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TRADITION AND THE APPROPRIATION OF THE COLONIAL
CULTURE BY THE IGBOS IN *THINGS FALL APART*



Gayathri Menon K

INTRODUCTION :

Okonkwo represents those adamant groups who are not ready to throw away their tradition and culture in the surge of the new one. He is portrayed in the novel as a super-human persona, whom the author describes as "when he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody" (*Things* 4). Being the most famous wrestler and warrior of Umofia and the neighborhood, he is honoured by all. He used to drink palm wine from the head of the first human that he killed in the battle. Nothing frightens him except himself and on the whole he fulfills the traditional igbo concept of how a warrior should be.

Abstract

Achebe's works can be collectively called as a manifesto of the cultural, political and social scenario of Nigeria reflecting the indigenous culture and life of the people, especially the Igbo society. At the same time geography never limits the value of his writings, since they adore a universal element in them. The experiences of the Igbo society is similar to the encounters faced by almost all the Third world countries under the gargantuan and mighty hands of colonialism. Things Fall Apart the very first work and the magnum opus of Achebe depicts the life and culture of Igbo people, the entry of colonial power and the subsequent withering away of their culture, people and land. The title itself denotes the postmodern notion of the so called centrelessness, where everything is on a flux and nothing is permanent. People are on the move embracing novelty and on their feet discard the cradle that lulled them peacefully to sleep. This paper attempt to bring out the cultural elements of the Igbo tribe and how the entry of the colonial culture affected them as depicted in Achebe's Things Fall Apart.

Keywords : Culture, Igbo, tradition, folk tales, colonization, religion, family

Short Profile

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His whole life is dominated by only one fear, the fear of failure or weakness. As the cancerous grip of colonialism began to carve Umofia and other villages, Okonkwo and some of his clansmen not only tries to resist it but also attacks the intruders. The murder of the messenger who comes near the Umofian meeting by Okonkwo rightly points out his rage towards those interlopers.

He sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was. He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word... In a flash Okonkwo drew his matchet. Okonkwo's matchet descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body"

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His courage boosts him to fight for his clan but he really knows the fact that he cannot fight alone to win without the support of others. Thus Okonkwo's suicide is not a sign of cowardice but better read it as a message to his own people. The murder and the subsequent suicide can be considered as an attempt made by a man to protect his tradition and to awaken his fellow men towards the withering of their culture.

The areas inhabited by the Igbo in Nigeria got clamped together under the prodigious tentacles of colonial regime, towards the end of the nineteenth century. Many people got converted to Christianity, which is one of the organs of the imperialist regime and it is marketed as something which owns the keys to the white man's knowledge, though there are still people who remained dedicated to the old Igbo religion. They demur to give up the rituals that honor the dead by not ceasing to pay tribute to their ancestors and making obligatory sacrifices to placate angered deities in order to restore harmony in nature. This collision of two cultures and its impasse form the main theme of most of the Igbo novels that appeared during and after colonialism. Chinua Achebe says, "One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did" (176). This infringement of Christianity and its welcoming apostles of old religion as well as those outcastes who were called *Osu* in the Igbo culture, spell disaster in the tradition. Okonkwo's son in *Things Fall Apart* seek asylum in the Christian camp, when they commit an abomination against the traditional religion.

Religion can be identified as a major archetype in *Things Fall Apart*, since it defines the life of the Igbos. Superstitions, myths and rituals come as an aliquant to religion. All these persistent images in their collective unconscious are transmitted from one generation to another and they act as a unifying force among the

community. Their worship of python as a god relates to their ardent belief in religion and its customs. For Igbo people "the royal python was addressed as 'our father', and was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds.... If a clansman killed a royal python accidentally, he made sacrifices of atonement" (149). Strong belief in spirituality leads them to cruel acts also. The acts like mutilating the dead body of *obanje* or the wicked child for ceasing its rebirth, since for them these wicked children "when they died, entered their mother's wombs to be born again" (73) and the barbarous act of throwing twin babies into the evil forest show that they have reached the pinnacle of superstition. At the same time these myths, superstitions, folk culture form the kernel of their culture without which the Igbo tribe have no existence. The gradual disintegration of their community got triggered when the Europeans pierced their dagger of colonialism into the core of their spiritual and cultural being. After the establishment of Mr. Brown's school that "produced quick results" (171), there emerged new churches in the surrounding villages and "from the beginning religion and education went hand in hand" (171).

Achebe is like a weaver weaving skillfully the golden threads of oral tales, proverbs and folk music into the texture of Igbo life. It is said that the Igbo people usually knitted proverbs into their day to day conversation. Stories such as mosquito and the ear, quarrel between earth and the sky, bird *eneke-nti* that challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and finally thrown down by a cat- stamp the oral tradition of the Igbo society. Children are nurtured by listening to these stories, songs and proverbs and this in turn accelerate their imagination and affinity to culture. During cold nights and rainy season, children sit near fireplace listening to the stories told by their mothers. This unravels igbo similarity to the picture of the story telling tradition which Indians too once had in their culture, but now lost somewhere while bolting

behind material pleasures. Nigeria has sculpted oral narratives and stories from the tradition of the daily life of common man. In villages, after the evening meal, members of the family gather on the porch along with their younger ones engaging themselves in story telling sessions. The session embroidered with riddles, like "what dines with an oba (permanent chief of a community) and leaves him to clean the dishes? A fly" (Owomoyela 34), not only charm the younger members to have a knowledge about the everyday activities of the world, but also make them sentient of gods and their powers, animals, nature and seasons creating a pantheistic attitude towards life. As "these have survived the coming of Christianity, the radio, TV, and literary journals and continue to exist even today" (Mahadeva11), one can visualize the simultaneous existence of the old and the new, the folk and the commercial culture analogous to the Indian traditional narratives like Harikatha, Yakshagana and puppet show. This deeply rooted folk tradition ruptured when it got mixed with the western one which can be witnessed from the character Nwoye, the son of Okonkwo who rejects his own tradition and joined Christianity. The kinship between man and nature has a vital role among Igbos and Achebe needs no use of imagination to represent this, since he can feel it among his people. The community to which he belongs has really given importance to nature and their main occupation is agriculture. A number of festivals are associated with agriculture in which the New Yam festival is the prominent one. Even the attack of locusts is associated to nature, a kind of pantheism fills the air. The beauty of the locusts descending is detailed as "full of power and beauty" (53)

Family and society bonds are potent and at the same time consist of loopholes. When Okonkwo and his family were exiled from Umofia, his mother's kinsmen in another village of Mbanta received them whole heartedly. Each function, whether it's a marriage or funeral,

people celebrate with unity. On the other hand, when Okonkwo inadvertently killed a child of the village, a group of people including his best friend Obierika comes and burns his dwelling into ashes and exiles him. One cannot assess the above as their own fault since their nescience drags them to it and they find it difficult to run away from their duties and rules of the community. Igbos follows a strict adherence to the rules made by religion and society. Besides being a patriarchal society, the role of women is a topic of debate in the novel and the society. It seems that women are the marginalized section of the society where their duty is to work in the kitchen and give birth to babies. A man without a title is called agbala or woman and being a woman is considered a shame. But every coin has two sides- the oracle and the priestess of God are women as well as ill treating women are considered a crime- woman enjoys a respectful position in certain affairs.

Okonkwo is the main character who undergoes psychological variations mainly due to the burden of expectations that the community has on the individual, his ardent belief in his own tradition and the confrontation between his and the colonial culture. On the skin deep level, he seems to be an adamant and confident warrior but an under currant of various emotions flow underneath his stern looking face. A fear of failure haunts him throughout his life and it directs him to various life situations and at last to death. This is evident from the narrator's words that Okonkwo "had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father" (4). He becomes a warrior because of his hard work born out of the fear that he too will be like his father Unoke. Okonkwo has in his mind a fatherly affection towards Ikemefuna, but that innocent boy faces death from the hands of Okonkwo. He does it to show his courage to others and as a result had to live seven years in exile bearing the pangs of fear whether he will be able to regain his lost titles and wealth. At last the fear for his clansmen and

the lost values escort him to a suicide which cements a death of abomination similar to his father's downfall. Unoke, the father of Okonkwo is a jovial man interested in music even though he is lazy and poor in the minds of others. Unoke's life style and character instills fear and at the same time strength to Okonkwo's mind. A fatherly affection joins Okonkwo to Ikemefuna and Okonkwo feels a kind of similarity between both their characters. Nwoye's casting away of the values of his own community and his consequent conversion into Christianity is shown here as a blind man recovering his lost vision. Atrocities in the name of spirituality and innocent Ikemefuna becoming the scapegoat for protecting the rules of the community are the reasons that made Nwoye decide his path. But he is not aware of the thorns that lay on the path towards the new culture that has fascinated him. Obierika takes up the role of the chorus and the spokesperson of Achebe. Along several places in the novel we can see Obierika uttering those statements, the author as well as the readers desire to ask. Each member of the community possesses character of different wavelength. But the force that binds them together is their exclusive cultural values. This exclusiveness is same for all the communities throughout the world. If an external culture comes into contact with it, changes are natural. Both tries to imbibe each other's values and the end product will be the emergence of a new reader in the place of the old one.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* probes one to introspect the cultural values of the most popular tribe of Nigeria and the dilemma through which they have passed. They had a glorious cultural past, where rituals, customs, art forms, traditions, myths, legends, literature and life style blended to form a distinct culture. But the social, political and cultural scenario changed as a result of colonial invasion and thus the themes in the novel is universal.

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