

**Aesthetics of African Culture in Nigerian Fiction: A Study of Ndubuisi George's
*Woes of Ikenga***

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Abstract

This study of Ndubuisi George's Woes of Ikenga examines cultural aesthetics, by exploring the cultural values, traditions, norms, beliefs, superstitions, cultural practices, rituals, ceremonies and cult societies in Nigerian fiction, and worldviews of the people within the settings of the work. The study aims at exposing the beauty of African culture, the beliefs and customs of the people, especially the culture that we should be proud of. The novelist set out to portray the beauty of the rich cultural heritage of the people, the belief of systems and the influences of the supernatural in human lives. The data for this study is from both primary and secondary sources. The novel forms the primary sources, while library texts, journals and internet are the secondary sources. The theoretical framework adopted in this study is Archetypal Criticism. It was discovered that Africans, indeed Nigerians have a rich cultural heritage they should be proud of in this contemporary time, despite the negative aspects of the culture. The study therefore exposed us to the various values, norms, heritage and beliefs that are uniquely African and the implications of these practices which form the crux of the study.

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

Introduction

Africa and her people have rich and beautiful cultural heritage. The advent of the colonialists portrayed Africa in bad light being seen as a cultureless people without hope of survival unless guided by the whites. So, the bulk of the early writings by African writers debunked such negative notions about Africans and their environment. There is therefore a need to portray the beauty of Africa and its intricacies, its cosmology, its environment and its worldview. It is often a romanticization of the African heritage. This is to explicate and unearth the hidden treasures in the African environment. This study is concerned with restoring the African image that suffered the colonial perception and marginalization. It cuts through the inglorious perception of the African people and intervenes in representing an alternative image of the African in the full exploit of his culture and tradition. Achebe in his own words also talked about African aesthetics. According to him:

In as much as one would not see African literature as different and special it is therefore, logical to accept the fact that literature, being a product of human culture, cannot develop in a vacuum rather it has to develop in a tradition or traditions (13).

The intrusion of colonization marked a disruption of African's traditional values and customs, it could be recalled that before the white men arrived the shores of the African continent, the European writers regarded Africa as a dark continent, peopled governed by savage and primitive heathens who indulged in all sorts of crimes, ranging from cannibalism, idolatry, fetishism and brigandry. Leo Africana's writing in this vein in the sixteenth century in his work, *The History and Description of Africa* commented that; "The negroes lead a beastly kind of life being utterly destitute of the use of reason of dexterity, of wit and all arts. Yea, they so behave themselves, as if they had continually lived in a forest among wild beasts". (21). It is expedient to draw attention to the above quotation. Since it forms the background against which Africans themselves write. It can be recalled that slavery and slave trade had a devastating impact on the African society due to the degradations to which thousands of Africans were placed. The main objective of African writing then, is the emancipation of the Africans from cultural dependence on the West. The most outstanding feature of these writings are the discovery of African past, the breakthrough in historical studies and a movement towards self-knowledge and literary independence.

For most African writers, the colonial situation has not only affected but influenced their growth, upbringing and education and therefore, acts as the theme or subject matter of their fictional writings. The result is the theme of cultural nationalism and culture contact in their works. Examples of this kind of works are Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* and Camara Laye's *the African Child*, etc. This research on the aesthetics of African culture as seen in Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* has been chosen because the manner in which European writers criticize African culture is alarming. The novelist wrote in response to issues on cultural conflict. The two cultures in conflict are the western culture and the African cultures.

Conceptual Review

Culture: Culture is a way of life of a group of people-the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Aesthetics: *Aesthetics*, the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated.

Africanism: *Africanisms* refers to characteristics of African culture that can be traced through societal practices and institutions of the African Diaspora.

Tradition: *Tradition* is a belief or behavior (folk custom) passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past.

Supernatural: *The Chambers Papers Back Dictionary*, also defined supernaturalism as not happening in the ordinary course of nature, miraculous. It is seen as the soul, a being without a body, a ghost, an evil spirit, it is the belief that living people can communicate with souls of dead people (512).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is Archetypal Criticism. This is derived from the Swiss Psychologist Carl Jung's Theory of the Collective Unconscious. According to Northrop Frye, Archetypal criticism:

Is a literary approach that identifies those mystic elements that give a literary work deeper meaning? Archetypal features help in understanding the text and in defining its form and function. These features also demonstrate that the meaning of a text does not reside only on the page nor can it be interpreted only as an independent entity (112).

Jung's theory of the collective unconscious provides the impetus for exploring archetypes represented in literary works. As Echezona Ifejirika says, in literature, an archetype is a typical character, an action or a situation that seems to represent such universal patterns of human nature. They are unknowable basic forms personified or concretized in recurring images, symbols or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognizable character types such as the tricksters (62).

A practical reading of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Great Ponds*, Odili Ujubuonu's *Pregnancy of the Gods*, *Pride of the Spider Clan* and *Treasure in the Wind*, Femi Osofisan's *The Women of Owu*, Chidubem Iweka's *The Ancient Curse* and *So Bright a Darkness* are critical examples of the archetypal literary criticism. In a nutshell, Ifejirika stresses that, it is important to note, however, that the archetypal relationship with literature and the works of art is that they seek to restore man, and his entire humanity, a humanity which values the primitive elements in human nature. And as such they have certain beliefs in supernaturalism and in the erratic nature of the gods. The archetypal critics therefore

believe in the powers of the ancient myths, legends, and rituals, primordial images (powers and forces that existed from the beginning of time), they believe in spirits, ghosts, mystical forces, gods and goddesses. They have a very strong believe in mystical powers, unforeseen forces, the reoccurrence of events or experiences. For example, the story of the tortoise in different tricks in Igbo land, the lizards, giant flies and other dangerous animals that hunt and destroy people's lives portray such beliefs. Archetypal criticism determines both the form and the function of the text and adds greater depth and understanding to literary works, hence this novel is chosen for the study, because it covers substantially the various archetypal beliefs as they relate to the supernatural elements or supernaturalism in the African world.

Review of Related Scholarship/Empirical Studies

In this section, it is worthy to note that scholarly reviews on *Woes of Ikenga* by Ndubuisi George vividly portray African cultural aesthetics. According to Femi Ajasa;

Woes of Ikengais an intense moving narrative exposing the level at which Africans struggle for survival in foreign countries, through engaging in demeaning jobs which they never bargained for. It sends a stern warning to any Nigerian and indeed African he believes that it is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven, to count the cost before intending to emigrate (12).

Femi Ajasa looked at this work didactically, he saw the moral lessons behind the makeup of the piece of art, the lesson that one should work his way through to the top right in his own motherland, Ajasa sees the novel as a warning to the likes of Ikenga who left home in search for greener pastures, who would rather go through the seven gates of hell and confront the fallen angel himself than be patient and work hard. He asks that they count the cost before emigrating unlike Ikenga who never used his brain to think of its aftermath.

According to Echezona Ifejirika in the 'Introductory note' in the novel- *Woes of Ikenga*

The very few survivors who get to the 'promised land', discover to their chagrin and utmost disappointment that all that glitters is not gold, as they face stiff immigration laws and challenges with particular reference to the near impossibility of obtaining permanent resident permit (PRP), a paper that guarantees the holders the freedom and opportunity to move about, work and earn a living without tears, fears and police harassment. The extreme difficulty in getting the permanent resident permit compels aliens or migrants to embark on drug trafficking and usage, prostitution and many ill-fated, unsuccessful and catastrophic marriage arrangements with young girls from the host and hostile countries (111).

Ifejirika in this aspect saw the novel from its economic perspective, where these immigrants like Ikenga realize that the pasture is not always greener on the other side, where they face stringent laws on immigration and are poised with obtaining permanent resident permit (PRP), whereas in their homeland they are allowed to move about freely and work. In order to work, move about, and earn a living they have to obtain the PRP and this leads the immigrants to go into shady things like prostitution, drug trafficking like Vanessa and Ikenga respectively.

Economically, these immigrants are trapped if they don't obtain the PRP and thus could lead to deterioration, because money makes things go round, when a man is unable to fend for himself and his family, he seeks other means to do so by hook or crook which is the situation with Uncle Ray and Ikenga. This result to economic quagmire and these immigrants end up in jail. Onome Onwah.org- in an evaluation of Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* says.

The novel is as real as real can be as the author paints the grim pictures of the lives of illegal immigrants in Germany and one can boldly generalize as the plight of most illegal immigrants in other countries. Onome Onwah takes a swipe at the realistic aspect of the novel which has plausible places. Actions and plot. He sees the situation represented as a situation that people actually go through, the novel is not written in a vacuum, it is a product of the society as the writer or novelist takes stock of his society, he represents in words, the happenings in his society, representing real situations and real places. The novel reveals the true situation that exists, a real event, occurrence, situation etc. So the author painted the real picture of what illegal immigrants pass through (1).

To PurpleshelveWordPress.com; “There are many conclusions or ways the novel *Woes of Ikenga* could have gone that may inspire hope for heroic Ikenga in the readers mind, but each cast aspersions on the readers own morality or displays his lack of it, thus drawing us to Ikenga's woes and showing clearly that there are indeed no easy options”. The novel is seen from its pessimistic point of view where the deeds of Ikenga only showed decadence of the society, the negative effects of leaving one's original habitat. It does not inspire hope, it equally does not present Ikenga in the limelight as a complete hero, Ikenga only brings pain to the readers, and casting aspersions on the readers own morality. It shows in real sense the woes of Ikenga.

These scholars have viewed the novel *Woes of Ikenga* from their various standpoints: pessimistically, realistically, economically and didactically, but the researcher took a swipe at the cultural perspective in this novel as it affects the beauty of culture. Breaking from the norm; the researcher showed the Igbo cosmology in its varied forms in

the other chapters in consideration of culture as it affects the African culture delimited to the Igbo society or community.

Cultural Intricacies and Influences of Supernatural agents in Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga*

A worldview is referred to as how people perceive and explain their world, or the ways things are or expressed in their environment. A people's worldview stands for their source of explanation for the way things are in the world, including their theories of illness, death and misfortunes and how human afflictions and problems can be resolved. In the case of the traditional Igbo community, all forms of individual and group religious practices occur within the broad outline of their worldview, particular beliefs, such as the basis for the ritual naming of a child, the "okukuonyeuwa" ceremony, death and burial rites, and other traditional values and practices emanate from and are validated by it. It is not only religion, but also most other aspects of Igbo traditional socio-cultural life that come under the influence of Igbo worldview.

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

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

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

So, the deity, "Ekwensu" is also the tempter deity, his job is to hunt down man so that man would not be able to obey God. He causes them to sin, using tools like lust of the

flesh, pleasures of the world and fear of the unknown. He has the authority to make man behave in a way that is not in accordance to the conventional way of behaving.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Igbo equally believe in proverbs, it is said that proverbs is the palm oil with which words are eaten. The knowledge of proverbs proves that the speaker is well grounded in the custom of the people; proverb is one of the traditional techniques that spices up a language. Like some other elements of folklore, proverbs play several significant roles in the literary works of writers who chose to blend their works with the touch of African oral tradition and also to give their creative works a stamp of uniqueness, authenticity and identity as they reflect and project their culture and tradition, outlook, view and perception of a community. Rems Umeasiegbu sees proverbs as any expression recognized by a people as embodying the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors. Proverbs help writers to express the belief, an outlook to life unique to their people. Proverbs as seen in the novel expresses the relationships among the characters thus;

it had been a case of okenaohia,ngw ere n'uzo (22).

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

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

Chukwuma-father to Ikenga, went searching for his son at Reverend Klaus's home, he was in desperate need of his son which provoked the proverb; "When a frog decides to leave the swamp for the mountains, it is that its life is in grave danger" (24). Another of the cosmology of the traditional Igbo society is myths and superstitions. Myth is an ancient anonymous story that explains how something came to be. It is a fictional tale that explains the actions of gods or heroes, or the causes of natural phenomena. It conveys the beliefs and ideas of a culture and it usually involves gods and goddesses and even tricksters. Myth, as part of oral tradition is composed orally and then passed from generation to generation by words of mouth to explain things about nature or teach lessons about how man should behave. A story surrounding a myth could either be true or false. It is therefore, very wrong for one to arrive at a hasty conclusion that it is true or it is false. Myth is about something within an environment or society. A myth, therefore, remains true as long as the rite is still alive with the society.

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

"As an elder departs, the people it an extension of life approved by their ancestors and spirit in world" (31).

The Igbo harboured the superstitious belief about circumcision; they saw circumcision as part of the tradition. So, with a sharp razor, he beautified the tiny genital of the male child, a practice that everyone knew very well how to perform" (35). Circumcision, they say would stop or prevent the child from behaving sexually immoral. Still on myths, the Igbo equally believe that rain during occasions like marriage ceremonies, funeral ceremonies is a bad omen and so the rainmakers are taken care of. The rainmakers if not taken care of could cause mischief and bring down rain. This is equally seen in the novel:

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

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

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

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

The Igbo people also believed in 'ogbanje or agwu'. The ogbanje would be really beautiful and have a date when they would die and go back to the world they came from, thereby causing pains and sorrows to the respective parent. Agwu is believed to be a spirit that comes and goes, when provoked it reacts fiercely. "Throughout the thirty-five-minute

ride to work, he tried to understand or identify the ogbanje element in his wife and its modus operandi in the white man's land" (195).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has unearthed the true beauty and Nigerian cultural values for all to see. The Igbo have their own worldviews how they believed the world originated and how they see the world. It never changed even when Ikenga arrived Germany; he never changed his perception even though he changed his environment. The new tradition and custom made him into a recluse" at the end of the novel but they keenness to be like the proper traditional Igbo man never ceased; even when he came to Germany. He had to greet the gods before eating with Mascot, he desired circumcision for his son, he desire self-respect.

This study shows the beauty, serenity, ambience and succour we find in nature. It shows that there is no escaping your roots, foundation, and culture. It has proved beyond reasonable doubt that we didn't hear of culture from the whites for me first time. It corrects the disillusioned image of Africans as animals and shows that we had gods or deities that we served before the whites came. We had beliefs, culture, norms, superstitions, rites and rituals that we observed and still observe. Thus, Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* depicts certain messages for humanity like any other literary work. The novel dwells on the theme of cultural intricacies, as well as the exploration of the roles and influences of the supernatural agents in the work of art. Furthermore, the author's works are critically based on archetypal criticism which is derived from the Swiss psychologist.

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