Religion In Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) has been a classic of African literature almost since its publication, confronting head-on the process of first European contact with the Ibo. Throughout this essay we will ask ourselves how religion establishes itself not only as one of the central themes through which the story is told, but is also carried within many other themes and elements of the narrative. The importance of Achebe's work in expanding the western imagery of traditional African communities away from the simplistic barbaric or utopian, will help us to better understand the role of religion throughout Okonkwo's journey; and how it connects to, and offers commentary on, both traditions.

An important and distinctive aspect of Achebe's storytelling in Things Fall Apart is the balance found when representing both cultural traditions, especially when it comes to religious and personal beliefs and community values. Brought up through both English and Ibo education, as his father was a converted Christian, he is capable of exposing those tragic truths of colonialism, without losing the complexity of these differing cultures, showing deep insight and awareness of them. He achieves this through a series of connections and points of comparison, which we will further develop.

The first of these connections can be found when considering a handful of characters, and how beliefs and values characterize them. Okonkwo, our strong and aggressive protagonist, is presented as a defender of his clan and its values within only the first few pages. Aspiring to become a leader of his community, the only thing that can keep him from doing so is his hatred of anything that could make him appear weak, lest he be perceived as anything like his father: 'It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw.' (Achebe, Things Fall Apart 17) Already, we see Achebe's awareness of English culture even when describing this African character and his tribal setting, borrowing the line 'red in tooth and claw' from Tennyson's poem 'In Memoriam A.H.H.'.

Furthermore, these personal values and communal beliefs he defends, later directly affect two of his kin. First of all, his adoptive son, Ikenefuna, is already a victim of the customs of their people, as he is taken into Okonkwo's home without having committed any crime himself. Although Okonkwo is caring and appreciative of him and his positive effect on his other son, Nwoye, Ikenefuna meets his demise at the hands of the very beliefs Okonkwo defends (and even carries out himself, despite being advised otherwise), sacrificing him to satisfy their Earth Goddess. Interestingly, Nwoye seems to come to direct contrast of Ikenefuna, as he lives, but only to despise his father and ultimately, once the first Christian missionaries arrive, be lost from Okonkwo and his beliefs, to this outsider religion. Nwoye is one of the few tribe members to question the customs of their 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 belief. He is repulsed by the excessive brutality of his father. This further sets Nwoye opposed to him, though within the story Okonkwo still antagonises Nwoye for this, not doubting himself, or his beliefs, or the methods of defending them.

The next connection to establish between the coloniser and the colonised becomes clear

through a brief consideration of the Ibo and their proverbs, which could practically be considered as a part of their religion, as they are not only engrained into their lifestyle, but also act upon them. An example of this could be the exile of Okonkwo himself, which comes from accidentally killing a member of the clan. Obierka questions the severity of the sanction, but is met with their proverb 'if one finger brought oil, it soiled the others'. Once again, the community believes it best to do so, in fear of what the Earth Goddess might do to the rest of them for the sole actions of Okonkwo. In fact, proverbs are described at the beginning of the story, in relation to the Ibo: 'Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.' (Achebe, Things Fall Apart 11) Once again, the connection between two cultures comes to light, as palm-oil is a resource the Ibo are rich in and is seen throughout the story, and that duality is interesting given that it was also one of the main interests of the colonisers in the nineteenth century, alongside bringing civilisation and Christianity: commerce. Specifically, for palm-oil.

These connections to colonisation are of no surprise, but seem more significant in this story, as when this book was published, there weren't really any published works like it, nor dealing in this way with the decolonisation contemporary to its publication. Achebe explained: 'I had to invent the language of that story. It was not something that anybody was teaching anywhere, the conversation between Ibo and the English- and so I had to make it up as I went along.' Much like those encounters between the Ibo and the English in the story, the conversation concerning beliefs was something nobody had taught any of them, and was only something beggining to happen a hundred years after European contact, through Africa's decolonisation in the 1950s.

When we go back to the title of this novel, Things Fall Apart, we become aware throughout the reading that what does fall apart are in fact whole communities, or clans, which weren't being understood by these colonisers- the English, whose lack of empathy and understanding, resulted in enforcement of their own ways upon these natives. But even when considering these, Achebe manages to offer a balanced portrayal. First, we encounter Mr Kiaga, a missionary who has great faith in his beliefs, but is essentially harmless. Then, the Ibo deal with Mr Brown, who tries to find middle-ground, and teaches them that they don't have to be so different. In fact, the 'red-earth church' is a symbol of the peaceful middle-ground between two very different cultures- which is why his successor, the Reverend James Smith, is who ultimately has it burnt down. The extremes of this religious imposition, and how through the outliers of their society, they have risen to crush them, is made explicit when Obierka speaks of how it is 'too late'. Enrique and Fernando Galván's study of Things Fall Apart commented on this speech:

This means that the Igbos have finally become aware of the plot. They are now conscious of how the colonizers, by introducing new ideas that disparaged the local traditions, were putting Igbo unity to the knife and planting the seed that would bring destruction to their community. (Galván, Journal of English Studies vol. 5-6 113)

And yet the author does not sacrifice the complexity of both cultural traditions- he doesn't favour either by simplifying it to evil nor utopian. We are told of the human sacrifice, the blind belief in proverbs and their Oracle, and we are shown how another community, with its own religion, crushes theirs: because their is no conversation, only imposition. And much like the community, its strongest defender is lost at the end of the narrative: Okonkwo takes his own life knowing his people are lost to him.

Lastly, in considering how the District Commissioner speaks of these events, we become most aware of how small these complete characters can be made when a narrator unlike Achebe dictates through only one set of uncompassionate eyes- Okonkwo is said to only be able to warrant 'a reasonable paragraph'. Achebe first and foremost highlights the importance of considering multiple points of view, and adopting some understanding for all of them- lest we find ourselves in the skin of merciless colonisers.

Achebe succeeds in maintaining a real image of tribal Africa, yet still exposing the cruel ways of the colonisers, and the injustice the clan suffers. Religion is used throughout the narrative as a central theme because it is what both sides have strongest fear of losing faith in. Their traditions and beliefs, through both characters and actions, are woven so that we can read into either and still sympathise with the tragedies that come as a result of the clashing of these communities.