

## Social Support as an African Norm: A Study of Ikenna Okeh's *Deportee*

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### Abstract

This study specifically examines social support as a norm in the Igbo society of the western Africa using Ikenna Okeh's *Deportee*. With the use of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this study explores the African standard of social support as portrayed in the novel. Through the explorations of some characters in the novel, this research examines the writer's presentation of African view on social support and the effects of its denial on those who need it. It is ascertained that despite the fact that social support is an African norm, everybody is not readily available to conform to it. It is equally discovered that family and friends are the key sources of social support, and that emotional pain and anxiety are the major effects of the denial of social support on the deprived. This paper is a call to Africans to imbibe the attitude of social support for one another as that is an antidote to dejection and depression which could lead to loss of life and property.

**Keywords:** social support, norm, oral tradition, deportee, psychoanalysis

### Introduction

In the pre-colonial African society, oral tradition occupied a significant status because it was completely acknowledged as the embodiment of the philosophy and wisdom of the people. Oral tradition, which is the total of all the testimonies about the past orally handed down from one generation to another, includes knowledge, memories, norms, values, and symbols generally created with the words of mouth. These possess a non-literacy nature because they are conceived in a non-literate society and are also founded on anonymity where no particular individual is said to be an originator of any given form of oral tradition which include proverbs, riddles, folktales, folk songs, myths and legends, folk dance, etc. (Finnegan 2012). Admonitions and approvals are given using these principles as stances, and the socially accepted behaviours are equally imbued in them. This is to say, therefore, that they serve as laws because they control human behaviours thereby engendering peaceful and harmonious co-existence of citizens.

The Igbo philosophies of *O nury ube nwanne agbana oso* and *Onye aghana nwanne ya* are the bases of this paper. Literally, the proverbs are translated as “A sibling's cry should not be ignored” and “One should not leave one's sibling behind” respectively. It is a norm among the Igbo people of Nigeria in West Africa that a person's predicament is a concern of his relatives and that no one should be left behind in struggles of life because there is strength in unity. Achebe clearly depicts this attitude in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo, in his earlier days borrowed some yam seedlings from Nwakibie. Again, when he is exiled from Umuofia, Okonkwo is sheltered by his maternal uncles at Mbanta. He is given some pieces of land to cultivate and some yam seedlings are contributed for him too. These two proverbs, in essence, are calls for brotherly support as that is the only way the society experiences peace and progress.

Lack of social support is among the major factors that hinder individual and community development in Africa. When a needy is denied of help or rejected by his immediate society, he is bound to suffer some psychological pain which may advance into deadly actions or cause some security challenges thereby derailing the society from the path of progress. This study, therefore, is an investigation into the African standard of social support, and is carried out using Ikenna Okeh's *Deportee*. Specifically, this study explores the writer's presentation of Africans' view of social support as well as the effects of denial and rejection on the needy.

The concepts of social support, norm, oral tradition, deportee, and psychoanalysis are reviewed for a better understanding of the topic under study. Social support, according to Drageset (138), refers to “any process through which social relationships might provide health and well-being”. Dean and Lin (qtd. in Song et al. 5), opine that it is the “functions of primary groups that meet instrumental and expressive needs”. It helps in both mental and physical health because it reduces psychological distress such as depression or apprehension during traumatic times. Social support expresses love and care from people, and the fact that the recipient is valued or held in a high esteem. This support, according to Taylor (192) “may come from a partner, relatives, friends, coworkers, social and community ties and even a devoted pet”.

Norm, another concept under review, is defined by Teilanyo (66) as the “guidelines of how we should or should not behave that have a basis in morality”. Norms offer certain rules for behaviour; they are specific behavioural models, rules and guides. Though some norms are culture-bound in the sense that they describe attitudes, practices, or behaviours that are morally accepted by a particular culture, others are universal because they are widely found and accepted in many other parts of the world. In other words, some certain behaviours which are considered important among Africans may have little or no importance in

Western societies. Paluck (596) sees norm as a “socially shared definitions of the way people do behave or should behave”. This is in line with the part toed by Granovetter that norms are shared ideas about the proper way to behave. This explains the unique feature of norms: they are learnt, established, and utilized when there is a contact between persons (35). Teilanyo, drawing a difference between norms and values, asserts that “values are the beliefs about what is important, while the norms are the behaviour and attitudes that support and indicate these values. It can also be said that values are manifested through norms” (66 – 7).

For a better understanding of the concept of deportee, it is pertinent to delineate the concept of deportation. Deportation is “a practice of forced removal of unwanted individuals or groups of people from a given territory” (Drotbohm 1). From this definition, it is deduced that a deportee is one who is deported. As defined by The International Civil Aviation Organization, it is “a person who had legally been admitted to a State by its authorities or who had entered a State illegally, and who at some later time is formally ordered by the competent authorities to leave that State” (ICAO 3). It is indisputable that this group of individuals is thrown into some psychological conditions right from the time of arrest – because the first step in the process of deportation is the arrest of the victim – through the jail or detention centre before he/she is eventually let out of the territory.

This research is anchored on Sigmund Freud's proposition of psychoanalytic theory. In this theory, Freud, an Austrian neurologist, opined that the unconscious plays a major role in the behaviour, feeling, and words of individuals who are not aware of its presence or operations. The tripartite psyche is an important aspect of Freud's psychoanalysis because it is here that he described the mind as having three operative parts namely; the id, the superego, and the ego. McLeod (2016) has it that the id engages in primary process thinking which is primitive, illogical, irrational, and fantasy oriented. The ego which makes use of

reason, on its part, seeks to consider the rules of behaviour. It seeks for other means through which the demands of id will be realistically achieved without any ugly effect on the society. This it does through either compromising or a postponement of id's satisfaction. The third which is the superego is an agency that seeks to enforce the striving for perfection as it holds out to the ideal standards and moralistic goals of the ego. It can as well retaliate against the imperfections of the ego by inducing guilt (Dobie 2012). The superego deals with the values and norms of the society.

This theory is considered appropriate for this study because there are revelations of the unconscious and the manifestation of the Freudian tripartite psyche as seen in writer's presentation of the characters.

#### **Social Support as an African Norm as Portrayed in the Text**

In *Deportee*, one of the novels long-listed for 2022 The Island Prize, Okeh presents a story of Anayo, a Northern Cyprus deportee who feels stranded and apprehensive on his return to Nigeria because he is penniless and disappointed in himself for the reason that he has fallen short of his people's expectations. The writer tells of his protagonist's predicaments and the social support he gains from his family and friends which consequently aids him in regaining his pride as he later migrates to Bulgaria. Okeh could be said to fall in the category of those novelists described by Nwachukwu-Agbada as the "Nigerian debut novelists at the turn of the new century ... who consciously want to say something new, create ferment in the artistic arena and consciously imbue their writing with a new vigor" (544). The title of the text alone makes an intentional and strident statement; a kind of tag borne by a certain group of people in the society. This particular group, in essence, only needs the support of people in their immediate environment to detach the tag from themselves.

The African norm of social support is vividly presented in this novel. Social support is portrayed as a guideline of how Africans should behave, and this has a basis on morality. The Glory Land Book Club (2022), in a review of the novel, opined that every man, overtly or otherwise, is a deportee needing help, adjustment of attitude, and some hope to grip on. This buttresses the importance of social support in our society. Okeh, through his story, upholds it as a proper way to behave, bringing the writer's role as a teacher to the fore. In an interview with Onuoha Chris of Vanguard Newspapers, in 2022, the writer succinctly asserts that his intention of writing the novel is majorly for entertainment and enlightenment. The writer condemns those characters that hear a brother's cry and decide not to come to their aid, through the effect of their actions on the protagonist. Loneliness is the opposite of social support, and "emotional support, belonging in a social community, being valued, practical help, and information and guidance" are encapsulated in social support (Drageset 137). These are offered to Okeh's deportee protagonist by his immediate family, extended family, friends, as well as women. These groups of people save the protagonist from going totally into depression which Bhowmik et al. describe as being "among the leading cause of disability worldwide" (42). For emotional support, Anayo's family is not found wanting; his parents and siblings throw their weight behind him despite the fact that they part with two plots of land to enable his migration to Northern Cyprus. Upon hearing of his son's deportation, Maazi Oji quickly refurbishes his house so that the sight of things will not throw his son into depression. The phone call conversation which Anayo has with his family to inform them of his arrival into Nigeria is one of the first cooling agents for his anxiety. Okeh puts it thus:

The phone call had gone on for longer than he had expected and there was no hint of sadness at the other end despite his fears. If anything, everyone's excitement for his return had rubbed off on him, and he'd felt the urge like never before to get home as quickly as he could. His mother asked to know what food he missed the most so

she'd make it for him. (71)

He is well received at home and everybody ensures that he lacks nothing. Although the consequences of deportation can be devastating to both the deportee and his loved ones, Anayo's family proves *Onye aghana nwanne ya* ideology to the letter. His father, Maazi Oji plays his fatherly role in dropping some pieces of advice for his son, guiding him, and rendering some practical help to him such as giving him the permission to take his car and go wherever he wishes. To Anayo's father, returning from the foreign land in good health is paramount.

The extended family is another source of social support in *Deportee*. This is portrayed in the characters of Ify, the protagonist's cousin, and her husband, Uka. The home of this couple in Aba is the protagonist's saving abode as he journeys from Abuja to Obigbo where his immediate family resides. Because his journey to Obigbo continues into the dark hours of the day, Anayo, ignorant of what areas are safe to ply at night, decides to pass the night in Aba and continue his journey the following day. The couple happily welcomes him and tries as much as possible to have him lodged in a hotel because they feel that he will be more comfortable there. It is when it becomes impossible to get a hotel accommodation due to early weekend rush that the couple resorts to taking Anayo to spend the night at their home. Despite being out of job, Uka finds it important to help Anayo in any possible way because he sees his hospitable acts as the proper thing to do; that which is expected of him as a relative; a norm. Uka, not only provides accommodation for Anayo but gives him some words of encouragement as he helps him to unwind in an outdoor bar over some bottles of drink.

Song et al. assert that social support “is accessible to an individual through the social ties to other individuals ...” and “the content of social ties” (5). This social tie is manifested in the novel under study through some characters who prove their friendship

with the protagonist. Friends such as Chike, Zion, Dede, and Ozo are used to exemplify the principle of *O nuru ube nwanne aghana oso*. Despite the fact that there are the likes of Blondie, Abuchi and Jonas who despise him because of his predicament, these four prove themselves as friends in need who, definitely, are friends indeed. Chike provides him with emotional support, renders some practical help to him, as well as ensuring that he does the right thing despite his fears and apprehensions. He ensures Anayo's peace and safety when he first arrives in Nigeria and lodges in an Abuja hotel, and visits him as often as possible in his hotel room. Dede, on his own part, is his advisor and confidant while he is at Obigbo. The moral support which he provides for Anayo is estimable as he takes him for evening strolls round their neighbourhood and encourages him in his escapades with women as well as the necessity of facing his life and ambitions not minding the gossips that fly around the town. Dede advises Anayo that his condition as a deportee is the best time for him to get a woman who will take him for who he is and not what he can offer. Anayo then goes in search of Chikaodi who, at the end, is disappointed in his lack of sexual prowess and the fact that he returns with nothing. It is Dede who convinces Anayo to seek financial help from his friends who reside abroad. Zion is one of them, a good friend of his whom he always runs to whenever he needs a financial assistance.

The social support given to Okeh's protagonist offers him the courage to join his family to celebrate the Christmas in his home town. There, he attends a wedding ceremony where he courageously joins Ozo and some other young men of his town to relax and have some good time. Ozo commends Anayo's courage in handling the ugly incident and condemns his own brother who “is too ashamed to return to the neighbourhood” (Okeh 119). While he is with Ozo and other friends, Anayo realizes that he has surmounted the stigma of deportation, and the worries about what people think of him. Instead, he feels delighted that he is being used as a model of resilience to others.

Lastly, women also provide a form of succour to Anayo. The Glory Land Book Club Book Review (n.p.) has it that Anayo engages in them – as many as will not see him as a failure – while not wanting to commit to any. The women in Nigeria, unlike those he meets abroad, are good enough for the release of sexual tension, and so he jumps from Fiona to Chikaodili, and then Oma, Anne, and the prostitutes, including Mercy who offers herself even while she is in her monthly period. Okeh puts it that “women had become for him a perfect grace from the despair that deportation offered” (Okeh 135).

Additionally, this study investigates the effects of denial and rejection on the needy as portrayed in the novel. Taking Anayo, the novel's protagonist as a paradigm, one deduces emotional pain and anxiety as major effects of denial and rejection on the needy. It starts with Angelina's polite rejection of him when he arrives Abuja. That sustains his anxiety as he wonders what the situation will be at home with people who “are not so cultured and are known to throw their sentiments and feelings at people's faces” (Okeh 41). He feels disappointed when Abuchi, his childhood friend apparently ignores his company while he is at his home town for Christmas; and he feels ostracized when Jonas, his cousin denies him of financial help. The pain worsens when Jonas's mother and siblings begin to avoid him. Moreover, the entire Obigbo has him as the major topic of their gossip and all of those cause him some degrees of emotional pain. The social support he receives from family and friends together with his desire to prove his mockers wrong pushes him to try and achieve leaving Nigeria the second time.

### **Conclusion**

This study borders on the presentation of African view on social support and the effects of its denial on those who need it. It is discovered in this research that notwithstanding the truth that social support is an African norm, everybody is not enthusiastically and willingly available to measure up to it. It is

equally discerned that family and friends are the foremost sources of social support, and that emotional pain and anxiety are the major effects of the denial of social support on the deprived. This paper is a call for Africans to see the necessity of imbibing the attitude of social support for one another. This behaviour will help bring remedies to some emotional breakdown such as dejection and depression, and that can forestall loss of life and property.

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