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# **Aetiological Values in Achebe's Stories for Children**

Paula García Ramírez

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## Aetiological Values in Achebe's Stories for Children

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### Abstract

A fundamental aspect of Achebe's work is shown in the narrations for children this writer developed during the sixties and seventies. These writings were Achebe's response to the disastrous consequences of the Biafran War for his ethnic group which provoked a long silence on the part of the writer, unable to develop his commitment with his community through longer texts. During these years most of the production of Achebe was circumscribed to literary essays and stories for children, as an attempt to build a valuable literature for children throughout autochthonous reconstructions. With the exception of *Chike and the River* (published in 1966), the other tales are characterized by its moral fable-like tone and by being situated in a remote past, before the

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known time, in which the relationships between the physical and the spiritual worlds were very intense.

Taking into account all these elements, I would like to pinpoint the aetiological value of Achebe's tales, that is, the attempt to show the rural traditions that were used by the Ibo community to explain the cause and the origin of some natural phenomena, or even, of some features of human behaviour. I dare say that these tales constitute a clear example of a specifically African literature for children that, using autochthonous elements, does not deny the contact and influence of Western literature.

## 1. Background

**B**etween 1958 and 1966 the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe published four novels which achieved great success with critics and public alike. This helped him to become recognised as one of the best postcolonial novelists in the English language. Some scholars, including Carol Innes (1990: 19), have even described him as “the father of the African Novel in English”, and his novel *Arrow of God* (Achebe, 1964) has been acclaimed as “the greatest African novel and one of the best novels in the world” (Enekwe, 1988: 33). But after the publication of *A Man of the People* (Achebe, 1966a), his fourth novel, a long narrative silence ensued as his fifth novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, was published more than twenty years later (Achebe, 1987a). The reason for that

long silence can be found in the personal experience suffered by the writer during the Biafran War.

As it is known, the population of Biafra, members of the Ibo ethnical group in its majority, attempted to build an independent state in 1967. This conflict, known as the Nigerian Civil War or the Biafran War, led to one of the most bloody and bitter struggles remembered in the twentieth century. Achebe, who belongs to this ethnos, clearly sided with pro-independents (note 1), and for more than two years he was a member of the diplomatic corps, until the defeat of the Ibo community, whose government surrendered in January, 1970. The disastrous results of the conflict deeply affected Achebe's vital path; the writer has often pointed out the strong moral and emotional consequences suffered by him (aggravated by the loss of friends and family, together with the economic collapse of the region). In fact, in an interview with Chris Searle (1991: 13) when Achebe was asked about the reason for "his long period of gestation for *Anthills of the Savannah*", he answered the following:

I am only speculating because in this area nobody really knows. I think that one of the reasons could have been the civil war in Nigeria, the Biafran War. This was such a cataclysmic experience that for me it virtually changed the history of Africa and the history of Nigeria. Everything I had known before, all the optimism had



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to be re-thought. I had to get used to a very new situation. I had found myself writing poetry and short stories, and writing for children in between, as it were writing, and trying to get acquainted with this new reality.

Therefore, during the seventies, Achebe gives up the novel. His literary activity, rather sparse, concentrates on other genres. So, in this period, he presents a collection of his essays: *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Achebe: 1975), his only collection of poems, *Beware, Soul Brother* (Achebe: 1972a) (note 2), in which he tells the Nigerian Civil War in a particularly dramatic way. The Civil War is also the protagonist of some of his short stories, included in *Girls at War and Other Stories* (Achebe: 1972b), although many of these had been published before in different periodicals.

Finally, Achebe's narrative work discovers a new form of expression: the stories for children inspired in the traditional legends of the Ibo people. These tales have received less attention on the part of the specialized critics, to such an extent that we can affirm that they are the most unknown aspect of the writer's work. However, these texts are of enormous interest and literary quality, and they constitute Achebe's clearest attempt to combine European and African traditions harmoniously. Therefore, my intention in this study is to vindicate the importance of Achebe's stories for children in his whole

literary production, and to analyse in detail one of the most significant characteristics of its content: the aetiological value. This is the feature that intensely marks the development and denouement of the narrative path of these tales.

## **2. The story of a little hero: *Chike and the River***

Chinua Achebe's stories for children are composed of four titles, *Chike and the River* (Achebe: 1966b), *How the Leopard got his Claws* (Achebe and Iroaganachi: 1972), *The Drum* (Achebe: 1977a), and *The Flute* (Achebe: 1977b). The last three share common features allowing a unified study of them. However, *Chike and the River* corresponds to a very different aesthetic and discursive pattern, as I will show in the following pages.

First of all, *Chike and the River* is longer than the other texts. More than a short story, it can be described as a short novel (or novelette), divided into eighteen chapters. There, Achebe tells us the story of Chike, a boy who must leave his mother because she is going through economic difficulties, and he must abandon his homeland, Umuofia, to travel to Onitsha city, where his uncle lives. Chike is fascinated by the great river which flows through Onitsha, the Niger, and he desires to cross it and find out what is on the other side. In the end, after some events, he goes by ferry-boat to the city of Asaba,

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on the other side of the river Niger. In Asaba, he gets involved in a dangerous adventure, in which his life is threatened by a gang. Nevertheless, everything ends happily: the thieves are arrested thanks to Chike's testimony and his heroism is rewarded with a grant for his secondary school studies.

Through the description of the plot, we discover that *Chike and the River* is situated in contemporary Nigeria, so that the story does not belong to the popular tradition of the writer. On the contrary, it is a tale in which any mythical or fantastic elements are absent, and even according to the rules, it belongs to the realist-tone narrative. Its tendency towards a child-like audience, or properly speaking, a teenage one, does not depend on its connections with Ibo oral literature, but on those with the western literary ways destined to the same audience. For example, the detective scheme (rather naïve, we must say) and the aspects of manners are similar to most of the British novels for teenagers. As an example, Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five*. Equally, we perceive in this Achebean first story for children a direct influence of the European picaresque novel; basically, in the description of the suburban lowish archetypes, among whom there are authentic busybodies: the mechanic who pompously calls himself 'Doctor of Bicycles', Professor Chandus, a supposed magician who is

but a vulgar fake, and so on. Even the friendship established between Chike and another teenager, Samuel, reminds us of some aspects of the protagonists from *Rinconete y Cortadillo*, the famous novel by Cervantes.

According to what I have already said, it is easy to understand the way *Chike and the River* responds to some very different features from the stories for children written by Achebe later on. Therefore, this text does not show us the aetiological value which is outstanding in the other tales. Besides, the happy ending is not related to the discouraging ends of the other three stories. In spite of all this, there is a remarkable element which is shared by all the stories, even *Chike and the River*. All of them constitute a discourse destined to make the audience aware of the dramas of the Ibo culture, in which the addressees were born and have to integrate themselves. As Jerome Bruner (1987: 89) has accurately pointed out taking into account, all the stories for children (whether they deal with traditional matters or with the author's works) define a school of canonical characters who act on a number of situations. Such situations present a map of possible roles and worlds in which action, thought and self-expression are permissible and desirable.

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According to this, the stories by Achebe acquire a didactic function, as they behave as interpretative frames which offer the young Nigerian children a reflection of the organised consciousness of their own culture. What happens is that while *Chike and the River* articulates this didactic function from an ethical perspective, the stories published later on will present it from an aetiological one. *Chike and the River* shows to its readers what the world the Nigerian young must face is like, and how they must behave in it. Whereas, the other tales try to give the answer to the why the world is like this, and, more specifically, why the reality which young Nigerian people must confront is so marked by hostility and disgrace.

From my viewpoint, this evolution found in Achebe's narrative for children is decisively conditioned by his own experience in the Biafran War. *Chike and the River* was written in the sixties, some time after the Nigerian independence. At that time, the nation was at peace. As most of the newborn African states, Nigeria is immersed in underdevelopment and poverty. Nevertheless, the huge human and natural resources allow it to contemplate an optimistic future. The happy ending of the story, which enables the protagonist to get a grant for his secondary studies, transmits a clear message (**note 3**): a humble young person may improve his condition if he man-

ages to gain access to a better education. For this reason, the improvement of education must be one of the pillars which sustain the future of Nigeria.

The opposite situation is represented by the other three tales, written in the seventies, after the defeat of the Ibo people in the war. Nigeria was a completely ruined country with too many unhealed wounds of hatred. In this context, optimism is out of place. On the contrary, the writer feels that it is his responsibility to investigate in his own tradition in order to discover an explanation of the struggle suffered by his people, in which there were thousands of innocent victims. The fact that these stories were not situated in the contemporary age but in a mythical, undefined past, neither means that they tend towards 'escapism' nor that they are unaware of the events of factual reality. Quite the opposite, one of the fundamental features of traditional tales is that —taking into account a plot-like scheme founded on basic and generic archetypes and situations— they add easily recognisable interpretative keys to the socio-cultural environment in which they take place, in such a way that a message and a teaching are derived from all of them. Certainly, Chinua Achebe is perfectly conscious of this circumstance as he has attempted to stress the capacity of these stories for being interpreted in accordance with

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the factual situations by means of 're-elaborating' these tales. The following passage is explicitly directed towards this situation. It is particularly referred to *The Drum*, but it could be addressed to the other two stories for children written by the author after the Biafran war:

I don't think I have altered the meaning and flavour of the story. In my own estimation what I have done is to make it applicable to our situation today. And I believe that this is what the makers of these traditions intended to do -to tell stories that would be applicable to that day, and I believe these stories are evolving slowly through the millenia until our own time (Achebe, 1987b: 3).

According to this, it is not strange that the writer directed his literary production towards traditional Ibo tales in a very specific period of his life; a period which coincided with the main difficulties for his community: the hard post-war years. The stories look back to the past seeking the answers his ancestors gave to injustice, discord, and causes of evil with the aim of finding the answers of the tragedies of our time. This looking back to the past presents a twofold perspective. On the one hand, a collective side: going back to the past teachings, a necessity for the Ibo community in this difficult period. On the other hand, an individual side: the rediscovery of his own childhood when he deeply impressed listened to the traditional tales from his mother's mouth:

The folk-stories my mother and elder sister told me had the immemorial quality of the sky and the forests and the rivers (Achebe, 1988: 25).

For all this, Chinua Achebe not only adopts the contents of traditional tales, but adapts the stories to the narrative forms of his community. Otherwise, his narrations would lose the didactic effects the writer is looking for.

### 3. The legacy of the Ibo tradition

As it has been pointed out, three tales are inspired by the traditional Ibo stories: *How the Leopard Got his Claws*, *The Flute*, and *The Drum*. The last two, published simultaneously, have such a similar plot that they may be interpreted as two versions of the same story to some extent. On the other hand, *How the Leopard Got his Claws* has the peculiarity of being a collective work: Chinua Achebe wrote it with the collaboration of John Iroaganachi, and it also includes as part of the story a poem by Christopher Okigbo (note 4), “The Lament of the Deer”. This poem is inserted in the most dramatic part of the story: after the dog has attacked and injured the deer in order to make his authority prevail over the animals by means of violence. One of the lines of this poem, repeated as a chorus (“The worst has happened to us”), summarizes the general



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tone of the story and the reading which has to be done with the war experience.

The three tales are very brief, and an adult reader may read them easily in a short time. However, as frequently happens in those publications for a young audience, they were published separately profusely illustrated. **(note 5)**

Up to now the only scholar who has analysed to some extent these stories for children has been Raisa Simola (1995: 250-263). Reasonably, she has regretted that Achebe's critics have almost totally disregarded these tales. From my point of view, the reason for this omission is twofold. The first one is strictly material: while the novels by Achebe have been published by British editorial boards with worldwide circulation, these stories were published by small publishing houses from Nigeria and Kenya, with short copy editions which were destined to the home market. In such conditions, just a few European scholars had direct access to the texts. Nevertheless, I must say that the second reason has to do with erroneous perspective on the part of some critics when they take into account these stories. For example, this is the case of Isidore Okpewho (1992: 18), who considers that Achebe is not the author of these tales but the one who has adapted and translated them. Okpewho's viewpoint forgets the work of 'recrea-

tion' and 'literariness' carried out by Achebe, and gives the reader the impression, erroneous from my point of view, that these stories are not part of the authentic Achebean literary production.

In her study of the three tales, Simola has analysed in detail the connections and influences found in these texts, not only in relation to the Ibo traditional folktales (note 6) but also to other contemporary African literary works. For example, Achebe's compatriot, Amos Tutuola (1952), wrote *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, whose ending (the so-called 'great famine episode') has many similarities with *The Drum*. Equally, Simola has clearly recognised that one of the definable features of Achebe's stories for children is their aetiological value. But she let it be known that it is simply a consequence of its oral nature: 'Most animal tales are aetiological' (Simola, 1995: 250). Nevertheless, I think that the aetiological values in these tales are deeper, and its interpretation does not exclusively depend on the link with a defined oral tradition. As I have already said, it is necessary to take into account the effects of the Biafran War, and the sociopolitical situation brought about by the same war in Nigeria during the seventies. We cannot forget that the general frame in which these tales are developed is the same one: an apparently balanced and peaceful

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community which is immersed in a conflict that breaks it up definitively. For this reason, the three tales turn on the same question: the origin of evil.

Another relevant aspect that has not been sufficiently explained by Simola is related to the idea that some of the elements repeated in these texts are also be found in the European literary and cultural tradition (particularly that of Greek-Latin origin). In this situation, we cannot leave out the hypothesis that, on the basis of an African perspective, Achebe has employed other resources he had access to thanks to his European Education. Definitely, this argument pinpoints the idea that Achebe does not limit himself to translating and adapting these texts, but he is also the author of them, as he transforms them from his literary consciousness.

On the other hand, it is convenient to point out that these tales are difficult to classify from the perspective of folktale typologies as they are used nowadays. In order to make this circumstance clear, we may take into account one of the best known, prepared by Chukwuma (1981: 14). **(note 7)** This Nigerian folklorist claims that, according to the implied characters, most of the traditional African folktales can be grouped in three types:

a) Animal tales.

b) Tales in which there are human beings and supernatural characters interacting.

c) Tales in which animals and human beings interact.

Now, if we take into account this classification, just one of Achebe's stories fits fully in one of the groups defined by Chukwuma: *The Flute*, which can be included in the second group, as it tells us about a conflict between human beings and spirits. However, *The Drum* is a story in which animals and spirits interact so, strictly speaking, it would not fit among any of the types referred to above. Finally, *How the Leopard got His Claws* has to be understood, basically, as an animal tale, belonging to the first group. Anyhow, it is worth mentioning that there are human beings acting (the hunter and the blacksmith), although their role is a secondary one, and there is also a natural force (Thunder) gifted with supernatural character features.

Apart from this, it is necessary to remark that the labels 'animal tale' or 'supernatural characters' do not explain sufficiently the narrative and structural characteristics of these stories. For example, *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, as well as *The Drum*, take as main protagonists animals, although the

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features assigned to them are very different in both cases. The animals in *The Drum* are completely humanized: they are able to speak, live in huts grouped into a village, gather yams, and can pick up and manipulate objects. That is, they reproduce in detail ways of living and social habits from the human communities. In the case of *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, the animals can communicate with each other. They are also able to feel and express typically human passions and feelings, and they are socially structured. However, their behaviour cannot be identified with that of human beings. So, the characters live into a natural environment (in a forest, not in a village), and the leopard cannot make his own claws, which he goes to the blacksmith for.

Moreover, the spirits found in *The Drum* and *The Flute* look quite different. The ones from the Drum live under the earth, and their existence is unknown to the animals which live on the surface. The tortoise, after sliding into a hole, lies just below the surface although she does not know where she is. She descends deeper and deeper into the earth and she never feels frightened by the spirits which she addresses in a pejorative way. When she returns, the other animals laugh at her as she boasts that she has been in the land of the spirits. They will believe in her when they see the effects of the won-

derful drum she has. Furthermore, the spirits of the story have a human-like existence. Their habitat and behaviour is quite similar to that of human beings (**note 8**), they are grouped into families, need food, have children who are frightened and cry if they are attacked, etc. The only 'supernatural' feature has to do with the magical drums, each of which has a specific power. It is supposed that the fact of being treated like 'spirits' introduces some supernatural connotations. For example, immortality, the absence of diseases, and so on. But none of these features are alluded to in the tale.

On the contrary, the spirits found in *The Flute*, live on the surface, and their existence is perfectly accepted and known by human beings who live on the border of the spirit world. These spirits dominate the wild forest, while the cultivated soil belongs to the human beings. Equally, the spirits dominate darkness while the human beings are the lords of the day. They are conscious of the spirits' power and avoid facing them in order to leave aside any extra risk. Besides, the spirits' attitude towards foreign people is hostile and threatening, in contrast with that presented in *The Drum*. So, when the leader of the spirits finds the first child, his voice sounds "... like the dry bark of thunder through a throat of iron", and he tells him (Achebe, 1977b: 6):

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Taa! Human Boy! Who sent you here? What are you looking for? Foolish fly that follows the corpse into the ground, did nobody tell you that we are abroad at this time? Answer me at once!

Summarising, the spirits from *The Flute* are ghosts with a spectre-like appearance. On the other hand, the spirits in *The Drum* respond to the image of a human community situated in an earthly paradise, living naturally a happy life, 'in a state of grace'.

#### **4. The origin of evilness: *How the Leopard Got His Claws***

*How the Leopard Got His Claws* tells us of the events that took place among the animals of the wild forest in the beginning. At a first stage, they all live happily and amicably under the leopard's government. The dog, the only animal which has pointed teeth, envies the leopard's popularity and power. For this reason, his attitude towards the rest of the animals is hostile and he refuses to collaborate with the others in the building of the hut which will protect them from the rain. One stormy day, taking advantage of the leopard's absence, the dog enters into the hut violently, hurts the deer and proclaims himself king of the animals. When the leopard returns, he fights the dog but he is defeated. The rest of the animals, conscious of the dog's power, accept him as king and abandon the leopard, who is obliged to go into exile. Yearning for vengeance and

despairing, the leopard seeks a blacksmith who makes for him the strongest teeth from iron and the sharpest claws from bronze. Moreover, he asks Thunder for a terrible voice. With his new weapons, the leopard comes back to the forest and faces the dog who is defeated. But his vengeance is extended to the rest of the animals who are obliged to run away. From that moment, the animals live dispersed in the forest and they are enemies. They fear the leopard, who eats up anyone he can catch. The dog, on the other hand, is obliged to seek the hunter's protection. Both of them have the leopard as their common enemy, and, from time to time, the hunter, helped by the dog, penetrates into the forest to hunt other animals.

This story is developed by means of two antagonistic characters, the leopard and the dog. At the beginning, the conflict breaks out on the part of the dog, who is characterized by totally negative features. His individualism and selfishness make him unaware of the common good. However, this does not mean that he is the only one responsible for the tragedy. The leopard reveals himself as a choleric and vengeful character, and the rest of the animals behave disloyally and in a cowardly way. In the development of the events, the attitude of the leopard seems justified and logical: "I do not blame you" is the sentence repeated as much by the blacksmith as



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by Thunder when they listen to his story. Nevertheless, his final attitude is completely disproportionate and the results are worse than the initially suffered injustice. That is, once the leopard calls for violence in order to assert his rights, he generates a series of events that, instead of restoring order, result in greater misfortune. We cannot forget that the dog's coming to power does not break the communal social frame although it brings out a radical change in the way power relationships are established. Therefore, we can say that the difference between the leopard's government and the dog's one shows us the contrast between a democratic and an authoritarian one. The first is based on the freely accepted social agreement; the second, to which the citizens must adapt themselves, is based on violence and fear. But the definite social disintegration will be a consequence of the leopard's vengeance.

At first sight, it would seem that the vision of the dog's attitude, offered by the writer, is contradictory to the one we have in Europe, where this animal is synonymous with nobility and generosity. However, this fact can be explained. The dog is fundamental in the development of those societies based on hunting and shepherding. In contemporary Western civilization, these tasks are not very important, but it has been compensated for the fact that the dog is the most frequent

pet. Now, in traditional agricultural societies the dog was of no use, so his image adopts a different perspective for the collective feeling. This is so in the Ibo culture in which this tale is set. This culture is basically agricultural and its economy is based on the yam harvesting and, to a lesser extent, on poultry care. Hunting and cattle are almost non-existent. **(note 9)** In Ancient Greece, the cradle of western civilization, a similar situation existed. The dog was considered as the most despicable being, uniting the worst qualities of animals and men. Like the rest of the animals, he is unable to think, but he is chained to slavery imposed by men, so that he is an unfree being. In fact, calling a human being 'dog' was the worst insult inflicted on a person. **(note 10)** As it is seen, as much in Greece as in the Ibo cultural tradition the same reproach is expressed towards the dog: his illegitimate alliance with the human being, contrary to what his own animal instincts would be.

The aetiological character of this story is reflected by the title itself, in which we find an explanation of the origin of the leopard's claws. Nevertheless, its aetiological exposition is not reduced to this aspect, but it is extended to other more general areas from reality: why the dog is a domestic animal which is in the service of men, why there is violence in the

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animal kingdom, and some animals attack others and feed on them, and so on. Obviously, the narrative plot (by means of which all these questions are revealed) acts as an allegory offering a second deeper level of interpretation. On this second level, not only the conflicts between the animals operate but also their projection on the events that broke out in Nigeria after Independence. In this sense, Simola (1995: 259) has pointed out that, because of its allegorical nature, this is the most political tale of the three and the gloomiest as well. The steps which are used to articulate the story, although they do not reproduce the steps followed by the Biafran War, take as a starting point a conflict which is recognizable as a civil war. For this reason, the parallelisms are quite clear. We can summarize these steps as follows:

- a) A peaceful state.
- b) The dog's anxiety for power provokes a conflict in which he initially wins.
- c) The leopard, defeated, manages new weapons (teeth and claws) and prepares his vengeance.
- d) The leopard goes back and defeats the dog, but his vengeance is extended to the rest of the animals.

According to what I have said before, the tragedy starts due to the internal contradictions arising in the animal community, without any human being interfering in the action. The human beings, that are briefly referred to, act as mere coadjutors, as much of the leopard (in the case of the blacksmith) as of the dog (the hunter). Simola (1995: 262) explains that, in this story, the human beings are presented in a negative light. From my point of view, that is not strictly true. Basically, the negative appreciation is concentrated on the part of human beings symbolized by the hunter. That is, those who base their survival on exercising violence over the animals. But this activity is not extended to the rest of humankind. In fact, as we have pointed out before, the Ibo culture is primarily agricultural, and hunting has an irrelevant role in their way of life. Agricultural communities may preserve their harmony with wild animals. However, hunting people cannot and they have to use the main instigator of the tragedy: the dog.

Finally, though briefly, I think it would be convenient to make reference to another reading of this story. Indeed, its allegorical richness is so outstanding that, apart from its interpretation taking into account the effects of the Biafran War, it permits another interpretation taking as reference the colonial history of Nigeria and other African countries. In fact, the colonial do-

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minion exercised by the European powers in the whole African continent was favoured by the social destruction of the native people, who were often mixed up in endless tribal disputes and were unable to offer an effective resistance to the invaders. Moreover, quite frequently, European people were helped by some local tribes who considered this alliance as a means of acquiring more power over the rival tribes. According to these facts, the presence of the hunter helped by the dog in the forest and the lack of comradeship among the animals are easily recognisable as the plot of African history during the colonial period.

### 5. Vanity Fair: *The Drum*

*The Drum* is also situated in a mythical and remote past, in which the animals live together peacefully. Such harmony is broken by a natural phenomenon: in this case a long, hard drought that causes the inevitable lack of food. Urged on by necessity, the tortoise decides to abandon the village in order to seek for food. After a long walk, he finds a tree full of fruit. While he is picking it, one of the fruits slips through his fingers, falls to the ground, and slides into a hole. The tortoise follows it but the hole is very deep; so deep that he is able to reach a subterranean world, peopled by spirits. When the tortoise arrives there, he observes a child who is chewing the palm fruit

he was looking for. He gets very angry with the child. To make amends for the trouble, the child's parents give him a drum which, beaten gently, makes all varieties of food appear. The tortoise returns to the Country of the Animals and, thanks to the spirit drum, manages to satiate the hunger of the animals. These acclaim him as king. The conceited tortoise organizes a coronation ceremony and he decides to appoint Elephant as his royal drummer. Unfortunately, the elephant beats the drum too hard and he breaks it. The animals demand a new drum if the tortoise wants to become king. The tortoise goes back to the spirit world, looks for a new fight with the child and insists upon a new drum in compensation. The parents allow him to choose among some drums and he chooses one which is bigger than the first. After coming back to the village, he organizes a new coronation ceremony in which Monkey is the new royal drummer. When the monkey beats the drum, instead of food, they find swarms of bees and wasps stinging them. All the animals are obliged to escape and scatter into all directions in the world; meanwhile, the tortoise has to remain hidden under a huge rock.

Whereas in *How the Leopard Got His Claws* the story turned on two antagonistic characters (the leopard and the dog), in the case of *The Drum* the only main character is the tortoise.

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The tortoise is an animal which frequently appears in the folktales of the Ibo community. For this reason, there is an Ibo proverb which says: "the tortoise is never absent from a tale". **(note 11)** The value this animal has varies from one tale to another. It is recognized that it has many physical handicaps (slow in motion, small in stature, wrinkled in body, etc.). Nevertheless, in the Ibo tradition the tortoise is recognised as the most clever and intelligent animal. This intelligence may be used honestly, but it may also be used badly as the tortoise can try to cheat the rest in order to take advantage of them in his own interest. To some extent, there is a parallel with the fox in the European tradition. In European folktales, the fox is also considered as a very clever, though selfish, animal. On many occasions, then, the fox is negatively valued and its strategies often fail. In a similar way, the tortoises which appear in Achebe's stories for children are unfriendly to the reader's eyes, as the value of their intelligence is tarnished because of their moral faults.

The tortoise also appears in *How the Leopard Got his Claws*, although it is a secondary character which acts as speaker for the rest of the animals. When the dog manages to get power, the tortoise is the first one to betray the leopard and it accepts

the new king in a clear example of servile adaptation to the new circumstances.

In *The Drum*, the tortoise's intelligence is manifested by the fact that it is the only animal which is conscious of the dangerous situation produced by the drought and of the necessity of searching for food anywhere. In his second journey to the spirit world, he uses a clever strategy for the child to eat the palm fruit. This trick allows him to be the offended party in the presence of the child's parents and to demand a new drum. Although he achieves his aim, his mission fails categorically. Blinded by ambition and vanity (his main defects), the tortoise is guided by appearances. So he believes that the spirits' goodness is synonymous with naïveté and they are easily cheated. He chooses the biggest drum without asking himself if the magical powers of the second one are similar to those of the first drum. Due to all this, the tortoise cannot be crowned as king of the animals and brings disgrace and disintegration to his whole community.

Referring to the rest of the animals, they are presented as a whole, without an individual definition of their characters or behaviour. To some extent, they are a chorus line with homogeneous properties. But we get the impression that it is a changeable, scarcely responsible community. So, the col-



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lective feeling communally varies according to the material conditions of life. None of the animals, except the tortoise, is able to find a solution to the great famine. When the tortoise produces some food, they behave with slavish flattery. The epithets used to address the tortoise are more than acknowledgements: Saviour, Great Chief, the One Who Speaks For His People, Our King of Kings (Achebe, 1977a: 18), and so on. The fact that such a big, powerful animal as the elephant becomes the drummer of the small tortoise points to the idea that there is no limit to the extent to which the animals will abase themselves. This submission reaches such a point that they renounce the egalitarian society they had created. When the first drum is broken and they are threatened with hunger again, their attitude changes radically; they forget the previous favours and they blackmail the tortoise and oblige him to get another drum. These events show that their attitude is not absolutely sympathetic, and the final punishment, by means of which they are obliged to scatter around the world, is perceived as a logical consequence. Certainly, they did not cause the end but their blind faith in the tortoise makes it necessary to extend the punishment to the whole community.

## 6. Pandora's myth Revisited: *The Flute*

*The Flute* narrates a story situated in a compound placed on the boundary between the land of men and of spirits. There an extended Ibo family—a father, two wives, and the children—lives. The first wife had many children, while the young one had only one child. One day, after returning from the farm, the second wife's only son realizes that he has left his flute at the farm. His parents advise him not to go and seek it because darkness is the time for the spirits. However, the boy stubbornly insists on finding his flute as soon as possible. Finally, his parents let him go. When he faces the spirits, they get angry. However, the child kindly remarks that he does not want to disturb them, but only to recover his flute. The leader of the spirits offers him a golden flute, and later on a silver one but, in both cases, the child refuses them. When they give him his bamboo flute he plays a song for them. The spirits are delighted with the boy's playing and decide to give him a present. He has to choose between two pots, a small one and a big one. The boy chooses the smallest and the spirits are delighted with his choice. The boy, following the spirits' instructions, returns home where his parents are waiting for him. He breaks the pot in front of them and all kinds of richness appear: "gold and silver and bronze, cloths and velvets,

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foods of all kinds, sheep and goats and cows and many other things of value” (Achebe, 1977b: 16). The first wife feels very jealous. Full of envy, she decides to take her elder son to the farm, obliges him to leave his flute there and to go back at night. Unwillingly, the boy goes there and demands his flute and a pot from the spirits. Their leader shows him a flute of shining gold and he accepts it. After playing a song that the spirits dislike, he grabs the bigger pot. When he returns home he gets his mother, brothers and sisters together. The mother closes every window and door in the hut and breaks the pot. Suddenly, all diseases and evils and abominations are set free and kill the first wife and all her children. In the morning, the father opens the hut door and the diseases attempt to get out. He fights with them and is able to close the door again, although a few of the diseases and abominations escape and spread through the world. “But luckily the worst of them -those without a name- remained in that hut” (Achebe, 1977b: 24). The similarities with the classical Pandora's myth are totally clear.

*The Flute* presents certain features which separate it from the other two tales. First of all, the protagonists are human beings; there is also an explicit reference to death as punishment. Then, tragedy is perceived in a direct way. That is, the

allegorical resources, though present, are rather reduced, and the tale is more dramatic. Whilst in the other tales the protagonists were presented as archetypes that corresponded with determinate general frames of human behaviour, the characters from *The Flute* are individuals gifted with a individual existence, with their own existential conflicts. That is particularly evident at the beginning of the story when the child asks his parents to let him go for his flute. His mother, conscious of the danger, begs him in tears not to go and promises to buy him a new flute on the next market day. But the boy has a very special relationship with his flute: he made it by himself and it is the only object he considers his own. His reckless stubbornness is explained by this fact.

Although this tale, like the others, is situated in a remote and indefinite past (before the appearance of diseases and abominations in the world), the family relationships and conflicts described answer to the contemporary conditions of life in Ibo rural communities. (note 12) From my point of view, the plot of the story acquires allegorical aspects in its relationship with the spirits' actions. Particularly, in the way the spirits influence the human characters in the story, and by means of them, the rest of humankind.

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One surprising element of the story is the child who is presented as the symbol of good behaviour who, at the same time, disobeys his parents. Meanwhile, the second child carries out his mother's orders and is punished with death by the spirits. This would appear contradictory to the moral and didactic teachings the tale wants to represent. However, I think that there is no such contradiction. Firstly, the second wife's son does not disobey his parents technically. He simply insists on the necessity of recovering his flute, offering sincere and conclusive explanations that impel his parents to allow him to go. The boy has been informed of the danger, but his flute is more important than the perilous walk to the farm. His consciousness of the perils permits him to behave properly in front of the spirits, who trust him, and he follows their instructions on the return journey carefully. On the other hand, it is true that the first wife's elder son obeys his mother, but he does it reluctantly and lazily without reflecting on the danger or the actions he has taken. His behaviour is mistaken and rude ([note 13](#)) and, in spite of the spirits' instructions, he disobeys them on returning home. As a summary, we may point out that while the first boy bravely faces the spirits, the second one solely shows fear.

On the other hand, Achebe attempts to explain how blind obedience is not a desirable virtue for youth. The first boy achieves success because he knows what he wants and his actions are free, responsible, and pondered, even when he opposes his parents. The first wife's son is irresponsible and unable to oppose his mother's desires, in spite of the fact that she is moved by jealousy and envy. It can be understood as a 'vicious obedience' as he obeys an unjust order. In *The Drum* the tortoise scorned the spirits as he thought he could cheat them and use them for his own benefit and ambition. The first wife, when she orders her child to go and seek the flute and the pot, is also despising the spirits as she thinks that she can demand some favours they only give to whom they want. This scorn towards the spirits, which necessarily reminds us of the Greek *hybris* (men's impiety and insolence towards the spirits), turns against those who show it. If in *The Drum* the punishment is extended to all the animals, in this case the punishment is also suffered by the first wife and her family as all the children die with her.

*The Flute*, like the other two aetiological tales written by Achebe, has a clearly pessimistic message. This pessimism is based on the knowledge of the fragility of the social order and collective happiness, both of which can be broken

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up definitively at any moment. Moreover, in a series of stories which are initially situated in utopian landscapes, what the reader discovers is that there is no place for utopia: what is discovered as an initial happy state is also imperfect and contradictory. Those imperfections and contradictions hasten the events. To a certain extent, the contradictions of the system derive from the moral condition of the characters: a perfect society cannot exist if the individuals who compose it are immoral and behave impelled by their lowest passions: ambition, violence, vanity, envy, and so on. However, there are also natural contradictions which are not attributable to human beings. For example, the characters from *The Drum* are not responsible for the drought which brought hunger and uneasiness to the community. In *How the Leopard Got his Claws* it is shown that in the beginning the dog was the only animal with pointed teeth, and this was used by the rest of the animals as mockery. Why was the exception necessary if the dog did not need them? ¿And why is the leopard supposed to be the king, if the relationship established between these animals made any kind of hierarchy unnecessary? And, referring to *The Flute*, to what extent is such a great distance between spirits and human beings necessary? Why is the relationship between spirits and human beings based on fear and danger?

It is evident that the world described by these tales is better at the beginning than at the end. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the initial worlds were perfect because, if they were, they could not be degraded in such a deep and definite way. Such a radical degradation has as a starting point the contradictions found in the initial world as I have stated before. Of course, as is said at the end of *The Flute*, we must feel fortunate as the worst abominations, “those without a name”, are not among us yet.

## 7. Final Remarks

At that point, we may conclude pointing out that a clear distinction between Achebe's first story for children (*Chike and the River*) and the other three should be made. *Chike and the River* was written and published in the sixties, before the Biafran War. It is situated on a contemporary period and the general mood of the story, essentially a realist one, has its main sources in the European narrative tradition: from baroque picaresque novel to the most modern tales in which the main protagonists are ‘young detectives’. Even when the writer does not hide the problems and social tensions of post-independent Nigeria, it is also true that Achebe asks for optimism and hope. The end of the story announces an improvement of the social situation of the main character thanks to his



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access to higher educational levels. This access is possible because the young Chike has shown a public-spirited act in a dangerous adventure. So that, this novelette has a clear didactic function: the foundation of a civic ethics for the youth of the new independent Nigeria (and, in general, of any of the new postcolonial African states). In Chike's character, Achebe projects some values he considers necessary for the future citizenship of his new-born country.

The other three stories (*How the Leopard Got his Claws*, *The Drum*, and *The Flute*) are rather different. They were written and published in the seventies, after the end of the Biafran War. Undoubtedly, the effects of that conflict are a key element to understand these three texts. Although they may be connected with the western literary tradition (for example, Pandora's myth), Achebe searches to establish a direct link with the narrative oral traditions of Ibo people, to which he belongs. Firstly, this circumstance is revealed by giving up realism in favour of contents with a strong symbolical meaning. However, Achebe does not act like a mere translator or adaptor of traditional tales. On the contrary, he impels them with his own artistic craftsmanship. The best exponent of this is the interaction established between animals, human beings

and supernatural beings which does not fit, strictly speaking, on the common canon of traditional African narrative.

In these three tales, the story is situated in a remote and mythical age. At that moment, the tales show the breaking of the equilibrated *status quo* of the world. The results of that is a new situation characterized by suffering and disgrace. So, the ethical searching, we refer to in the case of *Chike and the River*, has been substituted by an aetiological orientation: attempting to explain the origin of evil. An evil that is cruelly manifested in the recent past of his country, but it is deeply rooted in the beginning of the History.

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1. "Many of Nigeria's leading writers took sides or attempted to intervene in the conflict. Wole Soyinka was imprisoned for two years, an experience eloquently recorded in his autobiographical account, *The Man Died*, and the prison poems *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. The last sections of Christopher Okigbo's poetic sequence, *Labyrinths*, speaks out powerfully although obliquely against the events preceding and beginning the war." (Innes, 1990: 109). For a general overview of Achebe's narrative production, see García Ramírez (1999: 99-103). The biography of this author was written by Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1997).
2. There was a first edition that appeared in Nigeria in 1971 but with a very small distribution. The British edition, published by Heinemann in 1972, deeply revised, is studied as the definitive one. There is also an edition in 1973, published in the United States and directed at the American public, *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems* (cf Innes, 1990: 182).
3. This message is in accordance with the general principles that defended a human-oriented pedagogy during these years.
4. Christopher Okigbo was Achebe's best friend, and one of the best Nigerian poets in the sixties. He was killed during the Biafran war. Chinua Achebe edited a volume in his honour, *Don't Let him Die* (Achebe y Okafor: 1978). "The Lament of the Deer" is part of the homage of the writer to his dead friend.
5. In the editions I have used, the illustrators are: Adrienne Kennaway (*How the Leopard got His Claws*), Anne R. Nwokoye (*The Drum*), and Tayo Adenaike (*The Flute*).

6. A great number of Ibo traditional folktales have been compiled, published, and translated into English by Rems Nna Umeasiegbu in *The Way We Lived* (1969) and *The Words are Sweet* (1982).
7. There are other classifications of African traditional tales. Some of them have been studied in detail by Okpewho (1992: 181-221), who has remarked that most of them are inappropriate as they mix different criteria.
8. "There were huts and trees and farms." (Achebe, 1977a: 8).
9. In the first novel by Achebe (1958), *Things Fall Apart*, the main character, Okonkwo, has a high social status as he is a hard working man. However, he is bad at shooting and he never goes hunting; both facts do not interfere in the general idea his neighbours have about his bravery.
10. The cynical philosophers based their school name on this fact, (from *kynos*, 'dog' in Greek language). With this name, they wanted to show their total disdain for the system of values which prevailed among his contemporaries. (cf Carlos García Gual, 1982)
11. In Ibo language: "Mbe ako na iro" (Umeasiegbu, 1969). This justifies the fact that the collection where *The Drum and The Flute* were published was curiously called "Tortoise Books".
12. For example, *Things Fall Apart*, the first novel written by Achebe (1958), shows us a curious coincidence in the plot, although its characteristics are very different from *The Flute*. The first wife is also jealous of the second wife, who has an only daughter. This similarity shows us

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that the events described in *The Flute* are primarily real and specific phenomena, and their allegorical value is on a second level.

**13.** For example, when the leader of spirits asks him to play something with his golden flute, he answers: "I hope you have not been spitting into it" (Achebe, 1977b: 20).