

## Toward A Restoration of Societal Ethos with Reference on Chinua Achebe's Writings



<sup>1</sup>Mexan Serge EPOUNDA , <sup>2</sup>Zéphirin BOKOTIABATO MOKOGNA

<sup>1</sup>Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, Université Marien Ngouabi, Congo.

<sup>2</sup>Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, Université Marien Ngouabi, Congo.

**Abstract:** Traditional oral literature of Africa is counted as one of the most distinctly and varied categories of African literature with Chinua Achebe as pioneer. In his writings, Achebe takes on the roles of social commentator and crusader through the conduit of orature to criticize the devaluation of cultural and societal norms. His later novels can be read imbued with the lamentation of the death of moral and social values in Nigerian society; the unspoken degradation of Nigerian immigrants in Europe and America, and the frequency with which corrupt practices have undermined the nation's development. This paper examines how Achebe's writings canvasses for a re-examination of societal ethos, which demands that the contemporary Nigeria settles. Therefore, the necessary actions should be taken in restoring, maintaining and preserving the oral tradition. Preservation is not just limited to keeping the form of oral tradition in the community, but the values that contained in the oral tradition with the past by recovering social, moral and cultural codes for the restoration of human dignity.

**Keywords:** Restoration, society, tradition, preservation, discount, Chinua Achebe.

### INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe has distinguished and earned himself a respectable position among contemporary Nigerian writers, not only because of his prodigious contribution to the novelistic enterprise but also by virtue of his concern and passion for ancestral values. As an African writer, he was determined to carry forward his counter-discourse against European colonial discourse in order to prove that Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape. This perception of a writer in African social milieu is common to almost all writers from Africa. Lauretta Ngcobo is one of them. As a matter of fact, this concern reiterates her perception when she (1988: 150) writes:

A writer observes and interprets the norms, the values and the customs of society. He or she affirms or negates those values according to his or her personal convictions. In this way he/ she creates or destroys social values. His/her interpretation will depend largely on his/her vantage point and could sway public opinion one way or another.

Actually, Achebe has drawn remarkably on Nigeria's political history to raise awareness of negative social, economic and political situations, demonstrating their consequences on society, and showing how those consequences can be lessened or reversed to the benefit of all. Thought ranged in the old generation he has been endlessly determined in responding to social, political and cultural issues in which Nigerian nationhood is strikingly inscribed. This determination is vociferously embedded in *AOS*, which has invariably provided a convenient artistic platform for measuring not only his artistic virtuosity, but also his passionate commitment to the restoration and preservation of societal intrinsic values. This paper examines how Chinua Achebe in his writings criticizes a decline in social and cultural norms, which ostensibly reflects how contemporary Nigerian society has been weakened by its ambivalent positioning between poorly-digested western values and half-forgotten indigenous norms. Such positioning is often depicted in the portrayal of Nigeria as something of a cultural wasteland, in which time-honoured traditional values like honesty, selflessness and decency have lost ground to crass materialism, violence and selfishness. This is often depicted in the Nigerian literary works as exemplified by Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), *A Man of the People* (1966) from where we will search for an alternative social vision to the Nigerian degenerating social and political system. Therefore, to conduct this analysis, we will be preoccupied to answer the following research questions: what is meant by oral tradition? Why restoring societal norms in Africa? What are the places of oral tradition in Africa? How should oral tradition process manifest?

### MEANING OF ORAL TRADITION

Oral tradition is a story, tradition or practice that is shared orally or through speech- usually handed down from generation to generation. It was a good way to keep valuable information for others in your group and would allow the literate and the illiterate

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alike to share the information. In his own submission, Fadeyiye (2004) described oral tradition to include myths and legends which throw light on origin of communities- their social, economic and political institutions, their taboo, totems, social concepts and practices. Accordingly, Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1990: 54) considers oral traditions as 'a testimony delivered verbally from one generation to the next, with tends to the verbal and the way how messages are delivered.' The key element in the process of celebrating African culture through the postcolonial literature was the literary adaptation of tales from oral tradition. However, in Anglophone Africa, the description of oral narrative style is reflected in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), an interesting story of a hapless hero, who embarks on a quest in the land of the dead; deploying the oral motifs of circularity, repetition and exaggeration. Obviously, the narratives of tales and oral tradition through the novels reveal the concrete ideas of the glorious past of the African people. Accordingly, the writing of Chinua Achebe is essentially rooted in the oral traditions, often called oral literature and more recently, orature which in this paper refers to the distillation of intrinsic elements of traditional proverbs, anecdotes, legends, myths, tales, historical narratives and other creative appurtenances. These elements facilitate the poetic rendition of artistic performances for the purpose of harnessing aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction. To this effect, orature for instance is employed as a convenient motif in *Anthills of the Savannah* to rally against the desecration of cultural norms, and the distortion of social ethos in contemporary Nigeria. Its appropriation in the writings of Chinua Achebe in general, underscores Biodun Jeyifo (2003: 71)'s summation in IBA: Essays on African Literature in Honour of Oyin Ogunba, of the interface between written literature and non-written literature in the postcolonial societies:

Part of the reconfiguration of difference in the new perspectives on postcolonial literatures involves renegotiations of received notions of differences and distinctions between what literature is and what is not literature, between so-called highbrow and popular literature, and between written and non-written oral and performative traditions which some theorists have given the name 'orature'. The great challenge here is to map and account for the complex relations between literature and what could be described as its cultural and artistic 'others'.

Achebe draws a measure of influence from traditional African culture which resonates in his exploitation of considerable aesthetics inherent in the appurtenances of Igbo oral traditions, to examine the shift in social and cultural norms and circumstances in post-civil war Nigeria. However, the understanding of key words assumedly favours our inspiration on how the issue of oral tradition should be tackled. Thus, according to David Lewis (1969: 45) social norms are defined as

customary rules of behaviour that coordinate our interactions with others. Once a particular way of doing things becomes established as a rule, it continues in force because we prefer to conform to the rule given the expectation that others are going to conform.

The transition between a definition of "social norm" and a definition of "social change" may be rigid at times but they may also be modified over time. But Immanuel Wallerstein (1968: 5) agrees that change is a very slippery word and is often used to blur the exact direction of the change". However, a more expansive explanation of social change is provided in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* as "the significant alteration of social structures (that is, of patterns of social action and interaction), including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms (rules of conduct), values and cultural products and symbols" (Sills 1972: 366).

Surely, the above definition ostensibly examines social change as a process utilized by a particular society to regulate its norms and values as demanded by prevailing circumstances. Such circumstances could manifest in social system, such as the obliteration of predominant social norms and values by alien social practices; significantly political, such as a sudden change in political system of a particular society; and economic, such as the evolution of new policies which significantly impinges on the way a given society earns its living. This is the situation experienced or which is still being experienced by the Nigeria and with it the whole Africa.

A profound articulation of social change in Nigeria has come to constitute a major theme in Nigerian literary works. However, the choice of prose as a literary vehicle for the depiction of social change in Nigeria has been fittingly captured by the fact that it should stand first among the artistic genres found convenient by many Nigerian writers to their purpose of voicing social discontent. Many novels written by contemporary Nigerian writers have, for instance, discussed various shades of social change, ranging from corruption; military incursion into Nigerian politics; the Nigerian civil war; Niger-Delta crisis; and youths restiveness. A reflection of thematic preoccupations entrenched in social change in Nigeria are discernible in Achebe's latest novels.

Important to note that in their quest to portray social change in their works, the post-war Nigerian writers had to return to the local speech pattern so that, whether the writer is Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Urhobo or Nupe, there are linguistic models in his afflation which every member of a Nigerian, if not an African, audience can relate to" (1991: 166). Thus, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is replete with social and cultural concerns scattered in its nineteen chapters. It becomes evident from now that the present study claims the restoration of Nigerian ancestral norms which were waded and substituted by European's ones exposing the natives' discontent.

### SOCIAL DISCONTENT

In a broad sense, postcolonial literature is affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. Therefore, in the context, it asserts the indigenous cultures to restore the cultural practices and traditions. The major preoccupation of the postcolonial writing is to revise the historical social norms in the perspectives to justify the actions of the society. The postcolonial writers mainly emphasized the indigenous people, places, and their practices to get rid on the stereotypes, inaccuracies

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and general influences in the spheres of education, social, legal and political settings. As we can assume, they are known with manifold roles. One of them is a commentator on public issues which impinges on the well-being of society. In the African context, such a role has been essentially articulated by many critics among whom Chinweizu et al (1983:19) when they write:

The function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assume the responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings, and not preoccupy himself with his puny ego.

This role has been assumed by African artists since their morality and decorum have been thrown overboard by the political class in their desperate struggle to bleed the country white leading the country into troubles and unprecedented crises. Yet, most postcolonial African countries have experienced war and civil strife at one time or another, due to reasons ranging from ethnic conflict, political mismanagement of economic resources to a flagrant abuse of power. These conflicts with enormous drawbacks in human displacement, killings and destruction of properties and public infrastructures are still topical and most of writers draw their sources of inspiration from there. In this connection, Josaphat Kubayanda (1997:38) writes:

Tyranny is an endemic social and political problem in Africa and Latin America. An authoritarian reality similar to colonialism replaced the utopian dream underlying the movement for independence on those continents. Literary works from those regions portray totalizing codes that pinpoint an unfinished business of decolonization, for independence seems to be a self-serving arrangement between the European colonial centres and the emergent ruling elites of the African and Latin American colonies.

There is no doubt that the impact of war on African societies constitutes an important discourse as most African countries is subordinated to the unleashing of terror and brutality on women and children leaving the orphans in limbo, rootless and thousands of victims who lost their minds to grief" as casualties of the senseless war. Social discontents are not a mere invention of artists rather than factual accounts of events. A lot of voices sounded to predict the future of African people acknowledging that imperialism, in its colonial and neo-colonial phases is continuously press-ganging the African hand to the plough to turn the soil over, and putting blinkers on him to make him view the path ahead only as determined for him by the master armed with the bible and the sword. In this connection, Ngugi Wa Thiog'o (1986:4)'s words are relevant when he writes:

Imperialism continues to control the economy, politics, and cultures of Africa ... and pitted against it, are the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics, and culture from that Euro-American based stranglehold to usher a new era of true communal self-regulation and self-determination. It is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space.

Additionally, the wordings of Edward Said contribute to excite the discontent of African people and with them their society. Indeed, Edward Said exposes the Eurocentric universalism, which takes for granted both the superiority of what is Western and the inferiority of what is not. Said identifies the European tradition of Orientalism, which is the particular and longstanding way of identifying east as 'Others' and inferior to the west. In this connection Said (1978: 3) says "The 'Orient features in the western mind as a sort of surrogate and even undergrounds self". In this way, natives were ruled in the part being represented in the census, newspaper, anthropological studies and the law as a weak, willed, inferior, secondary effeminate. Colonization therefore inevitably brought culture to Africa, since "savagery" does not constitute either culture or history. Again we draw strong parallels to Said's argument which states:

Deconstructing the logic of [the Zionist] argument, we note that it admits the Palestinians' belated appearance as a national movement but does not recognize them as a people already in Palestine before the advent of Zionist colonization. This acknowledgment of a present fact but not of its historical background required only a small adjustment in Zionist views of the ideological importance of the difference between Jew and non-Jew. ("Ideology of Difference" 50)

Although Nigeria, unlike Palestine, has attained full national independence, it seems that in the Nigerian national movement the Western world still fails to recognize any existence Nigerian culture before colonization and the ability to build a culture other than that of the imperial society. Achebe shows in his work that British colonialism had a strong belief that may be perpetuated today in the Western world's attitudes toward Nigeria, that the implementation of the British

culture, and specifically the British school system, not only brought a formal system of education to Nigeria, but also brought intellectualism to the bush. It seems that Achebe's problem is not so much with the former as it is with the latter. By and large, Achebe recognizes the value of the school system instituted by the British. The system, in and of itself, cannot be deemed as right or wrong, good or evil. In fact, the system did present Nigeria with an opportunity of accelerated movement toward "modernity."

However, the British set up the system to teach British societal values and the idea of British superiority. Nigerian children, now Nigerian adults, learned that it was not only preferable, but imperative to emulate Western cultural ideals. This continues to affect Nigerian society by perpetuating the belief that anything "African" is by definition inferior. Nigerians have come to look down on their culture and their own entities as African. Achebe sees a definite connection of this feeling of inferiority to the persistence of political corruption due to a severe lack of cultural identity. This quest for cultural identity and criticism of the emulation of British society by post-colonial Nigeria, echoes throughout Achebe's work. His rural novels, set in villages of colonial and pre-colonial Nigeria attempt to remind his audience of the civilization and culture which existed before the advent of imperial domination. He asserts here that though the British stymied the development and virtual existence of Igbo society, the past it self cannot be destroyed.

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Achebe demands that the Nigerian not only look back to the past, but recapture and reclaim it. Said sees this as a primary function of all post-colonial fiction. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes:

Many of the more interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them—as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on the territory taken back from the empire. (*Culture and Imperialism* 31)

In this light, Achebe's fiction can be seen as a reclamation of that precolonial past and a reassertion of the original Nigerian culture or more specifically the Igbo culture. Achebe achieves this through the use of various icons of tradition in his fiction, the most notable being the village elder. This reiterates the significance of the artists as the bastion for reconstructing the society as opined by Roy Heath (1972:91): “it is our creative artists, our writers, painters, sculptors, and musicians that we must look to rebuild a shattered tradition...”

### BENEFITS OF ORAL TRADITIONS

Oral traditions, folklores and history are essential part of human creation and existence like in the bible in Genesis 1:2. The bible says “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” This quotation traced the origin of man to God through oral tradition i.e., spoken words, written out, with traits of folklore like proverbs and symbolism which form the history of human creation. In the same vein, oral tradition, folklore and history, have developed with Africa educational system since the traditional African society, that is, before the colonial era through informal training; this has formed the bedrock upon which the colonial education or western education lingers on. Since education is the process of learning knowledge, skills, beliefs, and habits of a group of people, the appropriate method of imparting it, is highly necessary and this can be discovered through history and oral tradition. Put otherwise, oral traditions matter on the ways a particular skill is transmitted regarding the different forms used by holders of that knowledge.

Oral tradition offers the advantages of inducing open communication and verifiable first-hand knowledge of events from a historical reference point. This practice allows languages to persist and permits practitioners of specialized traditions to show off their skills. Therefore, passing along lessons and ideas orally creates ownership of these histories among future generations. As such we can openly state that oral tradition benefits transmission of cultural values and first-hand historical events in a way that makes listeners more active participants in receiving information. This helps people retain what they learn and generates individuals who are capable of continuing these oral traditions. Hence, using oral tradition as a means of passing along stories and histories keeps the human element intact within the events that occurred. It grants a first-person perspective or a collective look at the conditions of a people during a specific period and relates details that create emotional responses among listeners. Additionally, implementing oral tradition is part of many cultural experiences and dates back to points in the past when these groups had no written language or the tools to create documents that stand the test of time. Oral tradition remains a part of cultural awareness and is of great historical value in parts of the world where this continues to be the case so that the past remains alive in the minds of present and future people.

With particular reference to the continent of Africa where the art of writing is extremely limited before the advent of Europeans, oral tradition and other oral sources of history like oral evidence and others constitute the bulk of the sources where the past history of Africa could be reconstructed. Oral tradition is therefore a reliable source because African non-literate societies have always from time immemorial used the oral mode, of which oral tradition is an integral part for the transmission of their history-customs, traditions, folklores etc from one generation to another. Thus, oral traditions are very valuable in stimulating and promoting African cultural heritage. However, the genres of oral literature for example serve many functions in African society. Apart from providing amusement, these forms are used to educate the youth, to authenticate and validate ritual and belief, to promote and encourage conformity to cultural norms, and to provide psychological release in an institutionalized manner. Education is the distinct medium by which every society inducts its younger generation into full membership. It therefore becomes necessary that, an educational policy be put in place to guide it in the process of induction. To this effect, oral traditions are original form of education in which both social values and community norms are taught to children through storytelling and moonlight plays. In the oral tradition, members of the community, most often the old and young, must spend time together. The oral tradition therefore reinforces interpersonal relationships, or social bonds, at many levels. For example, a story might communicate the importance of relationships while the process of sharing a story reinforces the same value.

In order to reconstruct elements of history, oral traditions are often needed. In this connection, oral traditions serve imperative tools in historical reconstruction. This practice was judiciously carried out by many professionals or none—professionals alike of the old time. Alagoa (1966) is one of them. Indeed, thanks to oral traditions, he wrote on the involvement of the Ijo's of the Niger Delta although some other useful historical source materials evidenced. In the same vein, *Samuel Johnson* (1921) wrote *The History of the Yorubas* using oral tradition which he collected by himself during his various postings as a minister of religion in Ibadan and Oyo and as a peace negotiator in the Yoruba wars of the 1880s. Culturally speaking, oral tradition constitutes an integrative institution among most peoples. It is a communal activity, which not only informs, but also embodies the precepts and values that

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are permanent as well as those that are changing in that society. It contains the society's wisdom and achievements in art, politics, religion, health care and so on. Oral tradition, in essence, almost always tends to capture cultural reality; covers a wider range of subject matter and can be found in a variety of forms. The form of oral tradition is determined more by its functional character than its oral nature and this form varies widely from people to people. There are similarities in the forms between different societies, but also unique features in the forms to be found in each society.

In a word, the various forms of oral literature fulfill several functions in African society ranging from didactic, psychological, sociological, linguistic, historical functions to entertaining functions. Sources of distraction, they also have educational value for young people, disseminate rituals and beliefs, encourage compliance with cultural norms, and provide psychological relief. Hopefully, a good education instruction for instance is added at the end of tales told to children insisting on its moral implication.

### MANIFESTATION OF ORAL TRADITIONS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S WRITINGS

In studying Achebe's novels as a body of work instead of individually, it seems clear that there exists a clear thematic division between his earlier works and the later ones. Two of his early novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, concentrate more on tribal life and the importance of tradition and culture to the Igbo nation. In these novels, setting is purely tribal, and the presence of the white colonialist is limited and exists solely as an "outsider." In his later novels, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* the setting is much more urban and the function of the work seems much more overtly political than the fable-like quality of the earlier fiction. This is not to say that those early novels do not perform a political function, but that function is achieved through much more subtle means. In the later works, the emphasis seems to be more upon the intellectual and cultural corruption of the native Nigerian by the adopted mind-set and values of the colonialist. In other words, the early works deal more with the genesis of cultural imperialism, while the later ones deal with the perpetuation-even after formal colonialism has ended. It is important to recall that the restoration of social ethos in Achebe's writings especially leads to such a life experienced in the author's earlier novels, also called 'novels of the village' which advocate ancestral values. These novels are *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and *Arrow of God* (1960). Oral tradition contains historical events, moral values, religious values, custom, fantasy stories, songs, spells, as well as the proverb goes, and ancestors advice. Oral tradition has been around since humans have the ability to communicate. The inheritance process that has been run for generations and the direct interaction between the speakers and their communities are the two main things in the process of creating an oral tradition in the community. In all of his five novels, Chinua Achebe creatively uses oral cultural elements such as proverbs, folktales, myths etc. to convey different messages.

The setting of *Things Fall Apart* gives Achebe ample opportunity to incorporate proverbs, myths, folktales etc. into the narrative. The society of *Things Fall Apart* is purely an oral society where people regarded words as sacred and hence their utterances bore utmost significance. In portraying the pre-colonial Ibos of Umuofia having systematic social, cultural, educational, administrative, and judiciary arrangements, Achebe uses the proverbs, myths and folktales as the depositories of values and customs. In this novel, the significance of community and kinship is emphasized through a number of proverbs which in particular, give a special character to the author's writing. His use of Ibo proverbs reveals his strategy to make a foreign language his own and his endeavour to make it express African sensibilities. Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu said that kinsmen are more precious than money and it is kinship that separates human beings from animals. He stresses his point with a proverb: An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him p. 165. The interdependence of one person on the other or the relationship between the individual and his/her society is thus expressed. Again, the oneness of the community is suggested even in this proverb with a warning: if one finger brought oil it soiled the others p. 125. Achebe shows that it is not only in words but also in deeds that Ibos follow these lessons. The Ibo society is also rooted on beliefs of different natures. That is why young women in search of children often go to worship sacred places as the following extract illustrates:

The wrestlers were not there yet and the drummers held the field. They too sat just in front of the huge circle of spectators, facing the elders. Behind them was the big and ancient silk-cotton tree which was sacred. Spirits of good children lived in that tree waiting to be born. On ordinary days young women who desired children came to sit under its shade (1958:33).

Here is a mythical thought regarded as an authority on questions of supernatural belief and ritual practice and such practices are called on to conversation to guide, encourage, praise; admonish or teach, and to rebuke or reprove. While the ones base their consciousness on beliefs, the others manifest their tradition through songs. This is the case of Ikemefuna, wondering whether his mother was dead or alive tried in vain to force the thought out of his mind. To this effect, he (1958:42) still remembered the following song:

Eze elina, elina!

Sala  
Ezeilikwa ya  
Ikwaba akwa oligholi  
Ebe Danda nechi eze  
Ebe Uzuzu nele egwu  
Sala

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The young boy struck up this song in his mind and walked to its beat knowing that if the song ended on his right foot, his mother was alive and if it ended on his left, she was dead. Fortunately, it ended on his right, so was alive as well. The attempts did not account. It was such a belief that the Ibo society experienced among the many. Another consideration consisting in consulting Oracle. Indeed, whenever people facing tricky situation which seemed supernatural, they didn't hesitate to consult diviners. This was the case with Okonkwo who, after the death of Ekwefi's second child had gone to a medicine-man who was also a diviner of the Afa Oracle to inquire what was amiss. It was there that Okonkwo was told his child was an *ogbanje*, one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mothers' wombs to be born again. To sort out of this ceaseless situation, Okonkwo was advised in these terms:

When your wife becomes pregnant again, 'he said, let her not sleep in her hut. Let her go and stay with her people. In that way, she will elude her wicked tormentor and break its evil cycle of birth and death... Ekwefi did as she was asked and it was there that her third child was born and circumcised on the eight day... p.54.

From the above quotation, we can learn how this people inquired about their issues. It is then a traditional practice that requires interaction between the medicine-man and the person in quest of truth through the game of questions-answers.

If oral traditions are cultural heritages transmitted from one generation to another on one hand, they are also messages, information and testimonies of a group of people transmitted through speeches, songs and the like on the other hand; yet, they are media of presenting ancient culture, history and experiences of the past generation. This is the sense we can grant to the way the narrator describes the means of communication in ancient times compared to the present time where several approaches can be used to summon a meeting: 'But this particular night was dark and silent. And in all the nine villages of Umuofia a town-crier with his ogene asked every man to be present tomorrow morning' p. 7. From there, young generations can learn how their ancestors settled meetings.

In *Arrow of God* also oral tradition is manifested in various forms but proverbs stand first for this study regarding the frequency of their usage by the author as well as their purport. It is obvious that proverbs are a natural part of the speech of all traditional societies and contain the kernels of the wisdom of the traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words and of their nature, they perform an ideological function by making available the ideas and values encapsulated in these memorable and easily reproduced form. These proverbs derive from a detailed observation of the behavior of human beings, animals, plants and natural phenomena, from folklore, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and the entire system of thought and feeling.

Above all, the use of proverbs is one more way in which the individual expresses the primacy of society – even in this matter of language. In this sense, we can assert that the man who proverbializes is putting his individual speech in a traditional context, reinforcing his personal point of view by objectifying its validity, and indirectly paying tribute to himself as a possessor of traditional wisdom. So, the use of proverbs, instead of individuating, both communalizes and traditionalizes a speaker.

The proverbs are numerous enough and sufficiently broad in scope to cover adequately the kind of experience with which the novels deal in Africa. There are proverbs for every occasion, proverbs to suit every situation and to light up every experience. Every significant affirmation can be strengthened with a proverb; every customary value, belief, attitude or outlook can be supported with proverbs, social problems and personal difficulties can be settled by an appeal to the sanctioning proverbs. Even contradictory views can be sustained by an appeal to different proverbs, and so on. At last, proverbs can also become an artistic device for giving complicity to narrative, unity to form, coherence and pattern to action, and direction to moral and social insight. They can also indicate force and resourcefulness of character. In his works, Achebe conveyed the importance of proverbs as a mode of expressing and exploring reality. This is seen in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, which are set entirely in the traditional Igbo village and, to a lesser extent, in *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, in which people and events flow between town and country, and where characters speak in proverbs. The least we can say on the issue is that the Igbo people believe that "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten and one of the ploys by which Achebe smoothen his presentation of Igbo reality lies in his ability to intersperse his narratives with fitting proverbs. These proverbs are to some extent placed in the novels to mark the defining point of the novel's action and so serve the dual interest of aiding plot development and heightening emotional response to the action. A good example is the cluster of proverbs at the end of *Arrow of God*:

'When a handshake passes the elbow it becomes another thing. The sleep that lasts from one market to another has become death. The man who likes the meat of the funeral ram, why does he recover when sickness visits him? The mighty tree falls and the little birds scatter in the bush... The little bird which hops off the ground and lands on an ant-hill may not know it but is still on the ground... A common snake which a man sees all alone may become a python in his eyes... The very Thing which kills Mother Rat is always there to make sure that its young ones never open their eyes... The boy who persists in asking what happened to his father before he has enough strength to avenge him is asking for his father's fate... The man who belittles the sickness which Monkey has suffered should ask to see the eyes which his nurse got from blowing the sick fire... When death wants to take a little dog it prevents it from smelling even excrement.' P. 226.

From this passage, we can read that the dominant images provoked in the proverbs are death and defeat, then Ezeulu's fate was sealed from the moment he squared up for battle against his people, but his defeat and destruction came in full force with the death of his favourite son Obika.

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Additionally, novelists use many traditional conventions of language. One of those most frequently represented is the fastidious art of conversation, raised into a ritual act of social communion. The elaborate attention given by speakers and audiences in the village setting to the formal conventions of address, to the minute courtesies and standard exchanges reflects the use of language not only as a way of communicating meaning but also as a means of establishing a friendly rapport

Between the speaker and the listener, or reinforcing a sense of integration, community solidarity and sympathetic relatedness. This is highly developed in the village setting, for ties of blood and community are very strong and social intercourse is face to face. Also because the need for good and friendly relations is more strongly felt in the village than in the urbanized setting where relations are less personalized and contact infrequent. Conversations are smooth, slow course, full of snippets of information with nothing really profound. Now and again, commiserating noises are added, fresh bonds of sympathy are tied and new feelings of group relatedness are forged. All of this bears out the comment which Achebe (1958: 6) unobtrusively made into *Things Fall Apart* that "among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly." However, it is also said that in traditional society, conventional conversations at the time of meeting and the final greetings at parting are highly valued.

As a matter of fact, the rural novels ascribed mastery over language to important male personalities in the Igbo society. Among them Ezeulu, as the leader of the traditional system, stands supreme in his command over language and speech. Each of his public appearance is a masterpiece of linguistic propriety. As evidence, his speech in the village assembly after his return from the sudden summons from the British Commissioner in Okperi illustrates most of the qualities of traditional linguistic decorum:

'I thank you all for leaving your different tasks at home to answer my call. Sometimes a man may call and no one answers him. Such a man is like one dreaming a bad dream. I thank you that you have not let me call in vain like one struggling in a bad dream... Our people say that if you thank a man for what he has done he will have strength to do more. But there is one great omission here for which I beg forgiveness. A man does not summon Umuro and not set before them even a pot of palm wine. But I was taken by surprise and you know the unexpected beats even a man of valour... that was what I woke up this morning and found. Ogbuefi Akuebe was there and saw it with me. I thought about it for a long time and decided that Umuro should join with me in seeing and hearing what I have seen and heard; for when a man sees a snake all by himself he may wonder whether it is an ordinary snake or the untouchable python... I salute you all.' p. 141-142.

Through this extract the speaker illustrates a number of speech conventions practiced among traditional Igbos. In fact this speech comprises three sections of the public address standing out respectively the opening, the middle and the conclusion. As we can see the introduction calls people's attention and appeal to their sense of social solidarity, to speak with one voice. In the middle section, Ezeulu thanked the elders for responding positively to his distressed call and proceeds to apologise for his inability to provide palm-wine as convention would have required. After having prepared the atmosphere for the message, he talks about the core matter which is to tell the people of the white man's order that he should come immediately to Okperi, the administrative headquarter. He then rounds off with a further apology for not fulfilling the conventional norms. He ended with a salutation. This concern evidences the manifestation of oral tradition leading to induce that Ezeulu's speech and style befit his social standing and his ritual and religious role as Chief Priest. He speaks with dignity and in full possession of the values of the tradition. We then can state that he understands all the conventional modes of address and observes the inner rhythms of speech expected of him, and as an elder he calls up the appropriate proverbs at each stage of his speech.

To conclude this section, it is worth saying that African oral tradition in general and the Nigerian one in particular need to be restored and preserved not solely because they are a cultural treasure but also because they contained lots of values that play the important role in people's daily activities. Therefore, the starting of disappearance and forgetting of oral tradition in African society is not only related to the loss of a cultural asset in the community, but also followed by the loss of values and local wisdom which is preserved in that tradition. Yet, there are plentiful values in the oral tradition that is still relevant to everyday life. However, the limitation of public knowledge about these traditions and values has been eroding of awareness of the existence of the culture in society.

### CONCLUSION

This paper concludes by recalling that toward the restoration of societal ethos with reference on Chinua Achebe's writings is the title of this article. This presupposes the existence of some norms before now, with a view the major preoccupation of the postcolonial writing is to revise the historical social norms in the perspectives to justify the actions of the society. Throughout this analysis, it appears that the postcolonial writers mainly emphasized the indigenous people, places, and their practices to get rid on the stereotypes, inaccuracies and general influences in the spheres of education, social, legal and political settings articulating the modes of creative expressions through the folk-songs, tales, proverbs and pidgin structures. And Achebe is counted among them. Thus, the portrayal of the Nigerian society in his earlier novels presents an evaluation of the discernible clash of two opposing layers of cultural values, the authentic African socio-cultural norms and the emerging western cultural practices. In his latest novels however, Achebe focuses on issues of racism, dictatorship, moral and political corruption, to name only a few. But the present paper has essentially centered on the subversion and devaluation of societal ethos by westerners, the death of moral and social values in Nigerian society, hence the purport granted to its title. Indeed, the exploration of Achebe's earlier novels through a network of some

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concerns for this analysis makes it clear that the author claims for a return to socio- political and cultural values on which solid norms could be built, that is foundations that existed before the advent of colonizers. Therefore, the necessary actions should lie in maintaining and preserving the oral tradition since preservation is not just limited to keeping the form of oral tradition in the community, but mostly the values that contained in the oral tradition.

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