

Ethics as a way of life: Self-Cultivation as moral framework in the Igbo universe of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Aminu Suleiman and Vaibhav Shah*

Abstract: Existing scholarship in the field of traditional African ethics has identified three broad themes namely communitarianism, personhood, and the vital force, instrumental for the common good of all. The present paper argues that African traditional ethics allows ample room for an individual's personal cultivation, regardless of the community's view on the ultimate good. In order to substantiate this argument, the paper seeks to undertake an analysis of proverbs as used in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The paper begins by surveying existing scholarly approaches to African ethics. It then compiles proverbs related to the 'communitarian' aspects of ethics and those that depict 'individual cultivation' in Achebe's African trilogy (*Things Fall Apart*, *No longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*). It examines how the proverbs are woven into the first novel, guiding the actions of the protagonist and other characters toward personal growth, illustrating ethical principles of personal development. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the arguments developed through this analysis.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, communitarianism, cultivation, personhood, *Things Fall Apart*, traditional African ethics

Introduction

African traditional ethics, deeply rooted in communal values and cultural heritage, has often been viewed through the lens of collective identity and societal norms. However, there exists a rich and nuanced dimension within these ethical frameworks that allows for individual personal cultivation, even when such development might diverge from

* Aminu Suleiman (✉)

Department of Languages, Literature and Aesthetics, School of Liberal Studies, Pandit Deendayal Energy University, Gandhinagar, India / English Language Education Department, Adamawa State Polytechnic, Yola, Nigeria

Vaibhav Shah

Department of Languages, Literature and Aesthetics, School of Liberal Studies, Pandit Deendayal Energy University, Gandhinagar, India
e-mail: asuleiman01@gmail.com (corresponding author)

the community's prevailing notions of the ultimate good. This study seeks to develop an argument that African traditional ethics, as depicted in proverbs, provides ample space for personal growth and individual moral agency. Proverbs serve as a fundamental repository of wisdom in African cultures, encapsulating ethical principles and life lessons. This analysis will focus on the proverbs portrayed in Chinua Achebe's acclaimed African trilogy: *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*. These literary works offer a profound exploration of the interplay between individual aspirations and communal expectations within the context of African traditional ethics.

In order to delimit the scope of this paper, a detailed analysis primarily concentrates on *Things Fall Apart*. This novel, a cornerstone of African literature, vividly illustrates the tension between personal ambition and communal duties through the journey of its protagonist, Okonkwo. Nonetheless, references to *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* may also be incorporated to enrich the discussion and provide a broader perspective.

The methodology of this research involves a close textual analysis of the proverbs embedded within the narrative of *Things Fall Apart*. By examining how these proverbs guide the actions and decisions of characters, the study aims to reveal the ways in which traditional wisdom facilitates personal growth and ethical reflection. Additionally, the research contextualizes these proverbs within the broader cultural and philosophical landscape of African traditional ethics, drawing on relevant scholarly interpretations and critical analyses. The analysis also aims to demonstrate how these proverbs are woven into the narratives, guiding the actions of protagonists and other characters towards personal growth. The outcome of this research will underscore the dynamic relationship between individual moral development and communal values in African traditional ethics.

To effectively put the argument that African traditional ethics allows ample room for an individual's personal cultivation, regardless of the community's view on the ultimate good, this study is divided into three sections. The first section surveys existing scholarship on African traditional ethics, focusing on the themes of personhood and communalistic elements as reflected in African proverbs. The second section explores the proverbs related to the communitarian aspects of ethics in Achebe's African trilogy, capturing the essence of African traditional ethics rooted in communitarianism and personhood, emphasizing unity, equality, fairness, and peaceful coexistence, while

serving as guidelines for ethical behaviour in communal life and supporting the normative claims about African ethics. The third and concluding section aims to argue that Achebe's novels, beyond emphasizing communitarianism and personhood, also highlight individual cultivation, which may diverge from the common good of a community. It explores numerous proverbs in the trilogy that focus on individual flourishing, aspiring beyond communal norms, and examines how these proverbs function as vehicles for achieving personal goals. The section identifies specific proverbs in each novel that express themes of cultivation and analyses their narrative contexts, with a particular focus on *Things Fall Apart*.

A survey of ethical framework in African tradition

Traditional African ethics is deeply imbued in the socio-religio-cultural landscape of African societies. Unlike Western ethical system which is claimed to be universalist and normative in its orientation, African ethics is experiential and rooted in the beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews of its inhabitants. A substantial scholarship in the field of African ethics has identified three broad themes - communitarianism, personhood and the vital force or life force instrumental for the common good of all (Menkiti 2018, 2004; Mbiti 1990; Gyekye 2011, 1998; Molefe 2019). Popular African maxims like "a person is a person through other persons" as they say in Southern Africa; or "I am because we are" as is uttered in the Eastern and Western Africa (Metz 2017, 63; Idem 2023, 186), suggest a deeper commitment of African worldview to the collective good of a community. Other than the three broad categorization of African ethics in terms of communitarianism, personhood, and the vital force, scholars have also drawn attention to the various sources of moral norms in African societies. Accordingly, (Okeja 2018) offers four typologies of moral justification in African philosophy – 1) appeal to tradition, 2) appeal to community, 3) appeal to religion and gods, and 4) appeal to human well-being. He asserts that moral norms are social artefacts that have the overall goal of guiding human interactions. Similarly, (Murove 2021) identifies three basic themes in African tradition viz. ancestors, *ubuntu* (humanness) and relationality. One can see a common pattern in all these themes as they tend to defy the universalist and normative tendencies of the Western ethics. They not only focus on the communitarian good as *sumum bonum* but also treat other important themes like personhood and vital force as prerequisite for the overall good of the community.

One important aspect of African ethics which has significantly drawn the attention of scholars is the notion of personhood. The concept of personhood, in African ethical system, is inextricably linked with the notion of communitarianism. One's attaining a personhood ought to be seen in relation to one's continual effort toward the common good of her community as (Menkiti 1984, 176) asserts:

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. It is the carrying of these obligations that transforms one from the 'it' status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the 'person' status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense – an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.

Menkiti's view of personhood is linked with certain obligations that an individual ought to perform in one's community. This view implies that an individual should make continued efforts to internalize communal norms, obligations, and relationships to cultivate and attain moral personhood. However, the concept of personhood needs clarity before it is made intelligible in the context of African ethics. In this regard, (Sapontzis 1981, 607) suggests two kinds of concepts while discussing the moral aspect of personhood. These two concepts are moral and metaphysical. Moral concepts are evaluative in nature and are concerned with "assigning rights, duties, obligations, and respect." Metaphysical concepts, on the other hand, are descriptive in nature. They denote the kinds of things that are individuals and "endure through space and time and have their own identity, integrity, independence, or self-sufficiency" (Ibid). Within an African ethical context, (Ikuenobe 2018) reinforces these two aspects of personhood- 1) descriptive psychological and metaphysical aspect, 2) normative and social-moral aspect. These two aspects are instrumental to form personhood-identity, rights, and autonomy of an individual. In the context of ethical discourse, it is the normative aspect that predominates scholarly discussion around the concept of personhood. Normative view of personhood, as (Oyowe 2018, 784) puts forth:

... is that persons are psychologically competent human beings who have demonstrated in behaviour, compliance to appropriate moral and social norms. "A person—taken in its fullest sense—is therefore an individual who, through mature reflection and action, has both flourished economically and

succeeded in meeting her (often weighty) responsibilities to her family and community.

However, normative view of personhood restricts the scope of an individual within a community and doesn't allow to see her as person qua person, as (Masaka 2018, 10) asserts that while a person is ontologically prior to and at the same time subsists in personhood, personhood when understood in its normative sense can be said to be something that can be acquired by individuals, much of it, within the confines of a community. Likewise, (Bujo 2001, 148) argues that "although the individual is embedded in the community, he or she is a unique and in-exchangeable being, who has irreplaceable tasks within the community." This stance of giving preference to an individual over her place in a community is due to the ontological status of a person which is distinguished from the concept of personhood as (Masaka 2018, 8) further states that "being a person is not an acquired trait in the sense that one attains it as one lives in the community. It is not something that is taught or learnt from others. One is born as such." Several critics have found the normative conception of personhood such as the one developed by Menkiti, mentioned above, as faulty, and problematic. For example, (Chimakonam 2022, 94) identifies some of the problems stating that they are based on the five assumptions, as quoted below:

First, it assumes that the ancient belief in the dominance of the community shared by a collection of sub-Saharan communities, which empowers the community to determine and override the individual can be compatible with modern life. Second, it assumes that all that matters in forging personhood is compliance with the community norms; thus, trivialising the individual capacities and endowments. Third, it assumes, quite in error, that it is fair, and all squared to compare traditional African communal thought with modern Western liberal thought disregarding the epochal difference between traditional and modern thoughts. Fourth, it assumes that an accurate conception of personhood should be a 'closed predicament,' which no individual should question. Fifth, it assumes that personhood can only be conceived as a social relationship that is an end in itself.

Manzini (2018) also argues that Menkiti's normative conception of personhood can be considered as gendered, ableist and anti-queer and demands for an inclusive theory of personhood. Normative frameworks of African ethics grounded in the ideals of community and personhood have also been attacked by some scholars who rather propose to study the domain in line with Greek philosophers like Plato

and Aristotle. The character of an individual plays a vital role in shaping the ethical orientation of African society as (Gyeke 2011) asserts that “Good character is the essence of the African moral system, the linchpin of the moral wheel.” He argues that society may have different norms transmitted from generation to generation in the form of proverbs, folktales etc. that guide individuals toward a right conduct and ethical fulfilment of one’s responsibilities for the common good of all. However, the onus is on an individual who applies this moral education in her conduct. Gyeke (Ibid) maintains that:

The ability to act in accord with the moral principles and rules of the society requires the possession of a good character. Thus, in the context of the activities of the moral life—in our decisions to obey moral rules, in the struggle to do the right thing and to avoid the wrong conduct, in one's intention to carry out a moral duty, the quality of a person's character is of ultimate consequence. It is from a person's character that all his or her actions—good or bad—radiate: the performance of good or bad acts depends on the state of one's character. Wrongdoing is put down to a person's bad character. Thus, the Yoruba maxim (proverb): ‘Good character is a person’s guard.’

The cultivation of moral character of an individual, however, is inextricably linked with the cultivation of a community. In comparison, Metz (2023, 186-187) while drawing parallel between African ethics and Greek ethical ideals, acknowledges the role of virtue in achieving the human excellence. He observes that:

The similarities between traditionally African ideals and those of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle continue, in that self- realization is typically understood to be a function of the exhibition of virtue or human excellence. Becoming a complete person or living a genuinely human way of life is not merely a matter of performing actions that are right because they accord with some principle but rather is primarily a function of displaying certain character traits relating to one’s beliefs, emotions and feelings, and the actions that express them.

However, the difference between African traditional worldview and Greek ethics, as Metz argues above, lies in the realization of the ultimate good. How an individual is capable to act rationally forms the basis of exercising virtues in Greek ethics. African ethics, on the other hand, focuses on the two distinct goods viz. community and vitality. Metz asserts that the fundamental principle of community as a realization of good requires the ‘other regard’ approach from the members of the society. To quote Metz (2023, 188):

I realize myself essentially in relation to people distinct from myself and cannot do so in isolation from them. Summing up one major Afro-communitarian conception of virtue, then, a person exhibits human excellence or virtue just in so far as she has character traits that express a prizing of communal or friendly relationships. Such an analysis would appear to capture additional virtues such as industriousness, respectfulness, and fairness.

The other source of this realization is vitality or a life force. Metz (2023, 190) explains the life- force as “an invisible energy that permeates everything in the world in varying degrees.” The degree of life-force follows a hierarchy, starting from the inanimate mineral kingdom, then ascending to plants, animals, humans, ancestors, and other spiritual agents, and culminating in God, who is the source of all life-forces. This variant of a self- realization ethics, as Metz argues, indicates that “one’s fundamental aim should be to increase life-force, either one’s own or people’s generally.” (Ibid.) Vitality as a source encompasses virtues such as prudence, courage, and mental health, which contribute to the flourishing of an individual. Furthermore, virtues like kindness, concern, charity, hard work, respect, and fairness—often associated with communitarian ethics—are also integral to vitality or life-force, as they promote liveliness and diminish weariness. Metz’s endeavour to compare African traditional ethics with Greek ethics, and his attempt to view the African variant of virtue ethics through the lens of two goods—community and vitality—raises an important question: What happens when an individual's aspirations for flourishing and human excellence are not aligned with their community’s values? Does African traditional ethics offer no guidance for an individual’s personal cultivation, regardless of the common good envisioned by their community?

The next section will seek to develop an argument that African traditional ethics allows ample room for an individual’s personal cultivation, regardless of the community’s view on the ultimate good. Given that proverbs, folktales, and communal practices are the primary sources of traditional African ethics, this analysis will particularly examine the proverbs depicted in Chinua Achebe’s African trilogy namely *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*. In order to delimit the scope of this paper, detailed analysis will focus on *Things Fall Apart* though references to the two other novels may also find space in the discussion. The analysis will also aim to demonstrate

how these proverbs are woven into the narratives, guiding the actions of protagonists and other characters towards personal growth.

Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's African trilogy

Proverbs serve as a vital repository of knowledge within traditional African ethics, embodying both ancestral wisdom and practical guidance, offering instructions on how to lead a purposeful life. To quote (Penfield and Duru 1988, 120):

Proverbs are in effect quotes from the ancestors- the spirits who rule in the lives of the living and who can punish as well as protect the living. Their philosophical meanings make statements about *omendli* -- the rules of a peaceful social order. These rules suggest how members in the society are to treat each other and behave. Their use in conversation and speeches not only reminds those present of the continued intervention of the ancestors in the lives of the living but also represents a distinctive way in which cultural knowledge is displayed and acquired.

The ethical significance of proverbs may be captured in the following remark of (Yankah 1999, 205):

Grounded upon years of experience and close observation of life and natural phenomena, the proverb, through metaphorical language, may warn, advise or reprimand by drawing attention to the moral or ethical consequences of human behaviour. It may advocate patience, cooperation, and perseverance, and repudiate greed, and selfishness.

As discussed in the previous section, African ethics centres on the themes of community and personhood. Scholar (Etieyibo 2023, 37) emphasizes the communalistic elements of African ethics, as reflected in African proverbs, and classifies them into categories such as dialogue, peace, and communal harmony; communal good, solidarity, and well-being; brotherhood and sisterhood (working together, communally and in unity); and humanism, hospitality, and caring. These categories imply that proverbs in African tradition steer an individual's actions towards the collective good of society, forming the foundation of communitarian ethics in these cultures. Chinua Achebe reinforces this principle in his works by incorporating an ample collection of proverbs that embody and transmit communitarianas well as individualistic ethics.

Achebe is one of the foremost writers addressing the complex ethical landscape of Igbo society in his novels. His works not only highlight the conflict between traditional African and Western ethics

but also offer a rich commentary on the traditional ethical value system, emphasizing community, personhood, and the character of an individual. Achebe's depiction of the Igbo universe prominently upholds these ethical themes, with numerous proverbs supporting this worldview (Ikuenobe, 2006; Morrison, 2018). The following is a list of proverbs (with page numbers in which they appear) related to the 'communitarian' aspects of ethics in Achebe's trilogy.

Things Fall Apart (2001, 5; 19; 68; 118; 156): "He who brings kola brings life"; "let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to other, let his wing break"; "if I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play"; "if one finger brought oil, it soiled the others" and "an animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him".

No Longer at Ease (2010b, 25; 59; 78): "Ours is ours, but mine is mine"; "if one finger brought oil, it soiled the others"; "anger against a kinsman was felt in the flesh, not in the marrow".

Arrow of God (2010a 13; 21; 27; 47; 57; 94; 114; 126; 132; 158; 164; 169; 208): "When a handshake goes beyond the elbow, we know it has turned to another thing"; when a man of cunning dies, a man of cunning buries him; "the fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into the grave"; "whatever music you beat on your drum there is somebody who can dance to it"; "when I cut grass and you cut, what is your right to call me names?"; "if a man seeks for a companion who acts entirely like himself, he will live in solitude"; "greetings in the cold harmattan is taken from the fireside"; "a man who visits a craftsman at work finds a sullen host"; "the lizard who threw confusion into his mother's funeral rite, did he expect outsiders to carry the burden of honouring his dead?"; "when two brothers fight, a stranger reaps the harvest"; "a fowl does not eat into the belly of a goat"; "even a hostile clansman was a friend in a strange country"; "a woman cannot place more than the length of her leg on her husband"; "an adult does not sit and watch while the she-goat suffers the pain of childbirth tied to a post".

The aforementioned proverbs in Achebe's trilogy vividly capture the essence of African traditional ethics, which are deeply rooted in the themes of communitarianism and personhood. These proverbs underscore the importance of unity, equality, fairness, and peaceful coexistence with other community members, while also serving as guidelines for expected ethical behaviours in communal life. They provide convincing evidence supporting the normative claims about

African ethics discussed in the first section. However, this paper aims to argue that Achebe's novels, beyond the themes of communitarianism and personhood, also highlight 'individual cultivation,' which may or may not align with the common good of a community. In other words, Achebe's trilogy contains numerous proverbs that focus on individual flourishing, with aspirations that transcend communal norms. What follows is an attempt to excavate proverbs in the trilogy that emphasize individual goals and aspirations for flourishing and to examine how these proverbs serve as means to achieve those ends. We will begin by listing the proverbs that express the themes of 'individual cultivation' in each novel (with page numbers in which they appear) and then analyse them in the context of the narratives where they are situated with special reference to *Things Fall Apart*. The list is as follows:

Things Fall Apart. "Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them" (Achebe 2001, 7). "If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings" (Ibid, 8). "When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for walk" (Ibid, 10). "A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness" (Ibid, 19). "The lizard that jumped from *iroko* tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did" (Ibid, 21). "*Eneke* the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching" (Ibid, 21). "Those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble" (Ibid, 25). "Never kill a man who says nothing" (Ibid, 131). "There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts" (Ibid, 132). "I cannot live on the bank of river and wash my hand with spittle" (Ibid, 156).

No Longer at Ease. "If you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one" (Achebe 2010b, 5). "A man who lived on the banks of the Niger should not wash his hands with spittle" (Ibid, 8). "Do not be in a hurry to rush into the pleasures of the world like the young antelope who danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come" (Ibid, 9). "...The great tree chooses where to grow and we find it there, so it is with greatness in men" (Ibid, 43).

Arrow of God. "It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless but sometimes, it is better to be a coward" (Achebe 2010a, 11). "Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own" (Ibid, 16). "If the lizard of the homestead should neglect to do the things for which its kind is known, it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland" (Ibid,

18). “The inquisitive monkey gets a bullet in the face” (Ibid, 45). “A man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards” (Ibid, 61). “Only a foolish man can go after a leopard with his bare hands”, and “A hot soup must be taken slowly-slowly from the edges of the bowl” (Ibid, 86). “The death that will kill a man begins as an appetite” (Ibid, 90). “Let us first chase away the wild cat, afterwards we blame the hen” (Ibid, 100). “A woman who began cooking before another must have more broken utensils” (Ibid, 101). “We do not apply an ear-pick to the eye” (Ibid, 113). “Greeting in the cold harmattan is taken from the fireside” (Ibid, 114). “The lizard who fell down from the high *Iroko* tree felt entitled to praise himself if nobody else did” (Ibid, 116). “The flute player must sometimes stop to wipe his nose” (Ibid, 121). “...bale that water before it rises above the ankle” (Ibid, 127). “A disease that has never been seen before cannot be cured with everyday herbs”; “When we want to make a charm, we look for the animal whose blood can match its power, if a chicken cannot do it, we look for a goat or a ram; if that is not sufficient, we send for a bull”, and “A man who has nowhere else to put his hand for support puts it on his own knees” (Ibid, 134). “Every land has its own sky” (Ibid, 160). “Until a man wrestles with one of those who make a path across his homestead, the others will not stop” (Ibid, 162). “It is the fear of causing offence that makes men swallow poison” (Ibid, 166). “A traveller to distant places should make no enemies” (Ibid, 169). “A man of sense does not go on hunting little bush rodents when his age mates are after big game” (Ibid, 170). “If the rat could not run fast enough it must make way for the tortoise” (Ibid, 171). “Our eye sees something; we take a stone and aim at it. But the stone rarely succeeds like the eye in hitting the mark” (Ibid, 172). “He who builds a homestead before another can boast more broken pot” (Ibid, 228).

Analysis

The cultivation or flourishing of an individual goes beyond merely pursuing aspirations that result in success through money, fame, power, or the fulfilment of desires. It also encompasses how effectively an individual can avoid flaws and vices that may hinder progress. Moreover, it involves managing difficult situations or external threats that must be navigated while striving for one's desired goals. Aforementioned proverbs in Achebe's trilogy can thus be categorized into four broad thematic aspects of cultivation:1)

Aspiration for success and meaningful life, 2) Cautionary advice regarding external threats, 3) Interpersonal relations as a means to personal aspirations, and 4) Wisdom sayings for a reflective living.

The four categories of proverbs mentioned above propose a framework for an individual to navigate life independently of the community's notion of the common good. These categories allow us to envision the Igbo society's concept of a good life and the ways one should pursue it. What follows is an analysis of these proverbs within the proposed thematic categorization and an examination of the narratives where these proverbs are located.

Aspiration for success and meaningful life

Although Achebe's novels portray the ideals and aspirations of various Igbo communities, there is still ample room for personal development. All three protagonists—Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease*, and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*—are bound by the duties and obligations expected by their communities. However, these responsibilities do not prevent them from pursuing their personal aspirations, which distinguish them from others in their communities. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's ambition for success and fame starkly contrasts with his father's failure. The proverb "our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them" (Achebe 2001, 7) is spoken by Okonkwo's father, Unoka, to his neighbour Okoye, who seeks repayment of a debt. However, Unoka does not practise what he preaches. In contrast, Okonkwo embodies the opposite of his father and achieves what his father could not, as Achebe writes:

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all, and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young, but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages... And so, although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so ate with kings and elders (Achebe 2001, 7-8).

This comparison between father and son highlights Achebe's emphasis on personal cultivation as an ethical theme where success and fulfilment, whether material or spiritual, are linked to right conduct of

an individual. Okonkwo's notion of success is so demanding that in *Things Fall Apart* he would, at a meeting, call someone a woman if they have not earned any titles (Ibid, 25). From a Western perspective, such an attitude might seem unethical due to Okonkwo's lack of humility and respect for others. This sentiment is reflected in the Igbo proverb spoken by the oldest man in the meeting: "those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble" (Ibid.). However, Achebe immediately dismisses the relevance of this proverb in Okonkwo's case:

But it was really not true that Okonkwo's palm kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself. Anyone who knew his grim struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky. If ever a man deserved his success, that man was Okonkwo. At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes, his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so, his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands. (Achebe 2001, 25-26).

The concept of *chi*, considered as a personal god in Igbo culture, serves as source of motivation for any actions an individual takes. *Chi*'s agreement to an individual's fortune depends on the kind of life that person chooses to lead. Achebe notes that:

when a man says yes his *chi* will also agree; but not always. Sometimes a man may struggle with all his power and say yes most emphatically and yet nothing he attempts will succeed. Quite simply the Igbo say of such a man: *Chie ekwero*, his *chi* does not agree (Achebe 1976, 137).

However, *chi* is not a source of moral judgment regarding the rightness or wrongness of an action. Instead, *chi* validates the results that arise from an individual's sustained efforts to achieve certain ends, as Achebe asserts:

...When we hear that a man has a bad *chi* that we are talking about his fortune rather than his character. A man of impeccable character may yet have a bad *chi* so that nothing he puts his hand to will work out right. *Chi* is therefore more concerned with success or failure than with righteousness and wickedness. (Ibid)

Thus, Okonkwo's dedication to his lofty ambitions receives favourable support from his *chi*. Okonkwo is a hardworking individual who is not shy about praising himself if it aids him in achieving his goals. To

convince Nwakibie to give him yam seeds, he uses a proverb to illustrate his fearless attitude towards hard work: “The lizard that jumped from the high *iroko* tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did.” (Achebe 2001, 21) This implies that one doesn't need to depend on others' validation when pursuing their aspirations in life. Thus, individual aspiration for a successful and meaningful life, as depicted in the novel, extends beyond the concept of community-based ethics traditionally upheld in the context of African tradition.

Cautionary advice regarding external threats

One might argue that traditional African ethical systems view warnings or cautionary advice about potential dangers and external threats as relevant to the community. These warnings carry significant implications for the pursuit of the common good envisioned by the community. However, upon closer scrutiny, some of the aforementioned proverbs are found to play a crucial role in guiding individuals to be vigilant about potential threats that could hinder their personal growth. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe employs proverbs such as “never kill a man who says nothing” (Ibid, 131) and “there is nothing to fear from someone who shouts” (Ibid, 132) while commenting on the destruction of the *Abame* clan. Although these proverbs are spoken in the context of a community's mass destruction, they also convey a powerful message to individuals, highlighting that acting hastily and without considering the severe consequences of one's actions can diminish one's chances of flourishing. Additionally, the story of Mother Kite, as narrated by Okonkwo's maternal uncle, Uchendu, reinforces the danger of acting hastily and carelessly:

Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went and brought back a duckling. “You have done very well,” said Mother Kite to her daughter, “but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?” It said nothing,” replied the young Kite. “It just walked away.” “You must return the duckling,” said the Mother Kite. “There is something ominous behind the silence.” And so daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead.” ... “What did the mother of this chick do?” asked the old kite. “It cried and raved and cursed me,” said the young kite. “Then we can eat the chick,” said her mother. “There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.” Those men of *Abame* were fools. (Achebe 2001, 131-132)

Another proverb is cited in *Things Fall Apart* by an elder, Okika, during a large gathering following the release of Okonkwo and other

prisoners. The meeting aims to determine the next steps: some, like Okonkwo, advocate for war against the colonial masters, while others outline the dire consequences and risks of such action. In his speech, Okika quotes his father, stating, “Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life” (Ibid, 192). This proverb illustrates the necessity of stepping out of one's comfort zone when confronted with the need of survival as Okika speaks:

We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger, we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing; they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So, we must do what our fathers would never have done. Eneke the bird was asked why he was always on the wing, and he replied: “Men have learnt to shoot without missing their mark and I have learnt to fly without perching on a twig.” We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil, we must root them out too. And we must do it now. We must bale this water now that it is only ankle-deep... (Achebe 2001, 193).

Okika's powerful speech is abruptly interrupted by the sudden arrival of five court messengers. Overcome by emotion, Okonkwo kills the head messenger with his machete. Despite a life filled with achievements, Okonkwo struggles to adapt to the new circumstances brought about by the early phase of British rule. His downfall is due to a rigid and uncompromising attitude toward the forces that challenge his lofty aspirations.

Interpersonal relations as means to personal aspirations

As discussed in the previous section, proverbs play a significant role in upholding communitarian ethics, where the idea of personhood is linked to the common good envisioned by the community. However, in *Things Fall Apart*, some proverbs emphasize interpersonal relations as a means to achieve personal cultivation. Friendship and marriage are two domains where these relations are crucial. Community gatherings on special occasions enhance the potential for flourishing, as respect and recognition come from others within the community. When Okonkwo hosts a feast for the kinsmen of Mbanta, he spares no effort to make it a grand event. For him, this is an opportunity to repay the support he received from his kinsmen during his exile as Achebe notes:

Okonkwo never did things by halves. When his wife Ekwefi protested that two goats were sufficient for the feast, he told her that it was not her affair. ...
“I am calling a feast because I have the wherewithal. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle. My mother’s people have been good to me, and I must show my gratitude.” (Achebe 2001, 155-156)

Okonkwo’s intention to host a grand feast is not restricted by societal or communal obligations to repay the kindness he received from his kinsmen. Rather, it stems from his genuine gratitude towards those who significantly helped him during his challenging times. The notion of kinsmen is attached to one’s own flourishing within a community as Uchendu remarks:

“We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. An animal rubs its aching flanks against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.” (Achebe 2001, 157)

The proverb in Uchendu’s speech highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships, particularly the bond between kinsmen, in the development of an individual. Okonkwo recognizes this significance and seeks to strengthen this bond by hosting a generous feast for his kinsmen in *Mbanta*.

Wisdom sayings for a reflective living

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe suggests that “wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own” (Achebe 2010a, 16). Proverbs play a crucial role in passing down this wisdom from one generation to the next. Within *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe employs several proverbs that encapsulate traditional wisdom aimed at promoting reflective living. Reflective living is essential for personal growth, and these proverbs serve as valuable guides in this regard. Examples such as “you can tell a ripe corn by its look” (Achebe 2001, 21), “a chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches” (Ibid, 62), “when mother-cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth” (Ibid, 66), and “a baby on its mother’s back does not know the way is long” (Ibid, 6) carry the weight of traditional wisdom. Although spoken in different contexts throughout the novel, these proverbs are instrumental in the development of individuals.

Conclusion

In the preceding section, an attempt was made to construct an alternative framework for exploring the ethical themes in Chinua

Achebe's trilogy, with reference to *Things Fall Apart*, using Igbo proverbs. This approach posits that traditional African ethics can serve as a guide for individual flourishing within a community, alongside the community's expectations. To support this argument, the trilogy's proverbs are examined, illustrating ethical principles of personal development. These proverbs are categorized into four themes: pursuing personal aspirations for a successful and meaningful life, offering cautionary advice against external threats, emphasizing interpersonal relationships as pathways to personal growth, and providing wisdom for reflective living. Through a detailed analysis of these proverbs within the narratives, it is concluded that African traditional ethics can be viewed as a framework for personal cultivation, complementing the conventional focus on communitarianism and personhood observed by many scholars in the field.

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