Poetry is arguably the most ancient, direct and forceful genre of literature; whether written or oral. African’s foremost novelist and widely acclaimed father of literature, Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe, is mostly known for his prose works, especially the novel Things Fall Apart. Little comparatively, is known of his poetry. But the fact remains that Achebe is a good poet as he is widely recognized as a good novelist. Although the scale of preference tilts more to his prose works than poetry nevertheless; he made lasting impressions and remarks with his poems which are worthy of note. The collection, Beware Soul Brother exists to bear testimony on the personality of Achebe as a poet and what poetry achieves in society. Incidentally, his collection of poems, Beware Soul Brother is a veritable and worthwhile corpus of his characteristic package of Igbo lore, reminiscences, experiences and unique writing style; in the grand genre of poetry. Select poems in the collection make deft use of Igbo religious and cultural tenets which Achebe the poet masterfully weaves as muse, paradigm and cultural rooting in order to portray the Igbo cosmology and worldview. This paper explores his art and style in presenting the gods, totems and guiding ancestral wisdom of the rich, ancient lore of the Igbo. Select poems from the collection form the crux and illustrations of the thrust of this paper and demonstrates Achebe’s strong affinity with the cultural artefacts of his native custom. The implications of these in his culture are also predicated on his poems for effectiveness and to achieve a desired goal of portraying the poet as not just purveyor of his native custom and tenets but a crusader who preaches for social restoration and the need to mend walls and build bridges after years of war and wreckages.

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe is one writer that needs no introduction in Africa and beyond. He is famous for his novel Things Fall Apart. The novel is reputed to have laid the foundation of African literature and equipped many African writers with the needed creative tools and set them on the proper paths towards the establishment of the much cherished and glorified African literature as we have and appreciate it today. In the novel, we could obtain glances of our African past, the way we pride and above all, our literature uniquely set apart and told in our African voice and unique style of storytelling. This is in sharp contrast with the literary style and manner of composition which the Europeans would have loved to impose on the ‘primitive’ Africa, as they once termed us, in their claims to salvage us from our primitive, barbaric, archaic and redundant living. Chinua Achebe sets out in Things Fall Apart to write a novel that touches the core of our culture and with that singular artistic gesture, he was able to prove and showcase to the white men that Africans did not hear
of culture for the first time from them. Achebe was able to prove that we have culture, we have philosophy of great depth and we have poetry too. It is all these that we lost to colonialism and this is what we must collectively strive to regain.

Achebe is widely known for his prose works. As a result of this, many do not associate the Africa’s foremost novelist Chinua Achebe with poetry let alone a collection. His classic prose work Things Fall Apart and a host of other remarkable works in the prose genre have somewhat eclipsed his eloquently sensitive collection of poems Beware Soul Brother; published in 1971 just after the devastating Nigeria-Biafra war.

The fact that he resorted to poetry just after the experiences of the war might serve as an inkling to the belief that poetry is often seen as the most direct, succinct and forceful genre of literature; hence its choice by Achebe to appropriately express his ordeals and those of his immediate community. His poetry collection, Beware Soul Brother exists to bear testimony on the versatile nature of the novelist and poetry provided an avenue for the writer to express his deep sense of loss and perpetual sadness made possible by his experiences during the Nigeria-Biafra war.

The poet in his collection draws our attention to many horrific scenes of the war and moments in history which we ought not to forget even as we wish never to experience such tragedy in the annals of our nation.

The Igbo have a well developed belief and worship system that features a ‘great beyond’ symmetrically aligned with the world of the living. Among the Igbo, totems, which are objects of worship and sanctity used in either invocations, incantations, worship or divine and ancestral representations, play a very important role in the religious and traditional life of the culturally inclined man. Like most communities, especially in Africa, the Igbo communicate with their pantheon mostly through totems like ofo, ogu, ikenga, okposi, etc. This is the life that Achebe deftly weaves into and arrays in his poems. They form models of inspiration, core sources of materials and vortices of radiating poeticisms for the poet, Achebe.

Many were the issues the poet raised in the collection as the poems approached the evils and experiences of the war form varying perspectives and dimensions. However, Achebe made abundant use of totems and cultural artefacts in his local culture to project his many viewpoints in the poems. Consequent upon this, one rightly observes that in the deep-rooted traditional Igbo ambivalence and innate duality of views, Achebe, a faithful ‘high priest’ and custodian of Igbo values adopts a laconic, dark, and wry manner in casting sly aspersions on the very basis of god and ancestor essentialities, essence and fabric. Igbo ontological inclinations as they affect this collection formed the framework for the major discussions in this paper.

**IGBO PEOPLE, WORLD VIEW AND COSMOLOGY: A BRIEF CRITICAL REVIEW**

The Igbo people make up one of the major tribal groups in Nigeria today. In tandem with the colonial geography, the Igbo occupy mainly the eastern part of the country. They are today found in high concentration in Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo states of Nigeria. There are also large Igbo populations in Delta and River states. Igbo people are a very immigrant race. They are in large numbers resident in Northern Nigeria and in old Ogoja, Calabar, Benin, and Lagos. This is as Ikenga Oraegbunam reports about them thus:

...Igbo migrants trooped out to the Cameroons, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, and recently to all parts of ECOWAS sub-region and South Africa.
And apart from the trans-Atlantic slave trade that populated Europe and the Americas with good number of Igbo elements, the 20th and 21st centuries have also witnessed an unprecedented influx of the people into the western world perhaps in search of the greener pastures. As a result of cultural diffusion experienced both by the home front due to colonial incursion and neo-colonialism and by the Diaspora who presently are in serious romance with the western culture, much of the traditional practices have undergone serious modification. This is certainly consequent upon Igbo receptivity and amenability to change. Hence, the Igbo traditional socio-political institutions notably communalism, democracy and religion have been drastically altered and modulated by imperialist incursion and Igbo access to western education, culture, Christianity and capitalism. City consciousness and urbanity have become integral components of the Igbo society. Onitsha, Aba, Enugu, Owerri, Umuahia, Awka, Nnewi, Agbor, Asaba and Abakaliki are fast growing Igbo cities populated, as it were, by hitherto rural dwellers (3).

The critic further projects thus:

...Another stamp of westernism is manifested in physical structures such as roads, streets, electricity, hospitals, building architecture, house furniture and home facilities, and so on. Yet, in spite of the above foreign influence and more, certain traditional practices are quite resilient. In the hinterland, some traditional Igbo communities live in dispersed settlements. The Igbo village, which is a small face-to-face society, is still easily recognizable. A number of closely clustered compounds and families form the Igbo village and several villages make up towns. Again, in spite of the modern alteration, the Igbo traditional political institutions that are designed to combine popular participation with weighing for experience and ability are still in tandem with the extended family sociology. The family head, the elders, the age grade, secret societies etc play a key role in this socio-political structure. Economically, the Igbos in the urban areas are traders and craftsmen. In the rural areas, they are largely farmers. In modern times, a good number are professionals in the areas of law, science, medicine, etc. The people embrace Christianity in huge numbers. However, that may be, much of Igbo traditional living and attitudes is still conditioned by its traditional worldview.... (4)

Cosmology on the other hand refers to the study of the physical structure, dynamics, origin, evolution, ethics, belief and worldview of a given homogenous set of people. In the words of Clement Okafor:

...The term cosmology is used to convey the link of a society’s perception of the world which it lives such a concept usually offshore the complex interlocking relationships between human beings and the pantheon of forces that function within their society’s universe, first a word about the Igbo. The Igbo inhabit the territory of south-eastern Nigeria, and their homeland is located on both banks of orimili (the great river), the River Niger, from which Nigeria derives her name. According to Basden, “the Ibo nation ranks as one of the largest on the whole of African (xi) Igbo people now number about twenty river million, a population larger than that of Now way, Sweden, and Denmark combined (68).

The Igbo people have an interesting and enduring history which is rather chequered in many accounting. The Igbo society is established on the principles of egalitarianism and communal living which highly reward and favour hard works, and the Igbo people are one of the most populated tribes on earth. Okafor went on to explain that the Igbo society is
historically egalitarian and democratic in the sense that the people have never had rulers with anything approaching autocratic powers. The Igbos he projects, while trying to drive home the views of Green, “have no hierarchy of powers rising from a broad democratic basis through ascending levels to one central peak; rather “Ibo democracy unlike English works through a number of juxtaposed groups and a system of balances rather than on a unitary hierarchical principle. This egalitarian principle is expressed in the famous statement Igbo answers Eze (the Igbo do not have kings). (68) According to Kenneth Usongo:

The Igbos are essentially a profoundly religious people that embrace polytheism. They believe in three levels of being, namely, the supreme god or Chukwu; lesser gods or Umuagbara; and beneath them the spirits of dead people otherwise known as Ndi Ichie. In this regard, the idea of reincarnation is strongly upheld hence the argument that death is transient with some of the dead coming back to the world through the newly-born. This explains the phenomenon of ogbanje, a practice whereby a dead baby returns into its mother’s womb multiple times if a ritual ceremony is not done to stop it. These ritualistic activities are handled by village priests and priestesses who, as diviners, ensure the spiritual health of the community (2).

The critic further avers thus:

As a cohesive society, the Igbos rigorously abide by precise tenets, for example, during the week of peace, the village is expected to resonate with joy and not hate. Any violator of this sanctity is punished regardless of his/her status. In addition, there are contending forces and spirits that nurture and regulate the society, for instance, the belief in osu or slave heritage, and the casting away of evil people into the Evil Forest. Traditional Igbo society disposed of fractious individuals, oracles or gods who threatened its well-being, thereby creating new avenues for success and the maintenance of individual and societal harmony. In fact, in order to enhance the community’s or one’s chances of success, supernatural forces are either invoked or appeased by using equally mysterious forces in the forms of charms or amulets called Ogwu which sometimes can be deified and propitiated as a god or goddess. Oracles can also be consulted to unravel a mystery or the future as seen in the oracle of the “Hills and Caves.” It is, therefore, incumbent on the subjects to strive for righteous lives following the dictates of societal ethics because failure to do so will result in excruciating consequences (3).

The Igbos are highly religious people with deep respect for the earth, life and the environment. They believe in the existence of the Chiukwu, the Supreme One who created every being and things on earth but not with the exception of the other gods, the pantheons who help the Chiukwu in accomplishing His various tasks and missions in a rather much populated and big world. The Igbos believe so much in the gods and their influences in shaping the affairs and destinies of a man. Whatever a man achieves, it is believed to from his Chi. If a man is great, his Chi receives all the accolades. When the man is miserable, the fault also lies with the man’s Chi who entrusted him with such misery and ill-fate. No one is expected to leave beyond the confinements of his chi and the chi deserves to be appeased at all times. In conformity with the above Ikenna Oragwunam posits thus:

...One of the results of several studies on Igbo anthropology, religion and philosophy, in spite of few dissenting voices, is a widespread belief in supreme and unique God, Chukwu (The Great Spirit), Chimeke (The Creator Spirit), Osebuluwa (The Lord who upholds the world), Ezechitoke (The Spirit King Creator), Okasikasi (The Greatest Being),
etc are some of the names with which this God is addressed... He is altogether a good and merciful God and does harm to no one. He sends rain and especially children and it is from Him that each individual derives his personal ‘chi’. Furthermore, apart from belief in some lesser spirits, some good, others bad, the traditional Igbo also usually go through the ancestors. For the Igbo man, life is not utter extinction. His dead relatives continue communion and communication with him after death. These dead relatives have the power to influence, help or inflict injury and pains on those relations physically alive depending on whether or not their funeral rites are performed. These unseen ancestors are part of the particular Igbo family who are often invited to the family meals... the ancestors are felt to be present, watching over the household, directly concerned in all the affairs of the family properly, giving abundant harvest and fertility”. This may be why they are referred to as “living dead” often expressed, as it were, in the institution of the masquerade cult (8).

Thus, the essence of totems and pantheons which replete the Igbo societies and fulfil various socio-political and religious roles in the lives of the people who venerate, revere and honour them. It is to this we shall now turn.

**Totems and Pantheons: A Critical Insight**

By totem, we refer to a natural object or an animate being, as an animal or bird, assumed as the emblem of a clan, family, or group. It entails a particular object, or being which a given homogenous set of people revere, honour and regard as sacred and which could be symbolic to the interpretation of the life and outlook of the people. Totem is an object or natural phenomenon with which a family or community considers itself closely related to and a representation of such an object serving as the distinctive mark of the clan or group. In other words, totem is anything serving as a distinctive, often venerated, emblem or symbol.

African societies are replete with many totems and totemic objects which many critics both native and foreigners have devoted their scholar energy studying and offering insights that could help us understand the African society, its composition and cosmology better. This is the case of the Igbo societies which are replete with many totems and totemic objects with serious social and religious implication and symbolism which differs from one culture of the society to another. The Igbo societies have proven a fertile ground for critics and scholars interested in the discovery and study of these totemic objects. Oriji John carried out an important study on the totems and taboos of the Igbo people. The research was able to shed light on the origin, nature and symbolic implications of many totemic objects in Igbo cosmology and we have come to accept them today with special regard to the many communities that make up the Igbo society. According to John Oriji:

The Igbo example suggests that no single theory can be used to explain the origins and functions of totems and taboos in human history. As Igbo society changed, its cosmology and the totems associated with them also changed. During agriculture, for example, the religious and politico-judicial functions that totems and taboos associated with them served, reached their apogee as evidenced by Ala-ezi, and Ala. The functional roles that totems played in society are further evidenced by the medicinal value of the Avosi tree, and the python and monkey totems of the Njaba and Lagwa respectively, meant to help the communities to influence spiritual forces they believed were the sources of fertility and other blessings. The foregoing examples validate anthropological theories that seek to explain the genesis of totems in the context of the human quest for
guardian spirits that would help them to control their physical and cosmological world (11).

In tracing the origin of totems in Igbo communities, Oriji in his field work and research draws attention to the idea that the origins of totems are unknown. But despite this, there seems to be several anthropological reports which help to illuminate and shed lights on the origin and existence of totems in Igbo community to a level that could provide the much needed insight on its evolution, trend and composition. According to Oriji:

The origins of totems and taboos in Igbo and other West Africa societies are unknown. But the extensive research done in other regions of the world by cultural anthropologists like C. Levi-Strauss, A. Goldenweiser, and J. G. Frazer are helpful in making some extrapolations about the roots of totems and taboos among Igbo peoples and the functions they performed in their society... Close analysis of Igbo cosmology suggests that the origins of totems and taboos among Igbo peoples date back to the Neolithic period (500 B.C.-2100 A.D.). Like other Agrarian peoples, the Igbo attached much importance to land (Ala, Ana) and ritualize it. The goddess of the land, agriculture and fertility (Ala, Ani) was the most dominant deity. Although the shrine of Ala was located in the common political, cultural and commercial centre of each community, the totemic emblems of the goddess were in some places, perennial trees like Uha planted at the centre of each compound (Ala Ezi, lit. earth goddess of a compound), to serve as its guardian spirit and protector and sources of its ethical ideals. Sacred Uha trees were also planted in mounds demarcating the boundaries of family and village lands, and people were forbidden to dismantle the mounds or cut down the sacred trees (2).

The critic maintains further that:

More elaborate taboos associated with the earth-deity of a community were used to sanctify its major laws during meetings of the Council of Elders (Amala, home of Ala) at their common political, commercial and cultural center, and the abode of Ala (Okpu-Ala, Ama-Ukwu). Violations of the sacred laws of Ala were seen as taboos and were regarded as the most serious offense that an individual could commit in Igbo society (Aru, Alu) The taboos covered a wide spectrum of crimes ranging from incest to stealing farm crops... Ala is the fountain of human morality, and in consequence, a principal legal sanction. Homicide, kidnapping, poisoning, stealing, adultery and all offenses against Ala must be purged by rites to her. Ala deprives evil men of their lives, and her priests are the guardian of public morality. Laws are made in her name, and by her, oaths are sworn. Ala is in fact, the unseen president of the community. The taboos of Ala were not confined only to humans, but also encompassed lower animals and other species that thrive on earth (3).

Oriji did much in his study to examine the various totems associated with origins of some Igbo Communities. In his discovery, he had maintained that in addition to Ala, the antiquity of totems and taboos among the Igbo is evidenced by their association with the origins of some communities. A typical example is the community of Nvosi in Isiala Ngwa which numbers over 150,000 people, and traces its ancestry to one Avosi, named after the sacred Avosi tree. He went on to discuss many other totems in many communities of the Igbo society which include, The Njaba of Orlu and the Python river totem (Eke), The Lagwa Okwata community of Mbaise and the monkey (enwe) totem, the Ikem Osokwa Nvosi Community and the totem of the bush-fowl (okwa), the Nnewi and the totem of the rabbit (ewi), Abam Raids in Ohia-Ukwu, Ohanze and the totem of the three-leaved yam (Onu), among many other totemic objects which have varying social significance and religious
implications in their various communities. They are essential and symbolic in understanding the origin of a particular community as well as their common and collective outlook to life. The critic ended thus:

The roots of totems and their functions, however, appear to have undergone some changes during civil wars and slavery. Totems that were seen as protectors and benefactors evolved during social violence, and were not freely chosen by the people as evidenced by the examples of Ikem Nvosi, Nnewi, Ntigha Uzo and Ohia Ukwu Ohanze. Depending on how one looks at the impact of slavery, it might be argued, at least, from the perspective of the slave traders, that totems and taboos owe their origins to economic forces, and the quest, say by the Aro, to spread the religious influence of their oracle in Igboland. One can also include in this multi-faceted theory, the Abam whose motives were largely dictated by the search for social validation within their communities, and thus by their zeal to climb the social ladder and become an Ufiem (Hero). However, if we turn to the victims of the raids in whose communities the totems and taboos originated, the earlier theory which links their roots to violence and its aftermath offers a more plausible explanation to a problematic issue (12).

Pantheon on the other hand means all the gods of a particular religion. The word pantheon etymologically is made up of two Greek words, pan meaning ‘all’ and theon meaning ‘gods’ which connotes all the gods in a given homogenous society. Pantheon refers to the gods of a particular country or group of people. The Igbo society is also replete with many pantheons which is rooted in their belief and cosmology. In the opinions of Clement Okafor:

Briefly, in Igbo cosmology, there is Chukwu, or ama ama amasi amasi (the one who can never be fully understood). Below him is a pantheon of deities whose domains may be limited to specific aspects of life on earth. Examples of these are Amadiora, the god of Thunder, Ufiojioku, the god of harvest, and Anyanwu, the sun god. Principal among these deities is Ani, the earth goddess who is the arbiter of ethical conduct. The major deities have special shrines and priests dedicated to their worship and it is the duty of human beings to strive at all time to live righteously by conducting their lives in accordance with the ethics of the community and by avoiding societal taboos. If for any reason human beings transgress those rules, they are expected to atone for their offenses by performing prescribed ritual acts of explanation (68).

Okafor further explains that when those who live well die in the Igbo society they become ancestors in ani muo (land of the dead) provided their living relatives have performed the appropriate funeral rites; it is these rites that initiate the dead into the company of the powerful ancestors. Such ancestors take an active interest in the welfare of the living members of their family, who pour libations to them and make offerings of their memories or certain occasions (68).

we can gather and infer from the above and other available sources that these ancestors also help the pantheons in fulfilling many religious and sacred functions in Igbo societies and that could account for the perpetual reverence, worship and veneration of these pantheons alongside the ancestors who work hand in hand to ensure peace, harmony, prosperity and goodness in the world of the living. This in anyway does not dwarf or efface the recognition of the supreme and awesome powers of God, Who is the Supreme One, Omamasiamasi, Chineke, Chi-Ukwu in the Igbo worldview. Also, Okafor projects that the Igbo cosmology admits of the existence of evil spirits Umunadi who believed to live in the luminal, uninhabited spaces beyond the village settlements and also in...
the bad bush. It also admits of the existence of Ogbanje. The spirits of children who reincarnate and are born to die, often in infancy, only to be born again by the same or unfortunate mother… (69) All these are significant, essential and important aspects of the Igbo society worthy of note.

TOTEMS AND PANTHEONS IN ACHEBE’S “BEWARE SOUL BROTHER”: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Achebe wrote “Beware Soul Brother” a collection of poems to recount his experiences and project his viewpoint on the war and its aftermath in our country. Generally, his poetry centres on the title poem “Beware Soul Brother”, which is in actuality a hub of sorts to the spokes of other poems in the collection. In the views of M.C Mclukie on “Beware Soul Brother”,

...It seems to me that poems were spoken through it was their gift to be a voice of voices. A vehicle must have felt some primeval oracle forcing sound from their throats as they whispered of their people in their place. When it used to be a place the gods of place seeking out voice incarnation of a people in its place lives caught in a time, a privilege may be the lack of it of wounds and the great humble arching grin of any thought alive in any field celebrated (392).

Achebe in the opinions of G. D. Killiam: …exploit the intuitive Igbo sense of duality which informs all things. Whatever the thematic content of the poems, they are manifestations in various moods and tones of this “world – view”…. (15)

Killiam went further to assert about the poem, Beware Soul Brother that it is

…a meditation…on the duality of life and death as this is made manifest in the Igbo sensibility, made visible in the masks and the dance; the lures of Ascension Day ‘the day of soporific levitation; as these are expounded by the leaden-footed, tone-deaf passionate only for the entrails of our soil.” The mixture of Christian and non-Christian attitudes suggested in these opposing lines points a way to the need to find one’s own way, to find a joy unique to one’s own soul (125).

In the language, style and diction of the poems, it is easy to notice the directness and lack of veiled pretences in manners of address. The lines have the poignancy of abrupt personal openings of Metaphysical poetry and also affinities to the ‘in medias res’ of epics. Most of the word constructions in the lines are made out in the active voice, while the extensive dearth of prepositions, conjunctions and punctuations combine with the other qualities to give the poem a strong, direct and forceful impact which is often the most appropriate and distinguishing mark of the visceral nature of poetry.

The poems are richly modern and written in affective simplicity of Achebe’s art. The lines and messages are clear with no contrived or frustratingly deliberate obscurities; hence effectively presenting a poet’s reaction to the distress and tragedy of war. Though he sectionalizes the collection into a ‘Prologue’, ‘Poems About War’. ‘Poems Not About War’, ‘Gods, Men and Others’, etc., almost all are firmly rooted in Igbo tradition and cultural foundations. This invariably is where the interest of this paper lies; especially parts concerned or dealing with gods, beliefs, worship, etc., peculiar to the Igbo; the way they nurture the rest of his poetics, and his apparent identification with the Igbo worldview.

In this mildly admonishing poem on the need for one to avoid getting lost in the orchestrated euphoria of a Utopian religion, and thereby lose the sustaining roots of one’s existence and being to unscrupulous plunderers of life essence,
Achebe mentions and makes use of the ‘abia’ drums. Thus;

…the Cross need not be
a dead end nor total loss
if we should go to it striding
the dirge of the soulful abia
drums… (lines 7-10)

Here the abia drum which is both the name for a drum and a dance for a dead, titled Igbo man performed by his peers as a final rite de passage as he joins his ancestors, is a solemn dance which Achebe metonymically presents as an also appropriate part of worship in the foreign religion (represented by the cross). He seems to suggest that even if we decide to get lost with the religion, that a total loss could be avoided if we go with or through our own means, thereby advocating religious compromise.

In lines 22-26, Achebe gives considerable priority to the relatively superior goddess in the Igbo pantheon, Ala. he says;

Our ancestors, soul brother, were wiser
than is often made out. Remember they gave Ala,
great goddess
of the earth, sovereignty too over
their arts for they understood too well….

Ala is a goddess among the Igbo as well as the name given to the earth, ground, land, etc. Therefore, Achebe’s metaphor hinges on the fact the physical contact of man’s feet and the positioning of all other things with the earth is an umbilical cord of ownership and belonging – the complete essence of Igbo ontology. The extra ‘sovereignty too’ is in deference to the awesome powers and control of Ala, therefore the arts are hers too. So whatever one does or weaves in the air, he must turn back to Ala, ‘where/it must return for safety/and renewal of strength’. (lines 30-32). The poet through the above reiterates the need for constant communing with one’s roots: hence Ala, the owner of both beings and arts.

“PENALTY OF GODHEAD”

The poet here paints a darkly humorous and wry picture of the chink in the assumed hermetic omnipotence and power of gods. This apparent weakness could be of dual perspectives – omission or commission; that is, the possibility of the sick old man, the nimble rat and the grim tenant (cockroach) escaping the inferno contrasting with the powerless(?) godhead left to save itself. The last five lines of the poem will suffice:

Household gods alone
frozen in ritual black with blood
of endless tribute festooned in feathers
perished in the blazing pyre
of that hut. (lines 15-19)

The question here is: does it mean that the gods cannot save themselves? Apparently, it seems so. Or does it mean it was premeditated to happen thus? These thoughts are stubbornly lingering and especially interesting because of the uncanny allusion to the Christian equivalent of the saviour-complexed Christ. Or as the title suggests: that a price must be paid for puny mortals to be saved. Or in extension it could simply mean that in the course of change, whether violent or gradual, it is the traditions and practices of a people that are left to perish while newer practices take their place – reminiscent of Victorian Thomas Hardy’s ‘old order yielding to the new’.
“THOSE GODS ARE CHILDREN”

Another scenario concerning gods, ancestors and their actions forms an inspiration for Achebe’s writing. In this poem he cast an observatory glance at the supposed omnipotence of the gods and how intelligent they are assumed to be, given their nature as all-knowing and all-seeing.

One of the episodes in the poem portrays an old man who pours trickling and meagre libations into an ant-size hole on the earth and invites all gods, spirits, and ancestors to join the feast; not to scramble since it would be ‘enough’ for all to drink. Again, there is a similar depiction of a man who presents an egg-sized yam for the all-powerful spirits, calling it ‘a sacrifice fit for the mighty dead!’

But the clincher is the story of a man who out of anger kills the brother and is required to die too in accordance with tradition lest the gods smite kinsmen and women in order to exact punishment for due condemnation being denied them. The kinsmen plead on behalf of the man because of children that would become doubly orphaned, and that he be given the chance to ‘retrieve the sagging house of his fathers’. According to the poem,

…the fine points
of the gods’ spears
returned to earth. (lines 57-59)

The man eventually lived for years, raised kids of both families, got to the ‘evening’ of his life and:

a long-prepared
hangman’s loop in their hand
quickly circled his neck
as he died
and the gods

and ancestors
were satisfied. (lines 69-75)

The poet’s view of their (the gods’) childishness is clear because apparently man seems to have an upper hand, a better deal at the expense of the gods. According to Achebe:

Yet they are fooled
as easily as children those deities
their simple omnipotence
drowsed by praise. (lines 82-85)

No explanation of the symbiotic relationship of the gods and ancestral deities and man could be more valuable and illuminating than that of Achebe himself. On page 66 of the notes, he explains thus:

The attitude of Igbo people to their gods is sometimes ambivalent. This arises from a world-view which sees the land of the spirits as a territorial extension of the human domain. Each sphere has its functions as well as its privileges in relation to the other. Thus a man is not entirely without authority in dealing with the spirit-world, and not entirely at its mercy. The deified spirits of his ancestors look after his welfare; in return he offers them sustenance regularly in the form of sacrifice. In such a reciprocal relationship one is encouraged (within reason) to try and get the better of the bargain.

“LAMENT OF THE SACRED PYTHON”

Idemili is one of the superior gods in the pantheon and is the father of the sacred royal python. The sacred python is one of the important totems in indigenous Igbo religious worship and is never harmed in any way by majority of core Igbo communities. Under Idemili’s jurisdiction is the realm of rain; and legend has it that a primordial quarrel between Sky and Earth,
the former withheld rain for some time and the latter was forced to plead for a downpour. Peace having been brokered, the relationship between them blossomed and respect and regality continued to be accorded Idemili’s child, the sacred, royal python.

The poem tells the tale of lament by the python whose regality and royalty has been greatly eroded by the advent of Christianity and other foreign religions. It tells of its ordeals:

   I must now
   Turn on my track
   In dishonourable flight
   Where children stop their play
   To shriek in my ringing ears:
   Look out, python! Look out, python!
   Christians relish python flesh! (24-30)

And Idemili’s reaction:

   And great father Idemili
   That once upheld from earth foundations
   …Is betrayed in his shrine by empty men (31-34)

The severance of organic connections by the intrusion of foreign religions and belief systems succeeds in tearing the cohesiveness that holds things together; hence the royal python’s bases have fallen apart. The tragedy is complete when

   …the sky recedes in
   Anger; the orphan snake
   Abandoned weeps in the shadows (40-42)

Achebe, through the above succeeds in commenting through poetry the notion of things falling apart and the lamentations continue.

CONCLUSION

The Igbo ontology, cosmos, belief and worship system, culture and practices all connected to its totems and pantheons, form for Achebe models and paradigms of inspiration to be drawn upon for literary sustenance and exercise. He almost always manages to link himself and his writing no matter how remote or near, to the sustaining muses of the Igbo totems and pantheon as the discussions have showcased. They do not just appear as features; rather they function as an integral fountain of belief and inspiration for a writer of Achebe’s mettle. For him, they are sustenance, a root, a base that supplies and nurtures the literary and creative mind; and he again proud to be the progeny of a rich culture. The destructions of these totems and heritages are akin to the destruction of our values, communal lives, oneness and togetherness. We can end that Achebe calls on soul brothers, his compatriots to beware and take caution so that history will not be repeated in the same way these cultural artefacts and heritage are not meant to be lost.

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