

## **Magic for Medical Healing in Igbo Society: *Ogwugwo* in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

**Hossain Al Mamun, PhD**

*Associate Professor of English, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet*

### **Abstract**

*In Things Fall Apart, Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma falls sick and is treated according to the local religious belief of the Igbo that relies on magical power. Ezinma's treatment presents dual magical acts performed by a regular medicine man and the medicine man or agadi-muayi or Chielo, the high priestess of the Cave of Oracles that houses Agbala, the unseen deity. This magical power provided by the gods and goddesses supposedly brought into light by the priests and priestesses and the medicine men puts the Igbo men and women in awe and makes them respect their deities. The presumed magical power of the deities not only heals the illness but it can also cause good or bad harvest. The way the high priestess of Agbala and a local medicine man treat Ezinma who has been a sickly child since birth shows that it is the fear of magic that works as the main factor of healing, not the magic's actual manifestation, as there is no concrete indication of any magical event in the text other than some remote references to magical occurrences, which cannot be substantiated. Therefore, the magical power of gods and goddesses is mainly a presumed or anticipated power. It is, in fact, the Igbo people's faith in magical power that has founded the basic religious constructs in Igbo society while the practitioners of magic or the presumed magical power attributed on them treat the sickly and explain the bodily-hitch behind illnesses or the reason for premature death. This paper focuses on the performance of this alleged magical healing and the very faith in it that has been a part of the Igbo tradition to project that the fear of magical power is the main facilitator, not its actual manifestation. This paper examines Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma's birth and sickness and demonstrates the treatment she gets by the different medicine men in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. This paper also explores the underlying issues of Ezinma's treatment as to whether it is a "magical practice" or the "fear of magic" that actually works.*

Nigerian Igbo society is replete with ancestral gods and other mystical entities, which adheres to the belief of deities and spirits as the sources of magical power. These spirits seem to demand a wide variety of magical practices, which are generally of a practical nature meant to address the common ills of the community like healing the sick, bringing good harvest, and so on by using materials like plants, coins, nails, wood, eggshells, twine, stones, animals, feathers, etc. In Igbo, "ogwugwo means healing, and it is the totality of the process followed in order to cure any ailment or pain, be it physical, spiritual, emotional and social" (Mbiere "Health and Healing"). While commenting on Igbo medical treatment procedure, Ugwu, an

Igbo author, remarks that there are two types of “healing process in Igbo culture, [the first one is] the folk or the self medication, which is normally undertaken on a personal level. The second one involves the expert healing and consultation with the *dibia*, the traditional medicine men or the medicine experts” (69). The Igbo healthcare practice, therefore, “finds its identity in the life of the community [,] which influences every aspect of his/her life, including the understanding of health/healing and the integral care of the sick” (Mbiere “Health and Healing”). Thus, a resolution is sought after this state of life or health by way of healing.

At the very beginning of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), we come across the towncrier who beats his drum at night and calls the villagers to gather in the marketplace the following morning. For the first time, we come to know that the villagers are afraid of darkness, as they think that evil spirits lurk in the dark, which are analogous to dangerous animals: “Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark” (Achebe 9). The meeting in the marketplace is about the killing of Ogbuefi Udo’s (a village elder) wife in a market at Mbaino, a neighboring village. It is stated that Umuofia is feared by the neighboring villages for its power of magic, priests, and medicine men: “Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country” (11). The medicine man of Umuofia, called “war-medicine,” is, in fact, a one-legged woman as old as stone. This old woman is also called “agadi-muayi” whose shrine stands in the middle of Umuofia on an empty ground, which the villagers are afraid of visiting at night: “And if anybody was so foolhardy as to pass by the shrine after dusk he was sure to see the old woman hopping about” (11).

The mystery ingrained in the shrine is the biggest fear generator that impedes the neighboring villages from going into a head-on collision with Umuofia inhabitants. Umuofia has strong men; yet, no matter how powerful Umuofia is, the village elders cannot embark on a war against Mbaino unless the Oracle of the “Hills and the Caves” is consulted:

And so the neighboring clans who naturally knew of these things feared Umuofia, and would not go to war against it without first trying a peaceful settlement. And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle—the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call *a fight of blame*. (11-12)

The holiest site in the shrine is located inside a cave with a very narrow opening that requires the visitors to crawl on their bellies in order to get in. Crawling on bellies is metaphorically the first act of unquestionable submission to the gods; the psychological impact of crawling falls heavily on the visitor’s ego or confidence. Once the visitors are in, the high priestess, spokeswoman for Agbala, receives them in an expansive dark space, as Agbala is an invisible entity. The priestess stands by a sacred flameless glowing fire and proclaims Agbala’s will.

Visitors willing to communicate with their ancestors' spirits, who have been reported to appear in blurry shapes by many, can do so only via the high priestess. The god does not directly communicate with the visitors; the communication, in case any communication occurs, only happens through the priestess, which shows that it is the priestess, who, in fact, orchestrates the presumed communication with the god or his or her appearance in front of the visitor. The god does not magically appear nor does he or she directly hold a conversation.

In Chapters Nine and Eleven, Okonkwo and Ekwefi's daughter Ezinma, "an only child and the center of her mother's world" (69), who is the last of her nine brothers and sisters that have died in infancy, falls sick, driving Okonkwo and Ekwefi out of their minds. Okonkwo and Ekwefi then take recourse to a series of treatments or supernaturally charged measures that may heal Ezinma's sickness or prevent her from dying prematurely. Ezinma's sickness turns her parents' world around, which imparts an image of the family bond and cultural heritage among the Igbo.

Nwoye opines that in Igbo society "worry and tribulations arise when the values of children, marriage, health, prosperity, and harmony are threatened" and this follows "from the fact that Igbo people believe that misfortunes can be caused by spirit agents whom we cannot see, and human ones, whose hearts we cannot know" (315). In Igbo "traditional psychiatric healing, there were healing techniques which were peculiar to the different traditional healers" (Chukwuemeka 41). Among the Igbos, "native or traditional healers are further distinguished in accordance with areas of specialization: 'Dibia Afa' (diviner) and 'Dibia-Ogwu' (medicine man)" (Uche 179).

It appears that Okonkwo has investigated the cause of his children's death by consulting with a medicine man of the Afa Oracle. As per the medicine man, the first child was an *ogbanje* or a bad child whose sole aim is to be born, die, and then be reborn to torment the parents. The Afa Oracle gave a solution to the problem asking Okonkwo to send Ekwefi off to her father's place during the time of her next pregnancy: "When your wife becomes pregnant again," he said, "let her not sleep in her hut. Let her go and stay with her people. In that way she will elude her wicked tormentor and break its evil cycle of birth and death" (70). Ekwefi did all these but the result remained the same.

Desperate Okonkwo then consulted another medicine man named Okagbue Uyanwa, whose expertise in resolving *ogbanje*-related issues is unquestionable:

Okagbue was a very striking figure, tall, with a full beard and a bald head. He was light in complexion and his eyes were red and fiery. He always gnashed his teeth as he listened to those who came to consult him. (71)

Uyanwa prescribed that Ekwefi should sleep in Okonkwo's shack instead of sleeping in her own *obi*; he then mutilated the dead child's body, dragged it all the way to the Evil Forest, and buried it, stating that the *ogbanje* would find it hard to get back from the forest:

After such treatment it would think twice before coming again, unless it was one of the stubborn ones who returned, carrying the stamp of their mutilation—a missing

finger or perhaps a dark line where the medicine man's razor had cut them. (71)

Yet it seems that the *ogbanje* kept coming back until Ezinma was born. This child, too, was also labelled as an *ogbanje* and expected to die at any time until one day Uyanwa showed up and Ezinma's *iyi-uwa* broke off Ezinma's tie with the *ogbanje*.

It appears that the *iyi-uwa* is a landmark planted by *ogbanje* to identify the niche to return to. Once the landmark is dug up, the *ogbanje* would fail to locate the place and repeat its habitual act. Uyanwa asked Ezinma to help him find the *iyi-uwa*. After leading the crowd on for some time, Ezinma, in a trance, points out the location and digging ensues. Finally a stone wrapped in a cloth is found and the child is saved. The whole show of locating the *iyi-uwa* and digging it up seems to be very magical to the local audience, "Everybody knew she was an *ogbanje*" (72) although there is no real magical manifestation. Ezinma's helping Uyanwa to find out the *iyi-uwa* seems to be a collaborated performance to bring her parents and others to believe that the evil spirit is finally cast away. Ezinma loved the fact that she became the center of attention, and, as the author says, her "feeling of importance was manifest in her sprightly walk" (74). This explains her taking part in the orchestrated show. The author's remarks on Ekwefi's belief:

Ekwefi believed deep inside her that Ezinma had come to stay. She believed because it was that faith alone that gave her own life any kind of meaning. And this faith had been strengthened when a year or so ago a medicine man had dug up Ezinma's *iyi-uwa*. Everyone knew then that she would live because her bond with the world of *ogbanje* had been broken. Ekwefi was reassured. (72-73)

Ezinma's new sickness has succeeded all these dramas and she lies in the bed with Ekwefi telling her stories to lessen her pain in the middle of a dark night: "The night was impenetrably dark. The moon had been rising later and later every night until now it was seen only at dawn. And whenever the moon forsook evening and rose at cockcrow the nights were as black as charcoal" (86). At this point, Agbala's priestess Chielo's shrill voice is heard. Although Chielo prophesizes recurrently, yet this time she specifically mentions Okonkwo's name: "Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbala ekeneo-o-o-o-o," came the voice like a sharp knife cutting through the night. "Okonkwo! Agbala ekme gíoo-o-o-o!" came the voice like a sharp knife cutting through the night. "Okonkwo! Agbala ekme gíoo-o-o-o! Agbala cholu ifu ada ya Ezinmao-o-o-o!" (91). Highly intimidated, Ekwefi presumes that Ezinma's death is imminent, "At the mention of Ezinma's name Ekwefi jerked her head sharply like an animal that had sniffed death in the air. Her heart jumped painfully within her" (91). Chielo arrives at Okonkwo's *obi* and demands to see Ezinma and takes her away paying no heed to Okonkwo and Ekwefi's joint entreaties asking her to come back the following morning. Once again the primordial fear of Okonkwo's clan for the darkness of night is highlighted here. Chielo's appearance at night but not during the day further underscores that people's fear is the chief factor that the clan's representatives of religion and medicine capitalize on.

To create a supernatural or magical ambience, arcane activities are done in secret in the absence of an audience. This is exactly what happens when Chielo picks up Ezinma from Ekwefi's *obi* in the middle of the night and runs away. Alienating Ezinma from her parents

not only impacts the parents but it also heavily influences Ezinma's psychic profile. Ekwefi's plea to escort Ezinma falls onto deaf ears, as the priestess refers to Agbala stating that no one should interfere in the god's will: "Tufia-al" the priestess cursed, her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder in the dry season. "How dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger. Bring me my daughter" (92). Nevertheless, Ekwefi's motherly instinct forces her to follow Chielo from a distance. For Ekwefi, it's like an epical journey to the netherworld in the sheer darkness of night. She recollects seeing Ogbu-agadi-odu, the evil essence manifesting itself as glimpses of light in the long past and hears Chielo console her daughter with comforting words, "Come, my daughter," said the priestess. "I shall carry you on my back. A baby on its mother's back does not know that the way is long" (92). Chielo runs to Umuachi, the farthest village then gets back to another village called Ilo with Ekwefi hanging on her heels. She eventually detects Ekwefi and asks her to dissuade but Ekwefi remains relentless:

The priestess' voice was already growing faint in the distance. Ekwefi hurried to the main footpath and turned left in the direction of the voice. Her eyes were useless to her in the darkness .... There were no stars in the sky because there was a rain-cloud. Fireflies went about with their tiny green lamps, which only made the darkness more profound. Between Chielo's outbursts the night was alive with the shrill tremor of forest insects woven into the darkness. (93-94)

In the murky light of an "incipient moon," Ekwefi sees strange figures and shapes, especially the shape of a man climbing a palm tree with his head pointing to the earth. Ekwefi, on the verge of losing her consciousness, recalls that Chielo is not the regular woman she knows from the marketplace, she is a part of the god Agbala who can help her face any challenge. As Chielo disappears into the cave of Agbala through a narrow pass, Ekwefi stands nearby munching on the futility of the trouble she has taken following her overhearing of the echo of Chielo's invocation of the god in the holy of holies. And then Okonkwo arrives. Ekwefi looks upon the face of Okonkwo, sees an assuring smile, and it dawns on her that Ezinma is safe. Ekwefi passes the ordeal, which the god Agabla has put on her to test her love for Ezinma; she has proved that she would jeopardize her own life to save Ezinma's, as the author narrates: "she swore ... that if she heard Ezinma cry she would rush into the cave to defend her against all the gods in the world. She would die with her" (98). Magic or the very thought of a magical happening is a confidence builder. There is no denying that the arcane ambience of the cave and baffling ritualistic practice of the Igbo religion have instilled a strapping confidence in the combined psyche of Ezinma, Ekwefi, and Okonkwo to put an end to Ezinma's sickness for good.

The magical beliefs of the Igbo in *Things Fall Apart* are embedded in the incident of Ezinma's illness. In the whole treatment process of Ezinma, which has run for years, there appears to be no *ipsum magicis sanitas*; instead it is all mere cogitatio that remains vital while the *metum de magicae* does the acutal healing. Given the fact that there are references to many magical happenings of the past and present and there is a current evidence of so called magical healing of Ezinma at hand, it is hard to find concrete proof of actual magical occurrences anywhere in the text. All magical or supernatural incidents are either second or third hand reports,

which do not prove beyond reasonable doubt that any of those incidents actually occurred. All medicine men, priests, and priestesses are prone to creating an arcane atmosphere that ushers in fear for the supernatural or the magical power of gods and goddesses. These are votaries of gods who claim that they can invoke gods and goddesses and have them use their magical/supernatural power to heal, resolve crisis, or yield good harvest. Although the supernatural never occurs, the very fear of it does, which, in fact, does the job.

#### Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. African Writers Series. London: Heinemann, 2000. Print.
- Chukwuemeka, Nwoko Kenneth. "Traditional Psychiatric Healing in Igbo Land, Southeastern Nigeria." *African Journal of History and Culture* 1.2 (2009): 36-43. Print.
- Mbiere, Chima Fredrick. "Health and Healing in Igbo Worldview: Significance and Missiological Implications." *SEDOS* (January 2014): 24-31. Web. July 15, 2016.
- Nwankwo, Ignatius Uche. "Resilience of Folk Medicine among the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria." *European Scientific Journal* 10.36 (2014): 177-187. Print.
- Nwoye, Chinwe M. A. "Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider's Perspective." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3.9 (2011): 304-317. Print.

