

The Decline of Igbo Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

A Literary Perspective

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* mirrors the Igbo ethnic group in South Eastern part of Nigeria and her culture in pre-colonial and colonial eras. This novel comes as a response to the negative depiction of Africans as savages, brutes, uncivilized and without culture by some European writers. Through the portrayal of Igbo culture, Achebe depicts Africans as people with established religious, judicial, political and economic systems. Before the coming of the colonialists, Africans already have set of rules and regulations that guide certain conducts in their society. From the novel, one observes that the justice system via the masquerade (Egwugwu) is much similar to the present day "Supreme Court" and its verdict is final. Also, issues affecting the entire community are discussed by all adult male children and decisions taken are implemented accordingly; religious functions are well defined and each deity worshiped has a priest that oversees the affairs of its worship and the economy of the people is hinged on agriculture. This paper discusses how these established culture and way of life declined following the British colonial incursion into the hinter land of Africa. This research is qualitative, permitting a postcolonial theoretical analysis of the text under study. It concludes on the note that Igbo culture has a long history but that culture is weakened by Western influences which may strangle it as those meant to preserve it are attracted to the culture of their new found masters- the colonialists.

Key Words: Culture, Literary Perspective, Chinua Achebe, Igbo and Decline

Introduction

The novel, *Things Fall Apart* is Chinua Achebe's reaction to the grim presentation of Africa by the colonialists. Before its publication in 1958, what is known literally about Africa comes from personal documentation and works of some European explorers and writers. Thus, the world is presented with a single story of Africa as a land full of savages parading as human beings. Achebe through the novel tells the story of Africa from an insider's perspective. Bekler (2014: 96), maintains that Achebe, through his works "changed the prejudices of those who had never been to Africa, and he managed to convert the negative ideas and feelings caused by the portrayal of his continent to positive ones". He shows through his novels, especially, *Things Fall Apart* that Africans are not savages; they have well established and organized society with strong sense of tradition and culture. He maintains that Africans are civilized with established judicial, religious, political and economic systems.

The novel which has its setting in pre-colonial and colonial Africa, presents to us a people whose collective destiny was truncated by the incursion of the colonialists. The novel begins at the height of Okonkwo's fame. We are told how he rose to fame through his personal achievements: he defeated his opponent in a wrestling bout and overcame the unfriendly weather to become one of the greatest farmers and one of the lords of Umuofia. Okonkwo has a humble beginning. His father Unoka is a loafer and a debtor who barely feeds his family. He impacts negatively on Okonkwo that he despises him and hates everything he stands for. He believes his father to have been weak, effeminate, lazy, ignominious, and poor. Consequently, Okonkwo strives to be strong, masculine, industrious, respected, and wealthy. In fact, the fear that he may end up like his father becomes the controlling force behind Okonkwo's actions. Achebe succinctly describes Okonkwo's predicament in the following lines:

With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor a young wife. But in spite of all these disadvantages, he had begun even in his father's lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. It was slow and painful. But he threw himself into it like one possessed. And indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death (Achebe, 1958:13).

This fear equally contributes to his many failings as he becomes too obsessed with what people will say than to what the tradition demands. This leads to his killing of Ikemefuna, against the tradition and warning of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, one of the elders in Umuofia. He tells him while announcing the verdict of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves not to have a hand in Ikemefuna's death for the boy calls him father (Achebe, 1958). He rules his entire family with iron hand and often scolds his son Nwoye who he sees as too effeminate. He flogs Ojiugo, his youngest wife during the Week of Peace, thereby committing a crime against the earth goddess. He equally beats his second wife, Ekwefi for allegedly killing his plantain tree and almost shut her with his gun. Okonkwo's killing of Ezeudu's son, though in advertently, the day the boy's father is buried ruins his ambition of taking the highest title in the land. Killing of a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess and the tradition of Umuofia demands, in this case, that he should go on exile for a period of seven years.

While in exile at his mother's land at Mbanta, the British imperialists came with their religion and government and take a stronghold in Umuofia. His son, Nwoye joins them against his wish. By the time he comes back to Umuofia after his exile, Okonkwo discovers that many things have changed. His clan has lost its spirit and has grown cold like leftover ash. He could not understand why the clan could not declare war on the Whitemen despite being provoked by them and their adherents. He decides to avenge himself after being humiliated by the prison guards even if the whole clan decides against that. He kills the Whitemen's chief messenger and then takes his life since his people allow the rest to escape.

Culture

Culture has been defined in various ways, and many of these definitions point to the fact that culture is "the way of life of a group of people". Hornby (2010:357) defines culture as "the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group." Taylor (1958) cited in Idang (2015:98) in his work *Primitive Culture* sees culture as that "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society". This definition which was made many decades ago has become a term of reference in the definition of culture by modern scholars. Taylor's definition entails that culture encompasses the entire life of a group of people. Taylor also emphasizes that culture is not inherent but a learned behaviour (Isidienu, 2021). Sociologists, according to Cole (2020) believe that culture "consists of values, beliefs, systems of language, communication and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a collective".

The importance of culture in a society cannot be over emphasized. Culture plays a crucial role in the everyday lives of the people in a given society. It helps in shaping their relationships socially, maintaining and challenging social order and equally determines how they make sense of the world and their place in it. On this note, Isidienu (2021) states that, "it is obvious that culture is an important phenomenon in human existence. Culture makes for a well fulfilled living. It gives meaning and hope for the future. Culture is a harmonized living that gives a society an identity and so remarkable in the life of that society." The culture of every society is made up of the shared values, understandings, assumptions and goals that the members of such society learnt from their forebears, enforced by the current members of the society and is still passed on to the upcoming generation. Thus, the three main characteristics of culture are: people/society creates it; it evolves due to human activities and it is passed on from one generation to another generation.

Culture is composed of material and non-material aspects. Material culture is made up of things which human beings make and use. It ranges from architectural designs (in terms of buildings, road construction and so on), clothing, literature, music, dance, art and so on. Non-material aspects of culture consist of the values, beliefs, language, and communication and so on. Material and non-material aspects of culture are very important aspect of culture. For Isidienu (2021) "both the material and the non-material aspects of culture complement each other. One uses material culture to understand and appreciate the non-material culture better.

African Culture

A researcher familiar with Africa and the Africans may likely come to the conclusion that defining African culture will be a herculean task owing to the diversity in existence in Africa and in Africans. Even with this challenge, some scholars still come up with definitions of African culture. Ezedike cited in Amposah, Omorogie and Ansah (2018:50) defines African culture as:

The sum total of shared attitudinal inclinations and capabilities, art, beliefs, moral codes and practices that characterize Africans. It can be conceived as a continuous, cumulative reservoir containing both material and non-material elements that are socially transmitted from one generation to another. African culture therefore refers to the African heritage.

Also Anyanwu and Falolaqtd in Amposah et al (2018:50) equally concur that “culture is a complex whole that embodies the totality of the African in a community, a lifelong process that bestrides birth and death.” African culture embraces those elements that are distinctively African which separate her from the rest of the world, especially in the area of beliefs, entertainment, arts, literature, architecture, morals, and values and so on. Africa has diverse cultures which vary from country to county and to the different ethnic groups which inhabit these countries. This diversity in cultures of African countries and those of their ethnic groups serve to distinguish the culture of a people from the rest. Aziza in Indang (2015:98) supports this view when he asserts that:

Culture... refers to the totality of the pattern of behavior of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs.

African culture is unique and it is passed from one generation to another. Thus, a person exposed to a particular culture through birth or migration tends to imbibe such culture through the process known as socialization. According to Fafunwa (1974:48):

Culture in traditional society is not taught; it is caught. The child observes; imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities.

The culture of a people is very important because it defines them and sets them apart from other cultures. There can be no society without culture. In other words, culture is society bound and people oriented. That is why Fafunwa (1974:48) maintains that “the child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environment”.

Basically, Igbo culture is the totality of the custom, tradition, belief system and practices of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. It evolves over a long period of time and was handed over from one generation to another. Kalu (1983:38) cited in Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2018) puts it that, “culture for the Igbo can thus be understood as a unified picture of the cosmos, explained by a system of concepts that order the natural and social rhythms and the place of the Igbo in the world.” Generally, every aspect of the life of the Igbo is attached to religion. An allusion that *ihe anaghị eme na nkịtị*, literally means that nothing happens without a cause forms the bases for almost everything they do in life. Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2018) affirm that “this culture is notably permeated by traditional religion that almost every reality has metaphysical imports, connotations and explications.” It is how the Igbo perceive the universe and everything in it, the visible and the invisible, the living and the non-living, etc. that forms their philosophy of life. This therefore reflects in the political, social, economic, moral codes, judicial and every aspects of their life. However, it is this organized way of life of the Igbo that waned by the coming of the Whiteman as reported by Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing the decline of Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart*, the post-colonial theory is considered apt and is therefore adopted. Post-colonial theory according to Tyson (1999:364) “...focuses on the experience and literary production of peoples whose history is characterized by extreme political, social and psychological oppression”. It equally concentrates on literatures of cultures that develop in response to British colonial/ imperial domination. Post-colonial theory seeks to identify colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies in a literary text. For instance, it can analyze the ideologies that impact the colonized to adopt the colonialist’s values in preference to their own. Again, it can study what ideology (anti-colonialist) promotes the resistance by the colonized against the colonialists. In carrying out a post-colonialist criticism/theory in a literary text, the main objective is to discover the ideology (whether colonial or anti-colonial) that informs the literary work. Thus, a post-colonial criticism can be carried out in a literary text, even if such text is not classified as a post-colonial one.

In line with the above, post-colonial criticism is considered very apt in the analysis of this paper. This theory is employed in order to successfully analyze the ideology (colonialist) that led to the decline of the Igbo culture in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

Traditional Judicial System

Before the incursion of the colonialists in the traditional Igbo society, the people already have an established system of adjudicating on issues according to the norms and traditions of the land. The importance of this traditional judicial system which the novelist dedicated a whole chapter to, can never be over emphasized. In the novel, we see the roles the family and the entire society through the Egwugwu (masquerade) officially referred as ‘the Fathers of the clan’ play in settling marriage dispute.

The above played out between Uzowulu, Mgbafo’s husband and his in-laws represented by Odukwe, the eldest of Mgbafo’s three brothers. Uzowulu reported his in-laws to the Egwugwu, claiming that they came to his house, beat him up and took his wife (their sister) back. He is of the opinion that since his wife left on her own accord, that tradition demands that the bride price he paid on her should be returned to him. This he asked his in-laws to do but they told him that, “... they had nothing to tell me” (1958:64).

Odukwe's defence belied the crucial role which the family members play in marital issues. He told the group of Egwuwgu whose leader is Ajofia that:

...Uzowulu is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years, no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman. We have tried to settle their quarrels time without number and on each occasion Uzowulu was guilty. (1952:65)

In addition, the incessant beatings which her sister receives from her husband have caused her to miscarry a pregnancy. To him, her life is always in constant danger and this made them (Odukwe and his brothers) to beat up her husband and took her away. This is acceptable in traditional Igbo society (for their actions were not condemned by the Egwugwu) where ones' brothers are expected to rescue their sister from imminent danger in her matrimonial home. They refuse to hand over their sister to her husband until desirable change is seen in him and a promise not to batter their sister ever again.

From the literary work, the marriage institution in traditional Igbo society is very sacred and is highly revered. Thus, the final verdict of the Egwugwu is geared towards upholding this institution. Unfortunately, this judicial system waned significantly with the introduction of the British colonial courts. Instances abound in the novel where the traditional judicial system was relegated to the background and the British imperial court was used in trying people for offences that already have a laid down procedure for its adjudication. People are tried in these courts for adhering to the customs and norms of the land. In the novel, Achebe states that the colonial courts house prison "full of men who had offended against the white man's law. Some of these prisoners had thrown away their twins and some have molested Christians" (1958:123). In fact, the words of the District Commissioner to the leaders of Umuofia underline the objectives of the British in setting up these courts and which explicitly show that the courts have come to stay and equally supersede any other judicial system in operation in the land. Achebe emphasizes it this way:

We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great Queen. I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn down people's houses and their places of worship. (1958:123)

The British incursion into the traditional Igbo society is subtle. They surreptitiously imposed their judicial system on the people and equally violated the customs and traditions of the land which has bound the people together for centuries. This together with the attraction which their religion, education, economic and so on have for some of the people in the traditional Igbo society, weakened the traditional Igbo judicial system. As more people embrace the whitemen, the more their judicial system is strengthened and the traditional judicial system wanes.

The Traditional Religious Belief

The Igbo of the South Eastern Nigeria practices traditional religion before the coming of the white man. They believe in the worship of Chukwu or Chineke, the earth goddess (Ala) and other deities and spirits. They equally believe in their ancestors and pour libations to them with the firm hope of their protection. Achebe succinctly explores this in the novel and we get to know more about this belief system from the conversation between Akunna (a traditionalist) and Mr Brown (the white missionary). Akunna informs Mr Brown that the people "...believe in him and call him Chukwu. He made the entire world and the other gods" (1958:126).

In the novel, one cannot fail to observe that the cosmology of Igbo people is shaped in line with their religious belief. The gods or deities determine virtually how things are run in the community. In the novel, we learnt that the earth goddess requires that before any planting season that the people must observe the week of peace. Achebe through Ezeani (the priest of the earth goddess) emphasizes the importance of this religious ceremony. He states that:

...our fore fathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth, we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessings our crops will not grow (Achebe, 1958:22).

In addition, the killing of a fellow clan's man is totally forbidden. It is an offence against the earth goddess and where it is done inadvertently, the person will go on exile for seven years. This is actually what led Okonkwo to flee Umuofia to his maternal home at Mbanta after he inadvertently killed Ogbuefi Ezeudu's son during the burial of the boy's father. Also, killing of the sacred python is an offence against the god, Idemmili. Also, one is not expected to kill one's ward or a person that comes to live with one's household and that person calls one, 'father'. Ogbuefi Ezeudu advised Okonkwo on this but he ignored him and ended up killing Ikemefuna at last.

With the coming of the colonialists, this religious system begins to wane. They introduce Christianity alongside formal education and these attract few people initially. Subsequently, more people embrace Christianity due to the "...growing feeling that there might be something in it after all..." (Achebe, 1958:126). Thus, what would have sparked off crisis between the two religions was contained until the overzealous ones from the Christian folk spark off tension by unmasking the Egwugwu, an act that is considered a sacrilege in the traditional religion. Achebe states that "one of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an Egwugwu in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did (1958:131). In order to pacify the spirit of the clan; the elders have to cleanse this abomination committed by Enoch. This includes the destruction of Enoch's compound and that of the church building.

Unfortunately, the church (Christianity) has the backing of the government and through it, gains control over the traditional religion. Some of the elders of the land were imprisoned and fined for destroying the church building. Even when they gather to discuss the recent happening in their land, they are commanded by the District Commissioner to stop the meeting and disperse. Thus, from the literal perspective, one can see that the colonial government works towards destabilizing the traditional religion, while supporting the growth of its religion (Christianity) thereby leading to the decline of this aspect of the people's culture. Generally speaking, the Igbo natives as a compassionate and friendly society welcomed these Christian missionaries. Yet, they were oblivious of the fact that their guests intend to rule their lands and replace their culture and religion (Chinweuba and Ezeugwu, 2018).

System of Government

Uchendu (1965) and Isichei (1976) cited in Ibenekwu, (2012:3) are among the scholars that have given historical accounts of the pre-colonial Igbo society and "have described it as acephalous, segmentary or stateless". He further states that "This classification is based on the fact that the pre-colonial Igbo society consists of autonomous villages and village groups ruled via diffused authority without any sort of formalized, permanent or hereditary leadership systems." This system of government is replicated in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as



the novel presents us with the pre-colonial system of government in Igbo land. As stated above, this system is acephalous in that it has no single recognized leader. Political power is invested on adult male members of the community, the eldest in a family or in the village. For instance, when Ogbuefi Udo's wife was murdered by Mbaino men, it was all the adult male members that assembled and took decision on going for war if the people of Mbaino did not accept their terms of peace from their emissaries. Also, we see the eldest of Mgbafor's three brothers representing their family during the marital case before the Nine Egwugwu's at the village square. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in his village (probably of the same village with Okonkwo) officially announced the death sentence pronounced on Ikemefuna by the Oracle of the Hills and Caves to Okonkwo. Some priests equally wield political cum religious power as we see in the priests of Ezeani and Ezeidemili, the priests of the earth goddess and the water goddess, respectively and the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, priestess Chika and priestess Chielo. The government system in pre-colonial Igbo society is not different from their culture. It is part and parcel of their daily existence and the system runs in such a way that one already knows what is expected of one at any particular time.

This system of government begins to decline with the introduction of colonial administration in the traditional Igbo society. They impose their system of government on the people and enact laws with which they try offenders. The district Commissioner sees the destruction of the church building as an offence against the colonial government. To him, it constitutes the disruption of peaceful coexistence of people in the society and thus, the perpetrators must be punished without recourse to the culture of their people or their system of government. The assembly of adult male members of the community where issues affecting the community is discussed is mandated to stop and these encumbrances on the traditional system of government in Igbo land affected it in such a way that it declines irremediably.

Economic System (Farming)

Farming plays a key role in the economy of the pre-colonial Igbo society. Every member of Igbo pre-colonial society engages in it. Afigbo in Mbakwe (2015:134) states that "in the pre-colonial Igbo society, agriculture was the most important economic activity with regard to both the number of people who engaged in it either on full-time basis or the prestige attached to it". In fact, one of the criteria for adjudging one wealthy is the size and number of one's barn. In describing Nwakibie as a wealthy man, Achebe says "There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns..." (1958:13).

Farming activity in this era is gender structured in that some crops are meant for the male while some are meant for the female. From the novel under study, one can easily observe that the pre-colonial Igbo society places yam in high esteem and as such, accords it the exclusive reserve of the men. Men plant yams, tend and harvest them while women plant cassava, maize, cocoyam, beans and so on and equally weed the farm.

An important aspect of farming in this era is that of share-cropping. According to Achebe (1958:16) "Share-cropping was a very slow way of building up a barn of one's own. After the entire toil one only got a third of the harvest". It is through this process that Okonkwo builds his barn. Thus, many industrious men of Okonkwo's era that do not have enough seed yams opt for share-cropping in order to build up their barns.

Also, farming in pre-colonial Igbo society is highly ritualized. Before any farming activity is performed, ritual cleansing is done both at the society level and at the personal level. At the society level is the observation of the Week of Peace, dedicated to the earth goddess whose blessings for plentiful harvest is sought at this ceremony. Individuals equally perform rituals at personal level as could be seen in the character of Unoka:



...before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams. I clear bushes and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow yams when the first rain has fallen... (Achebe, 1958:12-13)

This economic activity begins to wane with the coming of the colonial masters. The white men introduce formal education and encouraged the people to train their children there. Initially, some objected but when the gains of being educated become clearer, more people enrolled their children. These people become teachers, court clerk, interpreters and even church workers. This greatly affects farm work as people begin to shift focus from farming to white collar job.

Another factor that greatly aids the decline of pre-colonial Igbo society's economy (farming) is the introduction of trading centers that deals on trading in palm oil and kernel. The White men build a trading store where palm produce are traded for money and this leads to much inflow of money into the pre-colonial Igbo society. Thus, the people begin to shift grounds on their understanding of wealth. The idea of been wealthy practically changed from the number of one's barn to other factors like education, trading and so on.

Conclusion

Truly, change is inevitable in human history for it enhances the life, growth and development of such society. Mbakwe, (2015: 133) is not far from the truth when he asserts that "theorists throughout human history believe in the inevitability of change". The decline of Igbo culture so far analyzed is deeply rooted in the concept of change which takes the pre-colonial Igbo society by storm. The simple, quiet, agrarian and peaceful communities of South Eastern Nigeria represented by the fictional communities like Umuofia, Mbanta, Mbaino, Abame, Obodoani and so on in the novel under study experienced an imposition of the British culture. The British colonial masters and their white missionary accomplices introduced a culture that is quiet alien to the pre-colonial Igbo society. The initial attitude of the people to these white men is that of the treatment given to a stranger one knows that will inevitably leave the land. By the time they realized that they are not ready to leave any time soon but have converted their sons to their fold, they tried to restrain further activities of the white men. The church in Umuofia was razed down as a result of the crisis occasioned by the conflict between the two cultures. Ajofia literary told the missionary in charge of the church to "...go back to his house and leave us alone" (Achebe, 1958:134).

Unfortunately, the people could not achieve much as regards the protection of their revered culture. The colonial masters have permeated the judicial, political, religious, and even the economic systems of the traditional society. Those that are not attracted to their government are attracted to their religious, educational or their economic system. These greatly affected the culture of the traditional Igbo society that it decline greatly, during the colonial era and has risen to its revered status even to this day.

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