Conflict between Tradition and Change
in Chinua Achebe's postcolonial novel
Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

In studying the history of Asian and African countries, the colonial period plays an important role in understanding their history, religion, tradition and culture. Things Fall Apart is an English novel by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, published in 1957, which shows the African culture, their religious and traditions through the Igbo society. This novel captures the colonial period and its effect on Igbo society. It is a response and a record of control of western colonialism on the traditional values of the African people. This paper treats the novel as a postcolonial text, by focusing on the clash between occupied and colonizers, the clash between tradition and change, and the clash between different cultures, The Europe Empire and the African natives.

African Literature forms a main part of twentieth century world literature. The term 'African Literature' is defined by many Critics in different ways. The argument mainly revolves on the issue whether it means the writing produced by those living in Africa irrespective of tradition, culture and nationality or whether it means the work which is produced by writers of black origin only. It has been decisively agreed that African Literature represents the writing of African nationals carrying African soil reflecting African native culture and tradition; Those who their hearts beat with Africa. During colonization period, a great amount of African Literature was presented. In the colonial period, Africans were exposed to Western languages began to write using such languages. Among those African countries was Nigeria. It has been hard-done by the European colonizers during the Colonial and Imperialist Periods. After stopping the slave trade in 1807, the British decided to guard the African west coast in order to protect it, having taken over the Nigerian region in the early 1900s. Through colonizing Nigeria, the British Empire ruled over more than 250 tribes, each tribe had its own language and customs. The colonizer started to force its own language. Such practices were faced by producing new African Literature, a literature which concentrates on nationality and Africa internal issues during the colonial and postcolonial period which was known later as
Postcolonial Literature. The term Postcolonial is a critical approach or a literary theory that deals with literature produced by the countries that were or still under the effect of the colonial power. It may also deal with the literature which is written by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. Postcolonial theory became a critical toolbox for many critics in the 1970s, Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* is considered as the founding work of postcolonial.\(^3\) In his book, Said points out to the anti-humanist understanding of the contiguity between Western knowledge and colonial power.\(^4\)

Chinua Achebe, (1930-2013), is one of postcolonial writers who has been able to show in the structure and language of his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, that African writing is not an imitation of European forms, but a literature which its roots are deep in tradition. Achebe also played an important personal role in the emergence of postcolonial literature in Nigeria and other African countries. His parents gave him many principles of their traditional Igbo culture. As one of Africa's most outspoken intellectuals, Achebe is a public figure deeply involved in the political life of his nation. During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), precipitated in part by Biafra's attempt to separate from the Nigerian federation, Achebe was elected the deputy national president of the People's Redemption Party. He remained as an observer of Nigeria's politics and continues to be a fearless critic against military dictators.\(^5\)

Achebe like many other postcolonial writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Derek Walcott, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison has multiethnic perspective of history, culture and truth. He presents African culture through which he challenges, defines, and describes the new world of Africa under the influence of the colonizers. Africa is always pictured as a dark place by the white colonial power which needs some light to free it from irrational belief under the effect of white colonial power. In Achebe’s work, the old tradition is in struggle with modernity and where post colonialism is not only a reaction against old culture but also a development of new principles. Thus, his position as a postcolonial writer is important in the history of modern Africa because he made the natives realize that colonization has led to the destruction and downfall.\(^6\)

*Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe’s most famous work, which examines traditional Igbo society before and during European colonialism.\(^7\) It is set in the 1890s and shows the clash between the white colonial government and the traditional culture of the Igbo society. Achebe’s novel focus on European colonizers and natives. His education in English has helped him to capture both the European and the African concerning religion, race, tradition and culture. He
has a purpose in writing *Things Fall Apart* in English. Achebe wants his novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa; by using English language, the colonizer’s language. It helps to deliver his main goals directly to the white colonizer through his novel. Unlike other African authors who prefer to write in native languages only, as a reaction against the colonial language and culture, Achebe wants to renew his culture within and through English. He manages to capture the rhythm of the Igbo language and Igbo vocabulary and mix it with English language. The novel captures African’s history and its interior issues. The Igbo people are caught between two sides, resisting to keep their old thoughts and believes and save their tradition from being lost and embracing of change on the hands of the white and accept their new religion and authority over their society. Many of the Africans were excited about the new ideas and believes that the missionaries came with. This European influence, threatens the traditional Igbo society’s surviveal.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the theme of the fall of the African villages and tribes after the start of the British Imperialist colonization is one of the main themes in the novel. The main character, Okonkwo is extremely viewed by his tribe as a warrior and a great man who holds an important position in their society as being the village leader. He values tradition so greatly that he is not able to accept the changes which are taking place around him protesting to the British existence. After killing a young boy who Okonkwo took in as his own son, his life starts to fall down, leading to his exile. During his exile, the white men presence starts to make some changes in his village. After his return, Okonkwo and other tribal leaders decide to take control over their land by burning down the resident Christian church built by the British. As a result of this challenge, they are sent to jail for few days. The British humiliate them, which is a humiliation to all the villagers. Okonkwo, adamant in taking revenge and control once more on the village and drive out the white man from their land, by calling for meeting to start up a revolution and to announce war against the British. One British messenger tries to stop the meeting and Okonkwo ends up killing him. The other messengers ran away without any resistant by the other members of the village and Okonkwo realizes that the village’s fate was lost. Then he is found dead by the British soldiers. After he hanged himself and by committing suicide Okonkwo blot his reputation, since suicide is forbidden in the Igbo’s tradition.

The novel focus on tradition and the simple life of Igbo society. It is all about human conditions in different socio-historical states and in the series of events in a universal novel. While Achebe is going to show the Igbo society and culture as a sample of African
culture in general. Achebe takes on the task of revealing the beautiful images and showing that Nigerian tribal-culture as a diverse and gorgeous culture, by giving a complete picture of Igbo-society. The novel includes a complex interweaving of religious ritualistic and social features. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Igbo society was untied. They shared the joys and sorrows of one another. They used to sit around log-fire warming up their bodies, playing, dancing, laughing, singing and living their life.\textsuperscript{11}

Old man and children would then sit round log fires, worming their bodies. Unoka loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wondered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any lengths of cloth.\textsuperscript{12}

Moreover, in relation to culture, Achebe introduces the complex laws and customs of Okonkwo's tribe and their strong relations to each other by a series of flash backs. The practice of sharing palm-wine and kola nuts is shown in the novel to give a beautiful and peaceful picture of the Igbo. Unoka, Okonkwo’s father, when a neighbor visits him to collect a debt, the neighbor does not immediately address the debt. The neighbor and Unoka share a kola nut and pray to their family spirits. These kinds of customs are part of their social relations. The neighbor introduces the subject of debt through some of Igbo proverbs, thus, making use of a shared tradition. By emphasizing on the harmony and complexity of the Igbo, Achebe wants to give a complete image of Igbo culture.\textsuperscript{13}

Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disc congaing a kola nut, some alligator pepper and a lump white chalk.

"I have kola," he announced when he sat down, and passed the disc over to his guest.

(Part one, chapter one, pp. 5-6)

The Europeans, on the other hand, picture the Africans as savages, as the traditional images of men control over women. During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo notices that one of his wives has left her hut to have her hair braided without cooking his dinner. He hits her for her carelessness, Okonkwo’s reaction towards his wife might carry a savage image, but in fact it is not. Okonkwo’s reaction is a true traditional image of the Igbo society, where a woman must obey and treat her husband the way he wants. It is a matter of respect after all
Shamefully breaking the peace of the sacred week in a contravention known as *nso-ani*. Okonkwo has to sacrifice a nanny goat and a hen and pay a fine of one length of cloth and one hundred cowries. Okonkwo’s punishment is not because he hits his wife, but because he brakes the peace of the sacred week Okonkwo follows the priest’s orders.

Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal. Okonkwo did not know at first that she was not at home. After waiting in vain for her dish he went to her hut to see what she was doing. There was nobody in the hut and the fireplace was cold... He walked back to his *obi* to await Ojiugo’s return. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Weak of Peace.

(Part one, chapter four, p. 29)

This shows the way their tradition is and how they believe, and that they must not cross the lines otherwise they will be curse, they even believe that those who die during the Week of Peace their bodies should throw into the Evil Forest.

It is indeed true, said Ogbuefi Ezeudu. “They have that custom in Obodoani. If a man dies at this time he is not buried but cast into the Evil Forest. It is a bad custom which these people observe because they lack understanding. They throw away large numbers of men and women without burial. And what is the result? Their clan is full of the evil spirits of these unburied dead, hungry to do harm to the living.” (Part one, chapter four, p. 32)

Tradition acts and cultural behaviors are very important in the Igbo society. Just as there is a respect of woman towards man, there is a respect of men toward the power and authority of the Oracle. It is shown by Achebe in the novel, through the tragedy end of Ikemefuna, a boy from the neighbor village, when a woman from Umuofia is murdered on the hands of someone who belongs to Mbaion. The two villages will declare war unless Mbaina gives a young man and a virgin. That young man is Ikemefuna, who will stay with Okonkow for three years. During these three years, Ikemefuna calls Okonkow 'father'. Okonkwo is informed that the Oracle has ordered that Ikemefuna must be killed, and that Okonkwo must not take part in the action because the boy calls him 'father'.

“That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death.” Okonkwo was surprised, and was about
Okonkwo disagrees with the Oracle decision in killing Ikemefuna. His actions are too close to killing a kinsman, which is a grave sin in Igbo culture. Okonkwo does not want to look afraid or weak in the villager’s eyes. Obierika’s, Okonkwo’s friend, suggests that it is better for Okonkwo to stay at home and that doing so is considered the more proper action. Instead, Okonkwo’s action harms both his relationship with his son Nwoye and Nwoye's fidelity to Igbo society.17 It is right that Okonkwo disagree with the Oracle decision, but at the same time he cannot say a word, he does not want to disobey the Oracle decision otherwise he will lose his position in the society. The Igbo people look at the Oracle as messengers of gods and they believe that they must be followed.

You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.

"The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," Okonkwo said. "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm."

"That is true," Obierika agreed. "But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it."

(Part one, chapter eight, p. 67)

Such kinds of beliefs are found very deeply in the Igbo people. The people of Umuofia believes in bad omens. The twitching of eye-lid for instance is considered as a bad omen. When Okonkwo’s daughter Ezinma says that her eye-lid are twitching, her mother Ekwefi replied, “it means you are going to cry.” (Part one, chapter five, p. 40) Also, people are afraid of answering when they are called by their names. When Nwoye’s mother calls Ekwefi by her name, she replies, “Is that me?” (Part one, chapter five, p. 41) The belief in omens and bad omens is deeply rooted in the Igbo people, that it has shaped their behave:18 “That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear it might be an evil spirit calling”
In chapter thirteen a change takes place in Okonkwo’s position and life in his society. When just an accident changes the whole story. It is the funeral of Ezeudu one of the elder and great warrior of the clan. During the gun-saluting ceremony, Okonkwo's gun and by mistake kills Ezeudu's son. Even though the death is an accident, the act is an outrage to the Igbo. Now Okonkwo must face his punishment by exiling him for seven years. Okonkwo and his whole family set out for Mbanta, the home of Okonkwo's mother.

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in grabs of war. They set fire in his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of clansman. (Part one, chapter thirteen, pp. 124-125)

It is very clear that even those great men like Okonkwo, cannot be an exception among tradition rules and believes. A crime, which is not against a man but against the goddess of the earth, must no way be forgive. This shows how strong tradition is in the Igbo society and no one can cross the lines.

On the other hand, part two of the novel represents change in currency of events or more precisely, the changes in Igbo traditions. During Okonkwo's exile, many changes has taken place in Umuofia. The white men have arrived to the village and Christianity as a new religion starts to take place. The young’s of Umuofia begin to transform into the new religion. The white missionaries built a church in the village among those young’s is Nwoya Okonkwo’s son, he has embraced the new faith. Many things helped the missionaries to win more number of converts, one of them is when the missionaries ask the leaders of Umuofia to give them a place so that they can build their church. The village leaders decide to give them a space in the Evil Forest. The Evil Forest is a place where dead and dammed men are buried. The Igbo people believe that the Forest is full of hurtful and unpredictable magical energies, and that anyone who enters it
dies, but when the Christians stay alive, the villagers start to think that the white priests hold a powerful magic. In fact, the evil or traditionally forest is inhabitable in the eyes of the Igbo people but as the missionaries built a Church on it had become inhabitable. The missionaries succeed in changing the minds of the people.

The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there, won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages. That was a sorrow to the leaders of the clan; but many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man’s god would not last.

(Part two, chapter sixteen, p. 143)

After the missionaries have rooted their new thoughts and ideas in the young generation of Umuofia, they started to tell the young’s about the creator and that they are here to show his massage. They tell them that they are all brothers, and that it is time to leave all their believes behind and worship only God.

The white man was also their brothers because they were all sons of God. And he told them about this new God, the creator of all the world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshiped false gods, gods of wood and stone… He told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment… We have been sent by this 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, he said. (Part two, chapter sixteen, page 145)

Thus, there are illogical and superstitious beliefs prevalent in the primitive African society. However, all these religious beliefs of the people, have a positive quality. These believes kept the people united. Moreover, Achebe, shows out that if the culture of natives has some gaps, that does not mean that the western culture is complete. Towards the second half of the novel, a clash of religion believes are shown, and Okonkwo’s speech shows that Christian beliefs has some irrationalities in them. Okonkwo makes fun of the white man’s religion and their God “Jesu Kristi;” “You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then.” (Part two, chapter fifteen, p. 147) The missionary replies to Okonkwo, "I did not say He had a wife” (Part two, chapter fifteen, p. 147) Through this episode, Achebe wants to show that no religions or beliefs are perfect or complete.

It is true that the new religion cannot erase the Igbo religion, but the arrival of the white colonists and their new religion has
weakened the kinship bonds so central to the Igbo culture. Inherited worship plays an important role in Igbo religion, and conversion to Christianity has not face a fully rejection from the Igbo society. The Christians replace the Igbo kinship with a metaphorical kinship structure through God. The overjoyed response of a missionary to Nwoye’s interest in attending a Christian school “He went back to the church and told Mr. Kiaga that he had decided to go to Umuofia where the white missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write.” (Part two, chapter seventeen, p. 152) This makes Mr. Kiaga very happy. “Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake.” (Part two, chapter seventeen, p. 152) This illustrates that the Christian church clearly recognizes Igbo kinship bonds as the central hitch to the achievement of its missionaries. This shows how cunning the whites are, they knew how to root their ideas and thoughts in the young generation which will lead to the collapse of the whole Ibo society. The emergence of new religion has become successful in creating some worries in the minds of the villagers. The young generation are now attracted to Christianity. The Church starts converting the village folk to Christianity. When Okonkwo asked Obierika whether the white man understands their customs, he replys:21

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?
But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably 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 more act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

(Part three, chapter Twenty, p. 176)

The leaders of Umoufia for the first time admit that the white men are clever, and that they are on the right way. The white washes the brains of the members of Igbo society slowly and added their new religion by removing Igbo’s old believes and customs. These actions lead to the fall of the traditional life of the Igbo society.

Achebe’s remark is insightful. He points out that it is the internal crisis of the Igbo society that helped Europeans to take over and achieve their authority. These internal problems, lead to the breakdown of the Igbo community and made them weak and easy to control by the missionaries. The fall of the Igbo society in the hands
of the white represents the fall of whole Africa in the hands of the colonizers. The author points out that the white men not only brought Christianity, but also brought a government to the Igbo society. This government rule the Igbo society by replacing their culture, religion and tradition with colonizer’s religion and culture.

The colonizers in role, start to abuse the Igbo people especially when Mr. Brown’s takes Reverend James Smith place. He is a different kind of man, and he makes a great deal of conflict between the church and the clan by refusing to understand and respect traditional Igbo culture. Mr. Brown demands a complete rejection of the converts old religious beliefs. “He saw things as black and white. And black was evil.” (Part three, chapter twenty-two, p. 184) While on the one hand this comment refers simply to an inability to grip the stages in a given situation, it also refers to race relations and colonial power. Smith’s inability to practice respect among the Igbo people creates more hatred between the two sides. His main goal is to insult the Igbo people. That is clear when he requests that the leaders of Umuofia meet him. He asks the leaders of Umuofia to discuss the church’s burning as friends, “I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people’s houses and their place of worship.” (Part three, chapter twenty-tree, p. 194) The leaders of Umuofia are through in jail for several days. They are insulted and physical abused, and that the people of Umuofia must pay a fine otherwise their leaders will be hanged.

Okonkwo is not able to do anything which can interpret the actual roles of the missionaries. He finds that the missionaries intervention is a threat to his glory. That is why he refuse to accept their religion, while the Igbo society feel that it is unnecessary to take any action.

Okonkwo is a true patriot. He feels deeply hurt to see his village and his people are drowning away from their values, beliefs and their traditional culture. In a fit of rage and anger, he kills one of the messengers of the District Commissioner Court, who comes to stop the meeting of the villagers. “Okonkwo’s machete descended twice and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body.” (Part three, chapter twenty-four, p. 204) However, he realizes that nobody would fight against the white men. In his loneliness and despair, he commits suicide. He prefers to die, rather than watching his society falls apart. Unfortunately, Okonkwo cannot even get a suitable burial. He lost his status and reputation among his own people, as it is a sin to commit suicide in Igbo community. A man informed the District Commissioner, “it is against our custom… It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His, body is evil,
and only strangers may touch it.” (Part three, chapter twenty-five, p. 207) Those who commit suicide lose their place in the forebear worshipping traditional society to the extent that they cannot even be touched or buried in an appropriate way. Okonkwo has completely lost his value in the eyes of tradition.²⁴

This is how the traditional African society. In Things Fall Apart shifts from simplicity to complexity, freedom to slavery, peace, to combat, integration to dissonance, and from a united culture to the downfall of this culture. The aim of missionaries was to destroy the native’s religion, beliefs, culture, tradition and social identity; and to destroy their originality, as well as political and racial purposes, and to make them under their own property. The colonizer was not to encourage the growth of the Africans. However, the natives of Igbo were unaware of the goals of the outsiders, and eventually could not resist under the power of the missionaries.

Notes
9 Aggarwal, pp. 221-222.
10 Ferrara, 59.
12 Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, (New York: Anchor Books,1994), part one, chapter one, page 5. All references to this novel are taken from this edition. Henceforth; all subsequence references will be parenthetically cited within the paper.
13 Vaidyanathan, 27.

Vaidyanathan, 32.


Vaidyanathan, 43.


Maleki and Navidi, 13.

Ibid, 277.

Singh, 277.

Shen, 26.

Singh, 278.

Bibliography


الخلاصة

عند دراسة تاريخ الدول الأسيوية والأفريقية، تلعب فترة الاحتلال دورًا مهماً في قوائم، تاريخ، ديانات، ثقافات وتحليلات تلك الدول. أن رواية (الأشياء تتداعى) الكاتب تشيبدو أنديلي، والتي كتبها باللغة الإنجليزية ونشرتها عام 1957، والتي تظهر لنا عادات، ثقافات ودينات مجتمع الإغبو (أحدى العرقيات المكونة لدولة نيجيريا). تجسد الرواية فترة الاستعمار وتأثيرها على مجتمع الإغبو. ومثل توثيق لطبيعة الاستعمار على القيم والثقافة الأفريقية. يعترض هذا البحث الرواية على أنها رواية لدراسات ما بعد الاستعمار، من خلال التركيز على الصدامات بين الاستعمار وسكان الأرض المحتلة. أنها اصدمات بين ثقافيين مختلفين، الإمبراطورية الأوروبية والسكان المحليين لأفريقيا. والتي أدت إلى انفجار ثقافات مجتمع الإغبو.