

Societal Disequilibrium in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart": Identifying the Key Issues

Alfred Dakoru Osomkume (Phd)^{1*}, Eke Regina Akudo¹

¹Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria

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*Corresponding author: Alfred Dakoru Osomkume (Phd)

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria

Abstract

Objectives: This work thematically x-rayed the Igbo society and its culture, the impact of colonialism in Africa, cultural and religious conflict in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart". The novel captures the spirit of the African society during the transitional period. It delineates the encounter between the culture of Igbo tribes and the British culture necessitated by colonialism. Achebe's Things Fall Apart portrays the African culture, tradition, social life, rituals and religion as well as the role religion plays in shaping people's mind and behavior. It examines the impact of western religion on Igbo society/Africans at large that were happy with their religion. It elucidates the peculiarities in Igbo culture and tradition, especially the beauties and wisdom of its art and institutions. Achebe uses the novel to correct the misrepresentation of African culture and religion in Europeans literatures. It criticizes certain aspect of the African cultures that are inhuman and exposes the religious and cultural conflict between the western and African. The novel reveals the benefits of western civilization in Africa and these valuable benefits they acquired made them handicapped to fight their colonizers. Achebe delineated the colonial influenced on the African culture and religion. It also portrays the exploitation of the colonial masters under the cover of religion. It elucidates how the Africans suffered and lost their cultures and values due to the external forces that were beyond their control.

Keywords: Africa, Society, Colonialism, Culture, Religion.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart was his first important and famous work, published in 1958. About the time that Nigeria declared its independence from Britain, the novel was penned. In this tale, we see the disastrous results of Africa's contact with Europe. The work by Achebe perfectly reflects the mood of Africa at this time of change. It describes the clash between Igbo tribal tradition and British culture that colonialism forced upon the people of Africa. Against the backdrop of the British and Christian cultures, the values and ideals of African culture are described in great detail. In his article "Chinua Achebe and the Creation of African Culture," Simon Gikandi discusses the colonial fears stoked by the book.

During the 1950s, Africans were encouraged to leave the "tribal" culture and darkness in order to advance in their studies to the sweetness and light of colonial institutions. ... Things Fall Apart is as anxious about its colonial context as other texts from this

period; at the same time, however, it seems to exist in excess of this context; for a novel written within colonialism, it seems confident about its ability to represent its African background as it is of its power to manage the colonial anxieties that generated it in the first place (Gikandi, 2001).

Achebe uses his literary work "Things Fall Apart" to express his desire to reawaken in the life of Africans the consciousness of a lost values and identity caused by the colonizers.

The Igbo Society in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

Achebe in his novel portrays an Igbo culture, showcasing the distinctiveness of the African cultures from the European culture. The people were majorly farmers. They work very hard in order to earn a living. They lived happily and were contented. Igbo people were hospitable by nature, have great respect for elders. The Igbo people were famous for wrestling and loved watching wrestling, dancing, telling didactic folk tales

to their children under the moon light and enjoying music, (Banupriya, 2017). Achebe uses the novel to elucidate his cultural heritage, Oral traditions, rituals, social life, family ties and Igbo Religion.

Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" delineates the Igbo tribe as a self-governing people. They had no king or government to rule over them. It is a popular saying in Igbo that; (Igbo enwe Eze) meaning Igbos has no King/ruler. There was a council of elders consisting of great men from the nine clans to decide all the political issue in democratic way as portrayed in the novel. Criminals were punished on the basis of the decisions arrived at in the assembly of elders who were mostly guided by traditional laws of the clan in this context. This was portrayed in the novel when all Umuofia gathers together under the leadership of the elders (Ndi Ichie) and during these meetings everybody can speak his mind. They have developed a fairly democratic system of government where "a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" as Okonkwo was not judged according to his father's worth rather according to his own worth, his might. Igbo people also have developed a well-established and effective justice system. They always work together to settle the disputes among themselves or with other clans. This was elucidated in the novel when a member of their clan was killed by another clan; all the nine villages of Umuofia came together in the market place and decided to convey a message to Mbaino asking them to choose between wars or to offer a young man and a virgin as compensation." (Things Fall Apart, 15). They followed the due process. Everything seemed to work out in a harmonious manner as the people of Umuofia work together to settle the disputes among themselves or with other clans.

Many Africans value community life. They got along well enough to share a home. They have had one another's backs through thick and thin. Okonkwo's uncle, his mother's brother Uchendu, and Okonkwo's kids all helped him out when he was exiled in Mbato for seven years. He was allotted properties on which to cultivate and construct. Uchendu reassured him that she was a safe place and that his mother was supreme. Obierika was a good buddy of Okonkwo. Although Okonkwo was away in exile for seven years, he took care of his farm at Umuofia and sent the crop money to his buddy at Mbato.

The Igbo people celebrate two important festivals 'A week of peace' and 'the new yam festival'. These festivals not only provided them the opportunity of eating, drinking and merry-making in an assembly but also helped Igbo people to develop intimacy among them.

Cultural Conflict in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

Western fictions portray Africans as primitives and people without culture. Therefore, Achebe wants to write back to the Western canon, correcting the misrepresentations of Africa in western fiction. His defense of African culture against western invasions and prejudices is not one sided and without depth. There are many disturbing elements to the traditional Igbo culture portrayed in the character of Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart and Achebe does not try to hide them.

According to Akers, R. (1993), Achebe's goal is to showcase the unique aspects of Igbo culture and tradition, such as the aesthetic value and philosophical depth of Igbo art and institutions. Achebe also shows its flaws, which need to be corrected and which contribute to its demise. European fiction and literature often portrayed Africans in negative ways. They are looked down upon as being unsophisticated and uneducated. Europeans' stereotypical depictions of Africans are simplistic and rooted in racism. Heart of Darkness author Joseph Conrad paints a brutal picture of Africans, saying things like, "And these guys too had no earthly reason for any type of scruple." Restraint! I could as well have hoped for self-control from a hyena scavenging among the war dead (Conrad, J. 2013). That's how the Europeans viewed Africa, at least. Things Fall Apart, written by Achebe, provides a counterpoint to the picture painted in Heart of Darkness. Achebe's goal in writing Things Fall Apart was to provide Africa a literary platform. The racism and bigotry against Africans in Heart of Darkness was another target of his crusade. To counteract this stereotyping of Africa, he wrote Things Fall Apart. From the outset, it is evident that Achebe's goal was to dismantle the stereotypical European vision of Africa through education. Restoring Africans' "dignity and self-respect" is one of its stated goals. Things Fall Apart, as told by Achebe himself, is a narrative about the demise of a civilization that had "deep depth, ideals, and beauty," all of which were lost due to imperialism. The novel provides a detailed comparison of the British value system and religion to that of Africa, highlighting the ways in which these two systems differ.

The novel Things Fall Apart depicts the everyday life in an African village, thereby showcasing the beauty and complexities of Igbo society, while also criticising certain aspects of that society/culture such as the treatment of twins, killing of an innocent boy Ikemefula in place of someone else's crime (Moseley, K. 2017) etc.

The Portrayal of Religious conflict in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

We also learn about Igbo religion and customs and see how religion is a fundamental pillar in Igbo society. The novel shows the Westerners arriving in

Umuofia village as missionaries. Achebe explores the effects that the missionaries and Christianity have on the Igbo society.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* elucidates the Igbo religious practices before the emergence of the missionaries. It portrays that Igbo people have and worship many gods. Amidst these many gods, there is one God (Chukwu) who is supreme above other gods. They believe that this supreme God (Chukwu) is the creator of other gods. The supreme God (Chukwu) is unseen and unreachable. Therefore, they pray to these other smaller gods that they can see to mediate on their behalf to the supreme God (Chukwu).

They offer sacrifices to these small gods to appease them by offering kola nut, pouring libation with palm wine and making incantations to their ancestors. Among these small gods are two most important deities (Amadioha) god of thunders and lightning, (Ala) god of fertility or earth goddess. They believe that god of thunder strikes without mercy whoever that does evil in the land. Ala is female and the god of the land; as such she controls the earth's fertility. Ala is the female goddess (deity) of the earth, morality, fertility, and creativity in Igbo culture. Ala rules over the underworld and holds the deceased ancestors in her womb. Her name literally translates to "ground" in the Igbo language, denoting her powers over the earth and her status as the ground itself. They believe that god of fertility gives them a bumper harvest since they depend on land for survival. With human fertility, Ala is credited for the productivity of the land.

We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without their blessings, our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil. ... The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish (P. 29).

They strive not to dishonor the god of fertility else, they will have a fruitless harvest and there will be starvation in the land. The earth goddess makes their land fertile so that they can produce a fruitful harvest. Ala is worshiped by the Igbo of Nigeria and it is annually paid homage to during the new yam festival. She is the judge of land ownership disputes, and she is the source of morality and laws. As the goddess of morality, Ala is involved in judging human actions and is in charge of Igbo law, customs and tradition known as *Omenala*. She is feared more than any other gods. She is the queen of the earth.

They share a belief that the dead sees, therefore, they call on their ancestors for protection and to also bring luck and blessings upon them. They honour them by invoking their presence, praying for life, good health during the breaking of kola nut.

Their religious belief helps to shape their moral beliefs because they fear to offend the gods. Whoever offends the gods or commits a taboo against the land will go in for it. This was exemplified when Okonkwo committed suicide; they refuse to bury the corpse. Obierika exclaims in the novel thus; "we cannot bury him, only strangers can do it ... and now he will be buried like a dog". Some cultural traditions and festivals were guided by religious practices. Their religion has powerful influence on them. They were happy with their religion and try to uphold their religious values. They never saw anything wrong with their religion until the emergence of the missionaries.

The advent of white man's religion and laws led to the downfall of African tradition and culture. The white men imposed their religion on the people of Umuofia thereby making mess of their religion and culture. This was evident in the novel where Obierika and Okonkwo discussed how the white men has succeeded in pulling down the wall that bind them together which brought about the downfall of the tribal civilization: thus;

...The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceful with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (p.160).

Achebe depicts the havoc the coming of the missionaries caused and how it has distorted their happy living. When the missionaries came, they preached Christ, established churches and see the Igbo religion as primitive and an idle worship. They condemned and preached against polytheistic religion. Okonkwo being protective of his religion as depicted in the novel could not swallow seeing them destroy their religion. He resisted their new religion (Christianity).

In western religion, they pray to God directly by giving thanks to Him for His blessings and asking for His protection and favours. This is totally different from Igbo religion where they pray to their ancestors, asking them to mediate between them and the Almighty God. The Western religion and the African traditional religion were completely different and conflicting as portrayed in the novel. Igbo religion believes in offering sacrifices of animals and humans to appease the gods. The western religion does not accept that. They see no need of shedding blood either human or animal since Christ has shed His blood for humanity. He died once and for all for our sins. Igbo people marry more than one wife. They are polygamous in nature. They see it as pride and might. The western missionaries preached against it. They encourage (monogamy) one man, one wife.

African Igbo people were astounded to hear about monotheistic religion. They have always known and believed in worshipping many gods. They hoped that their gods being many would out-power and destroy the Christian God that is one God. They designated the evil forests for the Christians to build their churches. When the missionaries requested for land to build their churches at Mbato, they gave them evil forest so that their gods will destroy churches after 28 days and strike them dead. To their greatest chagrin, the missionaries waxed very high and grew higher in number. The Christians share a belief that the Igbo gods are man-made, powerless and harmless. The natives were demoralized when they observed that their gods have failed them. Instead of the Christian faith to be downgraded, they grow stronger in faith and in number. Many natives were being converted on daily basis. They built their churches in many different villages and attracted many converts to Christianity. These external forces created unrest and havoc to the peaceful existence and happy life of the Igbo people. Initially, only the weak members of the clan embraced the new religion but later on, other members of the clan joined.

Okonkwo was devastated and infuriated when his first son Nwoye joined the missionaries and embraced the new religion, he disowned him. The external forces were too much for Okonkwo to bear. His kinsmen were not ready to go to war; the natives who were converted joined forces against their own brothers. They became worse enemies against their own people. They succeeded in dividing the people among themselves thus; things fall apart and the centre cannot hold. Obierika in his remark expressed this “Our own men and sons have joined the ranks of the strangers. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government.” “How do you think we can fight when our own brother have turned against us”.

Impact of Colonialism in African society

However, Achebe uses the novel *Things Fall Apart* to elucidate the impact of colonialism in Africa. The westerners came with their religion, imposed their government on the people and became their master. The natives became disintegrated when the colonial power set up its government, courts of justice, prisons and agencies for trade and commerce. The government began to enforce its laws. Igbo people who did not abide by the white men’s laws were thrown behind the bars. Even the members of the council of elders were not spared. They were insulted, beaten and tortured. They were released only after the people had paid the penalty of 250 cowries. The natives were exploited in all ramifications. Those who opposed and resisted their rules were imprisoned. They lost their values. The people have no moral courage to face the challenge that befalls them. The racial nature of the whites was portrayed in the character of Mr. Smith. He segregates between black and white, called the Igbo people the sons of darkness.

Obierika and his friend Okonkwo in their discussion about the downfall of their custom have this to say; “that the white man came quietly with his religion, we allowed him to stay because we looked at his attitude as foolish. Now he has won our brothers to his religion. We can no longer act like one, we have falling apart”.

Achebe was not unaware of the benefits the Africans got from the westerners thus; they improved our commerce and provided the social amenities like hospital and schools. Unfortunately, these benefits offered to Africans made them to be colonized, enslaved and tamed the spirit of resistance to whatever that threatens their way of life. It made them unwilling to fight against these people that brought these valuable benefits to them for the first time. The westerners successfully colonized their will power, their conscience and their being.

When Okonkwo realizes that his people were unwilling to heed to his lone cry of war against the colonizer, he became more devastated and envisage the death of the tribe. Instead, the large crowd stands aside to let just four messengers, coming from the commissioner with an order to halt the meeting immediately, pass. Okonkwo the mighty warrior and epitome of the tribal notions of self-respect and dignity, is unable to accept the humiliating adaptation of the new power and decides to put an end to his life, a life that had been consciously spent in the quest and defense of his cherished tribes.

CONCLUSION

The proverb “ whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life” refers to the fall of the traditional culture of Umuofia in face of the advent of the white man’s religion and cruel laws.

Achebe delineated the colonial influenced on the African culture and religion. It also portrays the exploitation of the colonial masters under the cover of religion. It elucidates how the Africans suffered and lost their cultures and values due to the external forces that were beyond their control. Achebe clearly and convincingly elucidates the conflict between the two cultures (western and African cultures) very well and beautifully as an insider.

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