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## THE METAPHOR OF THE FEAST OF THE NEW YAM: A CASE STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART AND ARROW OF GOD

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### ABSTRACT

The feast of the new yam is the most important feast of the Igbo world. It is solemnized after the cleansing ceremonies. The pantheon of feasts is like the one of divinities. There is a big feast and secondary ones. The end of small feasts symbolizes the start of the feast of the new yam. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, divinities, spirits, the dead and the living are around during the feast. They play significant parts in the different rituals of the feast. The ritual of yam is performed to meet cultural and political needs.

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### INTRODUCTION

The work of art is an object whose "original form" can be found again as planned by the writer through the configuration of the effects it can have on the mind and sensibility of the reader. Umberto Eco states: "Any physical completed literary work wants a creative and personal answer from its interpreter. It cannot be understood if it is not reinvented in connection with its author" (1965, 18, translation mine). The life of any human society depends on social events and facts. For us, to understand these social events and facts amounts to understanding the working process of society. The Igbo pre-colonial society of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a well-structured and organized one. In this traditional Igbo community, farming is the daily activity of Igbo men. As such, Igbo people's life and that of the land are interrelated. The Igbo man without plots of land is portrayed as an "efulefu", that is a social washout. Farming, then, gives a meaning to the Igbo life. In this sense, the feast which is held at the end of the farming season is regarded as a break of work which is repeated from year to year.

It is also a time of happiness, joy and amusement. The feast is a social meeting which permits to solve family problems and make plans for the new year. During its celebration some established rules are often violated to enable social deviants to correct their misbehavior and reintegrate their social class. This paper analyses the metaphor of the feast of the new yam in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. From a sociocritical standpoint and the perspective of representation, we will decipher the quintessence of our topic. To reach our goal, the following points will be analyzed: Yam as a foodstuff from God or Chukwu, pumpkin leaves ceremony as a preparatory stage, the significance of secondary feasts and the ideological functions of the feast of the new yam.

#### Yam as a foodstuff from God or Chukwu

According to Igbo mythology, Chukwu is the God who creates everything. He also creates yam to save Igbo mythic ancestor Eze Nri and his family from a famine. Talking about the origin of yam in the introduction of *Things Fall Apart*, Don C. Obadike writes:

*An Igbo creation myth relates that in the beginning the surface of the earth was covered by water and no human lived on it. Then one day Chukwu (God) created the first human family,*

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composed of Eze Nri, his wife, his sons, and his daughters. Eze Nri and his family stood on the top of an anthill and had nowhere to go because the land was submerged. They were also hungry. Chukwu looked down and took pity on their condition. He gave Eze Nri a piece of yam and said, 'Take this, it is edible.' Eze Nri and his family ate the yam and found it was good. The following morning, they were hungry again and Eze Nri prayed to God for more yam. Chukwu listened attentively and then gave him some yamseeds, saying, 'Plant these and you will have an abundance of yams'. Eze Nri accepted the yam seeds with gratitude. (...). Chukwu then asked Eze Nri to sacrifice his first son and his first daughter and plant the yam seeds in their graves. Eze Nri obeyed. Shortly afterwards, yam and cocoyam tendrils sprouted from their children's graves. Eze Nri harvested yams and cocoyams and shared them among the Igbo people. (1958, xxi)

This passage reveals that the first Igbo family was living peacefully on top an anthill like Adam and Eve in the Edengarden. Eze Nri and his family received everything from Chukwu. They did not work to live. Chukwu sets free the Igbo man from bondage when he asks Eze Nri to sow yam to survive. Therefore, the advent of yam appears as the onset of work in the Igbo world. The Igbo man is compelled to work to get his daily bread. This situation highlights the devotion of the Igbo to farming. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, farming or yam crop is the main activity of Igbo men. The cultivation of yam is specifically the work of Igbo men. Yam is then valued in Igbo tradition. In *Things Fall Apart*, yam is the symbol of success and the virility of men like Okonkwo, Obierika and Nwakibie.

*Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man.... Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. (Achebe, 1958, 23-24)*

In this extract, the narrator gives to yam a "meaning or representational preeminence" (Sirvent, 2015, 66). Feast is also perceived as a cultural manifestation. In this respect, French sociologist, Guy Rocher defines culture as:

*A set of ways of thinking, feeling and acting more or less formalized which is learnt and shared by a large number of people. It is symbolic and objective. It is also meant to put these people into distinct and specific collectivity. (1968, 111, translation mine)*

Implicitly, the different festivities and the Igbo tradition form a heterogeneous set. There is no culture without festivities and vice-versa. Feasts allow Igbo men to perpetuate their tradition and customs. Feasts as community meetings aim at reinforcing social harmony.

### **Pumpkin Leaves Ceremony as a preparatory stage**

In the mind of the Igbo, the cleansing ceremony is a ritual which precedes the feast of the new yam. This ceremony usually takes place at the end of the year. The role of the ritual is to cleanse the village from the sins committed by the members of the "social group" (Zima, 2000, 15). It is also an appropriate occasion for each clansman to repent in order to receive the protection of Chukwu. This cleansing ceremony foreshadows the beginning of the new planting season. In

*Arrow of God*, Umuaro is a federation of six well-structured villages where Ezeulu is seen as a god. Ezeulu is the man who presides over the destiny of Umuaro. When Ezeulu announces the date of the feast of the new yam, his six helpers spread the news in their different villages. The "town-crier" usually uses his "ogene" to inform the village:

*GOME GOME GOME GOME. 'Ora Obodo, listen! Ezeulu has asked me to announce that the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves will take place on the coming Nkwo.' GOME GOME GOME GOME. 'Ora Obodo! Ezeulu has asked me... GOME GOME GOME GOME. 'Folks of the village. The Chief Priest of Ulu has asked me to tell every man and every woman that the Festival of the First Pumpkin Leaves will be held on the coming Nkwo market day'. GOME GOME GOME GOME. (Achebe, 1978, 64-65)*

The writing technique of this paragraph allows the reader to see the significance of the pumpkin leaves ceremony in Igbo land. The sound "GOME" of the "ogene" is written in capital letters and repeated sixteen times in the paragraph. This repetition of the sound "GOME GOME GOME GOME" shows that there is an emergency for the Igbo men to gather on the village "ilo". The writer also uses capital letters in the writing of the substantive (Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves) to depict the peculiarity of this event. The cleansing ritual day is a specific one. No Igbo man can miss this preparatory stage of the feast of the new yam. As such, the ritual always turns into a popular feast. On this specific day, Igbo women wear their most beautiful cloths and golden jewelry to show the wealth of their husbands. Every Igbo man brings a pot of palm wine to the feast as a contribution to the reunion dinner. The narrator portrays the cleansing ceremony as a vector of brotherhood, togetherness, and unity:

*A stranger to this year's festival might go away thinking that Umuaro had never been more united in all its history. In the atmosphere of the present gathering the great hostility between Umunneora and Umuachala seemed, momentarily, to lack significance. Yesterday if two men from the two villages had met they would have watched each other's movement with caution and suspicion; tomorrow they would do so again. But today they drank palm wine freely together because no man in his right mind would carry poison to a ceremony of purification; he might as well go out into the rain carrying potent, destructive medicines on his person. (Achebe, 1978, 66)*

This excerpt clearly reveals the non-existence of social categories during the feast. There is no more dialectic of the master and his slave, the rich and the poor during the ritual. For instance, Umunneora and Umuachala the other villages of Umuaro consider as bygone enemies suddenly become friends during the cleansing ceremony. The men of both villages eat and drink palm wine together during the festival. As the underneath passage indicates, the cleansing ritual is the concern of all the six villages of Umuaro.

*The festival thus brought gods and men together in one crowd. It was the only assembly in Umuaro in which a man might look to his right and find his neighbor and look to his left and see a god standing there-perhaps Agwu whose mother also gave birth to madness or Ngene, owner of a stream. (Ibid., 1978, 202)*

The cleansing ritual is performed with pumpkin leaves. In this sense, every Igbo woman carries pumpkin leaves to the ceremony. As showed in *Arrow of God*, the pumpkin leaves enable the Igbo to be in touch with the god Ulu, the alpha and omega of Umuaro. Every Igbo woman confesses and prays to Ulu and carefully rubs herself with the pumpkin leaves. The evocation of this prayer dedicated to Ulu during the cleansing ceremony is a good illustration:

*Great Ulu who kills and saves, I implore you to cleanse my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or seen it with my eyes, or if I have heard it with my ears or stepped on it with my foot or if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves.*(Ibid., 72)

At the end of the prayer, the Igbo woman symbolically draws a circle on her head with the pumpkin leaves and throws them to the master of ceremony known as Ezeulu. Implicitly, the misfortune of each wife and each family goes into the pumpkin leaves. These damned leaves are thrown into the evil forest. In the Igbo world, no normal Igbo man ventures into the evil forest. The ritual of the pumpkin leaves reunites the clan with its environment and divinities. Igbo men use elements of the cosmos to solve their social contradictions. In some areas of the referential space of the novel, human blood is used to replace the pumpkin leaves. This specific aspect of the cleansing ritual is seen in Umuofia. In *Things Fall Apart*, the reader still remembers that Ikemefuna had been killed by the men of Umuofia to cleanse the land from sins.

*As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'My father, they have killed me! 'as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down.* (1958, 43)

Okonkwo takes part in this bloodshed ritual despite the opposition of his best friend Obierika. Okonkwo beheads his own adopted son to show his attachment to Igbo tradition. This dreadful deed of Okonkwo is differently valued by art critics. However, beyond this evil deed, the African reader can see the yearning of the Igbo man to save his community to the detriment of the individual. In other words, for the Igbo, the safeguard of social cohesion is before everything. The bloodshed ritual is also portrayed in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (1973) where the Yoruba men killed "Eman as carrier" (142) during a cleansing ceremony. Achebe describes in his text two kinds of cleansing methods. Beyond the evocation of the pumpkin leaves and human blood in the plot, the writer urges the Igbo to use elements of the cosmos to perform rituals that demanded human blood in the past. In the plot, the end of the cleansing ceremony gives way to the celebration of secondary feasts.

### The significance of secondary feasts

Secondary feasts are mainly personal feasts. A small feast is not compulsory feasted by all the Igbo men of Umuofia or Umuaro. In the Igbo universe, the pantheon of feasts is like the one of gods. There is a big feast and small ones. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo man worships alone his "chi" or "Ikenga". As Sunday O. Anozie puts it:

*Among the well-known Igbo intermediary gods, Chi is the most important one. (...) As a tutelary deity, Chi is very close to the Igbo than Chukwu, the highest god. (1973, 33, translation mine)*

The adoration of chi is an affair between the Igbo man and his double or his personal god. Therefore, the presence of any other member of the clan is not important. Every Igbo man worships the spirits of his forefathers as he wants. In this perspective, Rems Nna Umeasiegbu represents the feast of the new yam in his novel as a social and family reunion.

*A day is fixed for the new yam ceremony and the members of the family living in other villages are asked to return home for the 'big do'. This festival is not only used as a family reunion, but also as an opportunity to offer special sacrifices to the family's god or chi, as it is commonly known. Laxative drugs are taken by all. New yams taken prior to the loosening of the bowels have a dangerous effect on the digestive system. Two or three cocks or even a ram are purchased and slaughtered. If the family is a small one, one cock suffices. Before the family feast starts, the man of the family goes to his shrine to thank the god and give him his share of the food and meat. (1970, 34)*

This passage highlights that the feast is an opportunity for the members of the family to meet and share a common food. At the end of the food, the head of the family shares the meat. Each member of the family receives his share according to his age. If the offering is a fowl, the head of the fowl belongs to the youngest boy of the family. Thus, the reader notices the personal feature of the feast of the new yam: "This occasion is strictly personal and this explains why guests are never invited. The family rises and says a prayer of thanks for staying a live to partake to the new yam festival" (Ibid., 35). The reader also perceives the personal characteristic of small feasts in *Arrow of God*. For example, the village of Umuagu celebrates "Mgba Agbogho" which is a fighting competition dedicated to young girls while the village of Umunneorapays homage to Idemili. The village of Ezeulu, Umuachala highly regards its small feast as it can be seen in this paragraph:

*Half a dozen young men ran up and down the different quarters beating their ogene and searching for the mask; for no one knew which of the million ant holes in Umuachala it would come through. (...) The ilo of Umuachala was among the biggest in Umuaro and the best kept. (...) Everybody in Umuachala seemed to be either there or on his way, and many people came from all the other villages of Umuaro. Women and girls, young men and boys had already a big ring on the ilo; as more and more people poured in from every quarter the ring became thicker and the noise greater. (...) An occasion such as this was often used by wicked men to try out the potency of their magic or to match their power against that of others. There were stories of Masks which had come out unprepared and been transfixed to a spot for days or even felled to the ground. (Achebe, 1978, 195-196)*

The small feast of Umuachala usually takes place at the end of the raining season. It is also a preparatory phase of the feast of the new yam. This small feast is known as "Akwu Nro" (194). This ritual is nothing but offerings from widows to the spirits of their departed husbands. The narrator refers to the importance of the feast of "Akwu Nro" in these words:

*This year's Akwu Nro was to have an added interest because Obika's age group would present a new ancestral Mask to the village. The coming of a Mask was always an important occasion especially when as now it was a Mask of high rank. In the last few days there had been a lot of coming and going among members of the Otakagu age group. (Ibid., 194).* We notice here that the feast of "Akwu Nro" is the concern of the people of Umuachala. The introduction or appearance of a new mask gives a particular dimension to the feast. The narrator uses the mask to show the religious aspect of the feast. In the Igbo fictional universe, small feasts play social and religious functions. In addition, the end of small feasts symbolizes the start of the feast of the new yam. For this reason, the ideological and political functions of the feast of the new yam is worth analyzing.

### **The ideological and political functions of the feast of the new yam**

The feast of the new yam is the most important feast of Achebe's fictional world. It is the unique ceremony the Igbo feast once in the year. Some days before this important social manifestation, an atmosphere of joy and gaiety hovers over the Igbo world. In the plot, Igbo men use the feast as alibi to honor Ani, the goddess of the land and fecundity. Ani is highly regarded in the Igbo traditional religion. The feast of the newyam is held before the beginning of each planting season. Ani is always the first to taste the new yam. In this sense, the Igbo people offer Ani yams for her kindness and gratitude. The different social classes mainly the "ndichie" and the "agbala", the "agadi-wayi" and the "efulefu" look forwards to the new yam festival because it epitomizes the end of a year and the onset of a new one. All the Igbo men who still have old yams in their granges are bound to eat them all on the eve of the feast. Indeed, the Igbo men used to eat the old yams because the new year must starts with fresh and delicious yams. In addition, women do the general cleansing of the kitchen utensils: pans, calabashes and wooden mortars in which yam is pounded. This ritual is the second stage of the ceremony of the feast of the new yam. Contrary to small feasts, some guests play significant roles in the success of the big feast. Foo-foo yam and vegetables soup is the main food of the feast of the new yam. The narrator refers to the abundance of food during the new yam ritual when he asserts:

*The story was always told of a wealthy man who set before his guest a mound of foo-foo so high that those who sat on one side could not see what was happening on the other, and it was not until late in the evening that one of them saw for the first time his in-law who had arrived during the course of the meal and had fallen to on the opposite side. It was only then that they exchanged greetings and shook hands over what was left of the food. (Chinua Achebe, 1958, 26)*

The feast of the new yam is regarded as a day of joy, generosity and love in Igbo world. Every Igbo man invites many parents and friends of the neighboring villages. Three days before the feast the look and way of life of any Igbo village change. To give a brand image to Umuofia, Igbo women rub the "obi" with red earth still they start shining. The feast of the new yam is a social meeting which the Igbo man regards as part of his life. Beyond public festivities, the reader can see an expression of brotherhood, solidarity and unity:

*As the day wore on his in-laws arrived from three surrounding villages, and each party brought with them a huge pot of palm-wine. And there was eating and drinking till night, when Okonkwo's in-laws began to leave for their homes. (Ibid., 28)*

The ritual of yam is for the Igbo man what the eve of Christmas represents for Christians. Before the ritual of yam if the family is starving, the traditional law authorizes the Igbo man to dig up yams from the backyard to save his family from famine. But he cannot eat yams from the big or family farm before the ritual. Anyway, no elder or family chief eats the new yam before the traditional ritual of yam. In a way, the feast is expressive because it raises some passions. It imitates the interior by the exterior (Hayat, 2002, 16). The feast also re-enacts the union of the six villages of Umuaro and their total obedience to the god Ulu who sets them free from the attack of the men of Abame. The Igbo men worship Ulu through the offering of the new yam. This has political implication because it reveals as a general population census as evidenced in excerpt:

*At every New Yam feast the coming together of the villages was re-enacted and every grown man in Umuaro took a good-sized seed-yam to the shrine of Ulu and placed it in the heap from his village after circling it round his head; then he took the lump of chalk lying beside the heap and marked his face. It was from these heaps that the elders knew the number of men in each village. If there was an increase over the previous year a sacrifice of gratitude was made to Ulu; but if the number had declined the reason was sought from diviners and a sacrifice of appeasement was ordered. It was also from these yams that Ezeulu selected thirteen with which to reckon the new year. If the festival meant no more than this it would still be the most important ceremony in Umuaro. (Achebe, 1978, 202)*

Clearly, the feast of the new yam has a double meaning. It permits to strengthen the links of friendship, brotherhood and unity. It also serves as a pretext to worship all the divinities of the clan. In this case, the feast is a particular day of prayer and adoration of the gods and the spirits:

*But it was also the day for all the minor deities in the six villages who did not have their own special feast. On that day each of these gods was brought by its custodian and stood in a line outside the shrine of Ulu so that any man or woman who had received a favour from it could make a small present in return. This was the one public appearance these smaller gods were allowed in the year (Ibid., 202).*

In both novels under study, the ceremony of the new yam is a matter of the living and the dead. This social meeting indicates that there is a bridge between the visible world and the invisible one. The feast enables kinsmen to show their strength and power. The day of the ritual is the single day of the year where intermediary gods and the six helpers of Ulu appear publicly in Umuaro. As the narrator reveals, the life of the Igbo is linked to the feast of the new yam. However, before feasting, some principles need to be respected. This is why Ezeulu cannot determine the date of the feast if he does not finish eating the thirteen sacred yams which constitute the months of the year in Igbo universe. The feast of the new yam helps the reader to better understand the place and the role of the traditional priest Ezeulu, the compass of Umuaro. He is the indicator of time and seasons. In the text, all his power is

bound to the announcement of the feast. The active participation of the Igbo in the different rituals of the new yam reveals the political genius of the ruling class. Beyond the ritual of yam, one can see attitudes and behaviors linked to the perpetuation of the social group. According to ethnic groups during the offering of the new yamsome specific aspects of the ritual come before the others. The feast, then has an integrative and educative functions.

### Conclusion

In a nutshell, the feast of the new yam is both a social and cultural celebration. It is a mere enactment of the Igbo tradition and worldview. This representation of the feast is an expression of translation, revelation and creation of the Igbo common reality. Through this symbolic representation (Hayat, 2002, 33), Achebe re-creates Igbo culture and tradition in the mind of the reader. This work also permits to see the difference between small feasts or cleansing ceremonies and the feast of the new yam. In the two novels we studied, the feast of the new yam is a vector of unity and social cohesion. The ritual of yam has four possible representations in the Igbo "collective consciousness": social, religious, political and ideological. In our analysis, the feast is seen as a form of handing on Igbo culture from generation to generation. Therefore, the symbolism of the feast of the new yam is in a way an affirmation or a reaffirmation of Igbo tradition. However, beyond the portrayal of Igbo culture, Achebe advocates the promotion of African culture. He invites African elite to come back to his senses and his African roots. The implicit of the text shows that the feast of the new yam is ideological because it confirms the power and the virility of Igbomen. The chief priest Ezeulu leans on the feast of yam as a pretext to reaffirm the supremacy and domination Igbo men. But his refusal to announce the date of the feast engenders the collapse of the aristocracy of Umuaro and the "fatal derangement" (Blanchot, 1980, 137) of Ezeulu, the very custodian of Igbo tradition.

On top of the celebration of yam, the reader can see the importance of the Igbo mythic ancestor Eze Nri, among Igbo people.

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