

# A pre-colonial hero

by Luciana Viarengo

"The conquest of the earth, which basically consists in taking it from those who have a different skin from ours or a nose slightly crushed, is not something particularly beautiful to see when you look at it closely. What can redeem it is only the idea. An idea that supports it, not a sentimental pretext but an idea and a disinterested faith, something, in short, that can be exalted, admired, to which you can offer sacrifices", claimed the Conrad's Marlow.

To refute this belief, even more what reveals all its vicious prejudice, is the voice raised in 1958 by Okonkwo, the tragic hero born from the pen of Chinua Achebe.

Okonkwo is a warrior of the ethnic Ibo group, the same group to which the victims of the war that followed the Nigeria coup in 1966 belonged. The same ethnic group of those children, whose belly were deformed and eyes looked like onyx stones sunk into milk - as fragile as the independence of their land, the Biafra - and which have become the image of malnutrition caused by famine.

But Okonkwo lives hundred and fifty years before all this. His land, the village of Umuofia, which with other villages extends around the last stretch of the river Niger, lives of agriculture and trade, follows the slow rhythm of the seasons and the weapons of Ibo warriors are those of their ancestors, weapons that kill one enemy at a time and do not disregard the value and courage of the warrior who carries it.

Okonkwo has so much valor and courage that he could sell it. He has such an amount of them that he views himself only as a warrior, without ever allowing his human side to emerge: he represses his feelings that are not aggressive, oppressed by the ghost of a father who had nothing of being brave and strong, a lazy and improvident father who accumulated debts and spent his time lying down playing the flute and talking. In short, guilty of having a nature that Okonkwo identifies as female, and therefore weak.

Virility for him cannot be dissociated from the respect that is bestowed to him and the 'titles' that the tribe recognizes to the deserving men. But his idea of masculinity often does not coincide with that of the clan: in him it is associated only with aggression. He has no patience for the failed.

To say it all, Okonkwo has no patience for anyone, not for his wives on which he raises his hands often, nor for his children, who he nevertheless loves. The only feeling which he allows to have in abundance is anger, and because of this in his action he is violent and impetuous.

In the clan, instead, there are other characters that do not have nothing feminine, but who however show a remarkable capacity to "think things through." One of these is Obierika, friend of the protagonist, who will decide not to follow the men in the ritual killing of Ikemefuna, the adopted son of Okonkwo. This latter, however, despite Ezeudu, the village elder, messenger of the fatal response of the Oracle of the hills and caves gives him the advice to stay out of it because "the boy calls him his father", not only joins the sacrificial journey but will also be the one that with his machete will give the fatal blow for fear that the clan could consider him to be weak.

Condemned to exile to expiate the unintentional killing of a member of the clan, the exile

could provide for Okonkwo the opportunity to get in touch with the part of himself that the ghost of his father brings him to deny. In contrast, host for seven long years of his mother's family in another village, he never misses an opportunity to compare the lack of bellicosity of his family with the pride that, in his memoirs, distinguishes the inhabitants of Umuofia. Wisdom, hallmark of the mother's family, is for him reason for blame. He does not agree with their negotiations and condescending approach and cannot understand their desire to control aggressiveness and avoid bloodshed.

In short, at least in appearance, the description of the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* personality is one that the whites would identify as 'savage'. In fact, it is through the character of Okonkwo - still obedient to the laws of the clan - that emerges, against the backdrop of the frightening night noises and the incessant sound of the drums, the immense heartbeat of the community, the portrait of a society governed by rules that the whites have misunderstood and meticulously destroyed.

The whites arrive. Like the locusts that, for the 'delight' of the inhabitants of Umuofia, hit the village so numerous to break the branches of the trees. But if they cannot damage the harvest already put in safe place, and once that the night dew has burdened their wings they can be caught and fried, becoming a rare and delicious food, the invasion of whites, greeted with the same naive and amused fatalism, will not be as painless or, even less, a source of joy.

Also on this occasion, Okonkwo does not contradict his nature of a warrior and tries in every way to stir up the spirit of his comrades. For him, the solution is one that requires the weapons, but the clan is not willing to follow him into open conflict.

The whites will build the church, on the land that Umuofia has given them according to an amusing and naive war plan: to the white men all the land that they wish, but the land reserved for them is that of the Evil Forest, a place for the inhabitants of Umuofia that equals certain death. This decision, as strategic as it can be, will prove to be a spectacular own goal: the whites, spied night after night will not die, confirming to the majority of the more considerable power of their god.

In a trickle of conversions –among which the most painful for Okonkwo, that of his son - and of initial verbal clashes, the Christian mission expands and with it the gap between the natives and their converted brothers. From a small group of religious conversions in the village - so enjoyable in the narrative as it is profound in suggesting ideas, trying to understand the concept of the Holy Trinity by Okonkwo, whose resigned conclusion is that the missionaries are completely crazy - the intervention of the whites extends to the civilian, social, legal and economic rules.

His last and personal attempt to revolt, climax of the novel, will allow Okonkwo to understand that he is fighting a battle already lost, and that everything for which he lived and which he believes is about to succumb to the injustice of colonization. As a warrior he will deny the supremacy of the white man with the only gesture of freedom left to him.

Achebe has written this novel using the language of the colonizers, perhaps because they are the primary recipients of the message. However, he made a careful choice in the symbols used, such as locusts (admittedly a symbol of the invasion of the whites) and fire (constantly united in all its forms to the various motions of the soul of the protagonist), closely embedded to the Nigerian culture. But above all, he has retained the style and the musicality specific of the Ibo language, with frequent recourse to metaphors, proverbs, fables and original words, with the result to get

arhythm and narrative richness intimately related to the characters and their world.

This language does not have a purely formal aspect, it is itself thematic energy when the rhetorical construction of the Iboconversations clashes with the language of the colonizers. While these latter ones give value to the immediacy of communication, the Ibo, as well as their own traditions, remain committed to a dialogue model considered inefficient by the whites. In the last chapter, the District Commissioner thinks that one of the most irritating habits of these men is precisely "their passion for unnecessary words", and to emphasize this fracture is the fact that the sentence pronounced by the Ibo is not useless at all: as the reader will discover it is, instead, linked to the final choice of Okonkwo and hides in itself one of the most profound ethical values of the Ibo tradition.

The intent of the writer is certainly to suggest a vision of his country very different from that offered by the colonialist literature. Chinua Achebe describes a society structured from a of social and ethical point of view, in which the ancestral values are deeply rooted; a society governed by the cycle of the seasons and tied to the land, with its own laws and codes, although not always understandable in the eyes of the white man.

The more this society emerges as organized, the stronger the perception of the rape perpetrated by white colonialism.

Despite this, what makes Achebe's work good is its equal distance from the guilt. He does not merely limit himself to impute to the whites the disappearance of a civilization, he also underlines the liabilities of his own people and how the decision to embrace a new faith and new rules has accelerated the collapse. With extreme objectivity, Achebe prevents that the reader encodes the characters of the story in good (blacks) and bad (whites), and highlights at the same time the need for cohesion, and defense of their own values, essential elements for opposing the cultural and physical violence of imperialism.

It is the writer that supports through the mouth of Obierika: "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came slowly and in peace with his religion. We laughed of his madness and we allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer be the same again. He has put a knife between the things that held us together and now we have fallen apart." And here the anger and the desire to revolt of Okonkwo receive light and meaning. It is the 'chi' - or individual god that determines the good or bad luck, something very similar to the Latin god Fatum - often mentioned throughout the narrative, that makes Okonkwo, in every way, a tragic hero, a symbol of the values that have been deleted by the violence of a culture that is deemed superior.

To the closing sentence of the novel Achebe entrusts his sarcastic opinion of the cultural imperialist project, which is represented by the book that the District Commissioner, amateur ethnologist, is going to write. The official, in front of the sacrifice of Okonkwo, plans to dedicate a chapter to the event, at most.

And here is the phrase, concise: "He had already chosen the title after much thought: The pacification of the primitive peoples of the lower Niger." A true concentrate of irony, starting from that "after much thought", from which emerges all the self referentiality of the white man - focused more on the title rather than on the civilization of which it pretends to deal with - to finish with a condescending word as peace, as to underline the concept of primitive beings incapable of living

in society. The colonialist claims to provide guidance on how to export order and well-being in a society that he himself instead has upset and overturned.

Although located in one space and at a precise moment of time, the story is in reality without place and time, as it occurs with any great novel. Achebe tells us in fact of denied civilizations, of dominant cultures and traditions annihilated. Current issues in our political and social landscape, which the critics dismiss with the stigma of relativism. In reality, the problem is not that of fictitious racial and cultural classifications, but of imperialist powers whose ultimate aim has always been and is today more than ever, to impose the supremacy of their cultural model, in a symbolic and factual conquest of the Earth.

(free translation)