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Stories as the Source of Commonality Among the Ibo

Vivid in my childhood recollections are stories, children's tales that my parents would devoutly read before bedtime or ancient legends that my grandparents would relay over the Seder table. These stories defined my life. They established a moral code, framed my ancestors in a safe of words, inspired me, explained my rich cultural heritage. Although the tales vary, each culture establishes its own anecdotes to convey its distinct perception of the world. Through its oral tradition, the Ibo tribe in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* explains its surroundings, spreads news, and molds individual character through tribal tradition.

As a tribal and agricultural society, the Ibo of Nigeria rely on the environment for sustenance; only through myths and fables do they, unaware of Western scientific advances, explain natural occurrences. To explain why a tortoise bears a cracked shell, Ekwefi relays a myth of a tortoise that plummets from the air and shatters his shell on the ground after deceiving several birds that aided his flight. Although it lacks scientific reasoning, this story provides a simple explanation of a natural phenomenon to these tribesmen who search for reason in the intricacies of nature. Similarly, to explain why mosquitoes are attracted to human ears, the Ibo develop a fable: "When he was a child his mother had told him a story about it" (75). By passing these stories through generations of tribesmen, the Ibo foster a sense of understanding of their environment, which contributes to their religious practices and societal traditions. The tales become a source of commonality among these clansmen.

An additional, practical application of the oral tradition is the diffusion of news throughout the various African villages comprising the Ibo tribe. As this primitive society lacks television and radio broadcasts, tribesmen rely upon stories as the unique means of remaining informed about the affairs of their relatives. When the Europeans arrive in Africa, tales spread rapidly about these "'white men'" (140-41) who signify radical change to these traditional societies. News of their powerful firearms and dominion over the natives spreads only through

stories, which maintain a mythic element. These exaggerated tales reflect the natives' common perceptions and fears of an unknown intruder. However, although these tales are exaggerated and altered, they are based on actual occurrences; ““There is no story that is not true,”” declares Uchenda (141). Stories are a means of communication for the tribesmen who rely upon an oral tradition to receive and transmit information.

A fundamental role of these tales is also to foster individual character of tribesmen. By providing specific examples of character traits, stories delineate the proper conduct of individuals. Often, elders relay these stories to youth because of their didactic nature. In teaching Nwoye and Ikemefuna of manliness, Okonkwo offers “stories about tribal wars, or how, years ago, he had [. . .] obtained his first human head” (54). These tales convey a lesson to the children and, therefore, instruct them of their societal expectations. Okonkwo's desire for his sons to mature into fierce warriors is paralleled by his choices of stories to transmit: “[. . .] he told them stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed” (53). Captured in these stories are the villagers' heroic feats, which are preserved in an oral tradition. Although many years have passed, Okonkwo's heroism in defeating the wrestler Amalinze the Cat thrives in stories, which are told among tribesmen. Therefore, Okonkwo's grand character is propagated through these tales: “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and beyond” (3). Not only do these stories instruct, but they are also established to recognize the traditional aspects of Ibo society, especially the power of men, and praise the great deeds of tribesmen.

By establishing a collection of stories, both mythic and factual, the Ibo tribe fosters a sense of commonality. It is through these stories that the Ibo develop their religion; only fables explain the intricacies nature, upon which their religion and customs are based. Sharing these stories through generations of tribesmen, the Ibo preserve their traditions and foster the attributes that they admire. As David Grene analyzes in his introduction to the translation of *Herodotus*, “Oral tradition constituted [. . .] the imaginative record of the past as it mattered to the present.” Stories are the bonds upon which the Ibo society is connected through generations.