing for philosophical reflection is not a new endeavour. Philosophers of the existentialist school have used novels and plays to express their philosophical views, with some of the best known works in this category being Jean-Paul Sartre's novels and plays that earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY?

Philosophic sagacity is a concept developed by Odera Oruka, a Kenyan philosopher. Oruka used the term to explain that there were logical and critical African individuals in pre-colonial Africa, and because of the depth of their reasoning, they were philosophers and their reflections philosophical. Prof. Paul Radin had earlier stated that in every society, and with respect to ancient and traditional societies in Africa, there were individuals who occupied themselves with the basic problems of what we customarily term philosophy (cited in Momoh 2000, 12). A sage, according to Oruka, is usually an opinion leader, frequently consulted by people because he is versed in the wisdom and traditions of his people, and is wise within the conventional and historical confines of his culture. Thus a sage is a custodian of the traditions of his people. Philosophic sagacity is the product of the reflections of a person who is both a sage and a critical thinker. This implies that a person can be a sage and not a critical thinker (this would be an ordinary sage as contrasted with the philosophic sage).

Odera Oruka initiated a series of dialogues with Kenyan African elders, and concluded that some of them had individualistic and personal answers to issues just as others were also guided by cultural philosophy. He stated that the aim of his research was "*to help substantiate or invalidate the claim that traditional African peoples were innocent of logical and critical thinking*" (Oruka 1991, 17). Consequently, he went on to identify his philosophical interlocutors by names just as ancient Greek philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes were all referred to by name, and general ideas about the originative stuff of the universe attributed to them.

The background to Oruka's assertion was the earlier prevailing opinion, held by a number of Western scholars, that what Africans had were communal thought, folk philosophy, ethno philosophy, *et cetera*, and not qualified to be labelled as philosophy. In this, they had the support of African post-colonial philosophers and collaborators who C.S. Momoh (2000, 16) labelled African logical neo-positivists because they chose to deny philosophic status to Africans in order to be compliant with the prevailing opinions overseas. Nwala (2010, 111) commented that most people who engaged in the debate between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy had a very limited historical perspective of the issue, especially on the Eurocentric revision of world intellectual heritage, which instead of acknowledging the Egyptian origins of European thought as Homer, Isaac Newton and many others did, denied this origin and asserted instead that European social and intellectual evolution and tradition started with the Greeks (in Philosophy and Science), the Hebrews (in Religion) and the Romans (in Law and Administration). This denial of philosophic thought to Africans was unfortunate because all human beings possess the same mental characteristics (Burns 1963, 429). In this paper we seek to undertake an inquiry similar to Odera Oruka's, in our case among the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria.

The Igbo and their Philosophies

The Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria are one of the most dominant groups in West Africa. According to Uchendu, "*the Igbo world is not only a world in which people strive for equality, it is one in which change is constantly expected. Its contractual character makes it a constantly changing world*" (Uchendu 1963, 15). One basic contract is that between human beings and spirits which, for the Igbo, is not simply permanent, for at times the spirits may change their roles just as human beings do. Whenever the spirits do not adequately perform the roles assigned to them, they are replaced by more pragmatic ones. Concerning this Nwala wrote:

Igbo traditional worldview, no doubt, was religiously-based but dynamic and pragmatic. The cosmological system is spirit-regarding. Not only is the world conceived as swarming with spirits, but everything including man (*madu*), and things (*ihe*) are conceived as

basically spiritual. However, within their religious outlook, the economic and physical survival of the people is their primary objective. Everything is centered on the economic activity of the people. The functions of spirits are essentially economic and materialistic (Nwala 2010, 115).

The dynamism of a society is usually precipitated by some critically-minded individuals who are engaged in reflection about their society. Basing our reflections on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we shall show instances of people who were cultural philosophers, but more importantly, others who at times disagreed with what may be called popular opinions by holding individual critical, logical and constructive ideas.

Early in the Novel, a story is told of Obiako, who queried an oracular injunction, because he felt it was not in accord with common sense and right judgement. Obiako had gone to the Oracle for consultation, whereupon the Oracle told him that his dead father (who had bequeathed him nothing) wanted him to sacrifice a goat to him. In response, Obiako was said to have retorted: "Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive" (Achebe 2008, 16).

This retort is interesting for a people whose consciousness is influenced by the decisions of the gods. This act of disobedience is difficult to believe for such a community, as is shown in another episode about the Week of peace, when every one is expected to be at peace with his colleagues and neighbours. Okonkwo was insulted by his wife, Ekwefi, whereupon he beat her, making the Chief priest of the Community to visit him and demand a cleansing. When Okonkwo was trying to provide justification for his action, the Chief priest said:

"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 crops 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. Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* [hut] and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her. The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase and we shall all perish ..." (Achebe 2008, 24).

In another instance involving the killing of Ikemefuna, a boy received as ransom from another clan and put under the custody of Okonkwo, a killing which was believed to have been commanded by a Deity, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, referred to as the oldest man in the quarter of Okonkwo's village, visited Okonkwo and gave advice that is relevant to a defence of the existence of philosophic sages among the Igbo: "*That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death*" (Achebe 2008, 45). He further cautioned Okonkwo thus:

"Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father" (Achebe 2008, 46).

Sadly, Okonkwo did not heed this sound advice, and went ahead to accompany the group of men who carried out the execution, and in fact was the one that killed Ikemefuna. When he returned from that gruesome mission, he engaged in a very enlightening dialogue with Obierika, an elder whose thought is the major plank of our argument in defence of the presence of philosophic sagacity among the Igbo. Obierika displays an intimate acquaintance with the culture of his people, but also exhibits a critical outlook towards it:

"I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy," he asked Obierika.

"Because I did not want to," Obierika replied sharply. "I had something better to do."

"You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle, who said he should die."

"I do not. Why should I?. But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision."

"But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the Oracle would do then?"

"You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood, and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you, I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families."

“The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger,” Okonkwo said. “A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.”

“That is true,” Obierika agreed. “But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed, I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it” (Achebe 2008, 52-53).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Igbo, like many other African ethnic groups, have a predominantly communal outlook. This is traced to their theistic cosmology. Because of fear of the wrath of God, they respond unquestioningly to oracular injunctions, as shown in the earlier part of this paper through the dialogue between the Chief Priest and Okonkwo during the week of peace. However, Igbo beliefs about God, human beings and the physical environment are the result of critical reflection. The greatest vindication of this fact is the supplementary thesis of “existential gratitude” (Momoh 2000, 425), which states that when a deity is not performing positively for the people, Africans can remove him and replace him with another, or create another existent which serves their purpose.

Among the Igbo, the individual perspectives of members of the community are highly esteemed, a fact which is evident in the Igbo saying that “*Uche one adigha njo*”, meaning as there are different human beings, so are there very many shades of opinion. Consequently, whatever position is adopted for implementation is based on consensus, which rather than being the opinion of the majority, is arrived at through negotiation that takes into account all shades of opinion. Respect for the individual’s opinion among the Igbo is evident in the incident, earlier cited, of the man who contested his dead father’s demand for a goat. This is backed by an Igbo proverb that “when a native priest is divining for you, you too must also be divining for yourself”, meaning that one is expected to rationally sieve the truth, instead of accepting complacently whatever the priest says.

Obierika, Okonkwo’s friend, and Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in the quarter of Okonkwo’s village, offer us the best evidence of the presence of philosophic sages among the Igbo. Obierika had three wives, and had the same number of titles as

Okonkwo, which goes to show that he represents a high ranking member of the Igbo community. Yet, while Okonkwo represented the communal custodian of Igbo thought, an ordinary sage, Obierika and Ogbuefi Ezeudu exemplify our earlier assertion that their philosophies are derived from experience. Their advice to Okonkwo not to have a hand in killing Ikemefuna is a function of a psycho-spiritual reason backed by sound logic. One's child is an extension of oneself, and the annihilation of oneself is self-contradictory. Okonkwo's uncritical actions gradually led him to commit suicide, an abominable act in Igboland, leaving Obierika, the philosopher, to mourn him. Thus Ogbuefi Ezeudu's and Obierika's variance with communal thought is in accord with Odera Oruka's thesis of the existence of indigenous African men and women who hold opinions based on critical reflection.

As further evidence of deep philosophical reflection on Obierika's part, When Okonkwo accidentally killed the son of a kinsman, a female *ochu*, an act for which the offender's house and belongings had to be burnt, Obierika participated with others in the destruction of Okonkwo's property, but afterwards went into deep reflection:

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.

Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time, he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?. The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil, it soiled the others.(Achebe 2008, 100)

By participating in the cleansing ceremony of destroying Okonkwo's property, Obierika was in accord with the traditions of the Igbo. Yet he had time for critical reflection. Here again, the fact of Obierika's critical reflection on the issue indicates the process through which changes are effected in society. With such reflection comes a conviction which requires action. The beginning of change in society is critical reflection with a view to finding solutions to pertinent problems.

It is worth noting that the Igbo, like several other African societies, were throwing away twins not because they were foolish, but rather because they were informed by experience. They reasoned that it was only in the animal kingdom that twins and triplets, et cetera are born. The error inherent in this thinking was similar to the earlier Western belief in the geocentric hypothesis which was later shown to be false and replaced by the heliocentric hypothesis. What is more, there are ethical considerations behind the Igbo custom which were rationally defensible. The belief in the commonality of all human beings is succinctly expressed in the idea of "one oiled finger soiling others". It teaches the great principle of brotherhood, respect for the value of each and every human being, and ultimately an ecological respect for all entities in nature. It is an injunction against people causing cosmic, planetary or communal damage because of personal interest. This is indicative of mature ethical reflection.

Obierika's outlook is no doubt the kind which Oruka regarded as that of a philosophic sage who is not only wise, but also rational and critical in understanding or solving the inconsistencies of his or her culture, and coping with foreign encroachments on it. Oruka explained that "as thinkers, they opt for or recommend only those aspects of the belief and wisdom which satisfy their rational scrutiny. In this respect, they are potentially or contemporarily in clash with the die-hard adherents of the prevailing common beliefs" (Oruka 1991, 178). Such people are not simply sagacious elders, but philosophic sages - they rise beyond the sphere of sagacity to the realm of critical thought (cf. Azenabor 2009, 74). Their reflections serve as a source of reform to their communities, offering insightful solutions to fundamental problems. The thoughts and actions of Obierika concur with these characteristics, and are different from those of elders such as Okonkwo, who are simply folk sages.

Philosophy engages in critical reflection on our everyday challenges and tries to proffer meanings out of the confusions and complexities that life throws at us. A philosopher is usually a child of his or her culture. As such, although the answers he or she gives to pertinent questions may be universal, the backdrop of his or her reflections is always the peculiar problems of his or her environment and time.

Further evidence of Obierika's critical approach is provided when he reminisces on the effect of colonialism with its attendant pollution and desecration of Igboland. Against Okonkwo's suggestion for the community to bear arms and chase away the white man from their land, Obierika evaluates the situation as follows:

“It is already too late. Our own men and sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia, we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power?. They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers and we would be like Abame...

“How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?. The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably 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” (Achebe 2008, 140-141)

Evidence of a critical and reflective outlook in some of the sages is also exhibited in a conversation between the white man, Mr. Brown, and one of the great men of the land, Ogbuefi Akunna. Mr. Brown had argued that the Christian God was the only true one, and that the African God was not. In his attempt to persuade Akunna to do away with his God, the latter responded:

“You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth. We also believe that and call him, Chukwu. He made the entire world and other gods” (Achebe 2008, 142).

Against the accusation that Africans worship idols made from wood, Akunna replied:

“Yes, it is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But he made them for his messengers so that we could approach him through them. ... we

make sacrifices to the little gods but when they fail and there is no one else to turn to, we go to Chukwu ... we appear to pay greater attention to the little gods but that is not so. We worry them more because we are afraid to worry their Master. Our fathers knew that Chukwu was the Overlord and that is why many of them gave their children the name Chukwuka - God is Supreme" (Achebe 2008, 143-144).

Against the assertion that we should not fear God because he is a God of Love, Akunna replied: "But we must fear him when we are not doing His will, and who is to tell His will?. It is too great to be known" (Achebe 2008, 143).

When Okonkwo is forced to go to exile following his inadvertent killing of a kinsman, he goes to his mother's kinsmen. There he broods about the fate that had befallen him. Ogbuefi Uchendu, the head of his mother's kinsmen, gathers his entire family and before he gives his advice, says, "*it is Okonkwo that I primarily wish to speak to, but I want all of you to note what I am going to say.*" In the fashion of Socrates who is fond of raising questions, he raises a series of thought-provoking questions:

"...why is Okonkwo with us today?. This is not his clan. We are only his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile condemned for seven years to live in a strange land. And so, he is bowed with grief. But there is just one question I would like to ask him. Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is *Nneka* or 'Mother is Supreme'? We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say *Nneka - Mother is Supreme*. There is another question: Why is it that when a woman dies, she is taken home to be buried with her own kinsmen?. She is not buried with her husband's kinsmen. Why is that? Your mother was brought home to me and buried with my people. Why was that?" (Achebe 2008, 106).

When Okonkwo replies that he does not know, Ogbuefi Uchendu chides him for not knowing, yet he is full of sorrow because he has come to live in his motherland for a few years. He then proceeds to tell them the answer thus:

"It is true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother

is there to protect you. She is buried there and that is why we say that mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted?. Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile.... These are now your kinsmen, you think you are the greatest sufferer in the world. Do you know that men are sometimes banished for life?. Do you know that men sometimes lose all their yams and even their children?. I had six wives once. I have none now except that young girl who knows not her right from her left. Do you know how many children I have buried - children I begot in my youth and strength?. Twenty-two. I did not hang myself and I am still alive. If you think you are the greatest sufferer in the world, ask my daughter, Akueni, how many twins she has borne and thrown away ... I have no more to say to you” (Achebe 2008, 107).

The answers that Ogbuefi Uchendu offers are borne out of deep reflection. The answers, though arising out of a specific situation, are universal.

Logical clarity is further seen in the way argument is presented in Igbo gatherings. The first step is to awake the mind and emotion through passionate salute which forces attention. This is usually followed by a speech which introduces the issue to be deliberated upon. Eventually, the main reason for a resolution to pursue a particular course of action is offered and is usually laced with proverbs. All this is evident when the people of Umuofia gather to discuss their reaction to the menace of the white man. After Ogbuefi Onyeka who had a commanding voice with which to draw attention and call the assembly to order had saluted the people, Ogbuefi Okika marshalled the following argument:

“You all know why we are here, when we ought to be building our barns or mending our huts, when we should be putting our compounds in order...

“All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes

“This is a great gathering. No clan can boast of greater members or greater valour. But are we all here?. I ask you: Are all the sons of Umuofia with us here? They are not. They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained

true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So, we must do what our fathers would never have done" (Achebe 2008, 161-162).

Even with the threat of the white man's power, the people still meet to discuss their affairs and provide solutions to their problems. Unfortunately, while this meeting is going on, the court messengers sent by the District Commissioner to stop the meeting walk into the gathering in their usual arrogant, intimidating manner. Okonkwo challenges one of them, and when he blurts the order for the meeting to stop, Okonkwo, in anger, quickly brings out his matchet and kills him. With his people having failed to support him by arresting the other court messengers, and fearing what would happen to him if the District Commissioner comes to arrest him, Okonkwo goes home and takes his own life. When the District Commissioner comes to arrest Okonkwo and finds him hanging on a tree, Obierika, who had been gazing at his friend's dangling body, turns suddenly to the District Commissioner and says ferociously: "*That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog*" (Achebe 2008, 165). Suicide is one of the issues addressed in applied ethics, with a view to determining whether under certain circumstances one ought to protect one's honour or run away from shame. Igbo ethics views suicide as cowardice and an abomination. A man must always continue to strive and not to take his own life, otherwise he loses honour and is buried in the evil forest.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing exegesis, we conclude that as Achebe demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart*, there are philosophic sages among the Igbo. These men and women are critical of the prevailing communal thought and are wont to reflect on the state of affairs of the community, and in some instances come up with conclusions and prescriptions that are at variance with their community's worldview. They differ from the ordinary sages who Oruka explained do *not undertake critical reflection*: "... *some of the sages are simply moralists and the disciplined, die-hard faithful of a*

tradition. Others are merely historians and good interpreters of the history and customs of their people” (Oruka 1991, 177). One can question the kind of ratio of philosophic sages to folk sages in the community, but that would not lead to the conclusion that there were no critically minded individuals. The reason for their limitation naturally, according to Onwuejeogwu (1992, 224), was the psychological prohibition in the community. Thus we can appreciate the likes of Obierika, Uchendu and Ezeudu who risked social opprobrium and went ahead to have individual, critical and sagacious reflections on the pertinent issues facing their society. Nnamdi Azikiwe acknowledged the role of these people as follows:

By delving into the various schools of philosophy, I was convinced that although the [Western] system was more systematic than the African, nevertheless, African philosophy was practical in the sense that people did not waste time on logic and frivolous arguments. Their philosophy was more pragmatic in that it was related to the pragmatic problems of everyday life, which they solved by adapting themselves to the logic of reason and experience (Azikiwe 1970, 120).

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