

THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY ON CULTURE AND RELIGION IN *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract:

The novel, Things Fall Apart, was written by Chinua Achebe and was first published in 1958. The book deals with Okonkwo, the main character in the book, and his approach towards Christianity and the new Umuofia after his exile. The novel shows us the impact of a western culture on the Igbo society and how the citizens have to adapt to the new changes and beliefs. Achebe, through this story, wants to show the readers that, things, culture and relationships do fall apart as we read it. White men arrived in Africa as traders, missionaries and administrators. In this essay, I will talk about the influence of Christianity on the Igbo culture. Is the Igbo culture civilized or barbaric? Was the arrival of the white missionaries in Things Fall Apart positive or negative? My essay will be divided into four sections, each giving a different influence of Christianity on the Igbo culture.

Key words: *Umuofia, exile, relationship, missionaries, Igbo culture.*

Introduction

In his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe tells the story of how an Igbo village in the Niger region first encounters Christian missionaries and British colonial governors. He tells this story mainly from the view of the colonised, though in the language of the colonisers. This fact is noteworthy as it underscores Achebe's aim, not to say his mission, as a writer: "What I think a novelist can teach is something very fundamental, namely to indicate to his readers, to put it crudely, that we in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans. "Accordingly, two thirds of "Things Fall Apart" is dedicated to the depiction of the way of life, the cults and traditions, beliefs and social rules of the villages of Umuofia and Mbanta before the coming of the white man.

Although the events related in the novel are fictional, they represent the real happenings of the time in Igbo land. *Things Fall Apart* is history transformed into literature. Therefore it is worthwhile to take a closer look at its historical background and relevance, which is what I will do in this paper, with a special focus on the role and effect of the Christian missionaries. In order to do this, I shall deal with the 19th century Igbo culture in comparison to the Christian world view, the relation of mission and colonisation, and the missionaries' impact on the Igbo society.

The Igbo (or Ibo) are still today one of the biggest ethnic group in what is now Nigeria. Ethnologists are at odds about their origin, but most theories suggest that they have moved to the Niger region either from Egypt or from Israel (supposing a relation of the names "Hebrew" and "Igbo"). They brought their iron making technology with them and soon extended their area in wars against the neighbouring peoples. In this chapter, I want to shed light on how the Europeans predominantly saw the Igbo in the 19th century. Then I want to point out some prominent features of the Igbo culture and society in the context of "Things Fall Apart", and juxtapose these to the world view the missionaries have brought with them. Thus it will be shown how the cultural characteristics affect the relation between the local people and the white newcomers.

Abominations

As the "white man" does not understand the cultural background of the Igbo's strange ways and

cults, he can hardly make a fair judgement on them. However, some traditional practises of Umuofia must strike the Europeans as utterly barbarian. Among these are polygamy (see also 2.4.), the condemnation of *osu* (outcasts), who are compelled to live separated from the village and wear “long, tangled hair” as a “mark of [their] forbidden caste” (p. 156), and the throwing away of twins shortly after their birth (p. 61f); Ikemefuna is killed because “the Oracle of the Hill and the Caves has pronounced it” (p. 57); a child's dead body is mutilated when it is suspected to be an *ogbanje*, a child that keeps dying and returning to its mother's womb to get born again. (p. 78)

The inscrutable will of a god or an oracle is generally accepted as reason and justification for these practises even though from an objective point of view, they must rather be termed violations of human rights.

Religiosity

The reason given for the exclusion of the *osu* is a spiritual one, namely that an *osu* is “a person dedicated to a god” (p. 156). Moreover, lawsuits are brought before the *egwugwu*, the masked spirits of the ancestors (p. 93), and the ancestors are also prayed to with the breaking of the kola nut (p. 6). There seems to be a religious background for almost every paradigm of the Igbo society. D.E.O. Ogudo states that a “deep religiosity permeates all aspects of their life social, cultural, political” (37). As E.N. Emenyonu observes, “devotion to gods and ancestors is taken for granted”, and “no one dared question the decree of the gods as pronounced by the high priests” (84). While the ancestors play a role in prayer and social rites, the Igbo belief in gods (and God) is thus described by Ogudo: “Along with [their] belief in God (Supreme Being), the Igbo [...] believe also in a multitude of minor deities which are [...] subordinate to this supreme being” (37).

Given these facts, the major difference between the Christian and the Igbo belief seems obvious: Christians believe in salvation through Jesus Christ and do not worship their ancestors or any spirits of nature. However, the Igbo, despite their ancestral cults and fear of spirits “need no-one to tell them that without God, not even the strongest 'alusi' (spirit) can do anything” (F.A. Arinze, qtd. in Ogudo 38).

This God, Chukwu, is not only “generally acknowledged to be the ultimate recipient of every acts of cult” (Ogudo 41), he also shows some strikingly Christian features: “[He] is the supreme head and creator of all things, a benevolent and just God” (B.K. Nwazojie, qtd. in Ogudo 43).

Nevertheless, the Igbo “think it more courteous and more within man's range to appeal to the spirits to obtain requests from God” (F.A. Arinze, qtd. in Ogudo 40), whereas the Christians exclusively worship the one and only God, according to the Biblical Commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (The Holy Bible. Ex. 20,3). In “Things Fall Apart”, it is at this point that the tensions turn to conflicts: the killing of the sacred python (p. 157) and the unmasking of the *egwugwu* (p. 186) are both affronts against the belief in spirits. The Role of the Christian Missionaries in Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart'

Christianity has influenced the Igbo culture in many ways. The main influence is on the religion that tribes follow. The white missionaries bring a different set of beliefs and laws which are incompatible with Igbo traditions and practices. The church which is built by the Christians, contributes to the destruction of the clan. Many Umofians decide to convert to Christianity, as they feel they will get more freedom, comfort and they can be and do what the clan does not agree to. The converts are outcasts, people with no titles and women who had twins. Such people are mistreated in the Igbo society. Christianity is giving such people dignity. The converts have the chance to find their true identity. The missionaries begin to establish themselves through the church. The white men's power increases as they survive the Evil Forest. The missionaries say “We have been sent by the Great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die”. The power of the traditional gods is challenged by the survival of the missionary hut in the Evil Forest, in which, the unfortunate people, twins and 'ogbanje' children are thrown. Christianity points fingers to the beliefs of the Igbo culture. For many, Christianity is an answer for all their queries. People think that converting to Christianity means peace and

was better than the Igbo religion and its superstitions. "Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines." This shows that the converts and the missionaries no longer respect the views and beliefs of the Igbo clan. The converts know that they are protected by the white men and they feel that they have a 'greater god' than the Igbos. In Chapter 18, with the episode of the python, the belief of the Igbos in god strengthens and the death of the convert responsible proves that the gods still exist and do justice to its people. In a sense, despite the influence of Christianity, some of Igbo people still have firm belief in their gods.

The second major influence is on the legal system in the Igbo tribes. It has a major hand in the collapsing of the clan. The new rules also apply to the Igbo tribe members, which has people who do not wish to convert to Christianity. The imposition of an alien legal system confuses the Igbos and adds up to the hatred the Igbos have towards the white men and the converts. "â€¦ stories were already gaining ground that the white men had not only brought religion, but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary." Before the coming of the white men, decisions are made by the heads of the clan, the men with high titles. But now, these men have lost their place and there is the police to pass laws and give final verdicts and punishments. The new legal system proves to be neither just nor deserves praise. While the 'egwugwu' frequently settle land disputes both effectively and fairly, the colonial court's decisions result in conflict and murder. The previously accepted traditions now are punishable offenses. Soon, the prison is "full of men who had offended against the white men's law. Some of these prisoners have thrown away their twins, while some have molested Christians." This shows that to a great extent, the Igbo members of the society neither fear the Christians, nor are they scared of the new legal system and its laws. By building the Christian church and establishing a new legal system with their own western laws, the colonial government gradually makes the tribal legal procedure less effective and destroys traditional beliefs. This shows that the western culture is interfering in the day-to-day running of the Igbo government.

The third influence is on the education given by the Igbos. Educating people of different age groups in Umofia helped those who were eager for self-advancement, who soon realizes the potential of the schools. Hence, by educating the people of Umofia, the Christians do well to the place. The people are able to widen their knowledge. There is no harm in educating somebody. Mr. Brown, one of the missionaries, teaches the ambitious students. Mr. Brown is, understanding, patient and friendly, which make the people, feel welcomed and they would thus want to continue studying to become responsible. "More people came to learn in his school, and he encouraged them with singlets and towels. They were not all young, these people who came to learn." This shows that Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. "A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers." This tells us that Mr. Brown's school is effective and good. The students can become successful and can even educate others, keeping the trend of education. On the other hand, through education, Mr. Brown is luring the Umofians to convert. By aiming at the different age groups, he wants the maximum number of converts who will accept the religion and its beliefs. The 'singlets and towels' are forms of bribe as the Igbo have never used them. These items, therefore, symbolize luxury and also the mode of living of the white. By using such stuffs, they will feel superior to their fellow Umofians. Mr. Brown tries to become godly figure in the eyes of the people. Mr. Brown's 'polite and caring' nature helps him in his strategy to attract Umofians to convert.

The last striking influence is that on trade. Christianity takes hold over the community but the clan also benefits from the trade and prosperity which it brings with it. In Chapter 21, the influence is introduced. "The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umofia."

The coming of Christians brings money indirectly to the Igbos. By trading, they grow their knowledge about trading and other countries. Trading helps Umofia as they now have a trading store and get money to improve the place. The traders mostly trade palm oil and kernels. This buying and selling of goods changes Umofia. People now believe in the white missionaries and trust them better. This shows that the coming of Christianity in the Igbo society brings both positive and negative changes. This dealing requires manual skills and special training which might be given in Mr. Brown's school. But in Umofia, before the arrival of Christianity, money was not of great value as sharing and borrowing existed. The appearance of money, through trading, decreases fraternity and friendship that was once there among the citizens. In a sense, the evil has been introduced in Umofia. There is competition and people want to be rich, unlike before.

It goes without saying that “mission” and “colonisation” are two different things. Yet in 19th century history, and hence also in “Things Fall Apart”, they are so closely linked, that, especially from the perspective of the Africans, they can hardly be distinguished. I therefore want to point out the fundamental differences as well as the connections of mission and colonisation, and their relevance for the story told in “Things Fall Apart”.

To conclude, the Igbo culture, in *Things Fall Apart*, is presented as both good and bad. Achebe manages to a great extent, to destroy the myth of the African savage. He impresses the reader by the fact that the white men are not bringing civilization, but are destroying the society. It shows that the colonization of Africa by western powers perpetuated the stereotype of primitive African savage. In Part 1 and Part 2, Achebe portrays a long-established and orderly African society with its strict hierarchy of gods, elders and titled men and with its own customs and religious beliefs. As from the end of Part 2, the white missionaries decide to destroy the culture and create hatred among its citizens. I think that each culture has the right for its own systems and other modern cultures, intruding, will just result in misunderstandings and hatred among the people who belong to the separate cultures.

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