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Fall Apart*

John Benoit

University of Massachusetts Amherst student

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John Benoit

ARCHETYPAL PATTERNS UNDERLYING TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CULTURES:

JANHEINZ JAHN'S *MUNTU* AND
CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*.

IN THE CONVENTIONAL wisdom of western scholarship, Black Africa has generally been regarded as a chaotic mosaic of diverse, unrelated, "primitive" cultures. Consequently such scholarship as is done tends to be narrowly focussed explications of unrelated minutia: "Orisha worship among the South Western Yorubah; Funeral Masks of the Lower Bambara; Male Puberty Rites among the Eastern Riverain Igbo" *ad infinitum*.

At the heart of this time-honored tendency towards a fragmentary approach is the self-justifying assumption that the traditional black cultures of Africa were "pre-logical," arbitrary expressions of capricious and unfounded superstition, consequently having no fundamentally recognizable relationship to each other. Being essentially "incoherent" and "mysterious" these cultures offered no terms by which their various parts could be rationally concatenated into an understandable whole offering a coherent world-view. Since, taken on an individual basis each culture was asystematic and unintelligible the best that a western scholar could hope to do would be to examine each part in isolation. That being the case for discrete ethnic cultures, the notion that there could be overweening logical, intelligible and intelligent organizing principles representing a fundamentally African cosmology from which most traditional African cultures derived would be quite inconceivable.

Yet this is precisely the argument of Janheinz Jahn's seminal significant study *Muntu* which essays to demonstrate the fundamental principles underlying a "parent" tradition which informs and shapes the apparently disparate and inchoate cultures of black Africa. In the face of the scholarly tradition of European fragmentization, this argument is an audacious even revolutionary one.

Using widely drawn sources, heavily dependent on the actual language and practice of African cultures, Jahn attempts to demonstrate in a systematic way, the existence of a powerful, intellectually elegant, closely integrated set of principles which cohere into an archetypal pattern informing and influencing

black African culture. This is not to say that there is a single traditional African culture: that flies in the face of clearly observable reality. What Jahn argues, quite convincingly, is that for all its obvious diversity, traditional African cultures all participate in and derive from a set of philosophical principles which find expression in individual cultures which may differ greatly in terms of emphasis, ritual and cultural detail, through which these principles find expression. Yet the adherence to the principles is clearly present.

If Jahn is correct in this argument, then any one of Africa's many tribal cultures should exhibit an observable relationship to the archetypal patterns and the fundamental concepts and philosophy he outlines in *Muntu. Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe's classic novel of Igbo culture was conceived and written out of the artist's particularized experience of one discrete African culture. It will be our purpose to juxtapose the events and values of the novel to the system of *Muntu*, to see if the meanings, rituals and values of Achebe's Igbo village are indeed compatible with the philosophic principles developed by Jahn in *Muntu*.

According to Jahn, the traditional African universe is one of forces deriving ultimately from a supreme force or Creator impulse not unlike the Prime Mover or First Principle of early Greek thought. All material and spiritual existence derived from this Primal Force (The Great Muntu) and to some extent is an expression of some aspect of this creative force. But all forces are not equal. Man is a force, as is a tree, a rock or a panther. There are abstract forces—love or hate—and modal forces—rhythm, laughter, motion. There is a coexisting immaterial world of spiritual forces balancing the material, visible world. But this fluid reality of forces is far from chaotic; rather, it is balanced and harmonized into a natural order, a hierarchy of forces of remarkable symmetry, a complexity of organization.

The most influential of these groups of forces is that in the category *Muntu*. The group in which human beings, ancestral spirits, Divinities of a lesser nature than the Great Creator are to be found. These *Muntu* forces are not of equal power and influence, but are united in that they all participate to some greater or lesser extent in certain essential qualities of the Great Creator. One aspect of the great *Muntu* in which these forces participate is their access to language: the power of language to articulate, define, specify and order is known as the power of *Nommo*. The other aspect of The Divine Force by which all *Muntus* are distinguished is that of creative intelligence or *Ubengwe*. A *Muntu* then is a force endowed with creative intelligence, will and imagination and the means *Nommo* by which to express these. To that extent they resemble the Great *Muntu*, are indeed expressions in reduced ways of this force. *Nommo*, is more than language in the western sense of mere words. It is the expression of will

and creativity. It is the conception and articulation of thought into reality, it is not language *per se* but the *power* of language. The great Muntu, God, Prime Mover simultaneously conceived and articulated the universe through his divine and numinous language, his *Nommo* at which moment there existed, a universe where there had been nothing.

Jahn tells us that in the hierarchy of forces represented by *muntu* beings, the *nommo* of one is either greater or lesser than the *nommo* of another. He ranks the *Muntu* forces by order of the power of *Nommo* granted them by the great *Muntu*: after the creator comes Loas or Orishas—lesser Gods representing natural forces as well as social actions and values—followed by spirits and ancestors. Across the border between the non-physical and the physical this ranking includes priests, chiefs, elders, warriors, youths, children and infants. This ranking is consistent with the importance and power of figures in *Things Fall Apart*: Chukwu, the Supreme God; Ani, the Earth Goddess; Evil Forest and Evil Spirit, ancestral spirits; Ezeani, Priest of Ani and Chielo, Priestess of Agbala; Nwakibie and Ezeudu, who were elders; Okonkwo, a warrior; Nwoye, Okonkwo's son.

Every *Muntu*, even the weakest, has power over all animals, objects and forces in nature by the power of his *nommo*. In the African perception of reality, nothing happens but by the will of a *Muntu*. If a powerful *Muntu* has ordered that something should happen, a lesser *Muntu* may not prevent it. In *Things Fall Apart*, the village rain-maker is unable to stop the heavy rains once the rainy season began. "The personal dynamism required to counter the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for the human frame." (p. 35) The rain-maker is not powerful enough to alter the natural order established by the Great *Muntu* or *Chukwu*. He cannot create rain in the dry season nor sun in the rainy season.

Human beings in this perception of reality are not powerless and at the mercy of all the forces of nature. People are a force themselves, living in relation to other forces in the universe. *Nommo* is the power humans have in influencing other *Muntu* forces and in commanding the forces of animals and objects. Ritual is the principal manner through which mankind exerts its influence, its force, its *nommo*. In a communal ritual celebrating the yam harvest and an individual ritual such as a blacksmith forging a machete, both the community and the blacksmith are exerting their influence, their force within the universe of forces. If the god of the river and the god of the fields quarrel and the fields and crop become flooded, then the community, through ritual, tries to placate these *orishas*. The people try to return the forces to their natural state of balance—dynamic tension.

A strong sense of responsibility accompanies the belief that the word is a key ingredient in altering the world. Since man has the power of *nommo*, since he has power over the word, it is he who directs the life force. He receives the word and shares it with others, thus fulfilling the meaning of life. (p. 124) A *Muntu* is responsible for his words because every word is binding, every word has consequence. A person's words create reality which affects other forces already in existence. Since the world is viewed as forces in relation to one another, every *Muntu* is responsible for the effect his words inevitably have on the relationships.

Achebe translates the concept of *nommo* into everyday life. When Okonkwo and Nwakibie meet to discuss the loan of seeds, they both speak eloquently and formally. In so doing, they each express their own prestige, their own identity. Their dialogue shows the aesthetic value that the Africans place on language. A person's control of the language and the elegance of his speech are highly regarded. Stylistic speech marked by metaphors, imagery and proverbs is an aesthetically pleasing expression of a man's power of *nommo*. Formal, stylistic speech is also observed by the families of the young bride and groom during negotiating the bride price and during the wedding ceremony.

Another form of *nommo* besides spoken language is developed in Achebe's novel: the language of the drums. The drums tell the clan about the death of Ezeudu. They call the ancestral spirits to appear at the funeral. The rhythms of the drums do not represent language, they *are* language. Their rhythm is an expression of *nommo* calling and producing the gods and ancestral spirits.

Another major concept that Janheinz Jahn attributes to African cultures is the *magara* principle. Jahn tells us that the ancestors are able to strengthen or weaken the life force of their descendants. The life force or *magara* is expressed by the living in contentment and happiness. Each infant is born with a small share of this force given by the common ancestor of the community. It increases as a result of the influence of the ancestors. Conversely, the living forebearers may strengthen the *magara* of their ancestors by sacrifice, prayer and ritual. Thus, a mutual dependence exists between the living and the departed; the living depend on their ancestors for guidance and protection, and the ancestors depend on the living for prayers and sacrifices to strengthen their influence and *magara*. Ancestors are strengthened not only through these honors paid them but more importantly, through children. The primary responsibility for the living is to have children. Ancestors are insured of immortality through descendants and the mutual flow of *magara*. This principle means for each person that he has a *magara* chain; an ancestral lineage of which he is the latest expression, from which he draws his identity, his place in society and history,

and which it is his duty to continue through his offspring.

Magara is also a key concept relative to an entire clan. It is the collective life force or psychic power of the clan, which consists not only of the living members of the community but also the ancestors and the unborn. Altogether they comprise a single, unified force: one entity. As one of the Africans who escapes from a wrecked slave ship in Harold Courlander's novel, *The African*, describes a clan to his fellows who, coming from various clans, intend uniting into a new one, it is "Many heads with a single stomach."^{*}

On a smaller scale, the father of a household is responsible for the harmony and combined contribution of *magara* from each member of the household, including the ancestors. If a man has many wives and children and he honors his ancestors, and worships the gods then his *magara* should be strong, his protective influence, or rather the protective influence of the whole household should be great and all family members healthy and contented.

The story of Ikemefuna in *Things Fall Apart* is a good dramatization of the *magara* principle at all levels of the culture. Ikemefuna and a young virgin are given to Umuofia, Okonkwo's clan, by the clan of Mbaino as compensation for the daughter of Umuofia killed in Mbaino. The woman's death weakens the *megara* of Umuofia. Mbaino has to do something that will restore the loss of *magara* suffered by the clan of Umuofia at their hands. Upon receiving the virgin, Umuofia decides to give her to the dead woman's husband to heal his loss and suffering, his *magara*. Ikemefuna is given to Okonkwo and his family to care for until the clan decides his fate. Three years later, the Earth Goddess, Ani, declares that Ikemefuna, who belonged to the clan, is to be killed.

Ikemefuna's death will restore the *magara* lost by the clan when one of its daughters, who would have brought more descendants into his life, strengthening the *magara* of the clan, was killed. The clan suffered the loss of the woman and the children she could have produced. But in killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo and his family, having raised the boy for three years, suffer a loss of *magara*. Ikemefuna is like a son and brother in Okonkwo's household. Nothing is done to restore the loss that both Okonkwo and Nwoye suffer.

This portion of the novel dramatizes the *magara* principle on both the personal and collective levels. The dead woman's husband and Okonkwo both suffer a loss of personal *magara*. Their *magara* chains are threatened by the events that take place. In another dimension, Ani is a metaphor for the clan. She is an expression of the unity of the clan, the collective *magara*, the collective life force of the whole community; including the living, the ancestors and the not-yet-born. The clan is a single entity—an aggregation of *magara*.

* New York, 1967, p. 50.

Jahn talks about rituals as acts in which the *Muntu* share, strengthen and combine their *magara*. The sharing of kola and the wedding ceremony in *Things Fall Apart* are two fine examples of the part ritual plays. They illustrate how the flow of *magara* is exchanged among the living and among the entities which make up clans—the living, the ancestors and the descendants to come.

Ritual is a daily aspect of life in Umuofia. Achebe shows how ritual has social and political meaning as well as spiritual value within the community. When Okonkwo asks Nwakibie for yam seeds to begin his own farm, the relationship that develops between them goes beyond that of creditor and debtor. The prevailing attitude at the meeting is one of cooperation and brotherhood. The words spoken express confidence and promise on the part of both men. The ritual sharing of *kola* is symbolic of the shared responsibility the men feel toward one another. It is a symbol of the cooperation into which both men happily enter. Okonkwo feels a responsibility to and bond with Nwakibie since the wealthy man is supplying him with seeds and expressing confidence in his ability. Nwakibie feels a responsibility to help the young industrious man begin his farm.

The meeting is more than a deal between two men; it is one between two families, establishing a social relationship between them. Nwakibie has his two sons present and two elderly neighbors as witnesses. All of his wives come into his *obi* to drink the wine in turn. If Okonkwo should fail to pay his debt, responsibility for payment falls to his son, Nwoye. Their bargaining thus is a mingling of the *magara* of each family. The collective *magara* of the two families are merged ritually in the yam seed transaction—thus strengthened. Politically, Nwakibie's prestige in the community is strengthened having a great warrior like Okonkwo on his side in any disputes as is Okonkwo's by the trust in him the wealthy man has shown. Sharing *kola* is symbolic of the union.

Another significant ritual that takes place in the novel is the marriage of Ibe and Akueke. Marriage is a slow process involving the couple's fathers, uncles and brothers. In practical terms, the groom and his relatives must demonstrate to the girl's relatives their ability to support her and the children she will bear them. This is the purpose of the bride price. The meetings between the relatives to determine the bride price is an opportunity to strengthen the bond of the relationship they are soon to enter. When the relatives are deciding Akueke's bride price, Ibe's uncle says to her people, "As the dog said, 'If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play'. Marriage should be a play and not a fight." (p. 70)

The settling of the bride price offers a chance for families to get to know one another, to share opinions and ideas. After all, what is being proposed by mar-

riage is not simply the joining together of two young people but the merger of two families, two lineages. The woman will bear children for her husband, strengthening and continuing the *magara* chain of his family. The bride price is given by the groom's family to compensate the girl's relatives, especially her father, for their sadness, the loss of *magara* suffered upon losing a daughter. The bride price mutually agreed upon represents the value the groom's family places on the young woman's ability to give birth to their descendants. It is also a way of insuring that the husband does not mistreat his wife, and of demonstrating the prosperity and cohesiveness of the groom's family and lineage.

The marriage itself is a social ceremony. Just as the relationship of marriage goes beyond the young couple to their respective families, it extends further to the whole clan. All the friends and relatives of each family gather to celebrate the merging of the two families. They all watch as the groom and the elders of his family arrive. "They sit in a half-moon, thus completing a circle with their hosts." (p. 110) The circle symbolizes the new unity between the two families. Kola is shared, food and palm wine are plentiful. Beyond being a social event, the marriage of the two lineages is a spiritual one. The importance of descendants and ancestors is clearly expressed in the ritual of marriage. Ibe's eldest relative said to Akueke's family, "It will be good for you and it will be good for us." (p. 111) Achebe thus dramatizes the mutual benefit, the mutual strengthening of *magara* of two lineages and that of the whole community.

According to Jahn, ritual also serves the purpose of communication among the living, the gods and the ancestors. The community creates the presence of the gods through the medium of music, dance and song in spectacular ceremonies. The collective *magara*, the psychic force of the community invokes the gods—the *she orisha*.^{*} The drums call the gods with specific rhythms for each *orisha*. At just the right moment in the ceremony the god being invoked descends and becomes embodied in one of the people. Contrary to popular Western belief this is not a phenomenon of madness or hysteria. It is an activity that occurs within a highly structured framework, following strict rules. Jahn explains that "the initiate is following laws of behavior deeply grounded in his culture . . . laws [which] force him to express his immense excitement in a catharsis, in rhythmic action embracing sound and movement." (p. 40) A person who is being "ridden" by an *orisha* is in constant contact with his or her surroundings. The person's physical and mental powers become more acute, intensified.

Ezeudu's funeral dramatizes the manner in which the ancestral spirits appear in the midst of the villagers. The ancestors attend his funeral because he was old, thus close to them. Life to the Umofians is as Achebe puts it "a series of

* The Yoruba word for worship is *she orisha*: literally, "to make the god."

transition rites" (p. 115) which bring one closer and closer to the ancestors. Since Ezeudu was close to the *egwugwu* (ancestral spirits), because of that closeness strong in *magara*, at his funeral, they are abroad, spectacularly dressed in raffia from head to toe.

The firing of guns and the language of the drums has called them to the funeral. One is violent, threatening destruction with his machete. He shouts that the spirit of confusion, Ekwensu (Evil Spirit), had entered him. But the most dreaded *egwugwu* that appeared is one who has only one hand and carries a woven basket filled with water. His power is greater than that of the other ancestral spirits. The *egwugwu* are men of the village dressed in raffia costumes who were being "ridden" by the spirits.

Earlier in the novel, the *egwugwu* appear to settle a dispute between the two families of a husband and wife. The nine ancestral spirits are the ultimate authority for the community. If a dispute cannot be settled by human agency, the *egwugwu* are invoked. Achebe's language is describing Okonkwo as one of the *egwugwu* is clear. He is not a representative of a spirit; he *is* an ancestral spirit. While he is being "ridden," he is the embodiment of a spirit. His costume like that of the other spirits is an awe-inspiring spectacle. "He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers." (p. 86) The spectacle of the *egwugwu* dramatizes the awe and sometimes terror with which people regarded their presence.

The ancestors have an active and direct relationship to the life of their forebearers. They do not exist in purely philosophical form. They are real. They are present. They exert their influence over people's lives, appearing and speaking to them directly.

The two works containing an African perception of reality—one by a European scholar and the other by an Ibo writer—complement each other remarkably. Janheinz Jahn's attempt to identify, abstract and schematize the fundamental principles and concepts underlying traditional African culture is not only illustrated but validated by Achebe's novelistic re-creation of the Ibo village culture. Archetypal patterns that Jahn discovers, defines and attributes to all African village cultures—the patterns themselves forming the basis of a traditional African culture—are clearly at work in the daily life of Umuofia. *Magara*, *nommo* and ritual are among the concepts, beliefs and principles operating simultaneously, inseparably, forming patterns. When viewed together the patterns reveal a sophisticated, complex and cohesive perception of reality—a perception grounded in an underlying "parent" tradition, unifying the disparate cultures of Black Africa.