

An Examination of the Application and Relevance of Des Wilson’s Taxonomy of Traditional Media Systems in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*

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1. Introduction

Until a few decades ago when the awareness struck some African Communication scholars, Mass Communication was seen and interpreted essentially in a Eurocentric perspective. Analyses of human communication phenomena were done against the backdrop of western, modernist and technology-mediated situations. With such intellectual oversight, much of the beauty and potency of the indigenous communication system was either ignored or relegated to the background. This, however, was not without some attendant consequences. For instance, some politicians who sought elective offices and concentrated their spending only on the modern mass media ended up in shock when election results were turned in (Akpabio 2003:4). It is nonetheless heartwarming today that the pioneering efforts of some African Communication scholars are now yielding dividends as attention has been shifted to a body of knowledge or course of instruction tagged in various institutions as Indigenous Communication Systems (ICS), Traditional African Communication Systems (TACS), Oramedia, etc. A positive development, no doubt, but the question is: what is an indigenous communication system?

2. Conceptual Clarification

Definitions of Indigenous Communication System vary as there are scholars, movements or schools of thought. Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998), a Ghanaian scholar defines it as:

Any form of endogeneous communication system, which by virtue of its origin, form, and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilization of the values, symbolism, institution and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualities and attributes

On his own, Hachten (1971) defines Indigenous Communication Systems (ICS) as “informal channels of communication”. Other authorities like Akpabio (2003:3) see ICS as:

the process and systems which utilize symbols, values and institutions which directly appeal and readily connect with the people and thus enhance the variety and effectiveness of messages that circulate in the community.

For the purpose of this presentation, ICS shall be construed to imply all forms of communication strategies, verbal or non-verbal that are peculiarly African.

3. Des Wilson’s Taxonomy

Des Wilson is a professor in the department of Communication and Language Arts at the University of Cross River State, Uyo, in Nigeria. As one of the pioneering scholars in the seemingly virgin field of indigenous communication systems, Wilson analysed and categorized the various forms and modes of traditional media systems into ten distinct pigeon holes. These include: Idiophones, Membranophones, Aerophones, Symbolography, Signals, Objectifics, Color Schemes, Music, Extramundane Communication and Symbolic Displays. It shall soon be explained in details what each of these categories connotes and how they manifest in Chinua

Achebe's popular epic, *Things Fall Apart*. It must however be stated at the outset here that Des Wilson's taxonomy, though a courageous attempt, is deficient in certain areas as some vital components of indigenous communication like rich indispensable proverbs (oil with which names, myths and legends are eaten) names, myths, and legends are not captured. We shall exhaustively discuss this later. Now to the text.

4. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart is an African classic epic which celebrates the primitive and serene beauty of precolonial Igbo society and captures the people's ordeals after the coming of the white man. Prior to the coming of the white missionary, Achebe projects the rich culture of the people of Umuofia – their language, religion, judicial system and marriage institution. The narration centres on a man-Okonkwo who as an embodiment of the Igbo culture, 'courageously' battles against his fate "chi" which appears to have destined him to doom. By dint of hard work, Okwonkwo braved the odds of his poor background and climbs the ladder of success. However, his conservativeness and fiery temperament constitute his tragic flaw as he, in defiance of the new religion and the alien administration of the white man, kills one of the court messengers sent to stop a village meeting. Noticing his people's reluctance to embrace his violent option to the white man's 'menace', he commits suicide, thus becoming a victim of his fears. In the text, the white man is portrayed as a destructive agent, an intruder who unleashes anarchy on the serenity of an otherwise peaceful culture.

5. *Things Fall Apart* and Wilson's Taxonomy

5.1 Idiophones

According to Des Wilson, idiophones are self-sounding instruments or technical wares which produce sounds without the addition or use of an intermediary medium. A close study of *Things Fall Apart* reveals the preponderance of this medium of indigenous communication in Igbo land. Idiophones manifest in the use of the 'ekwe' – a hollowed-out instrument and the 'ogene' used by the town crier as an equivalent of the signature tune of the modern broadcast media, to attract attention to a message. Instances of such usages abound in Chapter 2 (p. 7), Chapters 6, and 13 (p. 384) of the text.

5.2 Aerophones

Aerophones essentially are media which produce sounds as a result of the vibration of a column of air. They comprise the whistle and flute family including reed pipes, horns and pipes. In the *Things Fall Apart*, the use of aerophones dominantly manifests in the flute as a basic accompaniment of the Igbo music for entertainment purposes. Okonkwo's father, Unoka, exhibits an exemplary mastery and addiction to the flute as a folk musician (p. 4). The flute was his solitary partner when he was dumped at the evil forest to die of a strange ailment. Till today the flute as a medium of communication and entertainment is still prominent in Igbo land, as always demonstrated by the popular *Atilogwu* dancers.

5.3 Membranophones

These, according to Wilson, come as media on which sound is produced through the vibration of membranes i.e. drums. In the text, drums are used during all forms of festivals, wrestling, entertainment, burial, marriages, *egwugwu* or new yam festivals. They, like in the Yoruba land, are used to sing the praises of successful elders or winners of wrestling bouts. Drums herald the death and the burial of Ezeudu, a notable elder in Umuofia.

5.4 Symbology

In the Igbo culture as revealed in *Things Fall Apart*, symbology manifests in various forms. For instance, the decoration of Obierika's daughter as a bride with uli and tattoo (p. 49) and the drawing of chalk lines on the wall by Unoka, to symbolize his debts. A particularly striking instance is when Okoye pays a visit to Unoka and he is offered kolanut, Achebe writes thus: "Okoye took the lump of chalk, drew some lines on the floor, and then painted his big toe". This symbolizes welcome. Similarly, the use of a bundle of broomsticks to negotiate dowry or the unshaven hair used to identify an "osu" caste are all instances of symbology.

5.5 Objectives

These come in the form of media presented in concrete forms with significance for specific society only or may be universal through their traditional association with specific contextual meanings.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Objectives comes in the use of kolanuts and alligator pepper for various reasons especially in the welcoming of visitors, "He who brings kola brings life". Also the jigida beads which brides use to adorn their waists symbolize purity and beauty. Cowries and bundles of short brooms mentioned above used during engagements and the use of staff by Ezeani to fine Okonkwo for breaking the week of peace 'Nso-Ani'. (pp. 22 and 86).

5.6 Signals

The various beats of the drum are suggestive of different signals in Umuofia and by extension the Igbo community. This medium is fast gaining universal application in Africa. On page 30 of the text, Achebe comments that "the drum beat the unmistakable wrestling dance – quick, light and gay, and it came floating on the wind". Similarly, on Page 47, Okonkwo explains that the drum has not been beaten to announce the death of Ndulue because of his wife Ozoemena. Signals also come in the text in the form of gunshots meant to celebrate the transition of prominent persons. It is in one of such celebrations that Okonkwo inadvertently kills Ezeudu's son and eventually goes into exile. (p. 96).

5.7 Color Scheme

The use of color scheme in *Things Fall Apart* manifests in the people's tradition of drawing patterns usually in white, yellow and dark green or painting themselves with camwood before festivals. In either of these instances, white is impliedly suggestive of purity and peace, while green symbolizes fertility, black (evil), red (danger) and blue stands for love.

5.8 Symbolic Displays

In the text, the use of staff connotes authority and power. Similarly, the threat made by Okonkwo to Ikemefuna when he refused to eat and the silence and inaction shown by Umuofia people to indicate their disapproval of Okonkwo's violent action when he killed the court messenger. Also, the suicide committed by Okonkwo, the hero, is a form of non-verbal communication conveying his disappointment with his kinsmen. Of particular note here is the eye-contact that ordered the killing of Ikemefuna – the ill-fated lad when he was to be sacrificed in the forest.

5.9 Music

This plays a significant role in the life of the people of Umuofia as exhibited in *Things Fall Apart*. The songs are usually composed as a form of historic reminder of certain experiences or

happenings of the past. Instances of these are the songs for Okonkwo when he defeated Amalinze the cat, (p. 36), Unoka's group dealing in entertainment with songs and flute (p. 4) and the dexterity of Okudo in using song or music to spur men to fight during wars (p. 141).

5.10 Extra Mundane

There is an ample evidence of this medium of indigenous communication in the text. This is demonstrated by Achebe through the continuous interaction between the living and the dead typified in the "Egwugwu" or other deities. One of such situations is when Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the goddess of peace came to carry Ezimma in the night. Chielo is constantly possessed by the spirit of Agbala. We see another manifestation of extra-mundane communication when Ezimma, Okonkwo's daughter's "Iyi-uwa" (special stone) was extracted and reburied by Okagbue, the medicine man, to permanently sever the link between Ezimma and the Ogbanje world (p. 59). Other instances include consultation of the spirit of the dead (p. 12), the role of "Egwugwu" to settle quarrels; the presence of 'Egwugwu' at the burial of prominent persons symbolizing transition between the dead and the living and the consultation of the oracles by Okonkwo's father (Unoka) to know why he had always been poor.

The role or importance of extra-mundane communication in the Igbo judicial system cannot be overemphasized. Contrary to the alien and sometimes corrupt system of the foreign system where those who impose themselves on the people as mediators know little or nothing about the peoples culture, we see the thoroughness of the Igbo judicial system under the 'metaphysical' influence of the gods (Egwugwu).

Although Achebe is discreet with the Egwugwu's identities as mortals, the fact that the persona had transitioned to the level of the numinous through their costumes, invocations and masks is settled and unquestionable by the people. Hence when each Egwugwu calls on the parties in dispute and says "body of XYZ, do you know me?" the response is in the negative because the mortal cannot claim knowledge of the immortal, especially when he has taken refuge behind the mask.

This is what Layiwola (1998) implies when he argues that "[o]n the African Continent, the medium of the mask or the comprehensive costume of a masquerader is the invention of a spectral medium." According to him:

A man hitherto a young fledgling in the community, [like Okonkwo at the village square] attains the status of a god or an ancestor under the mask. Women and children and households including the peers of his mothers kneel before him for benediction and prayers – general or particular. He becomes a persona, a numinous invocation with a transient personality. He lasts only for the duration of the enactment. At the instance, the unknown is domesticated and brought within the realm of the living.

Layiwola captures the essence of the Igbo conflict resolution strategy through metaphysical or extra mundane means at the village square in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's thematic inference on the potency of extra-mundane communication in Igboland and Africa is still relevant especially in the light of recent revelations on the Okija shrine saga in Anambra State, Eastern Nigeria.

6. Critique of Des Wilson's Taxonomy as Applied in *Things Fall Apart*

As earlier hinted, the application of Des Wilson's taxonomy in *Things Fall Apart* is deficient in some aspects. For instance, one major strength of African languages especially as reflected in their indigenous communication systems, is the rich use of proverbs and aphorisms. This singular factor accounts for the beauty of the text, a fact which has accounted for the author's many awards. Not because Achebe invented the proverbs, but that his presentation in *Things Fall Apart* captures the soul and spirit of the typical Igbo dialogue and conversation.

The use of proverbs spices up all conversations in the text. Such uses ensure messages are communicated effectively without waste of words and possibility of entropy. Instances of the efficiency of proverbs are prominent on pages 14-16 of the text when Okonkwo solicits favor from Nwakibie for yam seedlings against the new planting season. A few examples will suffice:

“A toad does not jump in the daylight unless something is after its life”. “A lizard that jumps from the high iroko tree says if nobody praises him, he will praise himself”. “Eneke bird says since men have learnt to shoot without missing, it has learnt to fly without perching”. “Let the kite perch and the egrets too. And whoever shall say no to the other, let his wings break” etc.

The preponderance of rich proverbs and aphorisms in *Things Fall Apart* confirms the initial statement that proverbs are indeed the “oil with which words are eaten” by the Igbo. It must have been an oversight that Wilson’s taxonomy misses out on this. This becomes more instructive because Akpabio (2003) argues that as far back as 1966, Doob examined proverbs among the Fanti people of Ghana and noted that many of the rules of society are conveniently expressed in proverbs.

It is not only in proverbs that Des Wilson’s taxonomy is deficient in *Things Fall Apart*. Wilson does not also take account of the importance and meanings of names Igbo land and Africa. Names constitute a veritable medium of communication in Africa because a person’s name speaks volumes. This explains why in Yoruba land for instance, the naming of a child is not the exclusive duty of its parents. Virtually every one in the family will want to christen a child depending on their understanding of the circumstances in which the child came. In the *Things Fall Apart*, the potency of names in Igbo land manifests in the series of entreaties Okonkwo’s third wife Ekwefi calls her ever dying child, Ezimma, all in a bid to stop her from dying. Such names capture her fears: ‘*Onwumbiko*’, Death, I implore you, ‘*Ozoemena*’, May it not happen again, ‘*Onwuma*’, Death may please itself etc.

Though Wilson’s taxonomy misses out on this, it is nonetheless gratifying that he designed a six- point typology, which is an abridgement of his initial 10-point scheme. These include:

- (a) Instrumental media which comprises idiophones, membranophone, aerophones and symbology;
- (b) Demonstrative Media which combines signal and music;
- (c) Iconographic, the equivalence of objectification and floral;
- (d) Extra-mundane which comprises incantatory and graphic.
- (e) Visual dealing with color scheme and appearance.
- (f) Institutional which stands for social and spiritual media like marriage, chieftaincy, shrine and masquerade.

Eno Akpabio (2003:13) has expanded Wilson’s taxonomy to include the seventh addition of venue-oriented communication, structure and features as identified by Ghanaian scholars Doob and Ansu- Kyeremeh.

Akpabio’s creative addition of myths and legends, Names as Communication, and Folktales and proverbs as the eight, ninth and tenth point on the classification list appears to have effectively compensated for the seeming oversight of the Wilson’s taxonomy of indigenous media systems.

7. Conclusion

Although the issue of taxonomy is germane in indigenous communication systems, the focus of scholars in this era of globalization should now be how to formulate inter-ethnic codes of Traditional African Communication Systems. This should come in terms of an effective synergy, if possible, of the various media in order to fortify it against the frequent onslaught and attrition of the technology-mediated modernist media. Perhaps a convenient starting point for this is the task of capacity building by teaching, learning and re-learning the attributes of the fading African cultures by the increasing mass of Africa’s culturally deracinated populace. This is the point Achebe makes in *Things Fall Apart*.

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