



**Cross-Cultural Communication**  
Vol. 15, No. 1, 2019, pp. 48-55  
DOI:10.3968/11034

ISSN 1712-8358[Print]  
ISSN 1923-6700[Online]  
[www.cscanada.net](http://www.cscanada.net)  
[www.cscanada.org](http://www.cscanada.org)

## The Theatre of the Indigenous Tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Received 26 November 2018; accepted 7 February 2019

Published online 26 March 2019

### Abstract

There are basically three theories that explain the origin of the Nigerian theatre. Each of these theories represents a theatre tradition, and all these three theatre traditions exist side by side in Contemporary Nigerian society. One of these theories is the ritual and festival origin theory which states that Nigerian theatre developed from the rituals and festivals of the people. This theory stands for the ritual traditional theatre tradition. This is what is referred to as theatre of the indigenous tradition in this study.

This paper examines the theatre of the indigenous tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It focuses on the peculiarities of this theatre which characterize the work of art under study. It identifies and analyses the three different categories in which this indigenous theatre is found within the context of this work of art. It, then, concludes that there are certain activities in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that are either purely theatrical or have elements of theatre.

**Key words:** Nigerian Theatre; Indigenous Tradition; African culture; Theatre Theories

Adeniyi, V. O. (2019). The Theatre of the Indigenous Tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 15(1), 48-55. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/11034>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11034>

### INTRODUCTION

The origin of Nigerian Theatre is traceable to the basic theatre theories which include the ritual and festival origin theory, the Church origin theory, and the "Alarinjo" origin theory. The Ritual and Festival origin theory holds that Nigerian theatre emerged from rituals and festival. This theory stands for the emergence of the ritual traditional theatre tradition. The Alarinjo origin theory traces the origin of Nigerian theatre to the "Alarinjo" masquerades of the Yoruba. This theory gave birth to the popular theatre tradition. The Church origin theory reveals that the church gave birth to theatrical activities and the practitioners who started from the church and became professionals. This theory led to the beginning of the literary theatre tradition. Our focus, with particular reference to this study, is on the ritual traditional theatre tradition which is referred to in this paper as theatre of the indigenous tradition. It is the African pre-historic theatre tradition.

So many scholars have addressed the issue concerning the origin of theatre in Nigeria and Africa before colonization. For example, Bakary Traore (1972) believes that there is theatre in the narratives and story-telling traditions of the African people. Also, Oyin Ogunba is of the view that there is theatre in the festivals and rituals of the people. As he puts it:

There are two types of theatre in Nigeria, the first type is indigenous to country and derives from local traditional festivals, and the second type is foreign and is mainly borrowed from Europe (Ogunba, 1966, p.30).

Similar to Ogunba's stance is that of J.P. Clark who postulates that

If drama means the 'elegant imitation' of some significance to a people; if this means the physical representation or the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital elements of such representations are evocation, speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime, and if as the Japanese say of their Noh theatre, the aim is to 'open the ear' of the mind of a spectator in a corporate audience and 'open his eyes' to

the beauty of form, then there is drama in plenty in Nigeria...  
(Clark 1981:57)

J.N. Amankulor's (cited in Ossie Enekwe, 1981), Ossie Enekwe's (1981) and Ola Rotimi's (1981) views are very akin to that of Clark. For Amankulor, African traditional dramas involve celebration and participation of the people (referred to by Ossie Enekwe, 1981, p.154). This is supported by Ossie Enekwe, who claims that "ritual is an integral part of the African theatre" (1981, p.154) Rotimi too sees drama in African ritual displays. According to him, "Ritual displays that reveal in their style of presentation, in their purpose, and value, evidences of imitation, enlightenment and or entertainment can be said to be drama." (1981, p.77) B.M.

Ibitokun is not left out of the debate as he refers to African ritual dance as ritual drama. He postulates that

A dance is as powerfully communicative as a phonetic script if not more simply because...the signifier (the dancer in presence) and the signified (the dancing in process) and also the referent as stimulus-regulator (the participants and/or the observers and the time-locus) work simultaneously to convey a meaning (1993, p.11).

Harry Hagher, contributing to this debate, argues that there are some cultures in which the nature of festivals, as found in Yoruba and Igbo cultures, is pronounced. In such cultures, according to him, the story-telling tradition becomes their major source of theatrical experience. As he claims:

The Kwagh-Hir is an event which provides secular entertainment, education, and socialisation through the enactment of past and contemporary events by human performers, using puppets and masquerades. It is not a religious event. The actors do not assume the role of priest. It can, therefore, not be considered a ritual (Hagher, 1988).

Using the Kwagh-Hir of the Tiv people of Nigeria, he argues further that story-telling session is the focal point of African Theatre. He opines that

...The Kwagh-Hir theatre derives from the story-telling performance of the Tiv people. Both the theatre and story-telling events are interchangeable and synonymously called Kwagh-Hir (Hagher, 1988).

In the same vein, many scholars have argued that the Yoruba story-telling sessions qualify as theatre. These scholars include Ruth Finegan, Shapera Morris, Oludare Olajubu, Adeboye Babalola, and Ayo Akinwale. For example, Akinwale talks about the "intellectual processes" which go on during story-telling sessions as well as the mimetic impulses of both the story-teller and the audience in Yoruba *Alo Apamo* and *Alo Apagbe*. All these, he claims, "form the bedrock of the theatrical nature of these story-telling sessions" (Akinwale 1988, p.140). Finnegan corroborates this claim as she says that

...all the variegated aspects of more familiar literary forms may also play their part in the delivery of unwritten pieces, expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic

use of pause and rhythm, the inter-play of passion, dignity or honour...such devices are...but an integral as well as flexible part of its fuller realisation as a work of art (Finegan, 1970, p.3).

From the above exposition, we want to submit that there is theatre in the indigenous African activities. This theatre manifests itself, within the ambience of traditional African societies, in three different ways: in festivals and rituals, in story-telling sessions, and in the masque performances. The manifestation of theatre or theatrical elements in any of these three within the context of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is referred to as the theatre of the indigenous tradition. It is a form of theatre that is developed among the African peoples and rooted in African cultures. This paper, therefore, sees *Things Fall Apart* as Achebe's attempt to correct the Eurocentric view that Africans never experienced drama and theatre before the advent of colonialism.

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## MANIFESTATIONS OF THE INDIGENOUS THEATRICAL TRADITION IN *THINGS FALL APART*

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The popular definition of theatre as a performance or action which must be written and conform to the concept of unity of time, place, and action is strictly from the Aristotelian concept of the word. This has been attested to by Emmanuel Obiechina who insists that "African drama cannot develop like the classical Greek drama because Africa has a history and a culture that are different from those of the Greek" (referred to by Ossie Enekwe, 1981, p.150).

Ibitokun has also argued that Aristotle's *Poetics*, which "remains the most seminal and one of the earliest handbooks on what a play is, embodies the elements of Greek life which are in vogue only before, during, and a little after the time of Aristotle" (1993, p.1). It is relevant only to the world of artists who are western- oriented in heritage. This shows that theatre is culture-based. It is an artistic reproduction which cannot be separated from the world-view of the defining subject. Therefore, African theatre is seen from the perspective of Africans. It is a manifestation of "the black man's innate expressiveness" (Ibitokun, 1993, p.13).

The above arguments negate the various claims by scholars such as M.J.C. Echeruo (1981) and Meke Nzewi (1979) that festivals and ritual displays cannot be seen as theatre. Such claims are Eurocentric and of "Greeceanity" to use Ibitokun's (1993, p.1) word coined after that of Roland Barthes. African theatre is the socio-political, religious and cultural context that gave it birth. It cannot, therefore, be described strictly by using Aristotle's *Poetics*.

The life of an African is influenced by many circumstances that control his existence. These range

from occupational activities to rites of passage that are theatrically celebrated in traditional African societies. Thus, theatre, in the African society, is a celebration of life that usually involves a whole community. This is in line with J.N. Amankulor's view of African drama which he sees as being celebrative and participative.

The ritual and festival origin theory of theatre shows that theatre is a human activity that is exiting in nature and collective in practice. There are various ceremonies in traditional Africa that involve songs, dancing, acrobatic displays, drumming, pouring of libation, fire-torch parades etc. These ceremonies are seen as indigenous theatre in African societies. Thus, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is seen as Achebe's attempt to prove that Africans had their own form of theatre before the arrival of the Europeans to Africa. It is an attempt to portray African cultures in an indigenous theatrical form. We shall now examine theatre of the indigenous tradition within the context of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Theatre of the indigenous tradition is identifiable in three different ways within the context of the work of art under study. Each of these ways is identified and analysed in the subsequent paragraphs. One of the ways through which theatre of the indigenous tradition is made manifest in *Things Fall Apart* is through rituals and festivals. There are many instances of rituals and festivals in the novel. There is the New Yam Festival which is celebrated annually by most rural clans, with particular reference to the Umofia village. The festival is held before the harvest begins to honour and give thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clans. It is also done to renew the bond that binds the living and the dead together.

Ani, the earth goddess, is seen as the source of all fertility in Umofia village. She plays a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She is considered as the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. She is also believed to be in close communion with the departed souls of the clan whose bodies are buried in the earth. All yams of the old year are all disposed of on the last night before the festival. The festival starts with fresh yams which must not be taken until some have first been offered to Ani and the ancestral spirits. The festival begins the season of plenty which is the New Year and it is celebrated by men, women, young and old to usher in the new yam. The theological significance here is to appease Ani, the earth goddess, for the purpose of bringing good farm yields. It is also a thanksgiving ceremony for good harvest.

Three days before the festival, Okonkwo's wives scrub the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflect light (27). All cooking-pots, calabashes and wooden bowls are also thoroughly washed, especially the wooden mortars in which yam is pounded (26). This scrubbing and washing is ritually significant as it helps to spiritually cleanse the people and their environment from all impending evil and danger in the New Year. It is also suggestive of a sacred

cleansing rite in preparation for the new yam festival, which is Ani, the goddess' festival.

In the early morning of the day of the festival, Okonkwo offers a sacrifice of new yam and palm oil to his ancestors, asking them to protect him, his children, and their mothers in the New Year. Here, Okonkwo becomes the actor-priest who performs the offering of the sacrifice to his ancestors. He becomes the mediator in language between the spirit world of his ancestors and the world of his family. After this, there is eating and drinking from morning till night with friends and relatives. The first day is, therefore, devoted to feasting and fellowship.

The second day of the festival is the day of the great wrestling match between Okonkwo's village and their neighbours. It starts with the beating of drums which comes from the direction of the ilo, the village playground, where all the great ceremonies and dances take place. The ilo is not an ordinary play-ground. It is a place where the big tree and ancient silk-cotton tree which is sacred is found. It is believed that spirits of good children live in the tree, waiting to be born. On ordinary days, young women who desire children come to sit under its shade. The wrestling dance beat, which is quick, light and gay, is heard. Although the drums begin at noon, the wrestling does not begin until the sun goes down.

The whole village, men, women and children, turn out on the ilo, standing round in a circle with the centre left free. The stage type used here is the Theatre in the round, otherwise known as Arena Theatre. This is the type of stage type that is mostly associated with African Indigenous Theatre. It is a type of stage that allows stage-auditorium continuum. An indigenous method is used in managing the stage as the young men who keep order on these occasions dash about round the circle, two among whom carry palm fronds and beat the ground in front of them so as to keep the crowd back. These men end up beating the legs and feet of the stubborn members of the crowd. The entire members of the village who are present constitute the members of the audience, while the two wrestling teams are the performers or actors. The space occupied by the wrestlers, where the wrestling takes place, is the stage, while the place where the onlookers stay to watch is the auditorium. The wrestling match itself is the performance.

The dance and drumming, which usher the two teams into the circle, are elements of theatre. There are seven drums which are arranged according to their sizes in a long wooden basket. Three men beat these drums with sticks as they are possessed by the spirit of the drums, and by extension the spirit of Ani, the earth goddess. This shows that the sound that comes from the drums are invocatory, making the spirit of the worshipped goddess to manifest in the drummers/worshippers who are possessed in the process of active participation in the religious enactments. The beats from the drums give the

wrestlers an intoxicating rhythm. The contest begins with boys of fifteen or sixteen, with only three of such boys in each team. These boys are not the real wrestlers, but they set the scene. Their own contest can, therefore, be seen as the prologue to the real wrestling match. The audience-actor relationship is established as the crowd roar and clap during and after the contest, especially when Maduka, the son of Obierika, throws his opponent and his back touches the ground.

After the contest of these boys, which we have referred to as the prologue, the drummers stop for a brief rest before the real matches. During this period, they drink water, eat kola nuts, talking and laughing among themselves and others who stand near them. The audience members also use the period to move around, perhaps for the first time to see and discuss with whoever sit or stand next to them. This brief rest is the interlude, a comical interlude between the mock-matches (the prologue) and the real matches (the performance proper).

The real matches have two teams of twelve men in each of the teams, facing each other across the space. A man from a team dances across the centre to the other team and points at whomever he wants to fight. The two of them then dance back to the centre together and then close in. This is a dance drama. It is wrestling that is accomplished through dance. Dance, as a mode of communication, is used here to imitate an action. The audience-actor relationship is again established here as the crowd burst into a thunderous roar when Okafor falls Ikezue, who is flat on his back on the floor. They clap their hands and sing his praise in an antiphonal/ call and response style:

Who will wrestle for our village? Okafor will wrestle for our village. Has he thrown a hundred men? He has thrown four hundred men. Has he thrown a hundred Cats? He has thrown four hundred Cats. Then send him word to fight for us (36).

Thus, dance, music and song, which are indispensable elements of African traditional festivals, and important theatrical elements, cooperate and feature as organic parts in New Yam Festival as an indigenous theatre.

The wrestling match is also a ritual drama. Although Achebe does not tell us what led to the inclusion of wrestling matches in the New Yam Festival, it is assumed that there is a tradition associated with the people of Umuofia which involves fighting over a tuber of yam, which is being religiously observed during the Festival. The wrestling matches would then serve as a reminder of the fight over a tuber of yam. In the work of art under study, both the boys and the men engage in the wrestling matches to commemorate what happened in the past. This is a proof that the wrestling is a ritual drama, an imitation of an action.

Apart from being a drama, the wrestling match is a sport. According to a publication of the British Amateur Wrestling association, "wrestling...is one of the oldest-

known sports. It is one of the finest forms of exercise, bringing into use all the muscles of the body, and is also a wonderful mental stimulant" (1975, p.2). It is an exercise that is done to let off steam from the body, thereby helping to keep it fit. To be healthy, the body must be physically developed. To be developed, the body needs exercise. Wrestling provides such an exercise. It is also a wonderful mental stimulant as the wrestlers are always mentally alert and sensitive to any moves by their opponents. It generally occupies an important social status among the people of Africa. It is both a recreational and competitive sport as well as a source of entertainment. It serves a social function by bringing people from all walks of life together as a crowd, a sort of social re-union. There is, therefore, social interaction. It is a source of entertainment as people find great enjoyment and amusement in it. It is recreational as it provides a moment of relaxation and recreation for people after they have worked throughout the day.

In addition, there is indigenous theatre identifiable in the rites of passage in the novel. In Africa generally, and with particular reference to the Igbo land which is reflected in the novel, "a man's life from birth to death" is "a series of transition rites which" brings "him nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (85). The first to be discussed within the context of *Things Fall Apart* is the birth rite and the activities that are attached to it which are dramatically orchestrated. A new baby is circumcised on the eighth day. When Okonkwo's first wife gives birth to her third son in succession, Okonkwo slaughters a goat for her as is the custom. It is celebrated with feasting and music. There is also the naming ritual that is done seven market weeks after the birth of a child, especially when such a child is an "ogbanje". An ogbanje, as a diviner of the Afa Oracle tells Okonkwo, is one of those wicked children who when they die, enter their mother's womb to be born again. Okonkwo gets to know this when he goes to inquire why Ekwefi's child always dies.

Ezinma, Ekwefi's fourth child, is believed to be an ogbanje. The activities involved in trying to make her stay permanently with her mother, Ekwefi, are dramatic. These start when Ekwefi's third child, Onwumbiko is not given proper burial when he dies. The medicine-man, Okagbue Uyanwa, who is famous in the clan for his great knowledge about ogbanje children, asks on what market day the child was born. "Oye", replies Okonkwo (55). Okonkwo and Okagbue are the actors here. This makes the neighbours and the relations, who constitute the members of the audience, see that the child has died on the same market-day. The medicine-man then orders that there should be no mourning for the dead child. He brings out a sharp razor from the goatskin bag slung on his left shoulder and begins to mutilate the child. Both the razor and the bag are hand props. The space where this is done is the stage. He then takes "it away to bury in the Evil Forest, holding it by the ankle and dragging it on

the ground behind him". This is the end of that dramatic episode. Such a treatment, it is believed, is to prevent such a child from coming back to that family. However, it is revealed that there are some stubborn ones who still to return to the family with the marks of their mutilation.

When Ezinma becomes five years, the second dramatic episode takes place. In addition to the actors in the first episode is Ekwefi, the mother of Ezinma. The members of the audience are the same as in the first episode. The only difference here is in the stage type which is not restricted to one place. This negates Aristotle's unity of place. The various spots, that Ezinma takes the people to in her attempt to show the place where her *iyi-uwa* is buried, are the acting areas. These range from their home, the main road, in front of the big Udala tree, the bush, and back to their home in front of an orange tree, and later inside the pit dug up by Okagbue and Okonkwo. The hoe, that is used to dig the ground, the goatskin bag, two leaves which are chewed and swallowed by Okagbue before he takes the rag, the rag itself, and the smooth shiny pebble, which represents Ezinma's *iyi-uwa*, are all props. These can be divided into two groups of hand props and set props. The hand props are the ones brought to the stage by the characters, while the set props are the ones met on stage. Thus, the hoe, the goatskin bag, and the two leaves are the hand props, while the rag and the pebble are the set props. There is also actor-audience relationship as the people watching react audibly to every action that takes place on the acting areas. For example, all the women shout with joy when Ezinma confirms that the pebble found is her *iyi-uwa*, and this ends the episode.

The activities involved in the marriage rites within the context of *Things Fall Apart*, on pages 47-51, 77 and 92-93, are also dramatically inclined. For example, the celebration of Obierika's daughter's *uri* is dramatically orchestrated. It is "the day on which her suitor (having already paid the greater part of her bride-price)" brings palm-wine to her parents, her immediate relatives and "to the wide and extensive group of kinsmen called *umunna*" (77). It is celebrated by the entire neighbourhood who gather at Obierika's compound.

As night falls, burning torches are set on wooden tripod and the young men raise a song. The elders sit in a big circle and the singers go round singing each man's praise as they come before him. They have something to say for every man who is either a farmer, an orator who speaks for the clan, a wrestler, or a warrior such as Okonkwo. When they have gone round the circle, they settle down in the centre, and girls come from the inner compound to dance. As the bride, with a cock in her right hand, joins the dancers, a loud cheer rises from the crowd. All the other dancers make way for her. She presents the cock to the musicians and begins to dance. Her brass anklets rattle as she dances and her body gleams with cam wood in soft yellow light. The musicians supply music with their wood, clay and metal instruments as they sing.

One of their songs and which is the latest in the village is as follows:

If I hold her hand, she says, "Don't touch!" If I hold her foot, she says, "Don't touch!" But when I hold her waist beads, she pretends not to know (83).

This is an indigenous dance drama. The dancers and the singers are the actors and the actresses, while the bride is the main actress. She is the heroine. The elders and the crowd constitute the audience members. The acting space where the singing and the dance take place is the stage. It is a theatre in the round as indicated through the sitting arrangement of the elders. The source of illumination is the burning touches and this is an indigenous method of lighting. The cock with which the bride dances to the stage is a hand prop. The brass anklets and the can wood on her body are part of her makeup and they are traditionally oriented. The actor-audience relationship is established as the crowd cheers at the appearance of the bride on the stage. The music is supplied from the indigenous instruments which are made of wood, clay or metal. Thus the theatrical elements of dance, music and song are organically fused into this ceremony.

In addition, the activities involved in the ceremony of the marriage confession done in Mbanta, Okonkwo's mother's village, are dramatically orchestrated. It is the youngest of Uchendu's five sons, Amikwu, who is marrying a new wife. The bride-price has been paid and his people have taken palm-wine to the bride's kinsmen. The last ceremony which is to be performed is that of the marriage confession (92). Uchendu's eldest daughter, Njide, who asks the bride questions, the bride herself and Uchendu, who sits by the bride in the centre, are the actor and actresses. All the others; the relatives and friends, are members of the audience. The empty space that is occupied by these three is the stage. It is a theatre in the round as indicated in the seating arrangement of the twenty-two daughters of both Uchendu and his brothers. They sit in a circle on the ground. The hen in the right hand of the bride and the ancestral staff of the family, which Uchendu holds on stage, are the hand props used in the performance.

The time of performance is the evening, when the sun is setting. There is an actor-audience relationship established as the other women who are members of the audience talk to the bride to answer truthfully when she is being asked the questions: "Answer truthfully," urge the other women (93). The dialogue on stage is established through the questions and answers session. The stage business, on the other hand, is established as Uchendu takes the hen from the bride, slits its throat with a sharp knife and allows some of the blood to fall on his ancestral staff. Thus, another form of indigenous theatre is established here.

Furthermore, the activities involved in the funeral rites of Ezeudu within the context of *Things Fall Apart*,

on pages 84 to 87, are dramatic. It is a great funeral, such as befits a noble warrior. It is a warrior's funeral in which warriors wear smoked raffia skirts and their bodies are painted with chalk and charcoal. There are many egwugwu who appear from the underworld to show that "the land of the living" is "not far removed from the domain of the ancestors". In Africa, it is believed that the ancestral spirits visit the land of the living most especially at festivals and also when an old man dies, because an old man is considered to be "very close to the ancestors" (85).

As the evening draws near, the shouting and the firing of guns, the beating of drums and the brandishing and clanging of matchets increase. Because Ezendu has taken three out of the four titles in the clan in his life, he is to be buried after dark with only a glowing brand to light the sacred ceremony. Before this final rite, drums beat violently and men leap up and down in frenzy. As guns are fired on all sides, the one-handed spirit, an egwugwu, comes on stage, carrying a basket full of water. He dances a few steps to the funeral drums and then goes to see the corpse. "Ezendu", he calls in his guttural voice (86). After he has addressed the corpse, the drums and the dancing continue.

The space where these activities are done is the stage. The warriors and the egwugwu are the actors, while the crowd is the audience. There is an imitation of an action by the egwugwu who are believed to be ancestral spirits and so imitate the voice and actions of the ancestral spirits. There is also the game of "let us pretend" here as the crowd suspends its disbelief that the men in the egwugwu costumes are human beings or even their relative. The smoked raffia skirts that are worn by the egwugwu and the warriors are the costumes, while the paint of chalk and charcoal on their bodies is the makeup. The basket full of water that is carried by the one-handed spirit and the guns that are fired intermittently by the warriors are the hand props. There is also the combination of dance, music and song to establish African indigenous total theatre.

Another category of the manifestation of the indigenous theatrical tradition within the ambience of *Things Fall Apart* is the story-telling sessions. In traditional African societies, the available spaces in most compounds serve as the place where stories are told, while moonlight serves as the source of illumination for both the story-teller and the story-hearers. *Things Fall Apart* is replete with many story-telling sessions. On page 37, Okonkwo tells his boys-Nwoye and Ikemefuna- stories of the land, masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. On page 38, Nwoye remembers the story her mother often tells of the quarrel between Earth and Sky, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years. On page 53, Okonkwo remembers the story of the Mosquito and the Ear which his mother had told him when he was a child. Also, on pages 98-99, Obierika, Okonkwo's best friend, tells the story of a silent stranger whom the villagers of Abame have killed. To draw out a deduction from the story,

Uchendu, another of Okonkwo's friend tells the story of mother Kite and her daughter to illustrate that it is more fearful to hurt someone who is silent than him who reacts vigorously to provocation. All these stories are in a pure form. They are prose narratives.

The most detailed of all the stories in the novel is the one which runs from pages 67 to 70. It is revealed that it is in the evening, after supper, when each of Okonkwo's wives and their children take turns to tell stories. Ekwefi tells her daughter, Ezinma, a story which is summarized as follows:

Once upon a time, all the birds are invited to a feast in the sky. Although Tortoise is not one of them, but being hungry for two months, he cajoles the birds to give him a feather each, with which he makes two wings. He uses these wings to fly with the birds to the feast. During their flight he cunningly convinces the birds to take new names fit for the occasion. He himself takes on the new name as "All of you". When the feast is ready, Tortoise asks the host for whom it is prepared. The man replies as 'For all of you' He eats the best part of the feast and leaves the remnants for the birds to peck at. To show their displeasure at Tortoise's treatment of them, they take back their feathers. To get back home, Tortoise has to fall down from the sky. He tells parrot to tell his wife to bring out all the soft things and litter the compound with them. Parrot, however, says the opposite. Tortoise falls on hard things brought out by his wife. And his shell splinters. A clever medicine-man, however, puts them together again. That is why tortoise shell is very rough.

The theatrical potentials of the above story-telling session can be analysed as follows: The story-teller, Ekwefi, is the actress who performs before her daughter, Ezinma, who is the audience. The place where the story-telling session takes place is the stage, while the story-telling itself is theatrical in outlook. The art of mimesis or acting in the session is also theatrical as Ekwefi imitates each of the characters involved in the story. Also, the audience-actor relationship is established as Ezinma interrupts her mother during the narration of the story to ask questions. For example, when Ekwefi says that Tortoise wants to attend the feast with the birds, and knowing fully well that tortoise don't have wings, Ezinma wonders and says: "But he had no wings" Her mother replies her and says: "Be patient. That is the story...." (68) Then she explains how Tortoise gets to the feast with borrowed feathers. Although this story does not have a song as Ezinma points out: "There is no song in the story" (70), songs also serve as a medium of establishing the audience participation in story-telling sessions, apart from the fact that they also help to enhance the aesthetics of the session. For example, on page 38, we are told that whenever Nwoye's mother sings the Vulture's song, that he sang to soften the heart of the Sky toward the suffering of the sons of man, he feels carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, Earth's emissary, sang for mercy.

Finally, in consonance with Okpewho's assertion that theatre "is a vital place of communication which by its very nature relies on form for its significance...."

(Cited in Akinwale, 1988, p.139) there is a high level of communication in the story-telling session. It has communicated moral and political messages. It offers a moral lesson that anybody who misuses others' generosity will eventually become a victim of his own greediness. On the political level, the story could be an indirect criticism of the colonial powers who came to Africa uninvited and exploited African's resources. As Biakolo (1998, p.92) puts it: "Achebe is in effect saying that, like the tortoise, these ex-colonial powers will eventually be punished by their cupidity". This explains Atiyeri's postulation that

Achebe has the knack of using simple folklore to hammer home a point in contemporary life. He is adept at marrying current reality with the metaphoric past (1991, p .64).

The third category through which the indigenous theatrical tradition is made manifest in *Things Fall Apart* is through the masque performances. There is the portrayal of the ancestral cult and worship in the work of art under study. In traditional African society, the masquerade symbolises the ancestral spirit. Within the context of *Things Fall Apart*, it is known as "egwugwu" which is an Igbo word for a masquerade who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village. The totality of the "egwugwu" is the visiting spirit of the ancestor which calls for reverence and worship. In the work of art under study, the egwugwu is used in the administration of justice in the clan. It features in the trials scene where the marital conflict between Mgbafo and her husband, Uzowulu, is resolved.

The egwugwu trials scene is a communal ceremony that takes place at the village ilo when the sun's heat has softened. The ceremony is believed to be for men as the women usually look on "from the fringe like outsiders". An iron gong sounds, creating the spirit of expectancy in the crowd, who look in the direction where the egwugwu reside. This is followed by a high-pitched blast from a flute and drum-sounds. The essence of the music here is to convey the message that the spirits of the ancestors have arrived into their midst. It is used to announce their arrival. Thus the gong, the flute and the drum make coded sounds which are decoded by the crowd to mean the arrival of the spirits of the ancestors.

The egwugwu come out from the egwugwu house which is known in the histrionic parlance as "skene", the set that serves as the background to an action on stage. The house serves both spiritual and aesthetic purposes. The spiritual purpose is to serve as the abode of the supernatural beings, while the aesthetic purpose is to add beauty to the acting area through "the many-coloured patterns and drawings done by specially chosen women" on its outside walls. The stage is preset with a row of nine stools for the actors- egwugwu to occupy when the performance, the trials, begins. Of course, these chairs are not arranged in a firing squad style. Rather, they are arranged in an arch form, thereby creating the aesthetics for stage effect.

As the egwugwu appear on stage from their house, the women and children run away, shouting. A terrifying spectacle is created as nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan come out together. Each of the nine egwugwu represents a village of the clan. It is believed that the nine villages of Umuofia developed out of the nine sons of the first father of the clan. Their leader is called Evil Forest, the eldest of the nine sons. The smoke that pours out of his head is a stage effect that is created through the smoke-effect machine.

The significance and relevance of the egwugwu are appreciated in the totality of its dramatic import. This is portrayed through the game of "let-us-pretend" in which both the egwugwu and the crowd are consciously engaged. Even though they know that the "life" inside the egwugwu is a human being, and not a spirit, they suspend their disbelief, by believing that the "life" inside the costume is a spirit. For example, it is very likely that Okonkwo's wives and some other women know that the second egwugwu is Okonkwo because of the way he walks which resembles that of Okonkwo and because of the fact that Okonkwo is not among the titled men and elders who sit behind the row of egwugwu. But they keep all these facts within themselves and still see the second egwugwu, as well as all other egwugwu, as a visiting ancestor who must be revered. Thus when Evil Forest asks: "Uzowulu's body, do you know me?" He replies by saying: "How can I know you, father? You are beyond our knowledge." (64)

The smoked raffia, in which the egwugwu appear that gives them their supernatural appearance, is their costume. The wooden masks that the egwugwu wear is the makeup that is done for both ritual and aesthetic effects. The ritual effect is achieved through the terrifying picture that is created on each of the masks. It is painted in white, has round hollow eyes and charred teeth that are as big as a man's fingers. These descriptions give the egwugwu their ancestral touch, which is beyond ordinary and human level. The aesthetic effect is achieved through the beauty that the mask creates on the wearer. The two powerful horns on the egwugwu is part of the make-up. The rattling staff which the leader of the egwugwu, Evil Forest, holds and later thrusts into the earth is the hand prop.

There is also an impersonation through the human characters who pretend to be the visiting ancestors. Imitation of an action takes place as the human characters imitate the gestures and the guttural voice of the ancestral spirit to act out the role of an ancestral spirit. "They greet themselves in their esoteric language" (63) and address human beings as "bodies" as spirits do (64). Thus, the "life" inside the costume is the actor, while the crowd, who are the villagers watching the trials, are members of the audience. While the trials constitute the performance and the acting area where the trials take place becomes the stage, the area where the villagers either sit or stand to watch the trials is the auditorium.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this study, we have examined the theatre of the indigenous tradition in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. We have identified and analysed the peculiarities of the three different categories in which this indigenous theatre is found within the ambience of the work of art under study. They are the Ritual and Festival category, the Story-Telling session category, and the Masque Performances category. We have argued in this paper that the theatre in each of these categories is a human activity that is exiting in nature and collective in practice. We have also argued that this form of theatre is the African pre-historic theatre tradition, a form of theatre that is developed among the African peoples and rooted in African cultures. The conclusion that can be drawn from this study, therefore, is that *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's attempt to correct the Eurocentric view that Africans never experienced drama and theatre before the advent of colonialism.

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