

External and Internal Causes of the Downfall of the Ibo

One of Chinua Achebe's goals in *Things Fall Apart* is to portray Ibo culture vividly and honestly. Unlike European perspectives of the Africans – such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – Achebe's representation explains intricate customs, rituals, and laws and develops individual characters. *Things Fall Apart* shows Ibo society to be fully functioning and full of life. However, Achebe maintains his objectivity and avoids giving the Ibo any undue sympathy, painting some of their customs – such as the mandatory abandonment of infant twins – in a questionable light. While it is easy for us – especially in this age of political correctness and multiculturalism – to place upon the white man all the blame for the downfall of the Ibo, Achebe does not make the situation so simple. In fact, it is the acquiescence of his comrades, not the intrusion of the Europeans, which eventually causes Okonkwo to take his own life. Thus, it is difficult to place the Ibo and the white men into traditional categories of good and evil, for each exhibits positive and negative qualities. Although the Ibo certainly possessed a lively, stable society before the Europeans arrived, their internal struggles contributed to their own demise.

DEVELOPED CULTURE

Throughout the novel, Achebe offers detailed illustrations of the richness of Ibo culture. Many episodes do not directly advance the plot, but rather serve to provide examples of this culture. One of the most significant signs of the development of Ibo culture is its system of laws and justice. A whole chapter describes the proceedings as *egwugwu* (important clansmen who dress as village ancestors) determine the verdict in a wife-beating case (87). The villagers are not stupid enough to believe that the costumed

men are actually the village ancestors, yet: “Okonkwo’s wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves” (90). The villagers remain silent out of respect for the ancestors represented by the *egwugwu* and out of reverence for the ritual.

In addition to laws, Okonkwo’s world is also shaped by a social hierarchy, which sheds light on the values of his people. Achebe notes, “Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered” (8). And it is through the strength of his own achievements that Okonkwo gains his prominent social position. Originally gaining fame through his wrestling prowess, he proceeds to distinguish himself in a war, become a successful farmer, and gain some of the overt signs of social position: wives and titles. Okonkwo’s history shows that the Ibo value strength, bravery and success.

Other Ibo traditions described in the novel include the Week of Peace, in which no work is done (31), and the New Year festival, which honors the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan (36). The Ibo also have a highly developed mythology, including stories such as the tale of Mosquito and Ear (75) and the tale of Tortoise and the birds (97). These many facets of culture show that the Ibo are not just a bunch of savages in a jungle but an intricate, functional society.

QUESTIONABLE CUSTOMS AND THE CONFLICT BETWEEN OLD AND NEW

While Achebe does write with sensitivity and empathy for the Ibo, he does not hide the fact that many of their rituals and traditions rest on questionable foundations. Ibo society encourages – or even demands – certain practices which are harmful to its constituents. A prime example is the story of the boy Ikemefuna. Though he is innocent

of the crime in question – the murder of an Umofian girl in Mbaino – tradition nonetheless dictates that he must leave his family and his home to serve as a reparation for the offense. His first days in Umofia are full of suffering: “At first Ikemefuna was afraid. Once or twice he tried to run away, but he did not know where to begin. He thought of his mother and his three-year old sister and wept bitterly. When Okonkwo heard that he would not eat any food he came into the hut with a big stick in his hand and stood over him while he swallowed his yams, trembling. A few moments later he went behind the hut and began to vomit painfully” (27-8). It seems ridiculous that all this pain should be inflicted upon an innocent child as a means of reprimand for a murder he did not commit.

Yet things get even worse for Ikemefuna when the oracle arbitrarily and suddenly decides he should be killed. Nwoye’s reaction to the murder of Ikemefuna is particularly interesting. Although he is unable to put his feelings into exact words, he is able to isolate them and describe them: “As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. He just hung limp” (61). Nwoye also remembers feeling this way when he heard the cry of abandoned twins (61). His young conscience instinctively knows something is amiss in both of these situations, and they leave him feeling worried and empty. Nwoye is one of those rare people who actually question the customs of Ibo society rather than submissively following. His ability to step back and question the practices of his own society probably stems from his dissatisfaction with its beliefs; he has been repulsed the excessive brutality of his father: “Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still

preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children – stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat” (53). Before the Christians ever arrive, Nwoye is deeply uncomfortable about the deadly customs surrounding him. But as long as believers in those customs surround him, his feeling can never become more than a vague uneasiness.

The only other significant character to doubt his own Ibo customs is Obierika. After Okonkwo is exiled for seven years because of an accidental killing, Obierika ponders, “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?” (125). And, of course, he can find no answers because there is no rational basis for the infanticide or the harshness of Okonkwo’s punishment. He knows only that the earthly goddess decrees these things. This quells his uneasy questioning for the time being, but does not truly resolve any of his questions. Like Nwoye, he is too much a product of his Ibo culture to truly challenge any aspect of it independently. Moreover, he remains loyal to his Ibo values until the end, whereas Nwoye’s discontent eventually leads him to convert to Christianity.

These characters are instances of a rift growing in the society of the Ibo. Okonkwo yearns for the old days, “when men were men” (200). He is at first disgusted with Nwoye’s gentleness and laziness, and later outraged when his compatriots fail to take up arms against the Christians. His attitude toward those around him is more than simply an outgrowth of his brutal machismo; it is a staunch defense of Ibo values and

religion. One of the elders of Mbanta recognizes Okonkwo as guardian of the old ways, and praises him for strengthening the bonds of the village with a great feast. However, his words to the younger generation are less optimistic: “But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers” (167). The village elder and Okonkwo both realize the importance of “the bond of kinship” and the tremendous danger of its absence. Neither would dream of questioning the sacred decrees of the Earth goddess as Nwoye and Obierika do.

Thus Ibo society stands divided and disunited, a ripe opportunity for the Christian missionaries. On one side are the defenders of traditional Ibo values – Okonkwo and the other important men of the clan; on the other side are social misfits who feel vaguely dissatisfied with Ibo society – Nwoye and others, such as the outcasts, or *osu*. Thus the Ibo prepare the opportunity for the Christian missionaries themselves.

ARRIVAL OF THE WHITE MEN

The arrival of the Europeans finally gives a concrete form to the dissatisfaction felt by Nwoye, other Ibos, especially the *osu*. By taking advantage of the lower members of the Ibo social hierarchy, the Christians are able to gain a foothold in the African society. Nwoye is hypnotized by the missionaries’ singing, and “the hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul” (147). Nwoye’s dissatisfaction with his own culture makes him particularly vulnerable to the

preachings of the Christians, and he consequently finds the courage to attend church and eventually go to the Christian school for teachers. The *osu* also become an important component of the new congregation. In Ibo society they are treated like slaves, unable to marry or assemble with the free-born, forbidden from cutting their dirty, snarled hair, and not allowed any of the four titles of the clan (156). Coming from this perspective, the *osu* are naturally drawn to the Christian faith, which embraces them with open arms. After Mr. Kiaga accepted the first two *osu* into the congregation, they “shaved off their hair, and soon they were the strongest adherents of the new faith. And what was more, nearly all the *osu* in Mbanta followed their example” (157). The first female convert, Nneka, is also a social misfit, having had four consecutive sets of twins, and causing her husband and his family to become highly critical of her (151). By welcoming them into the church, the Christians are able to take advantage of the underprivileged in the society.

The Christians also gain power by demonstrating the irrational and superstitious nature of many Ibo beliefs, and thus discrediting traditional Ibo values. After giving the missionaries a plot of land in the cursed Evil Forest, many clansmen assume that the Christians will perish in a few days. Yet the missionaries continue with their work, even beyond the 28-day limit after which the Ibo gods supposedly never let a man defy them (150). At this point, the new church gains even more converts (151), having shown the complete absence of factual foundation for the Ibo belief in the Evil Forest.

The key to the white man’s success is his ability to turn the Ibo against themselves. When Okonkwo makes bold proclamations urging his people to slaughter the missionaries and drive them away, Obierika responds:

It is already too lateOur own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we

should try to drive out the white men in Umofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame (176).

Obierika – once again thinking – realizes that the white men have strained the disunity present in Ibo society and turned the Africans against each other. The Europeans have destroyed the bond of kinship, which the elder recognized as vitally important. In summary, Obierika says, “[The white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (176). It is this unity and kinship – or lack thereof – which truly determines the fate of the Ibo. It is important to realize that Okonkwo in desperation finally turns to suicide not because of an action by the Europeans, but because of his own people’s complete and disorganized submission to the invaders. After killing a white messenger, Okonkwo finally realizes the hopelessness of the situation: “Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umofia would not go to war. He knew because [the clansmen] had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult” (205).

CONCLUSION

The downfall of Ibo society is a product of both the white man’s external influence and increasing internal disunity. The situation is similar to that of a tragic hero whose tragic fall is necessitated only by the combination of a tragic flaw in his character and the uncontrollable forces working against him. Obviously Ibo society would have continued to prosper had the white men not arrived and attempted to control it; however, the coming of the Europeans alone was not enough to destroy the Ibo. Had they stood their ground and defended their traditions as urged by Okonkwo, they could have protected their way of life. But perhaps such a defense would merely be delaying the

inevitable; there was probably little the Ibo could do if the missionaries brought military reinforcements. In any case, if Ibo society can be compared to a tragic hero, its irrational beliefs would be its tragic flaw. It was these beliefs which directly alienated members of society, such as Nwoye, Nneka, and the *osu*, and created a rift within the Ibo. While such beliefs and customs are certainly evidence of the depth of Ibo culture, their irrational basis could not withstand the white man's defiance of them, as shown by the church's survival in the Evil Forest. Ironically, it is these beliefs – the presence of a social structure, the development of a religion – which not only show the richness of Ibo culture, but also lead to its downfall.