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African Proverbs Ties to African Culture

Throughout my reading of *Things Fall Apart,* I took notice of the many African proverbs that were prevalent in the characters thoughts and dialect. By examining the various proverbs, the text provides insight into the African culture and foundation of values. The use of language throughout the novel allows for African storytelling to come to life and draws the reader in. Through analyzing some proverbs from the text, it is made aware that character actions, relationships and interpretation are based off of the language. In the context of this novel, “Achebe (1958) comments on the importance of the use of proverbs among his people hence, he says, “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (Alimi 122). Through incorporating textual elements that emphasize the importance of African culture, Achebe allows us as readers to become part of the Ibo people’s world.

The incorporation of African proverbs provided a very dynamic and thought provoking reading of the text. One of the proverbs that caught my eye was, “the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching” (*Things Fall Apart* Kindle Locations 253-254). My first reaction to this proverb was that nature is a huge part of African culture and that men and animals are one in the same. In my opinion this proverb meant that men have learned to protect themselves without making mistakes or that it comes naturally to them. Therefore, since men and animals are alike the bird has learned to be free and explore without resting or waiting for an external force to make it happen. I think this proverb speaks a lot about who the African men were and how it is tradition to possess the qualities deemed appropriate for their gender. This notion was backed up throughout the novel in parts that talked about Okonkwo’s qualities and how he behaved throughout certain events. When I think of a bird as a form of symbolism, the words freedom, journey, and peaceful come to mind. Pertaining to the novel and this specific proverb, I can see how throughout Okonkwo went through a journey of self-identity and faith. Also, I think this proverb is trying to prove a point that you can’t learn without making mistakes or failing. Life is a journey and what you go through makes you the person you are.

As I further researched the symbolism of birds in Africa, I came across an explanation that pertained to Okonkwo specifically. According to Indigo International, “birds are the souls of humans who have reached a high state of perfection. They represent the process of opening to a higher wisdom and knowledge” (Shea). Throughout the novel Okonkwo is on a mission to obtain the highest of titles and greatest of feats. He looks to the higher power of the Gods in order to maintain his culture while looking for answers. After finding this information my viewpoint of what this first proverb means has changed. I think that now it means that men have learned to fend for themselves and be independent just like the spirits have learned spread their message without resting. This proverb then sort of ties to personal determination and the inner workings of ones self.

That was not the only proverb throughout the novel that dealt with birds. This proverb addresses a specific bird and situation, “To abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination” (*Things Fall Apart* Kindle Locations 1695-1696). The quote addresses the situation of the townspeople converting and practicing in the Christian religion after abandoning their own Gods and faith. First of all, the idea of gender roles and gender specific characteristics are addressed. It is saying that men who show weakness or make stupid choices are considered women. This kind of notion is seen throughout the novel as gender roles are clearly defined and the reactions to acting otherwise are said to be that of women.

Also, this quote is addressing the Christians actions of singing and praising rather than taking further action. Okonkwo considers this to be womanly because of the way their culture is structured and how they are in essence taught to be. From my perspective it is saying that the Christians are all talk and practice what they preach but they cannot defend their faith. The reference to hens is essentially saying that the Christians are a group of old men who walk around gossiping and preaching their one God religion. Okonkwo believes that by abandoning the African Gods way of life and allowing for sissy men to determine a high regard of life, that it is the ultimate portrayal and can’t be forgiven. A cultural clash is obvious and the white men “are quick to want to change certain elements of traditional Igbo culture that according to them are inappropriate and unacceptable. However, in so doing, the white missionaries fail to see that these “inappropriate and unacceptable” elements of traditional Igbo culture are what keep the Igbo together and at peace with each other” (Kenalemang 8). This proverb allowed me to examine the differences in culture and beliefs.

While birds are commonly used as symbols throughout African proverbs, toads are another animal that contribute to African culture. The proverb from the novel that made the most impact and was thought provoking was, “whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life” (*Things Fall Apart* Kindle Locations 2204-2205). I honestly had no idea what this proverb meant or the purpose of it. To my knowledge, toads are animals that are active both day and night. Thinking about it further, I came to the conclusion that this proverb was saying that if a man shows his emotion or fear than the world knows that something is eating him inside. In their culture, men were supposed to put on a strong front and always act that way.

As I looked through a scholarly source about proverbs in the novel, I came across what it could be interpreted as. According to the *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, “*this proverb is used to enlighten the reader on the purpose of the meeting, the burning issue for which they have summoned the meeting” (Alimi 124). The meeting came about because of the Christians taking over their people. It was meant to rally the men and remind them of where their true faith should lay in the African Gods. I think that this explanation affirmed what I thought this proverb meant. Another explanation that I came across was, “the toad in the proverb is a metaphor for the people of Umuofia, who in these extraordinary times have been driven like a toad to jump in broad daylight. The European colonists have altered their lives to a degree where the choice has to be made between fight or adapt” (KBSL English).

Through examining a few of the proverbs that were present throughout the novel, I was able to better understand and dive into the culture of the people of Umuofia. The language provided a context and sense of tradition of the African art of oral storytelling that creates vivid pictures. I was able to notice the pattern of animals and nature that drive their religion and culture. I especially enjoyed the symbolism that each proverb provided in that it allows us as readers to interpret them from our own perspective. Similarities between the African culture and Western culture also allowed for me to relate to the novel on different levels. I think that it is important to examine language of different cultures because language is a powerful tool that allows the world to function.

Works Cited

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