

AESTHETICS OF AFRICANISM IN NDUBUISI GEORGE'S *WOES OF IKENGA*

Obi Gladys Nwakaego, PhD
Department of English
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Igbariam Campus, Anambra State
nwakaegoobi@yahoo.com
08035522897

Abstract

Literature is a tool, a means of self-expression, and an avenue through which writers express their experiences, outlooks, sense of sympathy, and patriotism toward their various societies. Writers have expressed, in many works, their cultural values, norms, attitudes, traditions, beliefs, and dignity. This study attempts an exposition of Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* with a view to appreciating the African aesthetics in the novel, particularly the cultural heritage of the people, their beliefs, worldview, and norms, and how these affect the African characters in the novel. The theoretical framework for this study is sociological criticism, which highlights the social relevance of a work of art. The data for this study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The novel serves as the primary source, while library texts, journals, and internet materials constitute the secondary sources. This study examines the beauty of African culture. It demonstrates the importance of knowing, understanding, and valuing African culture and its beauty. It also broadens our understanding of our roots and the various values, norms, heritages, and beliefs that are uniquely African. The implications of these cultural projections form the crux of the study.

Keywords: Culture, Aesthetics, Africanism, Traditions, Roots, Values

Introduction

The art of writing fiction is often regarded by many as an imaginative work of art which is not real but purely an invention from the authors' fountain of creative ingenuity. People are often times being misled to believe that fiction is simply a 'counterfeiting account' of a presupposed real life event far away from reality. It is for this obvious reason that many tend to neglect the works of fiction as not worthy of any serious attention and concentration. But art is real, and deals with real life situations of the people. Knowledge of the sociopolitical, as well as economic situations that give rise to the large corpus of literary and creative works of art will go a long way to convince any literate minded personality that fiction could be anything but a creation of real life situations blended and woven on the powers of imagination.

Chinua Achebe, one of the most renowned African novelists in his work *Morning Yet On Creation Day* highlights the nature of what we generally regard as fiction. In the work, he stirred up many dusts of argument on the true nature of fiction. Achebe asserts that: "Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence through his imagination"(107).

Achebe believes that what writers do is to recreate in their works, a different order of reality from the one it took from but not entirely an abstraction. Literature always depends on human reality, thus, all literary works depict human actual situations. So, literature is a mirror which reflects man's actual life in the society where he is found. Literature also borrows from history and relies on everyday events. Literature, like all other art forms, draws on human experiences and tries to reflect the same and communicate it to man in order and artistic form. According to Asika Ikechukwu;

Literature in the commonest term is the reflection of man and his society. It is a mirror through which man as a social being could be looked upon and his society examined. It looks at human behaviour and attitudes to life which it often extols, criticizes, ridicules, and mocks in order to correct and build a more orderly and harmonious society. Literature teaches and entertains. It tells us who we are, where we are and where we ought to be (2).

Asika is here affirming to the various functions of literature in relation to its social attributes. Aesthetics refers to the appreciation or appraisal of value or beauty of a work of art. In a more narrowed sense, aesthetics refers to the philosophical contemplation of the beauty of a work of art. Africaness refers to elements in the works of art that expresses themes, ideas or notions that are African. At a moderate level, such Africaness is seen as representing the African aesthetic matrix. At the extreme, such Africaness may be an expression of cultural nationalism, in the literature of Africans in diaspora, Africaness takes the form of the black beauty Africans' homeland. It is often a romanticization of the African heritage.

There is a need to showcase the beauty of Africa and its intricacies, its cosmology, its environment and its worldview. This is to explicate and unearth the hidden treasures in the African soil. This study is concerned with exploring aspects of African culture otherwise neglected by some of her people diaspora and restoring the African image that suffered colonial perception and marginalization. It cuts through the inglorious perception of the Africans and intervenes in representing an alternative image of the African in the full exploit of his culture and tradition. The study is made to create a sense of balance in the representation of the African cultural dynamics and landscape. Scholar like Chinua Achebe has towed his part, he was an unapologetic member of the generation of African writers who were fighting back, challenging the stock of Western images on their homeland.

According to Olorunfoba-Oju, similarities between African and Caribbean Aesthetics have been demonstrated at various levels because of the numerous African elements preserved in several sectors of the diaspora. In his view:

One thing stands out when one reads a novel by an African on Africa. It's the fact that it is dominated by elements that reveal not only the cultural realities of its people but also the peculiarities of the region (39).

So, aesthetics is a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of art, beauty and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. According to Dictionary.com; Aesthetics is concerned with notions such as the beautiful and the ugly. Merriam Webster defines aesthetics as something relating to art or beauty. Africanism also refers to characteristics of African culture that can be traced in societal practices and institutions of the Africa diaspora. Merriam Webster says that Africanism is a characteristic feature of African culture, the nature and practices.

The theoretical approach for this study is sociological criticism. The Sociological Approach nurtures the idea that literature is a product of the society. It projects the social issues in the society through literature. Asika Ikechukwu has this to say:

Sociological Approach is rooted in the idea that literature is a product of the society. It sees a literary work as nothing but a product of several real aspects of the society of a writer. The critic using this approach to criticism is interested in determining the real life social-political and economic issues that obviously gave rise to a work of art (258)

Kofi Agyekum in Asika Ikechukwu's *Literary Appreciation; A practical Demonstration* says, "Sociological criticism focus on the values of society and how those values are reflected in the literary works". He further added that "sociological criticism studies the economic, political and cultural issues expressed in literary works because they reflect the true picture of what exists in the society" (258).

From these opinions, it is not out of balance to say that the sociological approach is solely concerned with the happenstances in the society. Webster Dictionary has this to add: Sociological criticism is a literary criticism directed to understanding (or placing) literature in his larger social context; it codifies the literary strategies that are employed to represent social constructs through a sociological methodology. Sociological criticism analyzes both how the social functions in literature and how literature works in society.

Igbo Cosmology and Worldview as Aesthetics of Africanism in Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga*

A worldview is referred to as how people perceive and explain their world, or the ways things are or expressed in their environment. A worldview can be understood in terms of a unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concepts, which order the natural and social rhythms, and the place of individuals and communities in them. In other words, a worldview reflects people's basic assumptions about, and perceptions of the universe which gives orientation and value to their life. A people's worldview stands for their source of explanation for the way things are in the world, including their theories of illness, death and misfortunes and how human afflictions and problems can be resolved. In the case of the traditional Igbo community, all forms of individual and group religious practices occur within the broad outline of their worldview and particular beliefs, such as the basis for the ritual naming of a child, the okuku onye uwa ceremony, death and burial rites, and other traditional values and practices.

The Igbo believe in the existence of deities; *Chukwu* as the central deity is classified as the '*ndi mmuo*'-invincible beings, category of ontological beings which includes *Ala* or *Ani*-the divine feminine earth force, *chi*-the personal deity, *ndiochie*-the ancestors, and *mmuo*- minor spirits. As the novelist says:

The people wisely preserved the dreadful punishment of the exile for equally dreadful sins against their powerful earth goddess Ani, and offences that should have merited death were converted to banishment... Since bloodshed was against the command of Chukwu, the great being and against the moral code of Ani, those who merited such forms of punishment were handed over to the army commanders (11).

The Igbo believe in their *Chi* and *Chukwu Abiama*, and this has controlled their daily lives, their community life. When they wake up in the morning, greetings are accorded to *Chukwu*. They perceive *Chukwu* as the controller of everything and so they reverence him. Reverence for *Chukwu*, the lesser deities and their *Chi* is very much present, even before the colonial masters came, especially in the character of Reverend Klaus who had to blend to the tradition of the people and he shared a kolanut with Chukwuma. Eloka came in with a bowl of water and a wooden tray containing kolanut, alligator pepper and a moulded clay chalk. The items, with their significance as marks of spiritual purity and hospitality, was not new to Reverend Klaus. "Reverend Klaus repeatedly washed his own share of the kolanut and hastily made a sign of the Cross before throwing it into his mouth" (20).

In the excerpt above, Kolanut in the traditional Igbo society marks hospitality; this is why Eloka brought in first kolanut and water, this showed that the visitor is highly welcomed to the house, kolanut is the king of ceremony, it is used to bring peace, it is used to settle disputes between people, and it has its various other uses. As the novelist says;

Their system of governance could be best described as theocratic with the central and divine authority being *Chukwu*, the supreme being and other lesser deities that dealt with the day to day activities of mortals through their priests and priestesses (36).

From the above, the role of *Chukwu Abiama* and the lesser deities cannot be overridden. *Chukwu Abiama* is seen as the greatest Supreme Being, he maintains his superior nature, which is why he has the lesser deities and other of his servants at his beck and call. The gods are explicated properly in the novel. As the narrator says:

It was unthinkable that mortals could communicate directly with *Chukwu Okike*, the God of creation who ordered the theocratic universe. He was believed to have created lesser gods in his infinite goodness through which humans could reach him. (37)

Chukwu created other gods through which mortals could reach him; he made them his vassals showing his superior nature, these gods were created for different reasons, some were made to tempt, some were made to protect, some were made to see over nature and its environment. He made other gods like *Ekwensu*, the tempter god; *Anyanwu*, the sun god; *Agbala*; *Ikenga*; the homed god; *Agwu*, etc.

As the narrator says;

"*Ekwensu*, the tempter god who had been given the authority to go against normal rules and conventional human and spirit behavior. His greatest weapons, which were mostly sin, love for pleasure and fear of the unknown (38).

So the god, *Ekwensu* is also the tempter god, his job is to hunt down man so that man would not be able to obey God. He causes them to sin, using tools like lust of the flesh, pleasures of the world and fear of the unknown. He has the authority to make man behave in a way that is not in accordance to the conventional way of behaving.

Anyanwu, the *Sun god*, together with his wife *Agbala*, lived far away from mortals but saw and reported human activities to *Chukwu*. Even as he gave light to both the righteous and evildoers alike, his purity and brightness were created as a perfect image of what man should be. As the narrator says:

Anyanwu is the *Sun god*, he provides for the people despite who you are and what you might have done, he gives light to all and sundry. *Anyanwu* creates the image of the supposed image of what man should be, *Anyanwu* and his wife *Agbala* is not unjust, he is fair to everyone under the sun (38).

Ikenga, the home god, was created and endowed with unimaginable strength and purity. A supernatural warrior who was believed to have come down to earth and made for himself a dwelling place on top of an iroko tree... "the god immortalized himself into a wooden totem depicting a well-developed two homed human figure holding a sword at the right hand and a tusk at the left with a fierce experience" (38).

Symbolically, the novel is named probably after the god and protagonist- *Ikenga*, hence *Woes of Ikenga*. *Ikenga* himself, born to *Chukwuma Udeaja*, is strong, fierce and brutally willed, just like the god *Ikenga*. *Ikenga* is a god or a lesser deity that depicts strength in a man. It is mostly significant to men, because men are naturally strong and they are seen as the stronger sex of the two. *Anyanwu*, *Agbala*, *Ikenga*, *Ekwensu*, *Amadioha* are the few amongst the lesser deities created by *Chukwu Abiama*.

The Igbos strongly believe in *omenani*, or *odinani* which happens to be their religious practices, customs, traditions, norms, values, taboos, cultural practices, modes of interactions, etc. So instead of going to the whiteman (Reverend Klaus), they prefer to go to the traditionalists, *dibias* who can foretell what was going to happen. The people or the custom that they had always been known to, accustomed to, just like *Udeaja* and *Chukwuma* were accustomed to their *Ogwugwu* shrine and had become custodians of it. The Igbo equally believe in the 'ndiichie', a group of people, elites selected to represent the opinions of the people, to speak and decide rightfully for the

people, these people were accorded respect and seen as wise. This is seen in the novel, when the colonists desire the Eke-ogba, the elders were consulted. As the narrator says:

The cries of foul by the omenani custodians fell on deaf ears...since *Ogba* Lake and its surroundings were jointly owned, the twelve clans of *Umuafor* separately appointed leaders and elders to represent them in the crucial land negotiations.... In honour of our ancestors, you will come back to take up your role and the custodian of Ndi-ichie and the leader of your people. (13)

The Igbos equally believe in proverb. It is said that proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten. The knowledge of proverbs prove that the speaker is well grounded in the custom of the people, proverbs is one of the traditional techniques that spices up a language. Proverbs keep the cosmology of a particular group of people from the proverbs of a particular set of people, their perception of the world comes to light. Proverbs is a code so that outsiders cannot hear what is being said. Proverbs is one of the elements of folklore. Like some other elements of folklore, proverbs play several significant and important roles in the literary works of writers who chose to blend their works with the touch of African oral tradition and also to give their creative works a stamp of uniqueness, authenticity and identity as they reflect and project their culture and tradition, outlook, view and perception of a community. Rems Umeasiegbu sees proverbs as any expression recognized by a people as embodying the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors. Proverbs help writers to express the belief, an outlook to life unique to their people. Proverbs as seen in the novels express the relationships among the characters, thus;

It had been a case of oke na ohia, ngwere n'uzo (22).

...The horns cannot be too heavy for the head of the cow that must bear them" (23).

"...children will play with snake like a toy only If it chooses not to reveal itself" (23).

Chukwuma, father to Ikenga, went searching for his son at Reverend Klaus's home, he was in desperate need of his son which provoked the proverb; "When a frog decides to leave the swamp for the mountains, its life is in grave danger" (24).

Also in the cosmology of the traditional Igbo society is myths and superstitions. Myth is an ancient anonymous story that explains how something came to be. It is a fictional tale that explains the actions of gods or heroes, or the causes of natural phenomena. It conveys the beliefs and ideas of a culture and it usually involves gods and goddesses and even tricksters. Myth, as part of oral tradition is composed orally and then passed from generation to generation by words of mouth to explain things about nature or teach lessons about how man should behave.

A story surrounding a myth could either be true or false. It is therefore, very wrong for one to arrive at a hasty conclusion that it is true or it is false. Myth is about something within an environment or society. A myth, therefore, remains true as long as the rite is still alive with the society. In the novel as the writer succinctly puts it:

Myth and superstition had it that twins were devil incarnates sent by evil spirits to torment their parents and bring pain and agony to people around them. It was also believed that they would eventually die at a young age and return to their sender, leaving their parents in grief. Thus, single births were regarded as normal while multiple births were seen as a typical (26).

The birth of twins in the traditional Igbo society was seen as an abomination, prior to the advent of the colonial masters. They threw these multiple birthed kids or babies into the evil forest because they believed it harbour evil, it was bad omen.

Reincarnation is equally a myth in the traditional Igbo society, the Igbo believe that great men and women reincarnate into the families of those they love and feel at peace with. Reincarnation happens when an elderly person dies and immediately or some hours, days, weeks later a child is born into that family, it is said that the child is a reincarnation of the dead elderly person - male or female. This is the case of Ikenga, who was born the eve- Udeaja- his grandfather died. The novelist says: "Reincarnation is a strong tenet of the Umuafor cosmology. In such perfect coincidences as these, where an infant arrived just as an elder departs, the people considered it an extension of life approved by their ancestors and spirit world" (31).

The Igbo also harbour superstitious beliefs about twins and circumcision. They see circumcision as part of the tradition. But before the advent of the missionaries, the Igbo threw away twins into the evil forest. It was seen as a bad omen, an abomination, so much that the land had to be cleansed. The advent of the missionaries accompanied with the stopping of the killing of twin children saved the life of Ikenga who could have been killed because he is a twin. "Those who are blinded by superstitions surrounding twins still nursed fear that the twins would one day die mysteriously. "So with a sharp razor, he beatified the tiny genital of the male child, a practice he very well knew how to perform" (35).

Circumcision, they say would stop or prevent the kids from being sexually immoral. Still on myths, the Igbo equally believe that rain during occasions like marriage ceremonies or funeral ceremonies is a bad omen and so the rainmakers are taken care of. The rainmakers if not taken care, of could cause mischief and bring down rain. This is equally seen in the novel;

Udeaaja was not an ordinary villager and would not be buried as such. That meant that a drop of rain during the burial ceremony of such a man would be seen as a bad omen. Therefore, all the rainmakers in Umuafor and beyond had been consulted and given whatever requirements they demanded (34).

Funeral is a time to mourn the dead and equally celebrate their time spent on earth, how fruitful they have lived. Therefore, rain would disrupt the programme of the day and this has to be avoided and this makes it a necessity to visit the rainmakers as custom demands. The Igbos have a myth on creation, they have a myth about kolanut, places, wind, sky, moon, etc. As Ruth Finnegan says:

Myths are prose narratives which in the society in which they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith, they are taught to be believed and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance doubt or disbelief (361).

Omugwo is one of the cultural practices of the Igbos. This is the part where the grandmother of the child; the mother to the wife, comes to take care of her daughter and the new baby. The mother of the new born is being pampered and taken proper care of. They make sure that the child is in good health. This time helps the grandmother, mother and child to bond. It brings the family together. It also helps the nursing mother who would be in pain at that time. The grandmother helps around in the home, gives the child his early morning bath, feeds him and helps in fostering peace and love in the home. In fact, Omugwo has been one of the traditions of the Igbo people since time immemorial. It gives the grandmother a sense of joy and pride, as this is one of the joys of being a grandmother and having to see your sons and daughters, and see how they are faring. It gives a sense of fulfillment.

The naming ceremony of a child is equally paramount, as the name of a child gives identity to the child and makes sure that the lineage continues. In the traditional Igbo society, children are named for different reasons, either they are named after the person they are believed to have reincarnated or they are named after the experiences their mother went through during child delivery or labour, or they are named because of the longtime they waited for a child—either way, a child must be named and carry the surname of his father to ensure lineage continuity. Ikenga and Vanessa kept on arguing about his traditions. Though Ikenga have left Umuafor for Germany for some years, but his worldview about his people could not be completely erased from his memory. "First, there had been a beat of quarrel over amending the child's name, then circumcision, and also the invitation of *nne* for omugwo. In his vicious quest to bestow an African identity on his first son, the boy was renamed Udeaaja Heinrich Afamefuna" (196).

The Igbos also believe in '*ogbanje* or *agwu*'. They believe that *agwu* or *ogbanje* worked in different ways most especially when provoked. The *ogbanje* would be really beautiful and have a date when they would die and go back to the world they came from, thereby causing pain, heartache and sorrow to the respective parents. *Agwu* is believed to be a spirit that comes and goes, when provoked it reacts fiercely. As the narrator says, "throughout the thirty-five-minute ride to work, Udeaaja tried to understand or identify the *ogbanje* element in his wife and its *modus operandi* in the white man's land" (195).

Conclusion

The study sets out to portray the beauty of African culture—the beliefs, practices, norms, values, customs, traditions, and worldview that make the Igbo distinct in their existence. It was discovered that the Igbo have their own worldview regarding how they believe the world originated and how they perceive it. Such views never changed even when Ikenga arrived in Germany. He never changed his perception, even though he changed his environment. The new traditions and customs instead made him a recluse at the end of the novel. However, his keenness to remain a proper traditional Igbo man never ceased. He greeted the gods before eating with Mascot, desired circumcision for his son, and also desired self-respect.

This study vividly portrays the beauty, serenity, ambience, and succor among the Igbo as highlighted in Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga*. The study shows that culture gives identity to a group of people despite the environment in which they find themselves.

It has also supported the assertion made by Chinua Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* that “the Igbos, nay Africans, did not hear of culture for the first time from the whites” (12). The study corrects the distorted image of Africans as timid people and shows that Africans had gods and deities they worshipped before the coming of the whites. Africans had beliefs, culture, norms, superstitions, rites, and rituals that they observed and still observe. The study further shows that Africans had their own philosophy before the colonial encounter. They knew how to farm, read, and write in their own ways. They danced, cried, and carried out communal activities together. The study demonstrates that Africans had an organized community and communal life in which they were comfortable. Finally, the study has unearthed the true beauty and cultural values of the African people for all to see.

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