

Literary Studies in the 21st Century: Practical Implication for Ethnic Conflict and Conflict Resolution Using Cyprian Ekwensi's *Iska*

Ile, Onyebuchi James (Ph.D Muenster, Germany)

Department of English Language and Literature,

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: ileonyebuchijames@gmail.com

Abstract

Ekwensi preoccupied himself with contemporary issues in the Nigerian Society, probably more than any other Nigerian writer. His novel Iska, set in the North, captures vividly the ethnic conflict situation in Nigeria. He guides the reader through his characters to the root causes of ethnic conflict or violence in Nigeria and the likely solutions to the conflicts. This paper examined the causes of ethnic conflict or violence among Nigerian ethnic groups as expressed in the text, Iska, and showed ways in which they could be clarified and possibly resolved. The paper tried to find out whether the text or the novel could be relevant in conflict resolution, whether it could capture the conflict incidents that ordinarily a researcher will go to the field to investigate, and whether the pieces of information in the text could come in handy in conflict resolution. The major objective of this paper was to prove that fiction can be relevant in conflict resolution in Nigeria. New Historicism and Instrumentalism came in handy in the conceptual framework with regard to theories and critical analysis. The method that was used in the process of doing this paper was largely inductive and deductive and references were made to empirical researches that supported the ground for the inductive and deductive methods used.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Ethnic groups, Ethnic violence, Nigerian Society, Values

Introduction

Iska is a conflict story that can help students of literature as well as students of conflict studies to better appreciate conflict situations in Nigeria. Ekwensi's novels are usually set in the city and reflects Nigeria's contemporary realities more than any other work by a Nigerian Writer. He dramatizes ethnic relation in Nigeria. He depicts interethnic marriages and the consequences as seen in the relationship between Dan Kaybi and Filia Onu. Both are educated and possess the enlightenment of education and so they have to battle stereotypes and other challenges that accompany such marriages. Both are not only different in terms of ethnicity, but also in terms of faith or religion. Although Dan Kaybi is not held back by either religion or tradition, yet his parents are devout Moslems. Conflict is automatically foregrounded from the outset. Besides, Dan Kaybi's father is a local politician whose hope of survival as a politician depends on his loyalty to the tribe. The Chairman of the local council sees Dan's father and wonders whether what he has heard is true, that is, that Dan wants to marry a stranger (30-31). Dan Musa himself, on visiting his son in the hospital wants to confirm the rumour that is going around with him. Dan is annoyed at his father for asking him, upon his first visit in the hospital, whether it is true that he wants to marry a girl from the East, instead of enquiring about how he fared. Dan confirms the rumour by telling his father that the person he is referring to as that girl is his wife.

His father begins to wonder what madness it is that has got into the young men of today. He wonders if there are no more girls in the whole of the North that his son should go as far as marrying a girl from the East. He believes that what his wife said is true, that is, that the girl has cast a spell on their son. Dan maintains that he is under no spell, that he sees nothing wrong in a young educated man marrying any girl of whatever "tribe" of his choice. His father believes he is not capable of seeing anything wrong with his choice. He

tells his son that his choice is wrong, because he is born a Northerner. And that any Northerner worth his salt, that is, who studies the Koran and goes to the Mosque, who wears robes and sandal and despises western education, who does not value any other language except Hausa or Arabic, who does not associate recklessly with people from other ethnic groups, would see what is wrong in marrying any person that is not of the North (30). Dan wants his father to understand that things are changing fast in the world and people have to change along with the time. His father argues that one must not forsake his origin because things are changing; that the fact that things are changing will not make him cease to be a Northerner from Nupeland, a kingdom founded by the great Tosede, the great masters of the River Niger. Dan tells him that his choice of life does not mean a denial of his origin (31). The Patients in the same hospital ward with Dan believe that he is mad to want to marry a southerner, because he ought to know that the Southerners hate them (31). Dan's father makes him understand the implication of his marrying a Southerner: He would not become a director anymore as was promised him by the chairman of the local council. His son tells him strongly that Nigeria is one country whether people like him like it or not.

The problem of this paper lies in the fact that ethnic conflict situations in Nigeria are revealed in it but because it is fiction, it could be dismissed as not reflective of data, even when data needs to be properly articulated in a believable story to make any sense. In other words, there is a chance of works as this not to be seen as something that could be useful in conflict resolution simply because it is fiction. Meanwhile, reading it one is exposed to the psychological, external and all other causes of conflict in multi-ethnic societies as Nigeria. When considered without the bias of it being fiction, and considering the fact that it mirrored the experiences of ethnic conflict in Nigeria, it could help scholars to understand ethnic conflicts more as well as their causes.

The major aim and objective of this study were to prove that literary texts are very relevant in understanding the whole gamut of ethnic conflict situations in Nigeria and, therefore, could be useful in their resolution. Most writers as Ekwensi have witnessed ethnic conflicts and their causes and, therefore, are able to use fiction to expose not only observable causes of ethnic conflicts but also the intangible causes, which emanate from our feelings and therefore cannot be directly observed.

The following hypothetical questions guided this study; questions as: can the literary text or novel be relevant in conflict resolution? Does it capture the conflict incidents that ordinarily a researcher will go to the field to investigate? How can the pieces of information it contains come in handy in conflict resolution?

New Historicism is a theory of criticism that stipulates that the work of art is located within history as such the work is usually influenced by the writer's time, on the one hand. The critic of the given work, for his part, is also located in history and as such he is usually influenced by his environment, beliefs and prejudices, on the other hand.

Based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices.

Historical Criticism insists that to understand a literary piece, we need to understand the author's biography and social background, ideas circulating at the time, and the cultural milieu. Historicizing the above-named text, therefore, will mean to connect it to the contemporary realities of the society in which both the writer and critic are located.

This paper provides a veritable historical platform for studying ethnicity in Nigeria from the context of fiction. As Ruth Finnegan affirms: "it is obvious that any analysis of African literature must take account of the social and historical context" (48); there are many other scholars and critics who believe that literature is a sociological phenomenon and should be approached as such. One of these scholars and critics is David Daiches. Daiches, in *Literature and Society*, asserts that:

Literature is a practical activity in any adequate sense of the phrase. Far from being a concern only of the specialist and the academician, it has been, in all healthy societies, a real part of the life of the people. To study the relations of literature and society is to see how one of the most important products of the human mind has been moulded by social conditions and has itself helped to mould those conditions; how men have interpreted the life of their age; how they have criticized it and commented on it and how at times they have been at its mercy; how the state of society can sometimes compel the literary artist to be false to his mission and sometimes it can give to his work a richness and universality and cogency that springs from contact with the most elemental facts of life - and death (12 - 13).

Critical Analysis

A British critic, Magnet, believes that by properly interpreting our accumulated human stories about how the human functions we contribute to better knowledge, which data are incapable of providing until they are properly articulated to make sense as much as literature makes sense out of the data of human experience (n.p).

Iska by Ekwensi is, therefore, an accumulation of accurate stories about the human world in Nigeria. It provides an account wrapped in interpretations and demonstrates that it can add up to knowledge than we can get elsewhere because it can be articulated in ways that make sense, enough sense to help us understand the ethnic conflict situations in Nigeria.

Iska, as a novel, is set in Kano. Kano is a city in Northern Nigeria. It used to be a rallying point for almost all the northern states because of its historical importance. It is the centre of Islamic activities in Nigeria. And in almost all the Northern states cultural and religious values are interwoven so much so that they determine the social practices. Therefore, the nature of Kano itself with regard to cultural values already programmed ethnic conflict or violence in advance. Little wonder it was impossible, owing to the preponderance of Islamic values, for the Christian Igbo to achieve full integration there. Such unilateral preponderance of a particular culture is usually regarded in conflict resolution as unjust and cannot be treated as relations of coexistence (Abu-Nimer 47). As Abu-Nimer puts it:

Coexistence generally refers to an accommodation between members of different communities or separate countries who live together without one collectively trying to destroy or severely harm the other. This minimal level of coexistence is

compatible with competition and even conflicts, if conducted through legitimate channels. It is also compatible with significant differences not only in values or cultural patterns, but also in economic standing and political power. It can be viewed as a minimal level of peace (47).

However, in the Nigerian situation as portrayed by Ekwensi in his *Iska*, this minimal level of coexistence was somehow complicated by the peculiar nature of Nigeria and the ethnic groups, for there was no mutual tolerance and respect anymore than there was relative equality in economic positions and political power between the Igbo and the Hausa-Fulani. The Igbo had the disadvantage of being in an environment in which Islamic culture was being unilaterally imposed, while the Hausa-Fulani had the disadvantage of being economically inferior. But again, they had political power, which had its advantages. Furthermore, Abu-Nimer insists:

[...]. Great differences in economic conditions and power are likely to mean that one party dominates another and that the accommodation is not symmetrical [...]. The character of the coexistence between peoples matter. One or more parties may judge a form of coexistence as a violation of their sense of equity or fairness. What is just and what is unjust depends upon the standard of judgement parties use, and all sides in a social relationship often do not share those standards (47).

Great differences in economic condition meant that the Hausa-Fulani might have felt as can be deduced from *Iska* that the Igbo intended to dominate and possibly enslave them. Therefore, by refusing to integrate into the preponderant Islamic culture of the north and by being economically superior, the Christian Igbo from the south attracted the envy and hate of the Islamic Hausa-Fulani of the north. The consequence of that soured relationship was persecution of and subsequent genocide against the Igbo.¹

Furthermore, a critic articulating the conflict story inherent in *Iska* cannot but notice that the patients (Ekwensi *Iska* 31) in the hospital with Dan represent public opinion in the North which is of the view that the people from the south hate people from the North. As such, marriage with them would only amount to an unholy union. Evidently, the majority of people, who stick to a particular way of life, do so because it is the tradition, not because they believe that particular way of life to be right, but because it is a way of life that has been before them, the violation of which they would rather not have imputed to them. The people from the north must have formed that notion of being hated by the people from the south because of the hostility that exists among them. The reason for the hostility should therefore be identified and treated instead of being avoided.

Avoiding a person or group or even a situation brings about a delusion that the conflict situation is non-existent; however, by avoiding themselves, the groups would have missed the opportunity that conflict situations offer people or individuals to understand themselves, to live together tolerating and accommodating one another's strengths and weaknesses. Avoidance, according to Wilmot and Hocker:

¹ See page 10 of the petition by the apex organisation of the entire Igbo people of Nigeria in October 1999; see also Alexander Madiabo, *Nigerian Revolution and Biafran War*, 1980, 84.

Allows conflicts to simmer and heat up unnecessarily rather than providing an avenue for improving it. It keeps one from working through a conflict and reinforces the notion that conflict is terrible and best avoided. It allows partners to each follow their own course and pretend there is no mutual influence, when, in fact, each influences the other. It usually preserves the conflict and sets the stage for a later explosion and backlash (116).

This is the case in Ekwensi's *Iska*, where a conflict situation had been allowed to simmer until it blew up when the Igbo buyer offered more money for a commodity, for which a Hausa boy had offered to pay less (22-3). When, therefore, the conflict escalated it became fuelled with prejudices. Apparently the ethnic groups in conflict tend to hold too strongly to their positions or opinions or perceptions, misperceptions and prejudices, so much that it makes it absolutely difficult for them to satisfy one another's interests and needs. The consequence will always be bloody for them. The message that underlies *ISKA* is the need for the ethnic groups to come together to find ways of resolving their differences and guaranteeing peace. However, it is understandable why they cannot come together: They deliberately avoid themselves and pretend that all is well. As Olawale Isaac Albert and Otite Onigu argue that:

[T]he proliferation of community and governance conflicts in Nigeria stems from the fact that Nigerians generally favour avoidance as a style of conflict management. At community and national levels, groups that feel aggrieved about certain issues complain very loudly about their predicaments but hardly get listened to by their adversaries or those that have the statutory responsibility to give them attention. The ignored groups soon take to violence and immediately get recognised by everybody (37).

In *Iska* the anger and negative information piled up by the Igbo and the Hausa-Fulani against one another was let off on the day a fight broke out between the Igbo and the Hausa buyer at the market. The Hausa-Fulani might have been aggrieved for long about the Igbo shrewdness in business, while the Igbo must have loathed the Hausa-Fulani's "aristocratic indolence". These parties must have held strongly for long to their views about one another.

Musa Kaybi, Dan's father is a typical case of one holding strongly to a position or a view. His views represent extreme views in any society. His son's insistence on marrying outside of their ethnic group and religion provides clarification for the father as well as the society. It goes also a long way to show that ethnic relation is an extension of family relation, however imperfect, and as such some of the hostility manifested in interethnic relations can be an extension of hostility expressed in interfamilial relations (Horowitz 62). Just as Dan battles to throw some light into what he believes to be his father's dark side, which borders on intolerance, Filia, for her part, rebels against her own mother's choice of husband for her. Filia's mother believes that Nafotim, the businessman cum politician is able to provide her daughter the security she needs in terms of material well-being and the supposed understanding that accompanies endogamy, that is, marriage within one's ethnic group.

Although the relationship between the Igbo and the Hausa-Fulani is of utmost concern to the author, his novel, *Iska*, is all the same a conscious exposition of the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations among the ethnic groups of Nigeria.

The episode in which Filia's mother tells Filia about an incident in the market between the Hausa and the Igbo (22-3) is an occasion of a conscious exposition of the degree of hostility between the rival ethnic groups as well as the implied causes of the outbreak of those hostilities. The incident of the Hausa man buying some potatoes at one shilling and the Igbo man adding three-pence on it to out-bargain the Hausa man leads to a fight that involves the Igbo and the Hausa (22-3). The fact that the writer chose such an incident meant that his consciousness would have been directed towards the reason for such hostilities against perceived strangers: the Igbo who are predominantly Christians resisted assimilating the cultural practices of their northern hosts, who are overwhelmingly Moslems and whose cultural practices are infiltrated with Islamic culture. As a result of this, the Igbo are seen as complete strangers and infidels even when Nigeria is a secular state. For Ismene Zarifis, "Nigerian constitution upholds the ideals of a secular state by prohibiting the adoption of an official religion under Article 10, and guaranteeing the freedom of religion in Article 38 [...] (22)." The economic superiority of the Igbo in the host's territory complicates the already strained relationship. The Igbo man who paid more to have the potatoes must have felt he was richer than the Hausa man who was willing to buy the potatoes for one shilling. It was absolutely natural for the Hausa man to feel humiliated because he could not buy the potatoes he loved: the Igbo man offered more than he did to have them. Therefore, arrogance of wealth or economic disparity, just as arrogance of power, has the capacity of arousing ill-feeling and resentment (Osaghae & Suberu 17) among the ethnic groups in the polity. Their conflict, apparently, found its root in their differentially distributed needs (Stratmann 142): the Hausa-Fulani are economically poor and may therefore covet the Igbo wealth; the Igbo are politically poor and may therefore covet the Hausa political power. The interplay between the two could get sustenance from many other material, psychological, and existential factors.

In the course of the fight between the two, the Hausa colleagues that came -instead of trying to find out what was wrong -joined their brother to fight the Igbo man, just as the Igbo colleagues that came joined, without questioning, their brother to fight the Hausa men. This singular act by the parties involved shows that there has always existed among them this strong feeling of animosity that was seeking a favourable time and event to live itself out.

Causes of Ethnic Conflict as evident in *Iska*

Ekwensi, among other things, chose money or economic disparity as one of the external sources of conflict. In a capitalist society like Nigeria, being rich could also be tantamount to getting whatever one wants, even if it means having to do away with a sense of morality. In *Iska*, Iloma Enu believes it is not fair for the Igbo buyer to top money on the price already given by the seller of the potatoes to the Hausa buyer. But, once the seller is ever willing to sell his or her ware to the highest bidder, without any sense of ethical responsibility, the willing buyer will always buy the ware at whatever price as long as he or she finds utility in what he or she buys regardless of how hurt the loser in the capital market feels. Yet again, it is this sense of loss and pain at the mockery seemingly made of his poverty that could make the Hausa buyer take recourse to his repository of negative information piled up against the Igbo in his structure of feelings.

A lot of other psychological factors can aid external factors, that is, wealth or economic disparity and natural resources, in the case of Ekwensi's *Iska* as is argued by Horowitz on his thesis on the advanced-group-and-backward group psychology, whereby the advanced groups see themselves and are seen as hardworking, intelligent and progressive and see the backward groups as lazy and failures and lacking in dynamism (233).

The mass of stored information which is the premise upon which each group bases its opinion of the other groups is expressed by the characters in *Iska* in the persons of Musa Kaybi, Dan Musa's father, the patients in the ward of the hospital, where Dan Musa was hospitalised at the time he had sustained injury as a result of his intervening between the Igbo and the Hausa groups that were fighting among themselves.

We must remember that Musa Kaybi had wanted his son to know that he was born a Northerner. And that if he studied the Koran and visited the Mosque, he would see the reason he would not marry a girl from the South nor associate with other tribes (30-1). In other words, it may be assumed that an average Northern Moslem, probably, sees mingling with other tribes as an act of sacrilege.

When one of the patients in the same hospital with Dan Kaybi wonders whether Dan actually knows that the Southerners hate the Northerners, one begins to wonder as well how the patient came to the knowledge that the Southerners hate the Northerners. And if the chances of Musa Kaybi, Dan's father, of becoming a director depended on his maintaining the status-quo, that is, ensuring that there was no intermingling among the various ethnic groups, it could then be concluded that the kind of information let out to the public in the North could be such that could only make them feel hated by the southern people, because the information could always be politically motivated. Again it could be said that the model of conflict engineered by people like Musa Kaybi is such that is based on a system of reward (Jarmon 55).

The social circumstances in *Iska* as well as their implications are very explicit with regard to the rigid structural and institutional imbalance in Nigeria so much so that it is virtually impossible for a Southerner living in the North to see himself as a *bona-fide* member of the Northern society and vice-versa (Jarmon 55).

A character in the novel, Hankuri Chemist, describes the North as a Moslem country. Therefore, he expects every Easterner coming to the North to try to learn some Hausa or Arabic. Not only that, he expects them to intermarry with the Northerners, just as he also expects them to become Moslems in order to be fully integrated in the Northern society. He believes himself to be so far a Northern Nigerian even though he comes originally from Eastern Nigeria.

While Dan believes learning Hausa or Arabic, becoming a Moslem and intermarrying are all ways of solving the problem, he doubts whether everyone who leaves his village can sacrifice everything like that just to be accepted (*Iska*, 39-40).

Iska is, probably, set at the time when Nigeria still practiced regionalism because of the recurrent mentioning of Northern and Eastern Nigeria in the text. While regionalism was capable of fostering development at individual pace, it created a sense of one being a stranger in a different country in another region of the same country as Ekwensi portrayed in the work. However, this sense of being a stranger in a particular region of one's country persists even with the abolition of regionalism and the creation of states, because the immanent diversity and cultural differences have not been appreciated positively.

At the present, there are no regions anymore in Nigeria. Instead, there are states, which have broken regional loyalty based on common ethnicity. However, the quest for political power by the ethnic groups has necessitated geopolitical rearrangements based again on ethnicity and

common interests; hence the South-south, South-east, South-west, North-east, North-west and the North-central geopolitical zones now exist (Osaghae & Suberu 20-22).

Conclusion and Recommendations

As could be seen, the text, *Iska*, is a realist text that reflected Nigeria's challenges of Nationhood. It exposes the level of distrust among the ethnic groups and how politicians exploit the ethnic and religious differences of Nigerians and leave them at the mercy of their whims and caprices. Properly examined, *Iska* is a conflict story that could through which ethnicity in Nigeria was defamiliarized by the writer so that he could shock us into being familiar again with the cankerworm and its debilitating effects. The text made us see the role of prejudice, stereotype, envy and jealousy in fueling ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. The protagonist even suggests inter-ethnic marriages as panacea to the problem of ethnicity in Nigeria. The protagonist also suggested the possibility of Christian Igbos in the North to convert to Islam since Islam is the predominant religion in the North, where Igbos live; indeed, understanding and tolerance are suggested in the text and these, too, are recommendations a social scientist studying ethnic conflict situation in Nigeria may probably proffer.

Works Cited

- Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001.
- Diaces, David. *Literature and Society*. Burntisland: Haskell House Publishers. 1970
- Ekwensi, Cyprian. *Iska*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1981.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970
- Horowitz, Donald. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Jarmon, Charles. *Nigeria: Reorganisation and Development since the Mid-twentieth Century*. Leiden: EJ Brill, 1988.
- Magnet, Myron. *What Use is Literature*. *City Journal*, (2003): n.p
- Osaghae, Eghosa and Rotimi T. Suberu. "A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria." *Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, Crises Working Paper* No. 6 January 2005: 17.
- Otite, Onigu et al. *Ethnic Groups and Conflict in Nigeria*. Ibadan: The Lord's Creations, 2001.
- _____ *Community Conflicts in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1999..
- Wilmot, W.W and Hocker, J.L. *Interpersonal Conflict*. Boston Massachusetts: McGraw Hill, 1998.
- Wimmer, Andreas. Et al.(eds.). *Facing Ethnic Conflicts: Toward A New Realism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. 2004
- Zartmann, William I. [ed.]. *Governance as Conflict Management: Politics and Violence in West Africa*. New York: Brookings Institution Press, 1997.