Coexistence Between Africa and the Western World

In Chinua Achebe’s most famous, groundbreaking novel entitled *Things Fall Apart*, he portrays a civilization that worships multiple gods, has ancient traditions that seem vulgar and inhumane to Western culture, and has customs that are that based strongly off family and ancestors that cannot be destroyed by inside/outside forces. *Things Fall Apart* shows a struggle with Western imperialism that eventually destroys the foundations that the Igbo culture was based upon—leading to chaos and the eradication of a culture that has been around for centuries. Western methods and actions are more civilized and logical compared to Igbo methods. There is less suffrage, and overall, the modernization of Africa was inevitable because “the colonizers, whose ideology Achebe is obviously trying to debunk, have a different order of hierarchy, given their education and historical background” (Okechukwu 14) and with this happening, this nation would proper over the lesser nation. Achebe’s “ability to reveal both what was truly at stake in that tragic conflict and why it was that the confrontation was decided in favor of modernization” (Moses 108) shows that the two nations could never stay separate. The British imperialistic views are too strong for the Igbo people to not be able to fall under British rule eventually; “the British imperial policy of ‘divide and conquer’ reveals the sinister side of Christian universalism” (Moses 128), basically sealing the fate of the Igbo people. A counterargument is that both cultures could have coexisted with each other, that Igbo culture was just as good as the West, both living peacefully and allowing both ways of life to prosper. It is argued “that [the Igbo] people had a culture that was as good as, if not better than, the Western culture, which came to destroy it” (Okechukwu 13) and during this imperialistic movement in Africa called “The Scramble for Africa,” which took place between Britain, Portugal, and France, several things changed for the Igbo people and all of Africa’s inhabitants.

When Achebe says that their way of life was just as good as the West, he is “contesting the representation of African in the novels of Conrad and Cary who have the propensity to represent the continent as either a blank space or a monstrous presence” (Gikandi 27) and that the Africans did in fact have a history, it was simply spoken and not written down. Change that threatened religion, family, structure, gender roles, trade, education, and government effected the Igbo people at a rate that they could not keep up with—the few who had seen this change coming did not have the power to prevent it from happening. All of these changes came from the Western way of thinking and acting. Some did not want change to happen, but it was inevitable for change to occur as there were with so many Igbo people following the Western world’s ways and so few to prevent the great change from happening. During this rapid culture change, an entire civilization’s customs were taken away by the West and were changed into modern Western thinking and acting. This change would have happened eventually and could have been delayed for many years, but Western imperialism brought about the change in Igbo culture at an accelerated pace, something that they were not fully ready to experience. The identity of Africa was lost, and the pressure of a new world was fast approaching.

During this great time of change for the Igbo people, and before the Europeans had arrived at Umuofia, the Igbo people had customs and traditions that had been around for centuries. The Europeans slowly, but surely, came to dominate many parts of Africa and dominate the culture of the African people. British imperialism cost the villages of Umuofia its identities in the spiritual and traditional realms—“Umuofia is, of course, defeated because it is disunited, and this disunity has important implications for the way the culture understands its own nature and situation” (Gikandi 35). This change came at such an expeditious rate and was so different from what any of the Igbo people had ever experienced before that both cultures ignored the option of coexistence. Both the Igbo and Western culture valued fame, honored personal achievement, valor, courage and bravery, but even if they had considered the option of coexistence, it would have failed because of the drastic differences between the two cultures. Africa and Umuofia could not have dodged the modernization of the African nation. Some believe that this change could have been one of acceptance and learning for both cultures and the loss of none, but “the Europeans misconceived the Africans. Because the Europeans lacked knowledge of the people’s language, they could not have a real insight into the African worldview” (Okechukwu 13). Warfare and insolent killing caused both cultures to resent one another, causing the eradication of an entire culture of Igbo people and the takeover of Western culture in Africa.

Psychological and social consequences of the transitions that were made from the tribal indigenous society to the Western mode brought by imperialistic takeover were of many different categories. The first category that experienced great change (and possibly the most change/most controversial change) was that of religion. The clan of “Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country” (Achebe 11), which states how powerful and well-known Umuofia is for its connections with the gods such as Ani (the earth goddess) and Chielo, the priestess of Agbala (the Oracle of the Hills and Caves). All surrounding clans feared Umuofia and would not dare impose on them, especially when dealing with the gods, although all under the same watchful eye. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves in Umuofia decides what actions the clan should take during warfare, and if the clan were to disobey the Oracle’s commands, any opposing force would surely have beaten them. In a way, this Oracle has the power over many lives and can save or not save them if so desired. In Western society in the 1900s, people did not consult a God or gods when dealing with warfare. This was a custom used by the Igbo people until the imperialistic rule of Europe changed their outlook on how to deal with combat. When the Westerners disrespect *egwugwu*, this is when the Igbo people turn to violence and they burn down the white man’s church. Although, “the white men, despite their sense of superiority, can be seen to have done the same thing that the ‘inferior’ natives do” (Okechukwu 23) when they wipe out a whole village because some villagers killed one white man. “But to wipe out a whole village because some villagers killed one man is surely worse than burning a church building…by burning the church is like desecrating the white man’s God…to unmask *egwugwu* is to desecrate the house of the people’s gods” (Okechukwu 23), which shows that the Western actions might be more severe than the Igbo. Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, has his own personal *chi*, separate from the gods that guide the villages. Although the strongest and wealthiest man within the clan, Okonkwo’s “whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness” (Achebe 13) and in the “medicine house,” or shrine, “where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices…and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself” (Achebe 14) showing that even the strongest men have these gods. Not only are these wooden statues symbols of their gods, they also represents their ancestors, which is strongly important because family means everything in this culture. Like Western culture, the Igbo people hold festivals to celebrate their gods (or one God in Western society such as Christmas)—such as The Feast of the Yams, which could be viewed much like Western Thanksgiving. This festival gives thanks to Ani, the god of earth and fertility. As the people of Umuofia first interact and converse with the Europeans about religion, many differences surface. The white man speaking to the natives hears multiple gods named and rebuts quickly with “’all the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky and you and me and all of us’” (Achebe 146), which shows the major differences between religions in both of these cultures. The white man barely listens to the people of Umuofia, simply telling them that “they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone” (Achebe 145) and this causes the entire crowd of people to begin speaking to one another about what was said. When Okonkwo finds out Nwoye has went with the “European white man (Reverend James Smith) who takes the part of slavish Christianity” (Moses 123), Okonkwo is outraged and furious at his son for abandoning the gods of his ancestors, and especially his, which is what makes Okonkwo so upset. He fears that when he loses Nwoye, he will lose the rest.

Within Achebe’s novel entitled *Things Fall Apart*, he examines conflict inherent in the act of transition of Africa, either within the evolving socials rules of family or the cultural definitions of a society from the West as it is assimilated into the modern world. Second to religion, another large change within the two converging cultures is that of government, traditions, and family structure. The West thought, “the African is without a universal conception of Law and God, and therefore without a conception of justice or morality that transcends immediate individual sensuous need” (Moses 110), but within the Igbo culture, family, structure, and justice is everything. The man is the leader of the house and the women (the multiple wives of the male) are the caretakers and are not valued as much as a strong male and this can be read “as the symbol of phallocentricism—meanings and defined and controlled by men and cultural identity is only achieved through the exclusion of women (Gikandi 34). Their opinions are not looked upon as helpful, unlike the Western way of thought that women are not quite equal, but are more respected than the women of Umuofia. In the Western way of marriage, one man can only have one wife, and in the Igbo culture, the male can have as many wives as he can handle and support. Okonkwo, the strongest warrior in the village, had many wives and children. Okonkwo “ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper” (Achebe 13), which shows how much power and superiority the male sex has over the female sex. Unlike the Western society, farming was also divided into sex-based roles—nearly every aspect of the Igbo society was gendered. Okonkwo’s “mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (Achebe 28) and this allows the males of the clan to maintain their position as the primary providers for their families and receive the respect that they deserve from them. Within the Igbo culture, young men are taught to be authoritative to women at an early age. Starting out with this state-of-mind is thought to lead to greater power in the future. Older men believed that “no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man” (Achebe 53) and this way of thought is being carried onward to their children because men are thought to be defined mainly by their behavior towards the female sex. Males are not seen as real men unless they can force women to carry out their orders and demands. The men of the clan have free will, but the women of the clan must be controlled and ruled over with a strong grasp. “In this patriarchal society, the possession of property, women, children, titles, and political power is a necessary component of the noble life” (Moses 111), which is true in some cases within the Western way of thinking, but mainly only possessions, property, and power.

It is not only the women of the clan that have to worry about the dominant males. The younger men of the clan have to worry about their fathers and if their fathers respect them and if they are proving to be real men to their fathers. The fathers of the clan want their children to grow up to take over the superior position of the clan, which means they must start working hard at an early age. Okonkwo, for example, wants his children to be strong and wealthy just like him, and not be has his father was—a poor man with no land who was in debt to many other clan members. Okonkwo “will not have a son who cannot hold his head in the gathering of the clan. [He] would sooner strangle him with [his] own hands” (Achebe 33) and this shows that he would rather kill his own son than live with a son that is inferior as an Igbo society member. Okonkwo is thinking of his own reputation within the clan, not his son’s reputation. Within the clan, the son’s of the father are more valued than the daughters of the clan. The father wants his son to be just like him when he grows up, much like the white man in Western society does; but in this fashion, the Igbo culture is much more strict about the future—but none-the-less, “both Okonkwo and the white man, this exhibit the beautiful, the harsh, and the ugly parts of the human nature and culture” (Okechukwu 16). When Nwoye turns on his father and joins the Christians, Okonkwo is greatly hurt and angered by his oldest sons actions. He saw Nwoye’s actions as a crime, not a choice. In this culture, “to abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination…like the prospect of annihilation” (Achebe 153) and this bothers the men of the clan because the white Christians believe in peace, preaching, and singing more than they believe in taking action towards a confrontation. They see how easily the boy was recruited into the Christian way of thinking and this worries them that it is going to be the end of their culture as a whole. And again, the thought of his daughters do not mean as much to him as the thoughts of his sons do. He is more worried that his sons will leave and follow the missionaries than his daughters.

Within the Western way of doing things and the tribal consciousness of Africa, the traditions and customs of the two clashing cultures are radically differentiated, but at the same time are somewhat related. The kola nut was one of the Igbo cultures most valued customs when hosting guests within one’s household. The Western way of acting with guests is exceptionally different, but at the same time, there is still a respect that the Western actions are inviting and polite towards guests coming into ones household. “He who brings kola brings life” (Achebe 10), which represents the great deal of tradition that surrounds the kola nut. The kola nut is another way of communicating respect between different people, much like Westerners do when having guests—it “seems [that] arguing [that] this society [of Igbo people] uses the same rhetorical technique that Westerners use (Okechukwu 19). They not only use the same technique when dealing with guests, but often times both cultures consult before war and other acts of importance. While it may seem like these two cultures are greatly similar, it is seen as the “white man unwittingly brought bribery, lack of respect for the ways of the clan and for the elders, humiliation of the elders and the titled men, and even the hanging of a manslaughter convict” (Okechukwu 19) and this happens because the white man’s interpreter hails from a different clan that does not share Umuofia tradition, which shows more than the two cultures could never leave peacefully. When dealing with marriage, the Igbo culture bargains or deals in sticks to determine married rights. This is somewhat scene in Western society as well, but not as a dramatic of an exchange. The man who wants to marry a woman in the Western world usually asks the father for permission to marry his daughter. Although these two people could get married regardless, it is still a custom to ask for the families blessing when dealing with such a strong topic as marriage. Instead of asking the father for the daughters hand in marriage, a series of events are held. In Umuofia, the families deal with bride prices. The bride’s family presents the groom’s family with a sum, usually demonstrated by broomsticks, and the other party adds or subtracts sticks as they please or until they are satisfied. They add and subtract these sticks until both parties finally agree on an amount. The final number of sticks represents the amount of bags of cowries paid by the groom’s family for the bride’s hand in marriage—much like the Western society does, but without objects, just words. In two neighboring clans called Abame and Aninta, the way of asking for a bride’s hand in marriage is much different. The men of Umuofia see their way of doing this as wrong and unjust. They think, “All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride price as [Umuofia people] do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they [are] buying a goat or a cow in the market” (Achebe 73) and this way of doing things is wrong to the people of Umuofia, just like the Umuofia way of doing things is wrong to the Westerners. Like in many societies, the Umuofia think their ways are best and others are benighted, just like the Western way of thinking feels about Umuofia; “but what is good in one place is bad in another place” (Achebe 74) and this is something that is ongoing between the Westerners and the Igbo culture. These people do not understand that “the world is large” (Achebe 74) and there are many other ways of acting and dealing with situations. Much like the marriage of man and woman, the Igbo are on the same level of agricultural intelligence—they have their own system of gaining economic success just like the West does. In Umuofia, “the wealthy man has huge barns, many wives and many children; he also wears titles as signs of the authority and power that comes with prosperity. This wealth…mediates human relationships” (Gikandi 37) and this is true for many cultures—not necessarily many huge barns and many wives, but the thought of being important when having money and power is always present. This could be seen within both the Igbo culture and the Western way of thinking and acting. There is also a concern with the sense of time and dates before the West came to Africa. “The village social structures and its system of exchange and beliefs follows an established calendar, a signifier of the culture’s sensitivity to the process of time and the fundamental connection of people, things and words” (Gikandi 29), which gives a strong representation of how the Igbo people were on the same grounds as the Westerners. Even though these two different cultures “were separated from each other by geographical and historical distance, [they] were organized roughly similar social structures and an ethos that celebrated a comparable notion of human virtue” (Moses 112). After the white man comes and begins to spread his religion and way of life around Umuofia, Okonkwo and many other elders and strong warriors begin to realize the factual change that is happening within the clan, “moreover, it is clear that this revolutionary change in the clan’s identity would have itself destroyed its traditional way of life” (Moses 126).

Within Chinua Achebe’s novel entitled *Things Fall Apart*, a story of olden day Nigeria is told through the eyes of a clan, more so an individual by the name of Okonkwo, that feels the wrath of European imperialism. Achebe “dramatizes a local struggle around the turn of the century in the Igbo heartland of West Africa between Protestant missionaries backed by British imperial power and the inhabitants of several Igbo villages” (Moses 108). Compared to the Igbo way of acting, the European way is more civilized and logical in action. There is less suffrage and inhumane treatment of people and animals and warfare is done at a tolerable and less violent way and is “impossible for the political and ethical differences between the British and the Igbo to have been mediated in a peaceful fashion” (Moses 122). Although, one cannot completely push the idea of coexistence out of his/her mind—what if these people would have been able to be civil towards each other? Would they have been able to live in peace and prosper as divided nations if different actions would have been taken? History has already made its mark and the colonization of Africa has been done. As of now, only thoughts of coexistence are available, and the idea of the Western world being dominant still remains true to this day.

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