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IGBO METAPHYSICS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

by Jude Chudi Okpala

I recognize in the critical history of *Things Fall Apart* three forms of hermeneutics. The first group reads the novel from a linguistic paradigm¹ and argues for the illegitimacy of any anthropological interpretation of the text. For this group, what is important is the symbolic nature of such a novel, which "continually restructures a variety of subtexts: cultural, political, historical and at times even biographical" (Quayson 123). The second group, particularly A.G. Stock, sees a rapport between Achebe's Igboland and Yeats's England. The third group, comprized of Obiechina, Chinweizu et al., Robert Wren, and Nnolim, explores the historical and cultural contexts of the novel. Yet, the pervasiveness of Igbo metaphysics in the text has not been fully discussed, and, therefore, it needs more detailing. What I shall do here is to explore the text with the intention of showing how Achebe uses Igbo metaphysics in his narrative imagination. But before I continue, I want to situate briefly Igbo metaphysics within the range of metaphysics in general and then pave the path of my interpretation.

Metaphysics is a derivative of this Greek phrase *meta ta physika*, and it is the name Andronicus of Rhodes gave Aristotle's books that appeared after the books on physics; but metaphysics later became the proper name of the discipline which Aristotle would have called "first philosophy" or "Wisdom." Metaphysics for Aristotle is the study of being as being; it is the final degree of abstraction, where things could be conceived independently of matter. "Metaphysics, as the very term indicates, rests on the assumption that the mere appearance does not include its justification, that it requires a foundation" (Dupre 1). Things are not intelligible because they exist, for existence itself requires justification. Accordingly, the search for foundation of the mere appearance resulted in many schools of thought, and especially by underscoring the relationship between the physical and non-physical beings, by assuming that reality is both physical as well as the non-physical. Plato held that physical reality participates in the non-physical. Aristotle argued that non-physical causes the physical. This structure of reasoning informs Western epistemology, particularly, Christian religion, the idea of Chain of Being, and the concept of human existence as dependent on one non-physical and transcendent cause, namely, God.

However, the focus of metaphysics changed in the course of history. The metaphysical investigation of the ultimate foundation of appearance turned into a search for epistemic foundation. In this connection, a schism surged between being and knowing—for metaphysics lost its focus as a study of being as being—especially

through the principles of 17th-century mechanistic causality and through Heidegger's metaphysics. Heidegger's metaphysics which began with the interrogation of "Being" is merely a philosophical anthropology; it is existential analytic of human existence (*Dasein*), by way of prescribing the authentic form of existence—that is living one's life to its possibilities.

But it is not enough "to analyze [only] the epistemic characteristics of symbolic processes," or focus on the existential ecstasies of human being, to find meaning (Dupre 11). Igbo metaphysics does not dissociate "being" from "knowing," nor does it isolate "knowing" from "being" and "acting." Igbo metaphysics is a "thought-system which recognizes the reality and independent existence"² of non-physical beings and their interaction with physical beings in the material world. Therefore, when I speak of Igbo metaphysics, I am evoking the question of being as being, which is also a question of being as knowing and as acting, and by using the modalities of Heidegger's investigation—that is, the existential-analytic of human existence—I will focus on the analysis of Igbo human personality. Accordingly, speaking of Igbo metaphysics in *Things Fall Apart*, I intend to recognize Achebe's exploration of this thought system and his inscription of Igbo human personality, especially through principles of causality, reincarnation, and dualism.

Dualism is a principle of Igbo metaphysics, which underscores the interaction of the physical and non-physical beings in human personality. This dualism, which is not anything like Cartesian's, is well revealed in this vernacular: Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it. This statement, which is pervasive in Igbo thought, even to the level of the reality of all things, means that nothing is sufficient by itself. In this connection, to use Achebe's words, "I am the truth, the way, and the life would be called blasphemous or simply absurd. . . . The world in which we [Igbo people] live has its double and counterpart in the realm of the *spirits* [*chi*]. A man lives here and his *chi* there. Indeed the human being is only one half (and the weaker half at that) of a person" (161-62). There is implicit in Achebe's observation a definition of human person in Igbo thought, that a human being is half of a person without the *chi*, which is an invisible divinity, a manifestation of *Chi-ukwu/Chukwu*, which guides an individual in life and draws the individual to *Chi-ukwu* or *Chukwu* (Great *chi* or God). As Elechukwu Nnaka asserts, "This idea of *Chukwu* conditions the Igbo to focus his mind on the religion of man and not of *Chukwu*, because it is man who has needs. . . . Man can build no shrine to satisfy *Chukwu*. He is the greatest and nothing but the greatest can fit him. And no man can supply that greatest [thing]. . . . All *chi* are *Chukwu's* sustaining essence" (30 *italics mine*). We can say that *chi* is a person's best proximity to *Chukwu*. So, the statement "Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it" means literally that nothing stands by itself: when a human being stands, something else, *chi*, stands next to him/her; that no human being stands without the essence of *Chukwu*. The statement, however, could also be interpreted as underscoring the ontology of the *umunna* (community) over the individual, and as emphasizing the interconnection in all things.

The following Igbo platitudes show the significance and the manifestation of *chi* in the life of Igbo people, hence the duality in Igbo human personality:

Oka onye ka chi ya = If you are greater than one you are also greater than one's *chi*.
Chi ya ekwero = His *chi* does not agree.
Chi ya kegbulu ya ekegbu = His *chi* deformed him.
Ebe onye dalu ka chi ya kwatuluya = Where one falls there his *chi* pushes one down.
Ofu nne n'amu ma ofu chi anaghi eke = Individuals have their respective *chi* in spite of parentage.
Obu etu nya na chie si kwu = That's the agreement he reached with his *chi*.
Onye kwe chi ya ekwe = If you say yes, your *chi* will say yes.
Onye ka chi ya? = Who is greater than his/her *chi*?

These are full philosophical statements; the translation, of course, does not carry adequate semantic extension. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Achebe uses one of them to articulate the inferiority of a person to his *chi*: "The Igbo believe that a man receives his gifts or talents, his character—indeed his portion in life generally—before he comes into the world. It seems there is an element of choice available to him at that point, and that his *chi* presides over the bargaining: hence the saying *Obe etu nya na chie si kwu*, which we often hear when a man's misfortune is somehow beyond comprehension and so can only be attributable to an agreement he himself must have entered into, at the beginning, alone with his *chi*" (165). This passage seemingly exudes determinism, and may challenge the freewill of an Igbo person in his/her action. Such a position would be dispelled if one understands that human action/being/knowing in Igbo thought has a spiritual valence because the result of a person's action—good or bad—could visit another generation in the person's heritage. In addition, the statement, *Obu etu nya na chie si kwu*, could be made when something, which is not a misfortune, but what is not expected, befalls a person; it could also be presented in the presence of an event that has befallen a profligate. As such, the statement evokes spiritual justice. You can see that a human person in Igbo thought is not just a composition of body and soul. His well-being does not depend solely on a rapport between the body and the soul, on showing how effectively the soul influences the body, or on how the body manages without the soul. The well-being of a person depends significantly on his relationship with his *chi*, on how his choice of action is influenced by his *chi*, on how much he displeases or appeases his *chi*. Igbo "philosophy of the human person is more existential and practical than theoretical. It is based on the conviction that the metaphysical sphere is not abstractly divorced from concrete experience" (Onwuanibe 184).

Achebe adopts this metaphysics in his narrative imagination in *Things Fall Apart*, for the text is filled with allusions to *chi*. Such allusion is not excess or resentfulness of language; it is, rather, a provocation of Igbo metaphysics. Okonkwo's fluctuating fortune, his exile, and his suicide provide a good illustration. If we plot the dynamics of Okonkwo's existence, we could say, to use a cliché, that he lived from grace to grass, that his life is a fluctuation between joy and sorrow. As the narrative shows, using one of the platitudes I mentioned above, particularly, *Onye kwe chi ya ekwe*, [if you say yes, your *chi* will say yes], Okonkwo says yes when his *chi* says yes. Such agreement

reflects optimism, and it is not merely psychological, but also ethical and practical, for Okonkwo's agreement with his *chi* resonates in his success and achievements, and in his people's recognition of his integrity.

In another aspect, the narrative adopts the platitude *Obu etu nya na chie si kwu* to show some misfortune in Okonkwo's life. In this aspect, the dualism in human existence is well underscored. Okonkwo's misfortune is not attributed to his humanity alone, but to his *chi*: "Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things" (121).

Many critics, however, have rationalized Okonkwo's misfortune as a symbol of Okonkwo's "refusal of the a new order, as well as the collapse of the old order (Irele, *Introduction to African Literature* 171) without looking at metaphysical construction of misfortune. I would add that Okonkwo's misfortune, which culminates in his suicide, cannot only be rationalized as such, for as his situation is underscored in the text, "Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things" (121). This statement is made when Okonkwo is in exile because of the boy he inadvertently killed during the burial of Ezeudu. The White man has not come to Umuofia at this time. Later, when Nwoye abandons the "traditional sanctity" for "the poetry of the new religion" (137), Okonkwo ruminates thus: "Why . . . should he, Okonkwo, of all people, be cursed with such a son? He saw clearly in it the finger of his personal god or chi" (142). These statements are made extradiegetically through the voice of the narrator, who explains every bit of the incidents in the narration. We hear Okonkwo's thought through the consciousness of the narrator, and his consciousness portends, at these junctures in the narrative Okonkwo's tragedy, to show that his misfortune is his agreement with his *chi*, *obu etu nya na chie si kwu*. However that may be, the apparent phenomenon is Okonkwo's interaction with non-physical beings, that his life is not his alone, but something he shares with his *chi*.

One would tend to dislodge the efficacy of this analysis for the seemingly contradictory relationship of the two principles advanced here, the optimism in *Onye kwe chi ya ekwe* and the determinism of *Obu etu ya na chie si kwu*. Such a contradiction, one would also say, exists in Okonkwo's life, and therefore, his life cannot be adequately accounted for; such a person might also say that Achebe's representation is aporetic and ambiguous. Such a recognition would be proper in the face of postmodern nihilistic rendition of language. I would argue, rather, even though there appears to be a cognitive contradiction between the two principles, that there is no contradiction between them. These two principles are founded on the superiority of the *chi* to Okonkwo, and because the well-being of a person depends on his being/action. What we need to do at this juncture is search for the quality of Okonkwo's action to see whether there is an infringement on the dualistic construction of human personality in Igbo thought.

The narrative presents Okonkwo in different lights: he said yes when his *chi* says yes; yet, he infringed the laws of the gods: he broke the week of peace; he killed Ikemefuna. In the narrative instances of these events, the elders, Ezeani and Obierika, warn him about the moral turpitude of his action, and tell him how the gods could wipe him out on account of his action (32, 64). This warning shows that Okonkwo's agreement with his *chi* is dissipated; his action is not in accordance with the will of the

gods, nor even with the will of his people. Accordingly, it would be improper to say that Okonkwo's life represents a contradiction; his life represents one who has arrogated to himself the power of the non-physical being and who has forgotten the power of *chi*. Okonkwo excised himself from that complex community, from the interconnection of things, to pursue his aggrandized individual ego.³

Achebe articulates the paradigm for understanding Okonkwo's failure very well in the following words: "Nothing is absolute . . . [I]s it not well known that a man may worship *Ogwugwu* [a god] and be killed by *Udo* [another type of god]?" (161). Okonkwo's fall cannot be explained away by focusing on the culpable presence of the white man. A fuller understanding of his fall comes from exploring the metaphysical nature of Igbo person's existence. To put it in another way, that you said yes when your *chi* said yes is not a reason for you to suffocate another person; that you said yes when your *chi* said yes should not be the basis for a defiant attitude towards other gods. Saying yes with one's *chi* is only an entrance into that community where one's well-being is dependent on how one lives in that community; for wherever something stands, something else stands beside it.

Another principle that reflects the interaction of physical and non-physical beings in human existence in *Things Fall Apart* is causality. Human beings operate with the idea that every event has a cause; but not every event has explainable and verifiable causes. The principal representation of such a physically unverifiable incident, which is, however, admissible in Igbo metaphysics, is Okoli's death. The only thing we know about Okoli is that he joined the new religion, that he "brought the church into serious conflict with the clan . . . by killing the sacred python, the emanation of the god of water. . . . The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as 'Our father,' and was allowed to go wherever it chose" (147). When the people learned that Okoli had killed the python on account of the new religion, they were infuriated; yet, they believe the gods will fend for themselves: "It is not our custom to fight for our gods. . . . Let us not presume to do so now. If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and the god" (148). And surely enough, Okoli fell ill and died. "His death showed that the gods were still able to fight their own battles" (150). There is no empirical causal connection between the killing of the python and Okoli's death; it is neither association of idea, nor a coincidence, for the narrative voice here is not satiric nor pretentious. The voice is very categorical regarding the death of Okoli, and what it wants the reader to understand is that Okoli died because he killed the sacred python. His existence affronts the gods; the people are no longer in support of his action/being, and they believe the gods will avenge themselves.

In the existential analytic of the Igbo person's existence, Okonkwo's and Okoli's lives are representatives of inauthentic existence, or improper existence. They have uprooted themselves from the ontological level of existence to the ontic, ordinary existence, where their presence is not respected. Okonkwo was not buried by the people of Umuofia; and the text does not tell whether Okoli was buried. Such lack of cultural finality creates not only a metaphorical gap between them and their people, but a narrative silence that can be read meaningfully from an Igbo cultural context. Put simply, to die without a burial is the worst thing that could happen to an Igbo

person because burial suggests both a physical and spiritual transaction with the ancestors; burial sets one off on the ancestral journey among the spirits. To die without one implies that you have lost all connections with the ancestors, with the people, and the land. This is the kind of image Achebe invokes with his representation of Okoli. For killing the python, Okoli not only desacralizes the land, he is perpetually “ostracized.”

To be expedient, I will briefly underscore more of this metaphysical thought system, this interaction of the physical and non-physical. Chielo’s transfiguration is a good point to note now. I have used transfiguration here to evoke the biblical account of transfiguration of Jesus, which is not completely dissimilar (Matthew 17: 1–13; Mark 9: 2–13), and to show the incredible, yet real nature of Chielo’s change. Her change, to use Chukwukere’s words, “lies in the inherent nature of spiritual powers” (520). The transformed Chielo is not the ordinary Chielo, yet the transformed Chielo inhabits the ordinary Chielo; she is a double in unity, for the ordinary Chielo lives always in recognition of the spiritual Chielo (101). Her people understand her as such, and this understanding shows that Chielo is not a schizoid or a grotesque (one might see in Dickens’ novels), but a real human being who only manifests that interaction of the physical and non-physical. The narration does not offer any physical action that could have caused Chielo’s transformation; it only sets forth evidence that illuminates a metaphysical transaction.

This sort of transaction is illuminated in what Chidi Maduka calls “*Ogbanje* scene in *Things Fall Apart* (that is chapter nine of the novel)” (19). *Ogbanje* means literally something that returns; it is also translated as reincarnation. This scene represents a child who returns to life after a series of deaths. The narrative voice tells here that dying is not the end of a person; that a person has the capacity of coming back to life. Such a process underscores that human beings have strong affinity with their spirits [*Chi*].

The narrative aesthetics of this scene ensures the credibility of the theme. The tale of *Ogbanje* is an embedded narrative; “it has the status of a self-contained short story with a beginning, middle, and an end” (Maduka 19). Narratologically, embedded narratives evoke realism, and such a technique reveals what Gilles Deleuze calls repetition: “a technique that is grounded in a solid archetypal model. . . . The assumption of such . . . gives rise to the notion of a metaphoric expression based on genuine participative similarity” (cited in Miller 6). The *Ogbanje* story is an individual plot that participates in the plot of the main story and ensures a discursive authenticating process. Accordingly the main narrative tells of the *Ogbanje* as an authentic event. Is this technique not Achebe’s way of saying that his story is true? There could be a multiple answer to this question, but Maduka, with whom I agree, has a position that illuminates Achebe’s obedience to Igbo metaphysics and to the reality of *Ogbanje*. He argues that, even though Achebe mixes ironic, comic and tragic modes in his representation, he “has not represented the phenomenon satirically” (22).

I am not constructing a metaphysics from Achebe’s narrative imagination. What he has done is a corollary of Igbo metaphysics, which, as Chukwukere asserts, “cannot pass the simple test of systematic anthropological reasoning, which should spring from well-founded empiric evidence . . . (521), nor could it fit into the structures of

rationalist logic. The principles of Igbo metaphysics are far beyond empiricism and logic. They cannot be explained with a theory of causality that is limited to sensory perception, because both visible and “invisible anthropomorphized beings” (Chukwukere 520) play a significant role in the lives of human beings, and because within Igbo cosmology there is a reality of things happening without a verifiable cause.

We should not now discuss metaphysics without considering Igbo metaphysics or pointing at *Things Fall Apart*. Igboland is a “metaphysical landscape.” What I have done here is locate some Igbo metaphysical principles in *Things Fall Apart*. These principles should not be denied as mythic, fantastic, or as mere figments of narrative imagination. These principles, to conclude with Jules Chametzky, “obviously” force “us to confront the ‘Rashomon’ aspect of experience- that things look different to different observers, and that one’s very perceptions are shaped by the social and cultural context out of which one operates”(3).

NOTES

1. Some other critics that should be recognized in these group are Susan Gallagher, who argues for the dialogical nature of the text and focuses on its “complex heteroglossia” (142), and Niel Ten Kortenaar, who argues that “instability,” which is provoked by *Things Fall Apart* is “a necessary condition of the text” (41). In this group also is Abdul Jan Mohammed. Though his argument has a postcolonial bent, his position is linguistic, for he reveals “syncretism,” “double consciousness,” in Achebe’s uses of oral and literate forms, syncretism that is deterritorializing and subverting.
2. Idoniboye uses the above statement to describe African Metaphysics (84). Additional studies or explorations of African Metaphysics are Onwuanibe’s, Chukwukere’s and Mbiti’s, and I am not suggesting in my title that Igbo metaphysics is different from African Metaphysics.
3. Iyasere has recognized a similar argument in his article, even though he does not do so specifically with Igbo metaphysics. Focusing on the killing of Ikemefuna, he argues that Okonkwo’s participation is not a sign of obedience to the gods, but a “competition with the gods” (307). Obiechina interpreting the embedded narrative of “The Tortoise and Birds” correlates the individualism of the tortoise with Okonkwo’s and opposes it to the spirit of community. He argues that just as the tortoise comes in conflict with the birds for its “individualistic obsession,” taking the name “All-of-You,” so does Okonkwo for taking the responsibility of the *umunna* (community) on himself.

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