

NARRATING CULTURAL SYNCRETISM: CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONS IN MARK NWAGWU'S *FOREVER CHIMES*

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Abstract

In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the issue of cultural syncretism in contemporary Nigerian fiction. The discourse relies on the template provided by Mark Nwagwu's debut novel, *Forever Chimes*. The methodology inheres on the exploration of the treatment of the theme of cultural contact and the enabling narrative techniques in the novel. In the main, the paper discovers the dissonant interactions of Christianity and African traditions in the cosmos of the story. It is also revealed that Nwagwu's text prioritizes cultural syncretism over cultural hybridity. African traditions are shown to lack the wherewithal to withstand the onslaught of Western cultures. It is concluded that although Nwagwu's novel exhibits a few lapses in its content and form, it still has more merits than strengths. Therefore, it is a successful work of art because of its laudable vision and fresh and unique narrative techniques.

Keywords: *Cultural syncretism, Nigerian fiction, Mark Nwagwu, Forever Chimes, Cultural hybridity.*

Mark Nwagwu burst on to the Nigerian literary scene in 2007 with his debut novel, *Forever Chimes*, a work that appeals to different audiences/readers and transcends ethnic, cultural and geographical boundaries. To a great extent, the much-quoted Ngugi's (1981) assertion that literature does not evolve from a vacuum is still potent because autochthonous myths, legends, folktales, customs and the like continue to be thematic and stylistic sources for African writers. It is pertinent to say that Nwagwu's novel is one of the current efforts to reconstruct a slice of African cultures. This is a timely and commendable effort because of the need to put the record straight, that is, the necessity to reconstruct African history and culture in this age of crippling scientific and technological discoveries. In this cultural-historical reconstruction, Nwagwu still dwells on many contemporary continental and global issues which include the problems of endangered cultures, conflicts in the continent, women empowerment, the role of the youths in cultural nationalism, etc.

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Indeed, the novel is replete with lots of topical issues. It may not be an idle claim, therefore, to declare that the text has a lot to offer in the building of a total African (wo)man. It has the potential to assist the reader in her/his all-round development – socially, politically, spiritually, economically, intellectually, physically and emotionally.

However, although Nwagwu's text deals with a common motif in African literature (cultural nationalism), its enduring brilliance lies in its artistic bravura, that is, the architectonics/techniques of the novel, which include biblical intertexts, direct addresses, sociolectal variations, code-mixing, flashbacks, oral poetics, proverbs, eulogies, dream technique, conundrum and axioms. Nwagwu is, therefore, able to negotiate a popular old thematic preoccupation in African literature with these fresh and insightful techniques. Abiola Irele (1990) comments on the tendencies of most Nigerian writers to only address post-independence concerns. To him, the outstanding attribute of the Nigerian writer is "his immediate engagement with history" (69). Sam Asein (1978) had earlier made a similar observation that a writer should "play a purposeful role in the human drama of his time" (74). However, a few recent critics are not very comfortable with the perennial rear-ward glancing and perpetual lachrymal tone of most Nigerian writers (See: Ayo Kehinde, 2005 and Charles Nnolim, 2006). It is not an overstatement to claim, therefore, that, Nwagwu's *Forever Chimes* is one of the texts that have taken care of these critics' caveat. It offers a continuation of and a challenge to the popular motif of cultural nationalism in African literature, and it is able to negotiate between the burden of modernity and tradition. Socio-political issues are only in the margins. History is not allowed to be the 'hero' of Nwagwu's novel (cf. Nkosi, 1982); rather, it is tangential. For instance, the trouble in Nigeria in 1905 is adroitly sandwiched with the background information about Chioma and her ancestors: "her great-grandparents were born in times of great tribulation...all of Nigeria was in turmoil, *wahala* everywhere" (7).

Solomon Iyasere (1975) avers that "the modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind" (107). Through

the exploits of the Akadikes, *Forever Chimes* reflects on the challenges involved in the synthesis of indigenous and foreign traditions in Africa. The novelist (Nwagwu) thus assumes the role of a griot, a historian and a story-teller. He perceptively dwells on the problems confronting the interplay of Christendom and African cultures. The narration moves back and forth between various cultural voices that are connected to various socio-cultural contexts and are shaped by issues of race, gender and generation.

In fact, *Forever Chimes* is a story brilliantly told in a language that speaks to the experiences of many Nigerians both at home and in the Diaspora. The novelist strikes a balance between Africans remaining faithful to their heritage as Africans and being fully at home in their new environments. However, as revealed in this novel, finding this balance can be a daunting task. It is apparent that, initially, Chioma, the archetypal Nigerian youth in the Diaspora and the protagonist of the novel, continues to reside physically in America, but mentally and culturally in Nigeria. At the outset, she does not allow the opportunities and 'good life' that the United States offer to dissuade her from imbibing her native culture; instead, she always yearns for the familiarity and comfort of her own culture. This is an evidence of a people's reverence of and responsibility to their ancestors and their insurance of lineage continuity.

Forever Chimes is also an entertaining, didactic and spiritually uplifting novel. It is a most compelling family saga with appreciable literary worth. Written by an erudite academic and versatile researcher, *Forever Chimes* has a strong moralistic, intellectual, didactic, pedagogical, and spiritual undertone. It portrays a Nigeria that goes beyond the notorious stereotypes of backwardness, corruption and misgovernance. Nigerians are depicted as important personalities who have some legacies to be emulated. Nwagwu does not only reflect the travails of the African continent in this postmodern age, he also dwells on concrete ways of tackling her key problems in the context of discriminatory and competitive relations between developing and developed nations. It also comments on many fundamental issues, including the major cultural, historical and

literary connections between black peoples in Africa and those in the Diaspora.

Nwagwu's novel is, indeed, one of the most memorable, deeply yearning and sophisticated family sagas in the twenty-first century. It starts with scenes involving the large extended family of Akadike. The scope of the novel is impressive; it intricately and enigmatically plots the story of three generations of one family (the Akadiques), pivoting on Chioma, a prodigy of a child. Although the story-line starts a bit slowly as the reader is (re)introduced to many sociological, anthropological and historical details, it turns into a fascinating read eventually, covering the lives of three generations of the family. Through this family saga, most events in pre-colonial, colonial and neocolonial Africa are seen in relation to a single family among whose members are representatives of African socio-cultural exploits and problems. The story is told through the point of view of Chioma who suddenly becomes disillusioned with the indigenous culture. We follow her through her birth, her naming, her exploits, her family background and socio-cultural/economic outlooks and her unexpected cultural backsliding. In fact, the story starts with some comments on the background and virtues of the precocious girl: "Chioma was not just born. She was created. And she continuously recreates herself in new light transforming her world" (2). She is thus portrayed as an empiricist and a creative individual. Her great grandfather, Akadike, is also described with superlative qualifiers: "a wealthy man of immense power and prestige...a legend in the town of Okeosisi, where his influence was profound and uncontested" (7).

The whole story bothers on how a new African immigrant (represented by Chioma) tries to come to grips with the ambiguities of an intricate fate made up of dispossession, disruption and dislocation. The text is, really, a product of meticulous historical and cultural research. Nwagwu also uses his native Igbo land, with its rich landscape, humanscape and cultural make-up to explore human nature and how to negotiate the labyrinth of multiculturalism in an alien land. This epistemological tool provides him with a worldview which is able to accommodate the complexities and ironies of postcolonial

accretion. Chioma's abrupt rejection of African culture and her cross-carpetting to Western culture may be Nwagwu's intent to reveal the complexity of African culture and the impossibility of cultural transplantation, especially, the complexity that drives Africans in the Diaspora to become capable of culture suicide, that is, all of their very own deviate from their code. Nwagwu dwells on this problem of cultural complexity by using multiple viewpoints to reveal variety of African Diaspora and their many individual dimensions. This reveals how African culture moves toward, and/or even seeks to destroy itself, a self destruction illustrated graphically by the characters, most especially, Pa Akadike and Chioma.

The stage is therefore set for the novel's main preoccupation – the presentation of the clash between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. On one level, the novel introduces African children to another world and to the lives of children who live in the United States of America, in a different continent, a different country and culture. On another level, the novel's universal theme addresses much broader issues of culture and Diaspora. These issues transcend geographical and cultural peculiarities. The question of cultural tolerance and impossibility of culture transplantation is a universal one, even though it may be addressed and resolved differently in different situations.

Nwagwu devotes his narration to the strained relationships between modernity and tradition. These conflicts, and the attempts to solve them, add to the story's mesh of sub-plots. Certainly, it can be asserted that other writers, like Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, Okot p'Bitek and Okara had earlier told clever stories of modernity versus tradition, but Nwagwu could be said to have told it better than some of the old writers. The narrative pairs the perspectives of the 'old' with those of the 'youths', juxtaposing the views of tradition with those of the modern. Stunning in its most unexpected delivery by a first-timer novelist, Nwagwu's novel is written with a measured and bizarre elegance. The novelist captures the interplay of tradition and modernity with great gossamer-wash of descriptions that expands into an ever-widening field of vision, keeping highly descriptive and

meticulous records of every moment of cultural interactions that passes by his characters. The text is imbued with cultural and pedagogical values. Nwagwu, a culturalist, projects some intrinsic aspects of Igbo culture, norms and practices. What we have in the novel is a painstaking analysis of magic in Igbo cosmology – its features, its *modus operandi*, its tenure of potency and its elimination. Some African cultural norms, values and traditional beliefs – in ancestors, life after death, hospitality to neighbours, respect for elders and use of proverbs and aphorisms – are preponderantly foregrounded in the text.

Naval-gazing approach is used by Nwagwu to capture the problem of cultural syncretism. This is done through the exploits and ordeals of the precocious Chioma. The story is multi-thematic, giving attention to domestic, communal, regional, national, continental and global issues. Time past, time present and the future cohere. The text also prioritizes multiple locales: rural and urban, home and abroad, the sea, the road, the air, and the celestial and subterranean realms of existence. Flashbacks are employed for historical reconstruction, and they are carefully inserted into the narrative to throw light on the characters' present situations. In fact, flashbacks are carefully positioned, and the transitions in time so carefully made that they build up indispensable pictures of the characters' lives. Majority of the stories are indeed segments of flashbacks. Intertextual miscegenation is also privileged in Nwagwu's tale, as many voices of precursor writers are heard loud and clear – Achebe, Ayn Rand, oral autobiographies, the Bible, etc. The text is also a bildungsroman, centering on the education of Chioma and Maduka.

However, it should also be stated that *Forever Chimes* resists convention and easy generalization. It has, in sufficient, but varying degrees, elements of postmodernism, metafiction and postcolonial texts. In the main, it exposes the artificial barriers that exist between and within cultures (African and Western cultures). Nwagwu, a puzzling writer, has devoted his creative talent to the mysteries of languages and consciousness. He uses pages analyzing the functional beauty of African cultures, artifacts, axioms, etc, and he spends so

much time on them that they are transformed into ritualistic havens of meanings. His defamiliarizes the African landscape by being so in-depth about his inventions and by providing such relentlessly exploded views. He equally has a concern with enlarging small thoughts about the materials which surround us – forests, places, rivers, mountains, grooves, and so on. It is also safe to categorize Nwagwu as a ‘religious’ writer who gives the reader the obscure radiance of words as spiritual world, and world as words. To a large extent, also, *Forever Chimes* dwells on the spiritual struggle in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and secular society. It is interwoven with references to, and explications of, pertinent ideas from the Holy Bible, philosophical and psychological ponderings and the foundational theories of Freudian psycho-analysis. The author steers these multiple threads of his novel with admirable – if at times overly academic – dexterity. The novel thereby provides an insight into the writer’s society and cultures.

The narrative alternates between the first-person singular and the third-person singular. The ‘I’ appears to be the inner voice that incessantly invades the third-person. The first paragraph establishes the protagonist’s engaging virtues in her specific family circumstances, as well as her wider socio-cultural, intellectual and spiritual context. She is immediately established as intelligent, perceptive, sensitive and moderate. The last part, however, enacts a turn or shift in argument. It explores a sense of culture shock. There is an unexpected transit from postcolonial temper to Eurocentricism and lack of respect for indigenous customs: “no children; no marriage; no Bia. All that is now in the past, just as my Uzo is in the past” (374). There is no doubt of the supernatural mystique with which the text is invested – a secret gift from the ancestors of Akadike who carefully select the recipient of the magic wand. Initially, Chioma successfully amalgamates aspects of Western culture and her traditional culture. For instance, she adopts Christianity while still retaining her belief in Uzo, the family’s mystique. However, the last part of the novel reveals her increasing disillusionment with African culture. Her loyalties are divided, and she has difficulties in seeking help or

speaking out against mental dissonance which arises out of bi-cultural confusion. The dynamism of Chioma is an attestation to the claim of Irene Visser (2004) that the family is both an agent of restriction and freedom. In her words:

The family ... is a vital institution. It is the primary social unit in any community, the individual's opening into the wider social network. As the first locus of development, the family provides nourishment to the individual, and sets the conditions of growth. Confronted with the individual's desire for independence and growth, the family may be metaphorically seen as a closed door or an open door, as a prison or a gateway to freedom (5).

The family is the custodian of tradition and memory. It transmits and mediates the memories, mores and myths of the preceding generations and communities. In fact, rituals, customs, spirituality, morality and religion all have their place within the family structure. What is implied in the foregoing quotation, therefore, is that initially the family of Akadike serves as a closed door for Chioma's deeds, ideologies, actions and her adherence to culture, but it later becomes an open door when she gets acquainted with two cultures. She therefore rebels against her indigenous culture in favour of Christianity and Western culture. Moreover, Nwagwu uses Chioma's revolutionary temper to comment on the problem of identity formation and growing up in a multicultural/transcultural world like the United States of America. Richard Priebe (2006) brilliantly comments on the fragility of cultural identity in the postmodern world. To him, the agricultural grandparents had "a cradle to the grave charter that allowed for stable transference of cultural identity from one generation to another – mobility, literacy and education have fractured that charter" (45). Indeed, Chioma has been affected by Western education, literacy and migration to the United States of America. Also, Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the subversive power of the carnivalesque and the dialogic is at play in Chioma's insurgence. She has, by her action, put to trial the notion of a fixed and stable self.

Nwagwu has thus positioned Chioma in a boundary situation where the traditional categories of identity and cultural affiliation are questioned, resisted and transgressed.

Also, to expose the trouble with biculturalism, one of the early discourses in the novel centers on the problem of child-rearing in a foreign land. Should Africans in the Diaspora insist on the strict child development guidelines that characterized their own childhood in Nigeria, or should they relax and follow the more liberal policies in America? Onyebuchi and Okeadinife argue this issue without any concurrence. This is the novelist's way of saying that attempts to reconcile contradictory beliefs always prove tedious.

Forever Chimes is written to fulfil an obligation, incurred by the author's status – being an African and a Catholic. He is firmly embedded in the two cultures, with an awareness of his place in each. Through the exploits and ordeals of Chioma, Nwagwu dwells on the problems confronting cultural miscegenation. He seems to be suggesting that a culture cannot be safely transplanted from its source into an alien setting. Chioma initially adheres to African autochthonous culture, but she is later infected with the virus of the exigencies of studying in a foreign country, as well as the complicated spirited social structure of Igbo (nay African) cosmos. By leaving the African culture for Euro-western culture, Chioma has finally cut herself (and extensively her family) from her (their) roots. Her final decision to jettison African culture for Western culture is plausible in a society completely overtaken by philistinism and crass materialism. Chioma's cultural-cum-ideological U-turn is a literary ploy meant to adapt the text to the realities of the author's world of experience, the post-independence contradictions and experience. It is a revelation of a strong tension between a modernity that is often an illusion of development and a tradition that sometimes reflects a poor image of a mythical past. Perhaps, Nwagwu is trying to propose that the Euro-American world is always responsible for most African exiles' thwarted ambitions and the constant neglect of African traditions by her people. The argument, stretched further, can mean that African culture cannot survive the outlooks of an alien

environment; neither can it cope with the demands of the present/modern age, and there is no hope for its future relevance.

Another striking technique employed by Nwagwu to dwell on the theme of tradition versus modernity is the employment of a fast-paced and enthralling plot structure, in spite of its heavy reliance on the technique of intensity/vividness. In fact, Nwagwu's firm grasp of the technique of vividness foregrounds his greatest gift as a writer – the ability to provide a firm historical foundation to an otherwise fictional work. He has the capacity for evoking scenes and presenting them vividly to the reader's imagination. Given his professional background, a University Professor, his knack for historical, archaeological and scientific research should come as no surprise. His academic tendency is revealed in the vividness of the narration and in the meticulously researched facts. Architectural, zoological, botanical and geographical landscape of his milieu is presented in extensive detail, and the social etiquette is richly described. The narration is aggressive, intense and revolutionary. The novel actually sets a new tone for an old theme.

The hallmarks of the text are apparent in its visionary qualities, timelessness and sublimity redolent of Achebe's styles. The story can stir the reader, if not to a profound affection, then at least, to a genuine reflection about the past, the present and deductively, the future of the African culture. The historical purview of *Forever Chimes* is panoramic, taking in a vast vision of cultural discourses and prominent historical events. Its synoptic, macro-cosmic view impresses the reader. It should be asserted that Nwagwu's novel, in many ways, accomplishes what most historical novels strive for - it paints a portrait of some specific periods and places in all their cultures and socio-political realities. It also has most of the trappings of literary gamesmanship.

Another intrinsic aspect of the novel worth elucidating is its characterization. Nwagwu's characterization is commendable. The portrayal of Chioma, Jeff, Pa Akadike, etc is particularly well done. He penetrates their psyches to identify the bases and motivations for their actions and conduct. There are rich developments and photo-like

descriptions of most of the characters that are picked up and brought into fleshy, vivid life. And the seeming multiplicity of the characters reflects the globalized nature of the modern world. The characters' metaphorical language influences Nwagwu's descriptions – the prose-a-prism through which the characters' cultures shine forth. The novelist allows them to speak and see for themselves through his robust narration and credible characterization. Each detail about each character is carefully conceived and meticulously rendered. Chioma's prodigy and Jeff's too radical cultural primitivistic temper may be overstated, but they are nonetheless still plausible. Here is realism at its best. Chioma's precocity, her initial cultural fanaticism and the eventual profound weight of diasporic dwelling on her own unexpected abandonment of her indigenous traditions are brought into relief through sharp characterization. The characters are also imbued with the breadth and depth of three-dimensional characters, making them round. The result of all this is a work that merits respect and admiration.

Nwagwu should also be commended for his ability to recreate scenes which many readers can easily recognize as familiar. This is another reason for the text's appeal. A cosmopolitan text, *Forever Chimes*, depicts a powerful and vivid evocation of Nigerian and American lives. However, what we have is not an accurate, unimaginative and faithful depiction of lives, but a picture of social, cultural and political realities in Nigeria and the United States of America with distortions, falsification and confusion of details which are glaring. Nwagwu's handling of such crucial incidents is significant.

Besides, Nwagwu is a visionary writer. This is because one notices the great visions of Gryphius, Doris Lessing, Holderlin, Novalis, etc in the story – that is, visions of peace, freedom, and humanity. Also, the reader observes, in the story, the features of lofty intellectuality and morality of Pascal, the Catholic, and the radical Christianness of Kierkegaard the protestant, the mystical depth of Dostoyevsky the Russian, and the enigmatic darkness of Kafka the Jew. But in the end, the metamorphosis of the protagonist of the novel

(Chioma) foreshadows an eclipse of an African god, the downfall of the modern pseudo-gods and the subsequent ascendancy of a 'higher' god. Chioma's mental dissonance towards the end of the story signifies that authorities and beliefs have started to crumble in Africa. Her initial rigid adherence to African culture and norms now succumbs to Catholicism, a development of intellectual life. Studies in literature and religion are particularly vulnerable to accusations of subjectivity and bias, because by their very nature, they deal with subjectivities and peoples' perceptions of their own identities. This is why the reaction of Chioma to African culture at the end of the story seemingly looks illogical. That is, Chioma and her family's inexorable slide into Catholicism is shocking. Equally the turn of events shocks the reader.

African literature has often been accused of spinning and spinning around the same themes. However, Nwagwu's *Forever Chimes* is an exception. It deals with a wider range of human experiences, centering on most important and most controversial concerns of contemporary Nigerian culture. The past is subjected to multiple interpretations in the text. Nwagwu uses the 'shocking' end of the story to reject stable, permanent centre of belief. This allows him to "play with fixed ideas, raising a hall of mirrors that reflect and deflect her/his selves in an endless play of signification" (cf. Ana Arce, 2000:79). Thus, Chioma resists stable categorizations. She is a fiercely independent personality who favours fluidity and introspection as deconstruction favours a continuous revision of beliefs. Through the radical temper of Chioma, Nwagwu rejects Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity and accepts syncretism. This involves negotiating one's ways in a labyrinth of cultural collision.

Through the character/characterization of Chioma, the novel unsettles and questions discourses; it involves deviations from the socio-cultural norms and unconscious process of picking, rejecting and creating new symbols. The novel is concerned with a detailed objective portrayal of the protagonist under various forms of social, psychological and spiritual stress. Indeed, Chioma's intrinsic conflict, between good and evil, reveals that *Forever Chimes* is seriously

concerned with the moral, religious and social problems of the postmodern world - the sources of evil in human lives (redolent with Graham Greene's and Evelyn Waugh's thematic and ideological underpinnings).

The plot of *Forever Chimes* is not linear; rather, it is inorganic/episodic. It takes the form of a chronicle in order to picture all the episodes of cultural interactions through the generations of the Akadikes. Culture is, therefore, explored on the pedestal of power-play in a struggle for survival and relevance. In the novel, the world is taken as a 'chess - board', while life becomes a game and 'man', the object of the game. As the Western culture/religion contrives and secretly designs to outwit its opponent (African culture) in this game of survival, havoc is consequently wreaked on the African culture.

The complex colonial and post-independence experiences of African countries have thrown into sharp relief the saliency and vicissitudes of memory, particularly in societies that have been marked by racialized religions, cultural contacts and conflicts. *Forever Chimes* interprets Nigerian culture in a new context which is post-national, post -realist and even post-historical. As a postmodernist novel, it challenges the assumptions of metropolitan literature and unfolds the possibilities of magical realism. Realistic spaces and times, as well as imaginary spaces and times are privileged. In fact, Nwagwu's novel belongs to the new literary tradition, which though related to the European tradition, is distinguished from it by its African frame of reference. The empirical are merged with the uncanny. Through this, Nwagwu is able to expose the conflictual parameters between the real and the imaginary. This consequently signifies the opposition between 'romantic' (metaphysical) and 'futurological' potentials of the text.

One of the ways in which a culture declares its presence is through the texts it produces. The celebration of the beauty, richness and validity of African traditions and cultures are seen in the scenes set in traditional Africa and some set in the United States of America. Accepting the claim that the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture (Roland Barthes, 1990) implies an

intertextual understanding of the text, placing it within a vast cultural network. Textual space contains the potential to produce a ‘differential space’ or a “space of radical openness”. By conceiving textual practice in this way, Nwagwu has shown the text as a new site for social transformation. The natural environment of Okeosisi, a fictional Igbo rural community, is appropriated, turned into a unique discursive space in which values and meanings are created, celebrated, contested and transformed. This setting houses the past and both determines and destroys the future. It also accounts for Chioma’s multicultural life-styles in a melting pot of cultures (the United States of America). The village and the city settings ring splendidly true. And the character of Jeff as he tackles the problem of malaria and the people’s reactions is engaging and credible. The theft of the car that conveys Maduka and Jeff to Okeosisi, at Calabar, is also a realistic event in Nigeria. Nwagwu is also skillful in depicting evocative settings - the hustle and bustle of activities in Nigerian cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Calabar, Port-Harcourt and the like.

One of the most compelling aspects of Nwagwu’s art is the use of multiplicity of voices to reveal to the reader the complexity of African cultures, especially the intricacy that drives its own citizens to become capable of savagery in the name of cultural syncretism. *Forever Chimes* particularly privileges children’s voices, once violated, neglected and forgotten. It denounces chauvinism. Nwagwu is at his best in deploying multiple viewpoints to expose the intricacy and variety of African cultures and their many individual dimensions, as well as how those cultures move toward and even seek to destroy themselves, a self-destruction illustrated graphically by Chioma’s sudden rejection of her indigenous culture. The text is also filled with the tone of hopelessness and, much worse for Africans, the meaninglessness and feeble nature of African culture: “the little gods that gave us Uzo have completed their task and have now returned home to be united with the one big god, Almighty God. And he alone shall I serve with all my body and soul” (375). We should remember that the idea of a high God was the invention of the Christian

missionaries. Nwagwu seems to be orchestrating this view through the foregoing statement.

Forever Chimes stands as a reminder of how media images of Africa can never substitute for African stories. Previous writings have habituated us to an Africa purely of impersonal disasters. Nwagwu however takes us beneath the skin of Afro-pessimism. From the early pages of the text, a lively cast of characters, beautiful sceneries, elegant places, worthwhile cultures and rich traditions tumble forth. The ethnographic richness of the text is revealed in the descriptions of the ordinary life, religious rituals and social stresses of an Igbo Village. Thus, the story of Africa's past is made a truly global tale, offering the opportunity to connect past and present in a powerful way. Indeed, Nwagwu is able to hold the reader spellbound, while he takes him/her round the landscapes of Nigeria, real and imagined. Although the early chapters may appear too detailed and seemingly pedantic, a distinct protagonist (Chioma) finally emerges later to give the story its needed structure. Chioma's exploits and dilemma open up the space for the author to explore some of the problems of multiculturalism and exilic consciousness, the stereotypes concerning Nigeria and Nigerians in the United States or in the Diaspora generally. Indeed, *Forever Chimes* is a text for all to read as the stories (or at least part of the stories) of Nigerians everywhere is told in the text. The story flows with imagery and metaphors that resonate with many familiar experiences and memories. It promotes heteroglossia as different discourses and counter-discourses are developed. This is revealed in the idea of global interaction and communication orchestrated in the novel (cf: Abigail Ward, 2007).

Although Nwagwu employs the technique of stories-within-stories in the text, each of the stories apparently stands on its own, and its impact is significantly enhanced when examined in the conversational context of the whole. For instance, a series of vignettes of Chioma's, Jeff's and Pa Akadike's lives and experiences are vividly and interrelatedly explored. Through this style, the text shows the unexpected connections between peoples, cultures, centuries,

countries and histories. Edward Said (1994) comments lucidly on the necessity of cultural connections thus:

No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival, in fact, is about the connection between things (408).

Actually, Chioma's survival in the United States is made possible by her ability to trace the affirmative connections between traditions, habitations, language and cultural terrains. The Akadike mystique, the walking stick (Uzo), Ifa and ancestral masks are portrayed as cross-cultural items. For instance, Jeff, a stranger, values African culture more than the natives. He admires the masks that Pa Akadike offers him as gifts like jewels:

Jeff's plane arrived Washington, D.C, on time. He had three masks as hand luggage, none of them covered, or in a bag, all were naked and bare, no make-up, no cover-up. When he approached the passport officer on the entry post, he wore one of the masks, in jest (323).

Therefore, the text dwells on a ubiquitous paradox of African 'new immigrants'; that is, the problem of displaced identity - difficulty of fully belonging to the society where they have settled and a sense of an unavoidable, almost atavistic, attachment to their birthplace. This tension between diasporic existence and local essence has always been a formidable ferment for the creative imagination of recent Nigerian writers. Nwagwu is, without doubt, one of the most distinguished representatives of this outburst of talents.

It should, however, be stated that the text has few artistic shortcomings which are pardonable for a first-timer novelist like Nwagwu. For instance, the otherwise informing and cultural novel suddenly becomes an agent of religious (Christianity) proselytizing. In the United States, things suddenly start to fall apart for Chioma. The family magical wand, that is, the family walking stick she

inherits from her grandfather, becomes a fetish object, and African gods and goddesses become 'small gods' without any power. Surprisingly, the alien God becomes the mighty God, the big God. The Igbo culture, hitherto a quintessential, preservable, worthy culture, is later projected in a negative light. The narrative is also at times marred by a bewildering amalgam of muddled actions, folktales, stories, characters, locales, quaint coincidences and very many recurring references and cross-references. An inattentive reader can easily get lost in this labyrinth of complexities. At times, Nwagwu shows ambivalent attitude towards the womenfolk. This sexist stance is revealed in many scenes of the novel. The following should suffice as few illustrations:

Let only real men attend; women should stay at home and watch the children and cook their husbands' good delicious *ofe ukazi* tomorrow (17).

Ah, no, my dear; this is not women's business. It is for men and men only (19).

However, despite this little criticism leveled against Nwagwu's *Forever Chimes*, its thematic relevance, stylistic felicities and visionary quality promise much for the future. All things considered, the text is a useful addition to the corpus of Nigerian prose fiction. It is to be hoped that Nwagwu continues to tell our stories, and to tell them, distinctively.

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