

The Individual and the Culture – Chinua Achebe’s “Things Fall Apart”



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Abstract

Individuals acquire resilience from the society in which they dwell and societies acquire power from the individuals who belong to them. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo builds his fortune and resilience with the aid of his society's customs. Moreover, Okonkwo's society benefits from his diligence and determination. In contacts between other cultures, beliefs about superiority or inferiority, due to limited and partial world view, are variably wrong-headed and destructive. When new culture and religions meet the original, struggle for dominance is bound to arise. For instance, the Christians and Okonkwo's people have a limited view of each other and have a very tough time understanding and accepting one another customs and beliefs, which resulted in violence as with the destruction of a local Church and Okonkwo's killing of the messenger.

No matter how many opportunities one gets for understanding, the individual must try to communicate. A social value, such as individual ambition, which is worthwhile when balanced by other values, can become unworthy when overemphasized at the expense of other values. There is no such thing as a static culture, change is continual, and flexibility is mandatory for successful adaptation. Because Okonkwo cannot accept the change the Christians bring, he cannot adapt. Achebe questions through the character of Obierika, whether adherence to culture is for the better of society, when it has created many hardships and sacrifices on the part of Okonkwo and his family? Notion of success and failure is widely expressed through the character of Okonkwo and his father Unoka.

The struggle between change and tradition is constant. Perhaps Okonkwo is not so much bothered by change, but the very thought of losing everything he had built up- his name, fame, fortune etc. He has a fear in his mind that he is going to lose all those things for which he strived hard to achieve. His suicide can be observed as a final attempt to show to the people of Umuofia the consequence of a clash between cultures.

Introduction

Things Fall Apart a novel written by a Nigerian Author **Chinua Achebe** is observed as the archetypal modern African novel in English. Achebe's choice to write in English has caused controversy. While both African and non-African critics agree that Achebe modelled *Things Fall Apart* on classic European literature, they disagree about whether his novel possesses a western form (Achebe, *The Art of Fiction*) Achebe has continued to protect his decision – “English is something you spend your lifeline acquiring, so it would be foolish not to use it. Also, in the logic of colonization and decolonization it is actually a very powerful weapon in the fight to regain what was yours. English was the language of colonization itself. It is not simply something you use because you have it anyway” (*The Art of Fiction*). The novel portrays the life of Okonkwo, a leader and local wrestler in Umuofia – one of a fictional group of nine villages in Nigeria, inhabited by the Igbo people. It emphasizes on his family and personal history, the customs and society of the Igbo, and the influence of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on the Igbo community during the late nineteenth century. A heavy part of the story takes place in the village of Umuofia, located west of the actual city of Onitsha, on the east bank of the Niger River in Nigeria. The culture depicted that of the Igbo people, is similar to that of Achebe's birthplace of Ogidi, where Igbo-speaking people lived together in groups of independent villages ruled by titled elders. The customs described in the novel portray those of the actual Onitsha people, who lived near Ogidi.

The spokesman Okonkwo is strong, hardworking, and strives to show no weakness. Although brusque with his three wives, children and neighbours, he is wealthy, courageous, and powerful among the people of his village. He is a leader of his village, and he has accomplished a position in his society for which he has striven all his life. Because of his position in society of the village, Okonkwo is selected by the elders to be the guardian of Ikemefuna, a boy taken prisoner by the village as a peace settlement between two villages after Ikemefuna's father killed an Umuofian woman. He lives with Okonkwo's family and Okonkwo grows fond of him. The boy looks up to Okonkwo and considers him a second father. The oracle of Umuofia eventually pronounces that the boy must be killed. The oldest man in the village warns Okonkwo that he should have nothing to do with the murder because it would be like killing his own child. Behaving uncommonly and the least affected by the warning, Okonkwo participates in the murder of the boy despite the warning from the old man. Shortly after Ikemefuna's death, things begin to go wrong for Okonkwo. When he accidentally kills someone at a ritual funeral ceremony when his gun explodes, he and his family are sent into exile for seven years to appease the gods he has offended. While Okonkwo is not present, white people begin to arrive in Umuofia with the intent of introducing their religion. As the number of converts increases, the foothold of the white people grows and a new government is introduced. The village is forced to respond to the imposition of the white people's nascent society. On his return from exile, Okonkwo finds his village changed place because of the presence of the white men. He and other tribal leaders try to reclaim their hold on their native land by destroying a local church. In reply to the act, the leader of the white government takes them prisoner and holds them for ransom for a short while, further humiliating and insulting the native leaders. As a consequence, the people of Umuofia finally gather for what could be a great uprising. Okonkwo, a warrior by native nature and adamant about following Umuofian customs and traditions, despises any form of cowardice and favours for war against the white men. When messengers of the white government try to stop the meeting, Okonkwo kills one of them. He realizes with despair that the people of Umuofia are not going to fight to protect themselves. When the local leader of the white government comes to Okonkwo to take him to court, he sees that Okonkwo has hanged himself. It is strictly against the custom of the Igbo to commit suicide therefore, among his own people Okonkwo's action ruined his reputation and status; "This attempt of the protagonist represents not only the culture rebuking him, but his rebuking his people, changing culture, as he realized that the Igbo culture that he loved had been forever altered by the Christian missionaries.

Themes in the novel include the relationship between the individual and his culture, and the effect of the same on the other. Individuals get strength

from their societies and they take the same from the individuals. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo builds his fortune and strength with the help of the society's customs. In relation between other cultures, beliefs regarding superiority or inferiority, due to limited and partial world view, are invariably wrongheaded and destructive. It is observed that when new cultures and religions meet the original, there is likely to be a struggle for dominance. For instance, the Christians and Okonkwo's people have a limited view of each other, and have a very tough time understanding and accepting one another's customs and beliefs, which had a consequence of violence as with the destruction of a local church and Okonkwo's killing of the messenger. In spite of various opportunities for understanding, people must strain to communicate. For example Okonkwo and his son, Nwoye have a tiring time in understanding one another because they hold different values. On the other hand, Okonkwo spends more time with Ikemefuna and develops a deeper relationship that seems to go beyond cultural restraints. The struggle between change and tradition is constant; however, this statement only appears to apply to Okonkwo. Perhaps Okonkwo is not so much bothered by change, but by the idea of losing everything he had built up - his fortune, fame, title, etc. that will be replaced by new customs. It can be inferred from the study that he bothers for these things as he especially mentions about a lack of "respectable" father figure from whom he could have inherited them from (Introduction, 1).

The role of culture in society is seen in the expulsion of Okonkwo after the death of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's expulsion due to causes beyond his control not, and the journey of Ezinme with Chielo, Achebe questions, particularly through Obierika, whether adherence to culture is for the betterment of society, when it has caused many hardships and sacrifices on the part of Okonkwo and his family.

Prior to British colonization, the Igbo people as depicted in *Things Fall Apart* lived in a Patriarchal Collective Political System. Decisions were not made by a chief or by any individual but rather by a council of male elders. Religious leaders were also called upon to settle debates reflecting the cultural focus of the Igbo people. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to explore Nigeria. Though the Portuguese are not mentioned by Achebe, the remaining Portuguese influence can be seen in many Nigerian surnames. The British entered Nigeria first through trade and then established The Royal Niger Colony in 1886.

Despite converting to Christianity himself, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* not only in response to the then common bastardizations of his native people, but to show his fellow citizens that the Igbo were dignified. His mentioning of the Igbo people's democratic institutions and culture serve to test themselves "against the goals of modern liberal democracy and to have set out to show how the Igbo meet those standards, (Rhoads, 61). While the Europeans in *Things Fall Apart* are depicted as intolerant of Igbo culture and religion, telling villagers

that their gods are not real (Rhoads,130). The Igbo are seen as tolerant of other cultures as a whole. For example, Uchendu is able to see "What is good among one people is an abomination with others" (Achebe,129).

The analysis of the cultural history involves myths, religion, superstitions, rituals, festivals, and icons. In *Things Fall Apart*, the mask, the earth, the legends and the rituals all have significance to the story and the history of the Igbo culture. However, the novel does not simply idolize the Igbo people, as Achebe also intended to show readers what fractures existed within the Igbo peoples culture. He "also presents its weaknesses which require change and which aid in its destruction" (Rhoades, 61). He depicts the injustice of Igbo society. No more or less than Victorian England of the same era the Igbo are a patriarchal society.

References

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3. Rhoads, Diana Akers. "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: *African Studies Review*. 36(2): 1993.