

Friendship and Solidarity in the Igbo Communalist Living: Issues in Selected Nigerian Texts.

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Abstract

The spirit of oneness and togetherness is a distinct trait in the culture of the Igbo people. The Igbo communal living fosters closed relationships in which people empathize and get involved in the concerns of one another. Friendship and fellow feeling in the form of solidarity are valued as much as of blood relationship. It is therefore no wonder, also that the women (among the Igbo) unreservedly rally support for one another at times of need. Therefore, the Igbo ideology of friendship and solidarity is one of the hallmarks of the people coexisting with less strife and high regards for their kits and kins. Friendship is an important relationship throughout a person's life span, and is therefore highly valued and upheld among the people. Narratives in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*; Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, and Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* reveal the bonds of friendship, women helping women and fraternal supports among the people. Although, literary scholars have critically studied these texts, this work veers a different direction to examine the issues of friendship among the men and women helping women solidarity. Using the framework of African Communalism as a moral philosophy and way of life that promotes cultural values, relationships, rights and responsibility, this paper makes a literary analysis of the patterns of relationship among the key characters in the selected texts. Specifically, the paper highlights the roles of women supporting women, and fraternal love among the men in stabilizing distressed individuals in the texts. The paper advances the Igbo ideology of togetherness that teaches the individuals in the community to have the moral attitude of contributing to the well-being of others, especially at the times of need.

Key Words: Communalism, Cosmology, Solidarity, Friendship, Relationship.

Introduction

Among the Igbo, it is cultural that friendship and inter-personal affiliations are important relationships through a person's life span, which are highly valued and lived with. This is because the spirit of oneness, empathy and togetherness closely bonds the Igbo society. The individuals in the society connect and relate as one in the community. Kwame Gyekye echoes this situation when he says:

The individual is an inherently communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated individual. Consequently, it sees the community as a reality in itself not as a mere association based on a contract of individuals whose interests and ends are contingently congruent, but as a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, which are not necessarily biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of a group and who share common goals, values, and interests and understandings of the good-crucial to an adequate conception of the community. (41-42).

This assertion makes it explicit that friendship is a part of Igbo communal living. It portends the values of love and harmony as exemplified in the ideologies of *ohazurume* implying togetherness, or *Igwebuike*. The mode of interaction among the men as members of the *umunna*, clan, or age grade, council of elders or titled men, are avenues to foster friendship in a typical Igbo community. Interactions within these groups are revered as much as blood relationships are.

On the other hand, women are a great force in the Igbo traditional society. The women have expanded roles, having navigated through the tradition based gender roles assigned to them by patriarchy. Women are a force unto themselves. They grow in solidarity to support fellow women and by this, form a formidable ally for their folks, especially in the face of adversity or difficulty. They have “become increasingly active on their own behalf and are seeking solutions. Educated urban-dwelling women often articulate concerns for other women not able to speak on their own behalf” (McFerson and Bolles 438). This ideology of women advocating support for women is a strong solidarity base for communal values and harmonious coexistence in the community.

Nigerian literary sphere captures incidents that reveal friendship and solidarity among the individual characters. For example, Chinua Achebe’s texts *Things Fall Apart*, and *Arrow of God*, replicate the moral doctrine of empathy and concern among persons in the community. In particular the friendship between Obierika and Okonkwo and Akuebue and Ezeulu, in the, respective texts show the fraternal relationship and the fact of communal concern in the people. Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Ifeoma Okoye’s *Behind the Clouds* highlight the extent of women support for fellow women. These texts form the primary sources of data for this paper.

Literature review of the texts that includes essays from scholars such as Nduka Udeagha and Grace Nwamah’s essay “Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and the Role of Women in Igbo Traditional Religious Culture” highlights the patriarchal belief, the fact that Igbo women are seen and heard because of their indispensable roles in the traditional Igbo society. This is against the earlier held notion that women are better seen than heard. The writers posit, “The place of women in Igbo cultural society is pivotal and very critical in the sustenance and continuance of human society”. They further write that:

In the dominantly religious Igbo culture, women are also imperative parts and parcel of the religion. They play diverse religious roles. They could function as deity, religious personalities and adherents, but more importantly they do not just belong to the Igbo traditional religion as ordinary members, some of them belong to the group of authorities that play leading roles in the religious culture of the Igbo. It is described in African traditional religious milieu as “sacred specialists”. (Udeagha and Nwamah 276).

The paper acknowledges the role of women as sacred specialties, religious personalities, and bridge-builders, and no longer, as cooks, child bearers, caregivers or mere economic supporters. By this, it reveals how far the traditional Igbo women have evolved in establishing presence and exerting influence in the advancement of the society.

Much critical work has been done in *Arrow of God* from diverse perspectives, including Marcel Ikechukwu Oyibor’s essay, “Igbo Cosmology in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*: An Evaluative Analysis”. In this essay, Onyibor reveals the relevance of cosmology in the plots and characters in the text. He observes, “Achebe uses the individualistic tendency in Ezeulu to do an

in-depth exploration of Igbo maintenance of dualism in their thought and .praxis". The essay highlights the Igbo material world and its relevance to the contemporary society.

Critical works in Nwapa's *Efuru* includes Perp St Remy Asiegbu's essay "Forces and Flaws in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*" which draws attention to the writer's conscious or unconscious struggle with forces, natural or supernatural that manipulate the actions of the characters. Asiegbu states that "in Igbo land, those who are under the influence of some gods or spirits are known to exhibit some queer characters, stubbornness or defiant attitude as one of such character traits. And it is such a thing that can make a beautiful girl like Efuru run to a man of Adizua's low status without even her father's knowledge" (102). The paper raises the issue of gossip by minor characters as a means of sustaining the narratives in the texts. Likewise, in *Idu*, it is recorded that "... the great love that exists between Idu and Adiewere around which *Idu* as a story revolves is a significant force in the novel" (103). This force makes Idu to take her life without regard to her only son, her only sister and her friend. It is described as a force of love. In spite of this flaw, Flora Nwapa succeeds in telling stories of her female folks by showing that they are not mere appendages to men but that they are worthy, hardworking and dignified women, their sufferings as wives, mothers and childless women notwithstanding. The texts *Efuru* and *Idu* set the stage for many of her contemporary women writers to define the African reality" (107). *Efuru* and *Idu* reveal the power of conscious and unconscious forces of love and shows gossip as a flaw in her writing.

While discussing Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, Margaret Fafa Nutsukpo in her essay "Feminist Consciousness and Assertiveness in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*" evaluates the import of feminist consciousness on the lives of the female characters in the texts *Behind the Cloud* and *Chimere*. She stresses that "in recognition of the significant role of feminist consciousness-raising plays in the emancipation of women, Okoye arms her contemporary female characters with tools of consciousness-raising such as education, economic independence and sisterhood as well as qualities such as courage and resilience to enable them break from the mold and excel" (21). Margaret used these tools in redefining the women status and promoting their sense of pride and esteem. This consciousness and awareness of women's problem and situations steer women to positive reactions towards liberation and from all forms of subjugation. It also raises their self-assertiveness and dignity.

The above themes and more as existing areas of discourse leave gaps for more discussions, which this paper is set to fill by identifying a significant dimension. The paper makes a literary analysis of the texts using the framework of African Communalism that promotes cultural ideals such as friendship, togetherness, brotherliness and sisterhood. The framework of analysis uses Polycarp Ikuenobe's conception of communalism, as "... an African conceptual framework and a set of cultural practices that prioritize the role and function of the collective group over the individual in a worldwide context" (Babacar M' Baye 807). This concept is applied in the understanding of the ideology of friendship and fraternal love among the Igbo race. Ikuenobe supports his argument saying, "... a conception of personhood and the relations between the individual and community in various African cultures are dynamics that reflect legitimate and critical African modes of inquiry and representation of morality" (Babacar M'Baye 807). The idea of relationship among the people as an everyday interaction and sharing of effects and affects becomes a moral engagement and values lived in the traditional Igbo society. The idea of African communalism hinges on "Igbo doctrine of *Igwebuike*, the strength of other is my strength, the glory of other is my glory, the positives of the other and the concomitant negatives is mine. I live

for the other just as the other lives for me” (Dozie Iwuh 25). Togetherness and friendship become the hallmark of communal harmony and peaceful co-existence among the Igbo people.

Friendship and solidarity, *Igwebuike* and *Ohazurume*, thrive on the framework of African Communalism where togetherness in action is a valued norm. Iwuh is of the view that “Igwebuike rests on the African principle of solidarity and complementarity and to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation” (23). The idea of liveness is anathema to the Igbo social mainstreaming. Individuals at different levels bond with others at various levels and groups in a typical Igbo community. Individuals find meaning in close group associations, such as the *Umunna*, the Age Grade, Elders Council, Cabinet Chiefs Council, the *Umuada* and other social groups and clubs. This assertion of *Igwebuike* further relates to the notion of *Ubuntu* as highlighted by Elza Venter in the essay “The Notion of Ubuntu and Communalism in African Educational Discourse” saying that “in African culture the community always comes first. The individual is born out of and into the community, therefore will always be part of the community, interdependence, communalism, sensitivity towards others and caring for others are all aspects of *Ubuntu* as a philosophy of life” (149). These ideologies are guides to the co-existence of individuals and relate to friendship.

Friendship is at the core of African Communalism that has it that according to Aristotle, “Friendship is a beneficial relationship that cuts across every sect and walk of life without any discrimination” (Iwu 19). Friendship requires individuals in their various states and groups. Iwuh further describes friendship “as one soul in two bodies, whereby the *Igwebuike* philosophy is one that enshrines and crowns the beauty of friendship in human interaction. *Igwebuike* is the priceless fruit of true friendship” (19). Individuals show concern and interest in the affairs of their fellows, including the women. Women in the Igbo society show friendship and love to fellow women. This is because the Igbo society promotes mutually shared relationship by way of solidarity and complementarity. This tendency affirms Lisa Hofmann’s reference to Bukowski et al that define friendship as a form of social relationships, which is a bilateral construct that refers to the relationship between two individuals. ...based on the mutual sympathy of two people” (502). Friendship therefore is a very important relationship aspect of life in the Igbo communal living and across African communities. This essay uses the aforementioned texts of Achebe, Nwapa and Okoye in highlighting the fact of fraternal relationship among the men, and women support for women by show of solidarity at times of need.

Friendship and sisterhood are African social structures inherent and embraced by individuals in African, and in this case, Igbo communal existence. They are the ideologies and ideals of life that keep and sustain the daily co-existence and activities of the people in their various communities. African and Nigerian texts have narratives that depict the harmony and peace in rural Nigerian setting. Literary texts such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *Efuru*, and *Behind the Clouds* have fictional characters that show close bonding with others. These narratives equally highlight women who show support to fellow women, especially at times of needs.

Textual Analysis

Achebe’s texts *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* reveal the beauty of Igbo cosmology and living patterns that uphold the ethics and ethos of African tradition. To project the dignity of African culture, Tanure Ojaide quotes Chinua Achebe’s strong conviction on the dignity of the African culture saying that “Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* to show that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans that their societies were not mindless but

frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity” (Azevedo 319). The philosophy of *Igwebuike* or *Qhazurume*, are all embedded in the epistemology of African communalism and friendship. These tenets and traits are analyzed in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Okonkwo and Obierika share close relationship, and both mutually enjoy benefits of friendship. For example, Okonkwo seeks the company of his friend Obierika in order to divest his depression after he killed Ikemefua. “He springs to his feet, hung his goatskin bag on his shoulder and went to visit his friend, Obierika” (*Things Fall Apart* 51). Obierika welcomes him with enthusiasm and shows his joy in having Okonkwo in his house. He goes ahead to inform Okonkwo of his daughter’s marriage and asks him to be present and help him in settling the bride price. The two men demonstrate care and concern for one another at various times and situations even at a time of great difficulty.

Obierika’s visits to Okonkwo during his exile in Mbanta are milestone in their friendship. Obierika who mourns the misfortune that befell his friend, Okonkwo, remains connected to the ideals of love. His visits are proofs of fraternal love and relationship among the men folk.. With a high sense of love and commitment, Obierika takes care of Okonkwo’s crop in his absence, sells them and takes the proceeds to him. He tells him: “This is the money from your yams... I sold the big ones as soon as you left. Later on, I sold some of the seed yams and gave out others to sharecroppers. I shall do that every year until you return. But I thought you would need the money now and so I brought it” (113). This show of love through visiting is replicated in *Arrow of God* when Akuebue, travels to Okperi to visit Ezeulu who is in detention. “Ezeulu was halfway through his meal when his son, the wife and his friend arrived.”(167). Akuebue brought yams and foodstuffs for his friend. In addition to this, Akuebue tells Ezeulu: “our journey has two aims. We brought Ugoye to relieve Nwodika’s wife of the burden and to thank Nwodika himself and tell him that whatever his kinsmen maybe doing at home he is today a brother to Ezeulu and his family...” (168). Akuebue has the initiative and thoughtfulness to ensure Ezeulu’s welfare and safety in Okperi while in detention.

According to *Igwebuike* philosophy and Aristotle’s concept of friendship, “... nature has imbedded in man the desire to be grafted towards engaging in a friendly relations with those that one is related to as seen in familial relations, that is the friendship of children and parents, above all, but also of fellow tribesmen and even of the whole human race” (Iwuh 19). The interactions between Obierika and Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and that between Akuebue and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* are pointers to the fact of familial relationship in the Igbo cultural dynamism. Akuebue and Obierika play significant roles in the lives of their friends: Ezeulu and Okonkwo at the peak of their travails. Akuebue remains the only visitor to Ezeulu even after his journey back from Okperi, at the point “Ezeulu becomes a public enemy” (*Arrow of God* 211). In spite of the stalemate and crisis, concerning the eating of the sacred yam Akuebue continues to provide companionship for his friend, Ezeulu. In effect:

Because no-one came near enough to him to see his anguish and if they had seen it, they would not have understood, they imagined that he sat in the hut gloating over the distress of Umuaro ... Akuebue was the only man among Ezeulu’s friends and Kinsmen who still came now and again to see him, but when he came, he sat in silence or spoke about Unimportant things. (*Arrow of God* 219).

Therefore, Akuebue after others have retired to bed had a frank discussion on personal household matters. He tells Ezeulu in confidence the cause of his daughter, Udenkwo's fight with her husband whom she complains always kills her cock for sacrifice without telling her or begging her.

Akuebue as a friend takes the responsibility of informing Ezeulu the tragic situation of the people's drift to the church for the blessing of the yams due to hunger. Akuebue has done his duty to his friend, knowing that Ezeulu does not punish the people deliberately. He rather knew that

... the Chief Priest was helpless, that a thing greater than *nte* had been caught in *nte's* trap so whenever he came to visit Ezeulu he kept clear of the things nearest to their thoughts because they were past talking. But today he could not keep silent over the present move of the Christians to reap the harvest of Umuaro" (219 – 220).

The bond of friendship laced with empathy and Akuebue who stands by Ezeulu at his time of distress demonstrates fellow feeling. Likewise, Obierika stands by his friend Okonkwo at the time of his suicide after he angrily cut off the head of the white man's messenger who swooped on the elders in their meeting. Obierika led the white man, who is the Commissioner, to the bush where Okonkwo hanged himself. In anger, he quickly turned to the District Commissioner and ferociously said, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia." You drive him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog... His voice trembled and choked his words" (165). Obierika, shares the pains of his friend and speaking up for him, even when he is no longer alive. The fraternal relationship shows the practicality and the spark of friendship. The two men Okonkwo and Ezeulu had Obierika and Akuebue to speak for them at the time of their helplessness and incapacitation.

Women Solidarity and Sisterhood

Solidarity for the womenfolk means women drumming and rallying support for fellow women. Women build a formidable force around one another in the spirit of sisterhood, where "... the strength of the other is another's strength, the glory of the other is another's glory, the positions of the other and the concomitant negative is mine....." (Iwu 25). In the texts under study, the narratives have instances of women coming together to help fellow women. In *Things Fall Apart*, women rallied around Obierika's wife as she prepares for her "daughter's *Uri*, a day on which her suitor (having already paid the greater part of her bride price) would bring palm wine not only to her parents and immediate relatives but to the wide and extensive group of kinsmen called *umunna*... But it was really a women's ceremony and the central figures were the bride and the mother" (88). At this instance, the women of Umuofia came in their numbers to help their own in the preparation of the event. Women and children assembled so early "at Obierika's compound to help the bride's mother in her difficult but happy task of cooking for a whole village" (68). This shows the joy of sisterhood. It makes the work easy as the women shared the work collectively.

In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Efuru, is able to navigate through marital challenges due to the friendship and care of her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law's sister, Ajanupu. Ajanupu and Adizua's mother, Ossai, remain very strong support for Efuru during her marriage crisis and troubles. At the initial stage of her marriage, Efuru is anxious of her not being able to conceive after a time. Her mother-in-law who "loved her daughter-in-law very much, defended her anywhere she heard people say unkind words about her. When Efuru was sad, she consoled her, told her that a child would come when God willed it" (*Efuru*24). The relationship is more like a daughter-mother relationship. Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the*

Politics of Gender describes Ossai, Efuru's mother-in-law, and Ossai's sister, Ajanupu, as "Efuru's surrogate mothers" (97). This is because they fill the gap of motherhood and offer strong support for Efuru. This close relationship exists so strongly to the point that Ajanupu first discovers that Efuru has conceived, and from then, Adizua's mother and her sister Ajanupu remain very close to Efuru monitoring her pregnancy through to term and delivery. Stratton further describes the sisters, Ossai and Ajanupu "... as complimentary characters, one serving as a negative, the other as a positive role model for Efuru. Each offers motherly advice on marital matters to the motherless Efuru" (97). Ajanupu proffers solution to any pregnancy related problem and teaches Efuru the dos and don'ts during pregnancy. For example:

At the seventh month, Efuru noticed that her legs were swollen she told her mother-in-law who immediately told her sister. She came and looked at it and went away without saying anything. The next day, she brought some leaves and some palm wine. She also brought a new clay pot. She cooked the leaves adding a little palm wine, when she finished, she gave some to Efuru pouring some palm wine in it. (*Efuru* 29).

Having gone through the pregnancy period successfully, Ajanupu single handedly delivered Efuru of her baby girl and continues to visit and care for the mother and the baby. Ajanupu feels happy delivering Efuru's baby and "... when the baby did not cry at once, she took hold of its two legs lifted it in the air and shakes it until she cried. She washed and tidied everything" (13). Efuru goes through her pre and post-natal stress confidently with the ready support of the two older women, her mother-in-law and Ajanupu. In the words of OladeleTaiwo:

Ajanupu symbolizes the spirit of economic and social independence which traditional Igbo culture encourages in women. She is extremely knowledgeable about the affairs of the village and is called upon to help with social and medical problems. She is presented as a strong character throughout and is Efuru's constant support in times of distress. Efuru becomes attached to her because of the many different ways she has proved helpful. (53).

Ajanupu goes as far as fighting to recover Efuru's money from her debtors. She persuades and coerces Nwabuzo to pay back the money she borrowed from Efuru, which she refused to pay. Determined to get the money from Nwabuzo, Ajanupu visits her, and refused to leave her house until she pays the money. Refusing every excuse from Nwabuzo, She sat down on the mat and stretched her legs, indicating her readiness to stay put until she pays the money. When Nwabuzo saw that Ajanupu was deaf to all entreaties, she was compelled to offer some shillings and a piece of cloth and handed them over to Ajanupu to avoid further embarrassments. Ajanupu's lone efforts fetched Efuru back her money. Similarly, Ajanupu defends Efuru against accusations of infidelity by Gilbert, in her second marriage by knocking Gilbert with a blow and with a mortar pestle. In appreciation of the kind gestures by Ajanupu, Efuru expresses her gratitude and telling her "I respect you very much; you have been a mother to me" (*Efuru* 208). The friendship and closeness of Ajanupu and Ossai provide stability for Efuru even as she adapts to various marital challenges.

Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Cloud* strongly advocates sisterhood as an avenue through which women can share and benefit from the friendship and kindness of the other. The relationship between Ije and Ugo Ushie stands out so much. Ije suffers a lot of marital challenges and frustrations, including childlessness, and co-wife rivalry from Virginia. In these instances, Ije is able to navigate through from the kind advice and encouragement of her friend, Ugo Ushie. At a

time, Ije is giving up on her marriage with Dozie, voicing out to Ugo her disgust in the affairs of her home and marriage; her intention to give up particularly the new house project at Independent Layout, Ugo advises her to do otherwise, telling her to instead, "... hold on to what is hers and not to alienate herself from Dozie so as not to drive him, into the welcoming arms of Virginia, the scheming woman" (86). As Ije constantly visits Ugo to find succor and relief from the hostility of Virginia, Ugo makes sure Ije eats food in her house and advises her on things she should be doing to calm her nerves. In this ensuing circumstance, Margaret Nutsukpo observes that Ugo Ushie encourages Ije to realize that "assertiveness, not passivity, is required to turn the situation around. Her word exhorts Ije and challenges her to fight for her rights in her marital home and Ugo Ushie stands by her until the problem is resolved" (Nutsukpo 26). Ugo plays a good friend and nurse to Ije when she falls sick. She is handy to attend to her when Ije sends for her. Ugo takes Ije to the doctor, and helps Teresa, Ije's house girl, to cook for her. At the time, Ije quits her house and marriage, she confides in Ugo of her new place. Ugo holds her secret, refusing to relay it to Dozie as he runs to her to ask his wife's where about. She rather advises Dozie to allow Ije sometime to be on her own. She tells him: "Give her a few days and her anger may subside" (110). Ugo mediates between Ije and Dozie as a mark of kindness and friendship. Ugo Ushie remains steadfast in guiding her friend closely until she resolves her marriage crisis.

Conclusion

The Igbo cosmology is known for the spirit of togetherness, unity and fellow feeling. Friendship becomes an aspect of this cultural ethics and value. People encourage one another by attending to each other's affairs, both in good and bad times. The African culture values friendship as an essential life support and motivation. The women folk draw power staying and acting together by being available to their kind through sisterhood, and solidarity for shared responsibilities. These aspects of Igbo communal living needs to be propagated and revised in spite of the seeming negative influences of the modern-time-friendships and the vagaries in the society. In this present time, the value of friendship should be strongly upheld for a more harmonized society. Through friendship and sisterhood, women firmly establish their influence and exert their presence as major part of the society. Therefore, the Igbo philosophy of *Igwebuike* is in-built in Igbo communalist living. This cultural norm should be propagated in order to highlight African moral and cultural value of close relationships among men and women in communities.

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