

# THE *MAGNUM OPUS* OF ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART VIS-À-VIS RELIGIOUS CHANGE

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## Abstract

Achebe (1958) captured the peaceful tranquility and values that existed in Igbo culture before the invasion of the whites. Things were no longer the way they used to be, he observed. They planted the superiority seed of conflict for themselves and seed of inferiority for African culture and made the people reject their religious values and ethical norms to embrace and assimilate their foreign religion and culture. They came with their cloths, bible, shoes, material enticement while planting their seed of discord to destabilize the Igbo cherished world and values. Like the dog that suddenly turns to his owner, so it is with man becoming dissatisfied with one religion. The moment a convert enters into contract with a new religion, he/she has petitions and reasons for entering into such contract. The relationship between man and the gods is like give and take – a trade or commerce between the spiritual and man whereby man offers blood of victims as sacrifice, pours libation and in turn expect the gods to reciprocate. When one deity fails, man moves to another or activates another carved image supposed to be more powerful than the former.

**Keywords:** Magnum Opus, Religion, Change

## Introduction

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's (1958) wrote,

How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man was clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

One wonders how custodians of African culture who had lots of power and fame might have felt when new values undermined everything they had worked towards. The knife of the white man destabilized the peaceful harmony existing in Igbo community which touches the fabrics of all Igbo man – from religion to socio- economic activities, political and psychological. Naturally, man attributes fortunes as coming from the gods but denies attributing misfortunes as coming from them equally. Rather than accept that fact, man often channels his blame towards his fellow human. If religious change or commerce is about give and take, why should man not accept the loss/negative as coming from gods equally. Does the Igbo saying that *aka nri kwo aka ekpe akwoo aka nri* apply in this case? If the right hand washes the left, the left in turn is expected to return the favour; whereby he refuses to reciprocate, there lies the problem. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe was emphatic that the progress made by Okonkwo was ascribed to his *chi* (his personal god) after his return from exile. Had Okonkwo failed in his effort to achieve great, it would have been linked to his enemies or a quick way to apostatize.

Most people have used religion as a means to enrich themselves. Most of the new religious movements today were break away from the main stream churches. People in this modern era perceive religion from a different angle believing that one does not have a full view of the masquerade from one vantage position. Achebe in *Arrow of God* presents Ezeulu - the chief priest of *Ulu* as a victim of circumstance. Though a priest of *Ulu*, he pretended not to be aware of his son's embrace with another religion. He made this point clear when he says, I want one of my sons to be with these people- referring to the new religion. If there is nothing in it, he will come back. If there is some good things in it, at least he will bring his share. From the statement above even Ezeulu was not so comfortable with *Ulu* deity as he is caught in-between two rivers. This lack of self-confidence in *Ulu* deity impelled him to turn the other way as his son joins a new religion. "I want one of my son sons to be with these people. If there is nothing in it he will come back, but if there is something in it he will bring my share". The smart priest of *Ulu* in his religious enterprise is very smart and would not want to lose out in either of the religions. Ezeulu seemed not to be thrilled with the benefits from traditional beliefs and practices thus he decided to try another phase of worship by first sending his son. There is no doubt about his intending conversion had he not been a priest of *Ulu* or if his son succeeds by bringing something good back home. Some people believe so much in the saying that 'where the benefits are greater, there lies the true God'. Hence, the craze for the miraculous.

In religious sphere, people are driven by emotions and the tendency to have their problems solved as quickly as possible in miracles. 'Miraculous' churches win more adherents than other major religions. Lack of miraculous performance ward off people from their original religion and at the same time miraculous activities lure them into new ones. In things fall apart, to reconcile the saying that, "it is not our custom to fight for our God and his victim, may lead to receiving blows meant or intended for the other person. As humans, some do not believe in fighting for the gods as they believe the gods have the necessary power to defend themselves. If one really believes that the gods are spirits and powerful, needless bothering oneself to fight for them. The adherents of any religion often expect their deities to avenge for the desecration, abominable acts and looting of their abode where they domicile. Whereby nothing happens to the victims, this may also lead to rejection of such deity for another believed to be more powerful and proactive. The failure of one God in time of need leads to a shift to another god.

### **The Bargain in Making and Remaking of the Gods**

Part of African belief system involves animism, where every object is believed to possess elements of spirit forces. Sacred objects are carefully designated and given a particular shape through carving. One of the sons of Ezeulu, Odogo is a nice Carver. He can carve the deity while the chief priest activates it. The activated deities are respected and revered. Achebe (1964) in the *Arrow of god* presents Ebo as one who reveres the activated image of a deity and could not withstand the abomination committed by Akukalia by splitting his Ikenga deity into two. He rushed inside his room and brought out a gun and shot Akukalia to death (pp.24-25). The Igbo respect and revere the deities. Man in turn expect the deities to reciprocate their kind gesture by resolving their impending problems. It is a two way thing. "You give me, I give you". Whereby the

deity fails to give when it is obvious that a lot of sacrifices must have been performed, the devotee is compelled to discard that particular deity for another alternative deity. The Igbo adage has it that “*ewelu ewelukwa n’ebute esemokwu* (one who takes a second share when others are yet to take the first, breeds rancor). When they fail to meet our demand, we bid them good bye and install another after all, they exist because we exist (Arazu, 2008). A marketer goes to market to make profit. Wherever he get the goods at affordable price, there he shops at.

### **Change from the Pre-Colonial Perspective**

Change from the primitive perception involves the making and remaking of the gods following the fulfilment of his wants and demands. Any deity that always meet with the problems of man is an asset, a good investment. Achebe’s reflection on the colonial invasion destabilized the peaceful and tranquil nature that existed in the local communities of Africa before the advent of the new religion. They planted a conflict of superiority of religion and culture. They introduce their own god and convince us into believing that ours are inferior and powerless. This caused the diminution of the African gods/ deities and the rise and installation of the Western cultures and deities. The tension that emanated from the establishment and installation of the new deity met its waterloo in the abrupt conversion and enrolment of the members into the new order. These movements portray change. Okonkwo considers the White man’s action as intrusion and threat to their age long religion. The religion handed down to them by their forefathers. The religion he believes so much in. He invokes the deity in times of war, wrestling competition and during farming season for bountiful harvest and as far as he is concerned the gods have reciprocated by blessing his effort in his bounty harvest, title honours and other remarkable achievements.

Most cultures experience the playing out of the same type of change; change from one traditional religion to new religion but not without some level of resistance. The resistance owes to the fact that no one knows what the new religion could offer and it tends to put them out of job. The challenges most of the defenders of old tradition (faith) have is the smart and shrewd manner the new religion penetrates the people. If the new faith engaged them in warfare and defeat them, perhaps the grudges may be minimal. But instead, they came with lots of incentives, palliatives and soothing words to lure and entice the locals into their new religion. Even in exile to his maternal home, the man Okonkwo thought of what would become of his clan Umuofia in his absent. The story of the new religion being introduced into the community could not calm his flared spirit. When Obierika, his friend brought the news that the White men had entered Umuofia his own village, he regretted his absent in Umuofia and was disappointed at hearing that the great Umuofia could not resist the White man’s (change) intrusion into the village. He thought that his absent would make the village to be in-situ but was disappointed that even at his absence change occurred showcasing the indispensability of man. Rather than recognize and accept the new change, the man Okonkwo felt disarmed at the cold feet exhibited by his people. He was not satisfied and convinced that the White man’s

coming was for peace and development but rather an upgraded type of reciprocity in religion. He braved to face the challenges alone and damned the consequences.

### **Modifications in the Primitive Religion**

Ezeudu was presented as the oldest man in the village of Umuofia who recounts what his father told him about changes in cultural observances: “It has not always been so; he said, my father told me that he has been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while these customs was stopped because it spoilt the peace which it was meant to preserve” (Achebe, 1958). Ezeudu challenged some of the traditional practices in Umuofia, like throwing the dead body that died on the week of peace into the evil forest. This he condemned believing it was because they lack understanding. The killing of twins was an old practice which suddenly fizzled away in the post colonial era; those who died of unknown diseases were thrown into the evil forest without funeral ritual.

What is happening in the Igbo community of today is the re-establishment of the abolished old tradition. I blame it totally on the degenerating economic situation biting hard on the people and the craze for quick wealth as young Nigerians have developed the incessant urge for instant money due to their impatience in going through the crucibles of life. The love of material acquisition has put man into the morass of return to tradition. Believing that, it's one of the hastiest way to make it in life. They are not talking about spirituality which involve- love, truth, honesty, compassion, nonviolence, righteousness, but the zeal to acquire wealth by all means possible. The new generation are clamoring for a reverse to or return to the old abolished traditional practices of ‘Okite’, human trade (trafficking), and *ogwu* etc. The reintroduction of the abolished religious tradition of *alusi*, deities, have been overstated as if religion is the only aspect that make up the Igbo cosmology (World view). There has been a cold conflict between the Igbo traditional religion and Christianity. There are about four major aspects that make up the Igbo traditional world view. The four aspects include: the economical aspect, social aspect, religious aspect and political aspect. For one to center on one aspect and call it “Igbo tradition” is an absurdity. To focus on one aspect and call it Igbo tradition does not hold water. The Igbo people are known for being industrious, religious and hospitable. They practiced gerontocracy as a system of government in the community. In terms of religion, there are four groups that handle these aspects of their trado-religious life. They are: *dibia afa* (diviner), *dibia aja* (*dibia* that offers sacrifice), *dibia ogwu* (the herbal medicine man) and *dibia oje-na-muo* (one who travels by etheric forces) (Arazu, 2008). These are trustworthy men committed to ensuring to the peaceful and harmonious coexistence in the community. There were division of labour amongst them. Each of them focused on his own specialty. They avoid every form of negativity. Even though they were wretched, they prefer to be so because of the esoteric implications. They were not unaware of what to do to become wealthy but deliberately avoided threading that doom part because of its adversarial repercussion. In their gluttonous quest for quick wealth, the new generation have flouted the repercussive implications by daring into the spiritualism. This has resulted to many death and insanity for engaging the elementals, the paranormal and the occultic. The elementals in this case

represent the amoral subtle beings that are invoked by man for different sorcery, devilry and thaumaturgy feats. All in the zeal for religious change.

The new generation are convinced into believing that Christian doctrine/ religion has been their problem and should be rejected. This idea began with the Islamist jihadist organization based in the NorthEastern Nigeria called *Boko Haram* which emphasized on rejection of anything Western civilization or western education. This has gradually infiltrated into other ethnics groups and has contributed to the quest for materialism, quest for miracle, quick money, kidnapping and short cut to everything. The normal Igbo man believes that it is not the money that makes one rich but, love, compassion, togetherness, community living, sustainable values and peaceful coexistence. Our people believe that *ezi afa ka ego* (virtuous personality is greater than wealth). The attempt by the new generation to effect the traditional change has met with lots of resistance from the old generation. The newer generations are fond of emulating their like in other ethnic group particularly when it concerns socio religious practices.

The missionaries were accused of exploitation and looting of our values, but these were the group that established education, hospitals, civilization among others. The missionaries like the Holy Ghost Fathers were different from the colonial white men who were business oriented. They exploit, traded human as slaves, oppressed and enriched themselves. They were after their personal wealth as against the advancement of the community. Hence to use that as a yard stick to remonstrate against Christianity is committing the fallacy of ambiguity and hasty generalization. Wealth for the new generation is now used as the yard stick for measuring respect and honour. I could remember the time of *Eze-ego* of Ihiala, chief John Nebeolisa, and their colleagues whose sources of wealth was uncertain as they reigned supreme in the early nineties, and fizzled away shortly after.

Nwoye, Okonkwo's son wanted a change right from the onset, he resisted the violent type of change his father expected of him. His father's open confrontation and beating could not stop him from joining the new religion. Ezeudu was another personality that wanted moderation of the old practices. He warned Okonkwo ahead of time not to involve himself in the death of Ikemefuna. He rejects the shading of an innocent blood despite the fact that he was the oldest man in Umuofia village.

### **Change from the Perspective of *Nwata Kwochaa Aka Osoro Ogaranya Rie Nri***

Change from the perspective of *nwata kwichaa aka osoro ogaranya rie nri* (when a child washes his hands clean, he dines with the elders) in Achebe's novel things fall apart. The concept of *nwata kwochaa aka...* refers to individuals who by their own personal effort have risen to the level or position of honour. Okonkwo as the principal actor found himself in a poor background where little or no effort is made to improve the poverty state. He never cease to blame his father for their misfortune. At this stage Okonkwo was full of thought on what to do to alleviate the poor level. For him, the best way to start was to be independent of his parents' nonchalance. He nursed the idea of rising to great height and to be part of the decision making of the clan. Okonkwo wanted all these but yet he had not washed his hands clean enough. One thing is to conceive an

idea, another is to execute it. Being conscious of his low status, he was not unaware that the struggle to greater height would not be an easy task. And he cannot dine with the elders without first washing clean his hands. He wasted no time in bringing the first honor to himself and uplift the low poverty level of the family by defeating Amalinze the cat in a wrestling contest. It did not end there, he brought back the first human head in a war. This blew up his fame and dignity on the social arena beyond his village. Having washed the social aspect of his hands clean, by earning social honours, this brought him closer to the elders. But not good enough to dine with them.

What about the cultural, economic and traditional honours occupied by the elders of the clan? Okonkwo started working harder towards a chieftaincy title and entering into farming to bridge the cultural and economic gap between him and the elders. He was industrious and promising to the extent that he was able to acquire two yam barns, held two titles and had three wives. Having attained the traditional status, an indication that he had not only washed his hands enough but was ready to dine with the elders. He now had a full privilege to mix up and decide what happens in the community with the elders. This is not a quest of bribing ones way through the conferment of traditional honours. One thing is to attain to great height in the community, another is to control and manage the power that comes with it. The level of wealth and power Okonkwo possessed within a short period of time pushed him into doing what he wouldn't do ordinarily. He now considers himself greater than those who were there before he even thought of washing his hands. He stands to throw challenge at both the elders and title holders before him. He ignored warnings from the elders about power intoxication because he would not want to be labelled as a weakling.

### **Conclusion**

Some of the locals who gave out their pieces of lands to the whites or religious groups did so not because they wanted them nor wanted other religions in place of their traditional religion, but they gave it to them to avoid reprisal or violent attacks from those coming to establish a new church rather they wanted to bring them in confrontation with the evil spirits. Some of the locals who gave out their piece of land to the whites or to religious groups did so for some reasons not because they wanted it but because they wanted to set a battle or contest between the invaders and the evil spirits believed to domicile in those evil forests; whoever won the contest should occupy the land and perhaps become the superior religion that needed no further conviction to join. Their main goal for leasing out the land was that the evil spirits occupying those abandoned lands would kill the occupants within some time. But their expectations would not be sustained as they were shocked at how the invaders escaped the wrath of the evil spirits. They felt dissatisfied with how the invaders established their religion and were not harmed by the evil spirits. One of the most painful aspects was that the lands in question was not a small piece of land but a massive layout that was estimated to be acres of land. The lot that the locals cast was so uncertain that they resigned to fate. This was a tremendous conquest for the invaders who took the opportunity to chastise their deities as powerless and see them as worshipers of dead gods. This particular feat won to their side a lot of converts. For the locals, it was a total failure and

defeat since the dreadful evil spirit could not stand up against the whites nor destroy them. Their idea was unproductive. They did not gain from the trade they transacted between the whites and the spirits. The change that accompanied this “defeat” was impactful. They had no option than to welcome the new religion as superior. Had the gods reacted at the time they needed them to react by destroying those that were developing on the evil forests, by now the traditional religion would have been the dream of all.

The advent of the new religion was well applauded but the foreign culture that accompanied it came with its controversy as they made effort to denounce and condemn our traditional values. Till date, this condemnation has not given way for good nor yielded any fruitful result in the African subconscious / psyche. Africa still battle with the inferiority complex and evil therein. Achebe (1958), described such situation thus, “Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run.” He listed out heroes who resisted the emerging changes in our society who would rather choose to die than be alive and watch the foreigners toil with their priceless traditional practices. Some of the key players do not get themselves involved in personal and family changes but when it concerns the community, the same key people would ignorantly repudiate being part of the change effect. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* labored and changed his impoverished status and arose to higher positions in the community. Unfortunately, he closed his ear to the voice of reason calling for change in the community. The high class struggle or accomplishment has made some people adamant to the call for change. They will never be part of this call in that it will adversely affect their position. They will prefer to feed their loyalist with such crumb as to sustain the loyalty. Some would clamor for individual change but adamant to change in the community. “That boy calls you father, have no hands in his death“. But being clouded with the hull of fame and status and in order not to be regarded as weakling, he gave the final struck to Ikemefuna. That for me is selfish enterprise. No matter how positioned one attains, we should not lose focus nor neglect the community for “no man however great is greater than his clan” (Achebe, 1958).

Change as innovation, modification, replacement, or civilization should be allowed to evolve and blend with the existing values to avoid things falling apart. It is only in Africa that those who have attained high class no longer think of what to do in order to effect certain crude changes in the community. Since, the discovery of climbing rope by our forefathers it has remained stagnant since then; no effort to improve on the already existing implements. Maybe they are waiting for the White Man to do the modifications for them. The cutlass remains the same. What improved variety has Africans introduced to improve the living condition of rural people?

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