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## APPRAISAL OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIAL WELFARE PRACTICE: A REVIEW OF *THINGS FALL APART*

By

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### Abstract

The paper briefly explains the concepts of African social welfare system and the present formal social welfare. It expounds on traditional charity and traditional means of meeting human needs in Africa before the coming of the Europeans. We examined the novel, "Things Fall Apart", to exemplify indigenous social welfare system. The study establishes the existence of well-organised social welfare that pre-dates colonialism in traditional African society and the importance of the welfare system to individuals and the

community in general. In addition, the paper gives an appraisal of mutual aids as described in the novel, relating it to the traditional African welfare system and its relevance and position in contemporary welfare system. The paper concludes that the concept of social welfare had been part of traditional African society before the advent of colonialism and calls for more research in order to identify notable African customs and practices as portrayed in African literature.

**Keywords:** Traditional social welfare; social values; human needs; formal social welfare; African literature.

### Introduction

In the traditional African society, the checks and balances of the elders and relations were considered integral to communal life. During this time, traditions and customs religiously guided and controlled moral and social behaviour. Each citizen was aware of his rights and duties to the society. He was conscious that he was duty bound to acknowledge and respect the rights of others. Thus, there was considerable measure of domestic and social stability.

As time went on, economic and social quests took many people far away from the traditional family compound. The position was made worse by increasing urbanisation and the growing complexities of human relationships. The result was unwholesome social cleavages and decline in traditional control on individuals and families.

It was common knowledge that before the advent of the Europeans to the west coasts and hinterlands of Africa, there was no entity called Nigeria. What existed were different peoples with different languages and different cultures. The major aspects of the social welfare system were embedded in



the social values of the people. These values were not in written form, but were passed from one generation to the other through oral tradition. It is quite interesting to note that some of these values are still being practiced and maintained in some rural communities up till today because they are closely tied to the culture of the people.

The major aspects of social welfare in the traditional period were traditional charity, respect for elders, communal living system, extended family system, widow inheritance, apprenticeship system, traditional medicine and health care, traditional education, etc.

As a matter of fact, the traditional African welfare system responded adequately to the needs of the people in all the areas where social problems exist today. Things went smoothly before the coming of the Europeans, before the scramble for Africa, and before the eventual and unfortunate partition of Africa. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly as Achebe captured it using Yeats' in the preface to the book that is being appraised, 'turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer, things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world'.

Social welfare has been explained in so many ways by different scholars. It is the well being of people everywhere in their personal daily lives. Social welfare concerns meeting peoples' needs in order for them to live a functional life. Since all human needs cannot be met by individual efforts alone, social welfare concerns itself with meeting human needs whenever such needs cannot be met by such an individual owing to a number of factors that are beyond the control of the individual. In his submission, Ashford (1987), views the idea of meeting human needs as a societal obligation and a social right of people in the society.

Johnson et al (1997), refers to human needs as:

.....those resource people need to survive as individuals and to function appropriately in their society.

From the foregoing, human needs vary depending on the individual and specific situation. Every individual has specific needs at different periods and if such needs are met, the individual will function adequately in the society. In a nutshell, human needs change from time to time, and the changes are beyond what can be humanly controlled.

In summation, social welfare generally relates to voluntary programmes that are designed to assist people. However, social welfare does not refer to, and should not be regarded as programmes for the unfortunate, because nobody is immune to situations in which assistance is needed. Stigmatization in traditional African welfare system is anathema. Not being able to meet one's needs at all times or inability to be wealthy is not perceived as abnormal in the traditional African society. This can be seen in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo was rebuked by the oldest man present in a meeting for calling Osugo a non titled man a 'woman' ....that those whose palm kernel were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble' pg. 19. Willensky and Lebeaux (1958), identified two orientations in social welfare, these are, residual and institutional.

The concept of charitable service and mutual assistance is not new in the Nigerian society. There has been the age long tradition of communal care and concern for needy kinsmen. There is also almsgiving which stems from man's prayer for mercy and which prayer in the words of Shakespeare "doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy". It is the belief of the Yoruba and which is largely true of other Nigerians that mankind is endowed to be benevolent;

anything short of this renders worthless any adventure to the world of the living; hence the saying, 'awaye ma se enikan lore, enia lasan' (whoever favours no one lives a useless life).

There are also the traditional mechanisms of mutual aid and community education through the observance of such cultural norms, which inhibit non-socially desirable behaviour or facilitate acceptable social behaviour or promote self-help. There are Owe and Aro among the Yoruba, Gwandu system in Northern Nigeria, an example of kinship and mutual aid organization, which facilitates development. The Nupe have the Adashi, an informal mutual aid society. These systems were based on kinship or village council of elders as units of community organization. This mechanism was effectively employed to clear farmlands, construct parks and access roads, build hamlets and even pay for dowry. The norms and practices were by the second half of the nineteenth century crystallized to formal services on the one hand, by Christian missionaries with their Judaic heritage of being "their brothers' keepers" and being "kind to one another" and on the other hand by the Muslim practice of the Zakhat religious alms which enjoin the rich to give to the less fortunate. It would be recalled that Muslim faith entered Nigeria around 1440. Christianity came to Benin area around 1515. The programme was abandoned in 1688. It came back to the South West of the country in September 1842 when Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman and his team of the Methodist Mission arrived at Badagry.

Contemporary social welfare system that concerns meeting human needs whenever they cannot be met by individual effort alone, started with the English Poor Law of 1601. According to Johnson Schwartz and Tate (1997), the English Poor Law was enacted because England changed from an agricultural society to an industrial society.

Historically, this metamorphosis weakened the extended family structure which met the individual and family needs. Furthermore, at that epoch, vagrancy was abolished and the acceptance of protestanism in England, led to the abolishment of monasteries and other Catholics institutions that were caring for the needy. However, insight gathered from African literature revealed the existence of a welfare system in Africa that predates the advent of the Europeans. Social welfare was inherent in traditional African society and formed an integral part of the socio economic system. Meeting human needs in emergency situations or assisting people to develop their full potential was an obligation and a right in traditional African society. It is an obligation to help those in need and a right to receive help. Therefore, it is not demeaning to ask for help and not superiority to help others.

The term social welfare has different meanings, as it is both an institution and an academic discipline. The National Association of Social Workers (the primary professional organization for social workers) gives the following definition of social welfare as an institution:

A nation's system of programs, benefits, and services that helps people meet those social, economic, educational, and health needs that are fundamental to the maintenance of society.

Examples of social welfare programs and services are foster car, adoption, day care, Head Start, probation and parole, financial assistance programs for low-income parents and their children, services to the homeless, public health nursing, sex therapy, suicide counselling, recreational services such as Boy Scouts and YWCA programs, services to minority groups, services to veterans, school social services,

medical and legal services to the poor, family planning services, Meals on Wheels, nursing-home services, shelters for battered spouses, protective services for child abuse and neglect, assertiveness-training programs, encounter groups and sensitivity training, public housing projects, family counselling, Alcoholics Anonymous, runaway services, services to people with a developmental disability, and rehabilitation services.

Social welfare programs and social services organizations are sometimes referred to as "social welfare institutions". The purposes of social welfare institutions are to prevent, alleviate, or contribute to the solution of recognised social problems in order to directly improve the well-being of individuals, groups, families, organisations, and communities. Social welfare institutions are established by policies and laws, with the programs and services being provided by voluntary (private) and governmental (public) agencies.

The term social welfare institution is applied to various levels of complexity and abstraction. It may be applied to a single program or organization - for example, foster care or Planned Parenthood. Or the term may be applied to a group of services or programs. For example, child welfare services is a social welfare institution that includes such services as adoption, foster care, juvenile probation, protective services, runaway services, day care, school social services, and residential treatment. The highest aggregate level to which the term social welfare institution is applied includes all of the social programmes and organizations in a country that are designed to prevent, alleviate, or contribute to the solution of recognized social problems.

Another meaning of social welfare derives from its role as an academic discipline. In this context, social welfare is "the study of agencies, programmes, personnel, and policies

which focus on the delivery of social services to individuals, groups, and communities”. One of the functions of the social welfare discipline is to educate and train social workers. (Some colleges and universities call their professional preparation programmes for social work practice “social work”, and others call their programmes “social welfare”).

Institutional social welfare refers to assisting individuals not in emergency situation, but helping individuals to actualise and explore their full potentials. It concerns assisting individuals or groups of people to attain satisfying standard of living. Each specific area in social welfare is regarded as a field of practice which practically focuses on specific problems or population groups.

The argument is; social welfare is not only for the poor or the unfortunate in the society, but, an arrangement that is designed to help when necessary. Bare and Ellwood (1994), describe social welfare as ‘helping people to achieve self-sufficiency’ and a transitional programme; time limited to assist those faced by period of unusual need. Collier’ Encyclopedia (1996), described social welfare as a scheme that helps people to replace lost income.

In the next segment of this discourse the different shades of social welfare as recorded in *Things Fall Apart* is presented.

The objective of this study is to appraise the traditional African Social welfare practice through a review of “*Things Fall Apart*” to identify social welfare schemes and practices and make appropriate recommendations based on the findings.

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study examining the themes of social welfare practice in a traditional African setting. It involved the

analysis of documents and materials. The novel, "Things Fall Apart", was purposively selected because of the wide representation of every member of social welfare target population i.e. family, children, adolescents and the aged, the frail elderly, people living with disabilities, the vulnerable population, groups, communities and society all available and exemplified in the book. The choice of Things Fall Apart for the study is also informed by its global acceptability. This is because it has been translated into languages such as: German, Italian, Spanish, Slonene, Russian, Hebrew, French, Czech, and Hungarian and is among the fifteen most read books in the world. Generally, literature texts reveal the culture of the people that constitute their setting and Things Fall Apart is not an exception. The paper reveals Things Fall Apart as a compendium of welfare state in traditional African society that is similar to what obtains in contemporary society.

The paper succeeded in establishing notable social welfare schemes (both communal and societal) for all the age groups in the population in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart using historical research to discuss past events in the context of present conditions. This was done by both authors drawing up inclusion criteria for examples of social welfare practice. The inclusion criteria were examples of communal charity, traditional mutual aid and dispute settlement found in the novel. We each read the book, outlined the examples and themes of social welfare practice in it. We then had a session to compare and reach a consensus on the themes of social welfare.

## Discussion

Things Fall Apart is a novel which portrays the collision of African European cultures in people's lives. Okonkwo, a great man in Igbo traditional society, cannot adapt to the

profound changes brought about by British colonial rule. However, as in classic tragedy Okonkwo's downfall results from his own character as well as from external forces.

This segment of the paper identifies means of meeting human needs at individual, family and community levels in the traditional African society. Here, the paper identifies residual, institutional and other forms of social welfare in the traditional African society as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.

When the people of Mbaino killed a daughter of Umofia the wife of Udo, the nine villages saw it as a collective responsibility and a joint decision was taken in demanding for compensation. A girl was given to replace the wife of Udo and Ikemefuna was given to the clan. The wife of Udo was called a daughter of Umofia. The word; daughter indicated that a single individual was the responsibility of the whole community.

This is a typical example of residual social welfare in which the need of an individual was met in an emergency situation (p. 8). Another form of welfare is the family bond and care in normal daily activities as portrayed in Okonkwo's family. This could be seen, when Nwoye's mother took care of Ikemefuna (p. 20) and tried to make up for Ojuigo when the later failed to prepare Okonkwo's food (p. 21).

Institutional welfare concerns helping people to achieve their full potential and improve their situation. This was available in traditional African society. This was portrayed when Okonkwo requested some yam seedlings from Nwakibie. Nwakibie replied: 'It pleases me to see young men like you these days when our youth have gone so soft.....' (p.16). The statement revealed that the welfare system at this epoch did not condone laziness. Assistance was rendered to people that were genuinely in need of it. Laziness was not a



parameter for help because the clan judged a man by the works of his hands (p.19).

On the other hand, seeking supernatural or spiritual assistance to make up for laziness by consulting the oracle was not acceptable. Chika the priestess of Agbala, was consulted by Unoka, Okonkwo's father because of poor harvest. Chika replied when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his hands (p.13). The belief in hard work took precedence when Nwakibie gave Okonkwo his first 'capital' of eight hundred yam seedlings.

When Okonkwo was banished from his village, there was a fusion of residual, institutional, Mandatory and communal social welfare. There was a complex fusion of assistance. Residual social welfare was employed in the sudden need for Okonkwo to flee his clan after he inadvertently killed Ezendu's sixteen years old son during the burial of Ezendu. His best friend, Obierika, came with six others to console him and to store Okonkwo's yams in Obierika's barn. The following morning after Okonkwo had fled, Obierika his greatest friend was among those that came to destroy his property. This was not done because of hatred for Okonkwo but it was a painful exercise that was done to atone for the desecration Okonkwo committed by inadvertently killing a boy. This issue was captioned thus:

They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo

.....They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clan's man (p.87).

Assistance such as this is mandatory welfare. Mandatory welfare is given for the good of the whole community though

it is painful, as it may involve loss of valuables like property as in the case of Okonkwo.

Institutional welfare was used in rehabilitating Okonkwo. In the first instance, his mother's kinsmen assisted him spiritually and materially. The spiritual assistance was the requisite rites and sacrifices for the death of the boy. The material help: a plot of land to build his compound, and two or three plots of land to farm. Each of his cousins gave him three hundred seedlings of yam to enable him plant a farm.

Two years after Okonkwo had been in exile, Obierika his friend visited him with proceeds from the sales of his yam. He also gave out his yam seedlings to share croppers in order to facilitate resettlement and rehabilitation of Okonkwo to his clan. From the submission above it can be deduced that the welfare system was well structured and imbued with foresight. Furthermore, it reveals that assistance to one another in traditional African society is far reaching, elaborate, sophisticated and advance.

Communal welfare was engaged when Obierika's daughter was getting married. The whole village was willingly involved. It was described as: 'difficult but happy task of cooking for a whole village' (p.77). Everybody had a role to play. For example, the three wives of Okonkwo contributed their share to the wedding. Nwoye's mother helped not only with her labour, but she went with a basket of cocoyam; a cake of salt and smoked fish. Ojuigo went with a basket of plantains, coco-yam and a small pot of oil. Ezinma went with a basket of cocoyam and fish. The summary of the community's contribution to the wedding is described below:

Some of the women cooked the yams and the cassava, and others prepared vegetable soup.

Young men pounded the foo foo or split

firewood. The children made endless trips to the stream (p.79).

The communal welfare portrayed above involved a happy and social occasion like wedding ceremony.

The traditional African welfare system falls under the ambit of mutual aids, one of the six means identified by Johnson et al (1997) as the means through which human needs are met. Mutual aids, have been used to meet human needs since men were bound together in extended families or loose social group. However, it is the least recognised and documented in our modern contemporary society. Mutual aids involve taking responsibility for one another's wellbeing. Here, friends and neighbours provided for people when personal capacity for care breaks down as a result of manmade disaster, like war such as the present situation in Lebanon in which Israel is bombing the capital of Lebanon, Beriut or natural disaster like the tsunami in Southeast Asia on December 26, 2004 and hurricane Katrina in the United States of America in late August, 2005. According to Hendl (1982), mutual aids mechanism is present in primitive society. An example of mutual aids is Aro an exercise in which farmers in traditional Yoruba society work collectively in one another's farm. Mutual aids are effective among people that hold similar culture, value, and life style and less effective among people with diverse culture and values. The major advantage of mutual aid is that it offers stigmatisation - free contexts and other cultural benefits. Though presently, mutual aid has been weakened in our contemporary society owing to modernization and it cannot supply all human needs as there are a number of means through which human needs can be met in our contemporary society, however mutual aids is still an integral means of meeting human needs in our

contemporary society though it has been an arrangement that has been a part of human society for a long time.

Traditional African welfare system is based on the need to make life more meaningful for one another. It is driven by selflessness. The welfare system, recognised the fact that nobody is immune to a situation in which help is required. For example, Okonkwo had to flee to his mother's kinsmen, it was not his fault that his gun exploded and killed the son of Ezeudu. His mother's kinsmen took care of him and ensured he was rehabilitated. When Okonkwo became dejected and refused to be comforted, his uncle, Uchendu, encouraged him, that he should take his misfortune with equanimity. Giving credence to this is the song:

For whom is it well, for whom is it well?

There is no one for whom it is well (p.95)

It points to the fact that the society realises that anybody could need help at one time or the other and nobody lives in a perfect condition.

Furthermore, the welfare system did not stigmatise those who were poor or in need. Okonkwo was rebuked for implying that Osugo is a woman because he had no title. On this occasion, the oldest man present commented that 'those whose palm kernels were cracked by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble'. This implies that nobody wants to be poor and success despite hard work is ultimately determined by situations that are beyond human control.

The traditional African welfare system is imbued with a lot of collective and relative responsibility. The former refers to responsibility of the society to care for its members and the latter is responsibility of family members to care for one another. Furthermore, traditional African welfare system has some limitations. When Okonkwo was to return to his village,

after the mandatory seven years in exile, he sent money for the building of two huts in his old compound. Nevertheless, his own Obi and the walls of his compound he had to build by himself. This showed that not all assistance is culturally acceptable. 'Those things a man built for himself.....' (p.115).

Finally, the welfare system commands appreciation. Appreciation is neither demanded nor mandatory. Though the person offering the assistance does not demand appreciation, the helped does not take this for granted as showing appreciation and receiving it is clothed with garments of humility and honour. This was demonstrated when Okonkwo thanked Obierika for his assistance after the latter visited the former in exile. Okonkwo tried to quantify his friend's assistance and he told him to give him his life. This demand was made by Obierika to indirectly tell Okonkwo that they are one, and trying to thank him was tantamount to thanking one self, which practically is not possible.

Expressing his gratitude to his mother's kinsmen. Okonkwo had a feast, and humbly express his gratitude:

I beg you to accept this little kola; it is not to pay you back for all you did for me in these seven years. A child cannot pay for his mother's milk I have only called you together because it is good for kinsmen to meet (p.117).

In addition, appreciation was valued. To show appreciation to Okonkwo for the feast - the oldest member of the Umunna commanded:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes..... We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.

Furthermore, helping one another was considered necessary in fostering peace and unity. It is the peculiar features that distinguished us from other animals. Uchendu when breaking the kola remarked:

We are better than animals because we have kinsmen.  
An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsmen to scratch him (p.117).

The assertion from the excerpt above is that it is honourable to assist and to receive assistance. It depicts love and respect for human relationship. Even in grief when the elders of Umofia were arrested, the whole village was concerned. For the first time in Umofia, the full moon was not a time of celebration but a time of collective grief, an evidence of deep-rooted love, in the society. There was even provision to help the dead. Obierika remarked when Okonkwo hung himself '.....we will do our duty by him'. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land (p.147). It shows the bond in African culture, which is the beauty of it. Traditional African welfare system from the position of this paper was imbued with social solidarity, responsibility and was devoid of individualism. The social welfare system at this period was wholesome and was linked to success of the entire society.

Social welfare as means of meeting human needs was well entrenched in the Traditional African society. The identifiable welfare systems are residual, institutional, communal and mandatory. From the submission above, the concept of social welfare is an inherent African culture. It predates the English Poor Law of 1601 which according to Johnson et al (1997), is the foundation of the present day social welfare system.

## Conclusion

Social welfare as a means of assisting people in pre-colonial African society was seen as an obligation and a right. It was devoid of stigmatisation or discrimination. It was well organised, constructive, appreciative and beneficial to individuals and the society in general. It creates a mutual assurance of social exchanges, providing emotional and material assistance that gives every individual a sense of belonging and assurance of assistance whenever in need. Traditional African Welfare System can be concisely described based on the submission of Friedlander (1961):

Social welfare is the organised system of social services and institutions, designed to aid individuals and groups to attain satisfying standards of life and health..... To promote their well being in harmony with the need of their family and community.

Finally, Traditional African Welfare System can be described from the perspective of Skidmore et al (1991), that social welfare is designed to help individuals cope with consequences of their situation and not to relieve people of their responsibility.

Further studies should be done on African literature in order to identify other African modes of modern institutions that predate the colonial era.

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