

Folkloric Meta-Narratives In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

Following Chinua Achebe's claim that his *Things Fall Apart* is a counter-narrative to Joyce Cary's distortion of the African image in Cary's *Mister Johnson*, most critics of *Things Fall Apart* have approached the existence of folklore in the novel from the perspective of cultural affirmation. Others see it as part of the artistic ornament used to deck the work. Be that as it may, this paper does not intend to dispute these perspectives. It rather intends to prove that Achebe's use of folklore in *Things Fall Apart* is not just to affirm the functionality of folk culture in the precolonial African society depicted in this novel but also to buttress several sequence of events of the novel. It argues that the folkloric narratives within the larger narrative that is *Things Fall Apart* function as specialized meta-narratives which play an interesting array of roles in the novel, namely: to run commentaries on the incidents that surround the hero's life; to show how folkloric wisdom in the novel appears to warn against certain unethical actions of the hero and to comment on the significance of some executed actions in the novel; as well as to foreshadow impending tragic situations in the life of the hero just like the chorus in Greek tragic plays. The methodology for this study is a critical analysis of the text in the light of a recontextualised and re-imagined application of Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of *metanarrative*. Unlike Lyotard's notion of a *metanarrative* as a grand narrative that helps to legitimize other little narratives, we elect to read folkloric meta-narratives as related miniature versions of different sequences of the story of the novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

Key words: Folkloric Meta-narratives, Folklore, Achebe, Chinua, *Things-Fall-Apart*

INTRODUCTION

Achebe has, debatably, received the greatest critical attention among all African writers. His *Things Fall Apart* is almost a classic in the development of African literary sensibility. This influence is evident in the wider translation of the novel into indigenous African languages and other world languages, as well as its adaptation to other artistic forms. Thus, in its status as an infinite source of new critical discoveries, the novel has continually remained pertinent, constantly shifting in line with shifts of emphasis in critical interpretations of every emerging African generation. This essay, therefore, will treat folklore in *Things Fall Apart*, not as the indicator of the rich Igbo/African cultural heritage but as contextualised metanarratives which functions like a relative discourse pattern that relays the sequence of events in the story of the novel, almost like the choric odes of the Greek tragedy. The aim of the research is to prove that Achebe's use of folk tales, folk songs and certain proverbs in the novel (which are collectively used as 'folklore' in this study), in addition to adding aesthetics and local colour, also runs commentaries on the series of events that surround the protagonist's life.

RELEVANT LITERATURE ON FOLKLORE IN *THINGS FALL APART*

The undermining of the centrality of folklore in the critical valuation of *Things Fall Apart* by critics is evidently inherited from the author's comment on the novel. Achebe in his *Hopes and Impediments* insists that he 'would be quite satisfied if [his] novels did no more than teach [the] readers that their past –with all its imperfections –[is] not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them' (45). This attempt to bring the Africans into awareness of the baneful effects of colonialism leads to a predetermined critical perspective to the novel mainly tilted towards culture and identity. For instance, Dan Izevbaye takes time to applaud the classical status of the novel –its ability to sustain a variety of interpretations and 'changing political/psychological needs of its readers in more than five decades of the novel's existence' ('Untold Stories' 61 and 64). In this, Izevbaye identifies five different major perspectives from which critics have studied *Things Fall Apart*. The first perspective, he describes as the novel's 'account of Africa's colonial past and the problem of the African image/identity' ('Untold Stories' 62). The second strand of criticism is the reading of the novel as a genuine

representation of the traditional Igbo/African culture. The third model of analysis subsists in the novel's structural adherence to W.B. Yeats' prophetic and apocalyptic vision in Yeats' dystopic poem, 'The Second Coming.' The fourth approach, as Izevbaye has it, is Abiola Irele's reading of 'tragic conflict between two social systems and cosmologies' in the novel; while the last perspective is Biodun Jeyifo's pioneering emphasis on the novel's system of meaning, the perspective that looks at the individual characters as repository of character types: Okonkwo as the type of hero seen in classical tragedies/epics, Obierika as more resilient and socially adjusted character than Okonkwo, Nwoye as an apostate, and so on (Irele and Jeyifo cited in Izevbaye 62-3). The gap these researchers fail to fill is their monumental omission of the folkloric content of the novel as a potential perspective of critical engagement in the novel.

However, when Izevbaye does consider folktales at all in the novel, he reads them as 'autonomous stories' or 'embedded stories,' as Emmanuel Obiechina elsewhere would have it, which add local colour to the work. The implication is that the folktales and folksongs in the novel are digressional addenda that reflect 'the Igbo narrative genre' different from modern 'expectations of narrative' which Izevbaye feels should subsist in 'causal principle' ('Untold Stories' 68). In fact, Izevbaye affirms Romanus Egudu's position that there is no causal link between the tragedy of Okonkwo, for instance and the story of the man whose goat is thievishly exchanged with a log of wood in the famous market where Obierika has gone to buy a goat for his in-law (Egudu quoted in Izevbaye 68-9). Our study plans to show that a strong causal link exists between the folktales and story of *Things Fall Apart*.

In any case, some critics are attentive to the existence of folklore in *Things Fall Apart* and its place in the making of African literature in general. S.E. Ogude thinks that folklore promotes social view point in line with group interest. For him, folktales in a novel promote or condemn one virtue or vice at a particular time (Ogude, 1-2). This is supported subtly in Annie Gagiano's 'Achebe's Children: Resonance, Poignance and Grandeur.' This critic examines the tale where a kite picks up a duckling and the mother duck remains silent, resulting in the return of the duckling by the kite because the kite smells tragedy in the silence of the mother duck; this story, he analyses as a repository of an ideal subtle and undisclosed parental love exhibited by Okonkwo when Chielo, the priestess of Agbala forcefully takes Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter away at night. For Gagiano, Okonkwo's silence is emphasised and encouraged by the mother duck's silence ('Achebe's Children' 37). He however condemns Okonkwo for adopting this disposition in bringing up his daughter, Ezinma, while exhibiting a crude and brutal disposition towards his son, Nwoye, resulting in the malformation of the latter's cultural sensibility and identity formation. For this critic, Ezinma's development into a dependable daughter is not unconnected to such other story within the novel like the story of the tortoise and the birds' feast in heaven which Ekwefi, her mother tells her alone as her only child. The tale accentuates the need to be wary of betrayal as the actionable disposition of the tortoise shows:

Almost all commentators on *Things Fall Apart* have noted the centrality in the novel of the tale of the tortoise and the bird's visit to the feast in the sky, but it is after all only Ezinma among the novel's characters who is privileged to hear it. The tale is a highly sophisticated recognition of the need to analyse the motive of those who speak with sweet tongue – such as Tortoise in the story that Ekwefi tells, or that of the messenger sent by the District Commissioner in inviting the Umuofia leaders to a consultation in his headquarters... Both the District Commissioner and the Tortoise are great orators. ('Achebe's Children' 38- 9)

Gagiano's analysis of the second folktale as a choric component of the novel which comments on the sequence of event is similar to our present study. However, unlike our study, Gagiano interprets these two stories only as they influence children upbringing in the novel; and he ends with indicting Okonkwo for the breakdown of the filial bond in his house because he (Okonkwo) undermines the negotiable nature of identity which the 'women's folktales' echo in the novel. He concludes that Okonkwo fails in Nwoye what he achieves in Ezinma because of his insensitivity to the 'cultural adaptation and cross-generational continuity' that folktales achieve in children which when undermined lead to deficiency and abuse of state power/authority by these children when they grow into adulthood.

Similarly, Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika's work, 'The Portrait of a Writer' would have also forestalled the need for this research had he not focused only on proverbs as the basic folkloric content that forms the discourse formative of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. We will see briefly, below, the mini framework that would act as the tapestry upon which the analysis of this work is anchored.

FOLKLORE, FOLKLORIC META-NARRATIVES IN *THINGS FALL APART*

In describing folklore, Bernth Lindfors outlines constituent elements of folklore – popular beliefs, stereotypes, stories, proverbs, and verbal performance styles (*Folklore in Nigerian Literature* 3). For the sake of convenience, we will focus on folktales, anecdotes and folksongs in the novel.

It is important to make some theoretical clarifications as regards the sense in which we have used and will further use the term folkloric meta-narratives in this discourse, so that the scope of reference in this work would be clearly mapped out in the mind of the reader. The need for these clarifications becomes clearer when we consider that our meta-narrative is predated by Jean-Francois Lyotard's *metanarrative* in his influential work, *The Postmodern Condition*; and so it is important to show how the former resembles or differs from the latter. First, the important thing our meta-narrative shares with Lyotard's *metanarrative* is that basic notion of a 'story within a story'. However, Lyotard's *metanarrative* implies, within the philosophy and history of knowledge, a certain grand narrative that connects other narratives or events, and this grand or master narrative, according to Lyotard, serves the function of legitimating the other little narratives that cluster around these so-called *metanarratives* or supposedly universal truths. For instance, Lyotard writes

that 'true knowledge, in this perspective, is always indirect knowledge; it is composed of reported statements that are incorporated into the metanarrative of a subject that guarantees their legitimacy' (35).

But our application of the term meta-narrative is different in two important ways from Lyotard's, and we have deliberately hyphenated ours to call attention to this difference. A meta-narrative in this work is a narrative within a narrative and it is not a grand all-covering narrative like Lyotard's. Again, the function of legitimation is not the sole task of our meta-narrative. In lieu of this limiting *telos* of the Lyotardian variant, we choose to think of the function of a meta-narrative as a fluid space that is determined by the peculiar exigencies of the narrative and the narrator. We have already implicated the range in which we are using the term folklore when we quoted Lindfors above, but suffice it to say that a meta-narrative is folkloric when the narrative is drawn from folklore. But it must be stated that beyond the implication of the existence of narratives in folktales, it is possible to reduce folk songs and proverbs to narratives, to stories, and these folkloric stories are folkloric meta-narratives insofar as they exist within larger narratives like novels, short stories and so on.

Literature provides an avenue where what is said is as significant as how it is said and sometimes forms part of what is being said. Though Umuofia is presented as a putative world with contradictions, complexities and intermittent ruptures, it can be said to be a functional social system partly because human and moral laws are strictly maintained. This portends that people know their place and pretty much stayed there. However, there are heterodox principles like the inter-tribal wars, famine, poor harvest and even the gruesome murder of a daughter of Umuofia by Mbano people that could have truncated the cyclic flow of life in this society; yet these issues seem not to be strong enough to crack the workability of this society. The hero of the novel, Okonkwo, rises to prominence through sheer industry; like his community, he too suffers the cruelty of the forces of nature, poor harvest in particular, yet his household still remains cohesive.

Nevertheless, the world of Okonkwo begins to struggle against the torrent of cosmic forces when the tragic fate of the 'ill-fated lad', Ikemefuna, whose tragic story is still told in Umuofia till date (*TFA* 4), is introduced into Okonkwo's life. Our misgiving about the *tragicality* of *Things Fall Apart* comes as a reserved tale of Ikemefuna. At this point, one will suspect that it will be an individual's tragedy since the lad is the doomed one not the entire community but it seems Ikemefuna's destiny is tied to that of Okonkwo and by extension, Umuofia. Whether the tragedy is Ikemefuna's or Umuofia's, the foregrounded sad story of Ikemefuna reminds the readers that we are in for *stories-within-in-a-story*, we are in for, in our terms, meta-narratives.

Tragedy in Igbo cosmology or in African cosmology is never abrupt. There is always a *pre-tragic* warning against things that will orchestrate doom. But as the Igbo believe, when the gods want to destroy a man, they first make him mad; so that in the boon of his insanity, he cannot heed such a warning –of course a tragic individual is seen when we are

confronted with an individual who is unable to remain passive in the face of anything that threatens to erode his sense of personal and human dignity, as Arthur Miller holds in his 'Tragedy and the Common Man.' Hence there are *pre-tragic* caveats given to Okonkwo at different stages of his life and endeavours. It is first intoned in the form of folkloric meta-narrative using the anecdote of the thoughtless little *nza* (sparrow) bird that feeds to its fill and then challenges its *chi* (guardian spirit) to a duel. The acme of rashness in Igbo and African world view is to challenge one's *chi*. Reverence for spirits and divinities is the first citizenship education that a child is given in traditional Igbo society presented in the novel. Ironically enough, birds are reputed as secondary trickster figure after tortoise in Igbo worldview. *Nza* (sparrow) is believed to be highly shrewd in Igbo, so the bird putting up a challenge to its creator cannot be interpreted as nothing else, if not as madness. Such a daring challenge to the powers that be is what Okonkwo dares. He has been warned by an old man, in a clan's meeting, that one who has his palm nut cracked by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble; this is because he has brazenly called a fellow man that has no title, a woman (*TFA* 8).

Secondly, Okonkwo is literally warned by the priest of *Ani*, the earth goddess when he defiantly beats his discourteous third wife, Ojiugo in a week of peace. Before the beating, his household and neighbours plead with him from a distance, reminding him of the cosmic implications of expressing his fury at such a time. Okonkwo fully understands the devastating implication of what he is doing but the Okonkwo we know 'is not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for the fear of the goddess' (*TFA* 9). He goes ahead and beats his wife thoroughly with the resolve that he can always appease the goddess. The narrator warns against such a Dutch courage with the parable of a rain maker:

And now the rains had really come, so heavy and persistent that even the village rain-maker no longer claimed to be able to intervene. He could not stop the rain now, just as he would not attempt to start it in the heart of the dry season, without serious danger to his own health. The personal dynamism required to counter the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for the human frame. (10)

This parable shows human limitation in his attempt to manipulate natural forces. But in our hero, we have an insensitive *rain-maker* who is unmindful of this limitation; this rain-maker will dare summon the rain in the heart of the dry season or to stop the rain at the middle of the rainy season.

The folkloric warning above is paralleled with a literal one given by an old man, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, who visits to inform Okonkwo of Umuofia's decision to have Ikemefuna killed as sacrifice to appease the land for the daughter of Umuofia killed in Mbaino. The old man warns Okonkwo not to take part in this crude act because Ikemefuna calls him father. Okonkwo is worried; we suspect that his worry must have to do with Umuofia taking such a momentous decision in his absence when he considers himself one of the lords of the land. His worry must have also come from the little

chemistry which has developed between him and Ikemefuna within the three years of his stay in Okonkwo's house. This chemistry has more to do with Okonkwo's admiration of Ikemefuna's positive influence on Nwoye, his son. Nwoye has been effeminate until the introduction of Ikemefuna into this household. Part of Ikemefuna's endearing influence is his possession of a large stock of folktales such that 'even those [folktales] which Nwoye knew already were told with a new freshness and the local flavour of a different clan' (10). In describing Ikemefuna's infectious influence over Nwoye, the narrator observes that:

He was like an elder brother to Nwoye, and from the very first seemed to have kindled a new fire in the younger boy. He made him feel grown-up, and they no longer spent the evenings in his mother's hut while she cooked, but now sat with Okonkwo in his obi, or watched him as he tapped his palm tree for the evening wine. Nothing pleased Nwoye now more than to be sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to do one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood or pounding food. On receiving such a message through a younger brother or sister, Nwoye would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles. (17)

Okonkwo's involvement in the entourage that is to take Ikemefuna back home to Mbaino, as the poor lad is told, is not illogical given that he is the person who brought Ikemefuna and allegedly knows his house. Ikemefuna could not have followed strangers even if they promised to take him back to his parents; Okonkwo is justified to go, to make the lad believe that he is actually going home – a dramatic irony that every child in Okonkwo's house knows and mourns. While on the way, the *pre-tragic* warning of Ogbuefi Ezeudu is emphasised with a folksong from Ikemefuna, the victim himself. The song parallels Ezeudu's warning and its story resonates thematically with the reality that Okonkwo faces. The song goes thus:

<i>Ezeelina, elina!</i>	-	<i>King, do not eat, please do not eat!</i>
<i>Sala</i>	-	<i>(sala) Onomatopoeic refrain</i>
<i>Ezeilikwaya</i>	-	<i>King, if you attempt to eat it</i>
<i>Ikwabaakwaogholi</i>	-	<i>You will cry bitterly</i>
<i>EbeDandanechieze</i>	-	<i>Where Danda (a worthless man) is crowned king</i>
<i>Ebeuzuneteegwu</i>	-	<i>Where noise rises uncontrollably</i>
<i>Sala</i>	-	<i>(sala) Onomatopoeic refrain</i>

In the meta-narrative that is the song, there is a warning against eating a certain unnamed thing. The king in this meta-narrative is at liberty to eat whatever he pleases, but the consequence of eating this very pre-warned meal, if I may call it that, will be chaotic and devastating. The song's reference to eating a thing forbidden can be associated with Okonkwo's ignoble act of filicide, which he will later commit. Of course, Ogbuefi Ezeudu is not in doubt as to whether Ikemefuna is Okonkwo's biological child or not. Ezeudu's

warning shows that sonship is negotiable; it further points to the limitations humans face in the exercise of their freewill. There are tendencies to exonerate Okonkwo in the allegation of filicide which would make it right that he does disregard the *pre-tragic* warnings given to him. This is most plausible as we watch Okonkwo withdraw to the rear when the entourage of Umuofia executioners gets to the outskirts of the town where Ikemefuna ought to be killed. The man who has been assigned the duty of killing Ikemefuna strikes a weak blow, blowing off the pot of wine on his head instead of the lad's head; at that point, Okonkwo is left with no option since none of the men wants to carry out the act. The narrator confuses the reader the more by insisting that Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna because he is afraid of being thought weak. Whatever is the motivation, the deed, against all warning, has been done so we can watch Okonkwo drown in tragic vortex as his life unfolds.

Ikemefuna's song above echoes the arty-crafty role of songs and poetry in the plays of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's poem, 'Full Fathom Five' is one of such poems rendered within his play, *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.

Hark! Now I hear them –Ding-dong, bell.

Though this poem has been read independently, especially in Cambridge International Examination literature-in-English syllabus, its organic and structural roles are central to the pervading theme of the play. In the play, *The Tempest*, Prospero needs a husband for his daughter, Miranda. So he directs his loyal sprite, Ariel to lure the wandering Ferdinand to his house to be joined to his daughter in marriage. Ariel sings the above lyrical lines and Ferdinand follows the voice to know the singer and to ascertain the veracity of the content of the song which claims that Ferdinand's father is dead from the ship wreck which Ferdinand just survived. This is the case with another poem of Shakespeare: 'Sigh No More, Ladies Sigh No More' rendered by Balthazar, Prince Don Pedro's servant in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. The poem encourages ladies who suffer the pangs of male-lovers' betrayal and infidelity to be cheerful and accept men as they are because they will not change; besides, prolonged forlornness can diminish beauty for the persona. These poems are strong critical commentaries on the works respectively, a kind of genre-within-another genre. They show that the reality we have characterized as meta-narrative is ancient and referable to texts in disparate epochs and climes. The difference between what Shakespeare does with poetry in these plays and what Achebe does with folktales and folksongs in *Things Fall Apart* is the difference in English and Igbo (African) rhetoric.

The major tragic events that happen to Okonkwo begin after he defiantly kills Ikemefuna against all warning: his

gun inadvertently explodes in a funeral of an old man, killing the deceased's son for which Okonkwo goes on seven years of exile in Mbanta, his maternal home. This echoes Isaac Newton's third law of motion which states that actions and reactions are equal and opposite in this context. Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, understands this and condemns Okonkwo's intractable action before this incident. In fact, Obierika condemns Okonkwo's act of joining the executioners' procession in the first place, oblivious of the fact that Okonkwo himself is the one who does the act of killing Ikemefuna. Okonkwo uses all sort of verbal gymnastics that his cultural oratory could afford him to convince his friend that his act of killing the boy is not unethical. The world of the novel believes so much that a hot piece of yam placed in the palm of a child by its parents cannot scald its palm; Okonkwo quickly invokes this proverb to the effect that the Oracles of the Hills and Caves pronounce the judgment, what does it matter who does the act? Obierika concludes that if the oracle declares that his son will die, the oracle should as well provide the executioner; a position which Okonkwo refutes by making derogatory insinuations about cowardice and fear of blood because Obierika did not come with them to kill Ikemefuna.

Despite his outward display of manliness, Okonkwo feels the fatherly emotion for the death of Ikemefuna. He is unable to eat for days after killing Ikemefuna, his daughter's persuasion, rather than make him eat earns him the regrets that she, Ezinma is a girl. He consciously wants to root out such feelings of emotions and softness which might likely call up the memory of his late father. But this complementary soft feeling is an integral part of his consciousness. Rather than mourn the death of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo decides to brood on a fantasy of a world where Ezinma is his male child and Nwoye either the female child or better still not even born at all:

"She should have been a boy," Okonkwo said to himself again. His mind went back to Ikemefuna and he shivered.... "When did you become a shivering old woman," Okonkwo asked himself, "you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed." He sprang to his feet, hung his goatskin bag on his shoulder and went to visit his friend, Obierika. (*TFA* 21)

We do not know how Okonkwo would have ended had he expressed emotion for killing the poor Ikemefuna, but we have seen what has become of him for refusing to express this emotion when it is most necessary. This binary opposition (the feelings of softness and forceful expression of masochism) that Okonkwo battles, almost like a Faustian figure, is captured in a folkloric manner. The emotion he struggles with and the logic behind it are represented in women's folktales, as Okonkwo calls them, and the violent/bloodshed tales respectively which Okonkwo tells the children. The first set of tales (women's tale) is told to Okonkwo by his mother when he is a child. He remembers one of such tales that night as the thought of Ikemefuna would not let him sleep, in addition to the noisy mosquitoes that keep 'singing'

into his ear. He recalls his mother's story of how and why mosquitoes sing in human ear. The mosquito proposes marriage to the ear, as the story has it. The latter turns it down. Following his humiliation, the mosquito keeps whistling to the ear any time it passes by to remind the ear that he is still alive and not dead as the ear has envisaged. After ruminating on this story, Okonkwo dismisses it 'as silly as all women's stories' (25). From this folkloric meta-narrative, the ear turns down the mosquito's proposal, yet the ear has no rest. In the same manner, Okonkwo banishes the female principle in his life and psyche yet he is not at ease with his cherished masculine disposition. This uneasiness with his masculinity manifests in his incessant fear of being thought weak—the logic behind Okonkwo's beating of his wife in the week of peace or killing a child that sees him as a father.

Secondly, Okonkwo's association of emotion with women and weakness is wrong given that he is raised with such stories, yet he turns out a strong successful man. Ekwefi raises Ezinma with such stories, yet she turns out a strong and responsible daughter. Ikemefuna influences Nwoye positively with similar stories, making it three different cases where our hero has got it wrong in dismissing emotional stories as 'silly women stories'. When he experiments by his cherished masochism by telling Ikemefuna and Nwoye violent stories of war and bloodshed, Okonkwo records colossal failure as this further estranges his son, Nwoye from him rather than imbue in him spirit of masculinity as Okonkwo had intended. He wants to consolidate what Ikemefuna has initiated in the life of his son but he wants to use a different kind of story to do this—more like using a wrong formula to get the answer to an equation. The narrator grants that:

Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children—stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird eneke-nti-oba who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat. (*TFA* 17)

This makes folkloric meta-narratives in this novel a double edged sword that can create and can at the same time demolish. Nwoye understands his father's dislike for women's stories and tries to please him by pretending when Okonkwo is around that he no longer cares for such stories any more:

That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him. So Nwoye and Ikemefuna would listen to Okonkwo's stories about tribal wars, or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim, overpowered him and obtained his first human head. (*TFA* 17)

By flouting all the warnings, and killing this child, Okonkwo crosses what Gilbert Murray would call 'boundary situation' (Murray cited in Akwanya 26). This is a situation where the 'deep question of existence' is posed to the individual and his decision here has a lot to say in the work

becoming either tragedy or otherwise. And once crossed, we can only watch the inexorable devastation unfold as tragic inevitability. Here, the tragedy that would befall Okonkwo is captured in another folktale told by Ezinma, his prodigious *Ogbanje* (spirit child) daughter. She is believed to have died severally and returned to Ekwefi cyclically. Now she is sick with similar fever that kills Ekwefi's previous children strongly believed to be her. While Okagbue is still outside digging for her *Iyi-Uwa*, the special stone that serves as the link between the *Ogbanje* child and the spirit world, Ezinma and her mother are to prepare yam and vegetable for the excavating group outside. Ezinma observes that the vegetable is much; Ekwefi reminds her that the heat of the fire will reduce the vegetable. As the duo cook and Ezinma watches the vegetable diminish in the pot, she remembers the folktale where the snake-lizard gives its mother some seven baskets of vegetables to prepare for it. After cooking the meal, the vegetables reduce to three baskets. Out of impatience and rashness, the snake-lizard kills its mother on the premise that it has been swindled by its mother. It decides to experiment it itself by cooking another seven baskets of vegetable, only to get the same three baskets afterwards. The snake-lizard at once hangs itself out of grief for having killed its mother unjustly.

This meta-narrative is the narrator's summation of the novel, such that we begin to envisage a suicide-like death for the hero who has killed his son just like the snake-lizard who has also killed his mother. It is in fact possible to think of 'killing' in the novel in metaphorical terms, and by this we mean the way in which Okonkwo disliked whatever his father represented, including his shameful death, only to die shamefully as well.

Be that as it may, the hero is yet presented with another chance to make amends and end this foreshadowed tragedy. He understands that his situation is somewhat fatal and seems almost predestined. He thinks over his losses and feels bad because it appears to him that:

Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his chi also affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation. (*TFA* 43)

At this time, he has lost his place among the nine ancestral spirits *Egungun* in his clan, Umuofia after seven years of exile; he has lost his son, Nwoye to the Christian missionary, he has lost the influence on Umuofia people as one of the lords of the land. He fears so much whether he can recover and feel optimistic that he will. In fact, he will take the highest title of the land; initiate his sons into the Ozo title and marry off his daughters to wealthy Umuofia men. One should not be surprised at his resilient thought; Georg Lukacs has assured that a tragic hero differs from a comic one in that the tragic hero is capable of successful struggle against relationship even when such a struggle portends ruin. This is opposed to the comic individuals who inhabit a world where men are incapable of struggle (Lukacs cited in Akwanya 115). Okonkwo's confidence is captured in the

narrator's words: 'as the years of exile passed one by one it seemed to him that his chi might now be making amends for the past disaster' (*TFA* 56).

The narrator reminds us that Okonkwo inhabits a world called tragic, and in this world, everything is fixed. Part of what it means is that a doomed individual can only be free if he accepts his fate and not struggle to change it because it is actually unalterable. This fact dawns on Okonkwo when he makes the mistake of the mother hen. This folktale is told by Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle with the lesson in the foolhardiness of fighting a war you cannot win. It is about the kite that picks up a duckling and the mother duck keeps mum. The mother kite hears of the silence of the mother duck when the young duckling is captured and asks the kite to return the duckling. The kite afterwards picks a chick and the mother hen screeches, curses and raves in futility. The mother kite decides that the chick is the ideal prey (*TFA* 46). This lack of caution in this tale is what Okonkwo displays in the face of the intimidating command of the white man's messenger. After the elders of Umuofia (Okonkwo inclusive) are released from detention for their role in the burning of the church and the people are deliberating on whether to fight or not, the white man's messenger marches to the meeting venue and orders them to end the meeting with the threat of the wrath of the white man 'whose power they well know'. Obierika, who understands the times, warns Okonkwo that it is already too late to fight the white man because he has dismantled the cohesive force holding Umuofia (*TFA* 57); but Okonkwo makes the mistake of the mother hen in Uchendu's story by decapitating the white man's messenger's head and so he hangs himself like the snake-lizard in his daughter's story.

CONCLUSION

This paper started by examining how the authorial intention of *Things Fall Apart* has affected the criticism of the folkloric contents of the novel. However, given that a work of art, in Northrop Frye's ideals, has to be an inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries even if new works cease to be written (Frye 17), we took yet a different approach to the exploration of folklore in the novel. Using a recontextualised reading of the Lyotardian metanarrative, we interpreted folklore (especially folktales, folksongs and parables) as meta-narratives that function in the novel as pseudo-commentaries on the sequence of events that surround the hero's life. The folkloric meta-narratives discussed stress either a chain of event in the life of Okonkwo or functioned as *pre-tragic* warning against certain unethical actions of the hero. Our study also proved how folkloric meta-narratives in the novel exist as a critique on the significance of some executed actions of the protagonist. The study finally presented folkloric meta-narratives as foreshadowing the impending and consequent tragedy of Okonkwo in the novel. The implication is that the use of folklore in the novel is not only for cultural affirmation or artistic embellishments as earlier critics have said, but for choric functions just like the chorus in Greek tragic plays. The paper also linked the function of folkloric meta-narratives in this novel with the role of poetry in

Shakespeare's plays to emphasize that folkloric meta-narrative is a technique that formed part of what made *Things Fall Apart* worthwhile.

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