

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## A SEARCH FOR THE ROOTS OF THE PRESENT DAY CRISES OF NIGERIA IN ACHEBE'S AFRICAN TRILOGY

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### ABSTRACT

Nigeria is in the spotlight but for all the wrong reasons. The news of religious unrest and the terrorist outfit Boko Haram is making headlines all over the world these days. The recent turmoil is seen by many as the inability of the reignig government headed by Goodluck Jonathan to tackle the terror groups operating in the North. But is there something more to it? How did a country or a geographic region (before its unification) which lived in harmony be thrown into such terrible plight? There are some who believe that the present crisis is a colonial production. This paper is an exploration into Nigeria's history through the works of Nigeria's foremost important authors in English, Chinua Achebe to access how colonial forces played their part in creating a situation as horrid as this. The transformation from the land of peace to ongoing turmoil had three phases – breaking of clan oriented power positions, turn towards materialism and resultant corruption and finally biased division of power and resources. The imperial authorities took this nation through all these three phases and created for them a hell in their own land to live in. Nigeria sunk in corruption and communal divide must understand the colonial intensions and interests behind the policies which resulted in its present day plight and try to reorganize itself as a unified nation forgetting clan, region and religion.

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### INTRODUCTION

Few African writers have ever been much more read and admired than Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* has figured in the literature of several countries and is translated to around sixty languages over the past six decades. With the other works in the genre of 'fact based' or historical fiction, such as *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease* formed a powerful trilogy

exploring the country's history. According to Achebe storytelling functions as a bridge between generations and as a means of passing the wisdom from the vaults of the 'era of purity' to the youth of the present day. Achebe's aim is to encourage the new generation of educated Nigerians to act and change the scenario. For Achebe, novel is a vehicle for self discovery. Writing is an activity through which the African can define his identity and re-

discover his historical roots. The self defining function of the novel is, for obvious reasons, especially important to writers in a post-colonial situation, especially where the exposure to European culture has led to a relegation of traditional values and practices. If they fall back, they can't complain others for rushing forward. "A man who does not lick his lips, can he blame the harmattan for drying them?" Achebe wanted his society to move on.

The British colony, Nigeria gained independence in 1960. Nigeria is now, one of the most populated countries in the world and is the largest democracy in Africa. Nigeria has a population of over one hundred and twenty million and there are Muslims, Christians and other indigenous religions. But Muslims and Christians with fifty percent and forty nine percent of the population respectively, dominate the pre-colonial religions of the land. Though they belong to these religions, primarily they belong to four ethnic groups – Yoruba, Igbo or Ibo, Hausa and Fulani. But the conquest of the Fulani kings over the Hausa territory of the North during the pre-colonial era, resulted in a cross ethnic mix and the ethnic group of the Northern Nigeria is known as Hausa-Fulani now.

The Igbos or Ibos, of the Southern and Eastern Nigeria, were of hundreds of tribal clans. These many diverse clans had their own dialects, culture, political and governing systems, etc. The Igboland, the home of the Igbo people covers most of the South-East Nigeria. This area is divided by the Niger River into two unequal sections- the Eastern region and the Mid-Western region. The river, however, has not acted as a barrier to cultural unity; rather it has provided an easy means of communication in an area where settlements claim different origins. The origins of the Igbo people has been the subject of much speculation, and it is only in the last six decades that any real work has been carried out on this subject.

With news regarding the Muslim – Christian conflicts raging in the region keeps on coming, a probe into the very beginning of the events may help to analyze the situation much better. For that purpose I decided to rely on Achebe himself. An analysis of his *African Trilogy* even though there isn't a Muslim character appearing, presents us with

hints sufficient to read along with some historical proofs. Such a reading of these works reveals how colonial rulers played a divisive role by implementing the 'Indirect Rule', which eventually shaped into a divide and rule manner resulting in the constant distrust and tensions between the Muslims of the North of the country and the Igbos of South. The paper evaluates the step by step process that was followed by the colonial rulers that led Nigeria to the present day crisis.

#### DISCUSSION

Chinua Achebe's 'African trilogy' is a venture of revisiting the past and emphasizing the fact that the roots of the present day Nigeria lie in their colonial encounter. *Things Fall Apart* is set in the early decade of the twentieth century, when the British administrators and the Christian Missionaries, after several futile attempts to make inroads to Nigerian cultural and social establishment, finally succeeded in it. This was followed by *Arrow of God* in the chronology of the time of setting though it is the third novel in the order of publishing. *Arrow of God* is set in the 1920's when Lugard's Indirect Rule policy was there in place. The colonial power has grown wider and mightier by that time. It shows how the native culture and traditions "died" to accommodate the imbibed substitutes provided by the West. Ezeulu's tragedy in *Arrow of God*, far from being a personal tragedy is one of the total social order and tradition. The last novel *No Longer at Ease* is a continuation of the first novel, but takes place after a few decades. The story tells the story of an intellectual boy who got education from England. This hero, Obi Okonkwo is the grandson of the hero of the first novel, Okonkwo. Obi, in sharp contrast to Okonkwo is a hybridized Nigerian of the new age, while Okonkwo remained adamant to his traditional beliefs. But the tragedy of Obi is a message that the colonial encounter has left them in a tight spot where the life leads a Nigerian more often than not, to failures. The Nigeria shown at the threshold of independence in *No Longer at Ease* is one engulfed in corruption and the loss of culture along with the hybridization of the society combine well to harm the country from that period onwards.

The British moved into Nigeria with a combination of government control, religious mission, and economic incentive. In the north, the British ruled indirectly, with the support of the local Muslim

leaders, who collected taxes and administered a government on behalf of the British. In the south, however, where communities such as Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* and Umuaro in *Arrow of God*, were often not under one central authority, the British had to intervene directly and forcefully to control the local population.

The story of this early colonisation and the spreading of missionary activities are truthfully portrayed in the 'African Trilogy'. The early failures of the attempts at getting converts and the cunning adaptations made by the catechists to attract natives and woo them in to converting are all shown in a detailed manner by Achebe so that his fictionalised history will be a sincere account of what has actually happened on the banks of the Niger river in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that changed the life of the land forever.

British imported goods, the English language, and the Christian religion. Religion, as Achebe shows in *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*, was the most divisive than any other colonial imposition. Not all missionaries watched in silence when a set of masked ancestral spirits destroyed the church like Mr. Smith as Achebe has shown. They have used the military back up to silence the oppositions whenever a stir broke out. As Achebe has shown in *Arrow of God*, certain catechists prompted the native Christians to go and destroy traditional symbols, just as Okonkwo's mate in masked group was unmasked. One story in *Arrow of God* tells us how a mob of Christians went on to kill the sacred Iguana and thus causing tension. The natives became wild and started chasing down Christians and burning their houses. The District Commissioner had to send a force to ease the situation. Similarly Oduche's act of imprisoning the sacred python was encouraged by the preacher. In this way Christianity acted as the catalyst to the colonial mission and it won the new order enough people to work for them as well as made the white man's law ideologically justified. So the history of the spreading of Christianity is vital in any studies on colonial Nigeria. Achebe's '*African Trilogy*' also concentrates on this vital development.

Thus the groundwork accomplished by the missionaries in pre-colonial days must be a central concern. They were instrumental in setting the scene which would meet the colonists when they

started arriving. Missionaries were used by the colonial power as an *avant garde*, to expand into new regions, a fact keenly displayed by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. The missionaries spent the early days in the market place and travelled through the villages to preach the gospel. They asked the tribals who their king was. But the villagers told them they have no kings, but men of high titles, elders and chief priests. It was impossible for the missionaries to get all of them together. They gather only at the call of the chief priest of the village. So they asked for a piece of the land and the chief priests gave them the condemned forests where they bury the evil spirits, people who died of really evil diseases, leprosy, small pox etc and the 'unfortunate twins. By giving that part of the land, they thought that their superstitious beliefs regarding the forest would turn true and the churches of the new religion will be wiped out. They were hospitable enough because it was not their custom to turn the requests of a stranger to the land down. But the church stood the test of time and it was a vindication of the new religion over the superstitions of the native religions. Other than embracing the outcasts, *efulefu*, the good for nothing people who are condemned in the clan, the unfortunate twins etc, they employed opportunist devices to spread their roots in these villages. A fantastic example of such an opportunist stand is given in the *Arrow of God*, the Christian preachers and catechists were strong in the matters regarding the principles of Christianity and they were adamant to object the traditional practices of the natives.

Because of the slow progress of the mission, the missionaries started hard work using the native converts. In *Arrow of God*, we can see that even after serious works from the part of its catechist John Jaja Goodcountry, the St. Mark's church in Umuaro could get only a few converts. He managed to increase the number of students in the catechism class from a mere fourteen to thirty – with one baptism there and three in the parish church at Okperi. They failed to field any candidates for confirmation. But it was hardly surprising considering the special nature of the Igboland. The church tried all sorts of things to woo the natives to the new religion. But most of the people turned a blind eye towards these advancements.

Because of this incapability of the Church to attract more natives from Igbo region, they decided to implement the "indirect rule", appointing paramount priests to communicate between the colonizer and the natives and rule on behalf of the empire. But the British administration didn't get as many native leaders as the wished. Like Ezeulu, many of them refused the offer viewing it as an insult to be some other's priest other than that of their deity.

'Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief, except Ulu'

'What!' shouted Clarke. 'Is the fellow mad?'

'I tink so sah,' said the interpreter.

'In that case he goes back to prison.' Clarke was now really angry. What cheek! A witch-doctor making a fool of the British Administration in public!" (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 498)

The appointment of Warrant Chiefs or Paramount Chiefs in Nigeria was a matter of necessity for the British and a source of panic for the Natives. The British could have governed in no other way since English officials demanded high remuneration and long leave to travel back, and found it hard to cope up with this new culture. The colonial budget could only afford a limited number of them. The success of colonization depended heavily on the co-operation of the natives. What the British did not realise, however, was that peoples such as the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria were unfamiliar with the idea of 'chiefs' or 'kings' - in their society decisions were made on the basis of general consensus, which was usually achieved by protracted debate. So they had to resort some greedy natives who were willing to take the positions only to attain new benefits. But the system was counter productive to the natives of Igboland. One such example is given in Achebe's *Arrow Of God*. Captain Winterbottom made strong opposition to the appointment of James Ikedi as the Warrant Chief of Okperi. But he was forced by the superiors to give this man the honour against his better judgement. James Ikedi was chosen simply because he was one among the very first people to receive missionary education in three parts. But as Captain Winterbottom feared within three months Winterbottom started to hear rumours about this

man's high handedness in receiving warrants. He had set up an illegal court and a private prison. He took any woman who caught his fancy without paying the customary bride price. More serious scandals were uncovered later. Chief James Ikedi had teamed up with a notorious and drunken road overseer who had earned the title "Destroyer of Compounds" from the natives. They went around intimidating the villagers and telling them that unless they give them money the road would pass through their compounds. Anyone who had no money must borrow it from a neighbour or sell his goats or yams. Chief Ikedi took a large share of this illegal tax. Ikedi even tried to topple the social order:

The latest thing he did was to get his people to make him an Obi or king, so that he was now called His Highness Ikedi the First, Obi of Okperi. This among a people who never had kings before! This was what British administration was doing among the Ibos, making a dozen mushroom kings grow where there was none before. (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 71)

The British finally abolished the Warrant Chief system after the Aba Riots in 1929, when they were forced to re-examine their entire system of government, yet clearly the corruption that began in the era of the Warrant Chiefs created a situation in which it was the norm, and no amount of university education could rectify this. Achebe treats the problem of corruption in 1950s Lagos in the second novel of the trilogy, *No Longer at Ease*. Despite his aspirations to avoid the temptation of corruption, Obi eventually succumbs, finding it more or less impossible to live up to the image created by his position in the Civil Service.

The posting of the warrant chiefs during the Indirect Rule period was a double blow to Nigeria. It dismantled Nigeria's religious harmony forever. General Lugard was firm in constituting the Indirect Rule and the appointment of Paramount Chiefs was a significant part of this initiative. The colonial administrators in regions like the Southern Nigeria found it an uphill task to recruit the natives. In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu poses one such difficulty. The igbos were resilient, so they put up a brave front exactly like Ezeulu. The British rulers were adamant too. So they employed another method which cast a

lasting spell on Nigeria's social life. They tried and succeeded in the same mission in the Northern areas where Muslims are dominant. The Muslims co-operated with it since they are used to a native, fellow Muslim leading them. It was the way they lived too. So there was absolutely nothing new in it for them. But as far as the Igbos are concerned "Igbos never knew kings". The rulers then decided to bring the Northern Muslims belonging to the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group to the Igboland and made them the Warrant Chiefs. It was so humiliating to the Igbos to be lead by a Muslim. The Muslim chiefs in turn tried to make a blend of the colonial rules and Islamic Shariah rules in Igboland. This infuriated the Igbos. They went on protesting and by the time there. But it wasn't required. As soon as the missionaries succeeded in "taking away" the natives of the indigenous religions and converting them, the role of the Warrant Chief was given to the converted Christians. As anyone can guess, these people who live in a hybrid mentality threw the Muslim rulers out of the Southern region and restored Igbo pride.

The Muslims will obviously feel irritated, though they had no claim over the land before. The Northern region was a complex territory, because they were predominantly Syrian merchants. They were aware of the immense possibilities of money and were capitalist in a sense. So they could embrace colonial policies and get on with it from the very outset itself. But the Igbos were late in accepting the colonial authorities. They realized that "the White man has come to stay" only after a show of resistance. Their resistance included bloody fights and burning Christian churches. Surprisingly, these resistant group underwent conversion and the Muslims never did. They had their written text Qur'an, and clinged to their religious faith. Thus the root of the religious conflict was well established at that point in time itself. Mass conversion during the period in which Nigeria was on the threshold of independence took the dislike between the two groups to another level – hatred.

*'Who owns this place?'*

'I think a Syrian. They own everything in Lagos' said Joseph "

(Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* 30)

Such reactions of dislike towards one another were growing slowly into another level which was bound to 'explode'

I suppose so', said Marie, 'but surely it's time someone stopped all the Moslem holidays. Nigeria is a Moslem country you know'

'No it isn't. you mean the North.'

They argued for a little while longer. (Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* 140)

This argument between Marie Tomlinson and Obi Okonkwo is reflective of the dislike getting intensified between the regions; North and South, and more dangerously between the two religions; Christian and Muslim.

The British rulers who did play a huge role by devising a sort of "divide and rule" towards the end of their regime added fuel to it. They became more intolerant towards Northern Muslims who were once their friends in dealing with the Southern Igbos. But with the spreading of Christianity among Igbos, they became the White man's close aids. The North was ill treated when the electoral constituencies were divided. Though the geographic territory of the North covered a wider area than that of the South-West combined, the Muslim populated areas didn't get as many constituencies as that of the Igbo-Yoruba territories in the division. The result was evident – Muslims never came into power. The present president of Nigeria Mr. Goodluck Jonathan is from the Christian sect which is a minority at least by a few percent to the Muslims who form 50 percent of the total population of the country.

Hence, the Muslims of the country were upset, and they were attracted by religious thinkers who advocated extreme views on the implementation of Islamic Shariah rules in the country. The pro-Christian government of Nigeria never appreciated such initiations. This resulted in the formation of the notorious Islamic terrorist outfit of Nigeria, Boko Haram. Boko Haram's founder was Mohammed Yousuf. Yousuf started Boko Haram as a religious school where Holy Qur'an is taught. But the teaching gave way to training militants very soon and young Muslims were recruited to carry out terrorist operations. There was a series of bombings and explosions which halted the country's growth. After the death of

Mohammed Yousuf, Aboobacker took over as the leader of the group. He was an evil minded extremist and openly stated that killing others for Islam is God's order and one must find pleasure in it as sacrificing goats or cocks for the almighty. This statement was immediately followed by the Christmas day explosions at the Churches which killed thousands. President Goodluck Jonathan ordered strict actions and the North is now a battleground and the Muslims belonging to the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group are now fleeing the country to other neighbouring Islamic countries.

The unrest is now at its peak and the situation is worse than that of the Biafra Civil War days. This is when a glance into the past becomes significant. One can't tell what went wrong unless he is aware of the exact point in time – “*when the rain has started to beat*” them. There is hardly any Muslim character in Achebe's 'African trilogy'. The only Warrant Chief in the Trilogy is “His Highness” James Ikedi. And the other one invited for that post is Ezeulu, the protagonist of the *Arrow Of God*. Here Ezeulu's refusal and the non-cooperation of the Southerners are significant. Anyone who pays attention to this and tries to explore the history of Indirect Rule in Nigeria will understand how this reckless colonial policy contributed a big hand into the continuous unrest between the two religious groups in Nigeria.

#### CONCLUSION

It is not justifying to see *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* as simply a statement of cultural and racial retrieval, as a novel that embodies a discourse of nativism. Rather than a unilateral revaluation of the past, the central preoccupation of this novels, as indeed of Achebe's entire works, revolves around the deeply problematic nature of the relationship of past to present in Africa. What is at issue here, in the most fundamental way, is the bearing of that past upon the present, fraught as this is with implications for the future perspectives of the continent. Achebe, like his hero Obi, prays for his land caught in the grip of persistent unrest and socio-cultural and political turmoil.

God bless our noble fatherland  
Great land of sunshine bright  
Where brave men chose the way of peace  
To win their freedom fight.  
May we preserve our purity,

Our zest for life and jollity.  
God bless our noble countrymen  
And women everywhere.  
Teach them to work in unity  
To build our nation dear;  
Forgetting region, tribe or speech,  
But caring always each for each.

This poem reflects Achebe's idea of a nation in which neither clan nor religion constructs a boundary between fellow countrymen. But unfortunately for Achebe and his generation who have lived through the colonial days the future remains bleak. The materialist culture brought with the introduction of currency paid way for endless days of corruption. But more devastatingly the ill treatment towards the Igbos and later against the Muslims on part of the colonial rulers disturbed the communal harmony of the region once and for all, leaving them in the dark days of conflicts, attacks and riots. Through an analysis of Chinua Achebe's 'African Trilogy' and taking cues from historical documents available we can conclude that the present trauma that the independent state of Nigeria undergoes is nothing but a colonial construct.

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