



Research Paper

## Portrayal of The Igbo Society In Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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### Abstract

My paper aims at analysing Igbo society as it appears in Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The political, religious, economic and traditional customs of the pre-colonised Igbo society of the 1980's in the fictional village of Umuofia are briefly explained in this paper. It further discusses the sudden and drastic changes forcefully brought into it by British colonialism in the early twentieth century that baffled and disempowered the Umuofians. Achebe's main purpose in this novel was to show the impressive life style of Igbo society to the European society.

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### I. Introduction

Chinua Achebe, being brought up in the Igbo town of Ogidi in south-eastern Nigeria, had a thorough insider's knowledge of the African way of life. Consequently, he strongly disapproved of the superficial representation of Africa in novels like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Joyce Carey's *Mister Johnson*. Following in the footsteps of the authentic depictions of Nigerian life in the novels of Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi, he documents the cultural, religious, political and economic aspects of the pre-colonised Igbo culture of the 1980's in the fictional village of Umuofia and the sudden and drastic changes forcefully brought into it by British colonialism in the early twentieth century that baffled and disempowered the Umuofians. Achebe introduces several Igbo words into his narrative style that emotes the cadences of pre-colonised, pre-modern society in its simplicity of diction.

It is believed that the Igbo originated in an area about hundred miles north of their current location at the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. They share linguistic ties with their neighbours the Bini, Igala, Yoruba, and Idoma, with the split between them probably occurring between five or six thousand years ago. The first Igbo in the region may have moved onto the Awka-Orlu plateau between four and five thousand years ago, before the emergence of sedentary agricultural practices. As this early group expanded, so too did the Igbo kingdom. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes the history of the Igbo tribe by describing both the perfections and imperfections of their culture and traditions that made them different from Western cultures.

#### Patriarchal Society –

The Igbo society is rigidly patriarchal. The solvent men like Okoye, Obierika, Uchendu and Okonkwo are polygamous. Even the categorisation of crops and crimes is based on gender. Crops like coco-yams, beans and cassava, that require less labour in cultivation than yam are feminine while yam is the king of crops. Their food crop is 'yam' that requires immense labour during sowing and reaping. Thus, perseverance and tenacity are held to be the supreme virtues that bring prosperity and success and grant a man the right to enjoy the 'idemili' titles that are the hallmarks of manliness in this patriarchal society. Achebe observes, "Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed" (Achebe 25). Their belief in 'Chi' or the personal god of an individual, reflected in the proverbs that if a man says "yes", his 'Chi' also says "yes", indicates that freewill is more important than predestination.

Intentionally committed crime is masculine, inadvertently committed ones are feminine. Thus, when Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu's adolescent son, when his gun explodes, he is given the punishment of only

seven years of exile. Occasional wife-beating is tolerated, such as Okonkwo's domestic violence on his second wife, Ekwefi, for cutting banana leaves. However, for beating his third wife, Ojiugo, during the week of peace before yam planting, he is chastised and penalised.

#### Law, Religion and Governance –

In the pre-colonised Igbo society, governance, religion and law were closely dependent on tradition. The ruling authority in the novel is an oligarchy of nine eminent umuofian elders or 'ndichi', who executed the judicial norms formulated by their ancestors or 'egwugwu' in an unbiased manner. In matters of serious legal dispute, such as 'Uzowulu's regular physical assaulting of his wife, even during pregnancy, resulting in miscarriage, the masked and raffia-clad titled elders perform a ritualistic impersonation of the 'egwugwu' listened to both the complaints before delivering the verdict.

However, this democratic judicial practice is totally destroyed by colonialism. The religious intricacies of the polytheistic faith of the Igbo people is reflected in Akunna's conversation with the missionary, Mr. Brown. 'Chukwu' is their supreme god, "who made all minor gods" to act as his "messengers". Ani is the "owner of all land" (Achebe 14), the Earth goddess and the source of all fertility and the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. It is to her that the newly cultivated yam is first offered during the Feast of the New Yam before being consumed by the villagers. 'Ifejioku' is their "god of yams" (Achebe 14).

#### Customs and Traditions –

Igbo culture, in all its variety and diversity has been meticulously captured by Achebe in his novel. He describes the electrifying excitement of the wrestling matches and the busy preparations for the Feast of the New Yam when huts are decorated, immense amounts of yam foo-foo and vegetable soup are cooked and relatives are invited in huge numbers. The Umuofians abide by time-honoured rituals of courtesy and reverence. Even when Okoye comes to request Unoka to return the large amount of cowries that he had lent him, there is first the customary offering of the kola nut, alligator pepper and palm wine to the guest. They speak in proverbs before Okoye breaches the real issue. Unoka says, "Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them" (Achebe 6)

The Igbo custom of speaking in proverbs is a rhetoric of reverence and courtesy about which Achebe mentions, "the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and the proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 6). He includes this ritual of Euphemism in sayings like "Let the kite perch and the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break" (Achebe 15), "a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness" (Achebe 15) or "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing" (Achebe 16).

#### Imperfections of the Igbo society -

The Igbo value system also has its own demerits. Tenderness and sensitivity are condemned as feminine so that a man, who is idle or titleless, such as Okonkwo's father, Unoka, is taunted as a woman or 'agbala'. To overcome the childhood shame of being mocked as the son of an 'agbala', Okonkwo built himself up as a mighty wrestler to gain permanent fame by overthrowing the invincible Amalinze, the Cat. Mistrusting emotions, he never expresses love for his children, brings them up with tyrannical discipline and subjects his son, Nwoye, to severe corporal punishment upon seeing the least stress of sloth in him.

## II. Conclusion

The cultural heritage of the Igbo people is slowly lost due to the hegemony and regimentalisation of the standardised colonial culture. Just as the title of the novel, alluding to W.B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* reminds us of the ideals of Christianity that could no longer anchor the disintegrating world of the early twentieth century, similarly the indigenous culture and ideology of the Igbo people collapsed due to colonial atrocities as well as weaknesses from within such as insularity, absence of mobility and the formal education and health facilities. The merits and demerits of this crumbling world have been described by Achebe in a glaringly truthful and unsentimentalised way.

## Bibliography

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