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THE INTERPLAY OF AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY AND WESTERN CIVILIZATION; A
TEXTUAL X-RAY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at examining the interplay of African cultural identity and Western civilization as demonstrated in the analysis through the work of Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. It further, gives a profound insight into a typical African society before the deliberate, collaborated and selfish intrusion of the white men for educational, religious, social, political and economic reasons. Also, it x-rays two phases: before and after the invasion vis-à-vis attempts by these white missionaries to impose an era of civilization, education and religious paradigm on the already once peaceful and well-organized African society. This imposition was resisted by some clans and community leaders, but not without its casualties, palpable benefits and consequences on both sides.

Keywords: Interplay, Identity, Intrusion, Invasion, Civilization, Casualties.

Introduction

The author of *Things Fall Apart*, Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born in 1930 at Ogidi, Anambra State Nigeria. His parents wanted him to study medicine through a scholarship but he changed it to English literature at the University College Ibadan. He is an internationally acclaimed writer and founding father of modern African literature in English.

He wrote several literary works which include but not limited to *Things Fall Apart* (1958) *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) *A Man of the People* (1966) *There was a Country* (2012) He has won several awards which include Margaret Wong Memorial Prize (1959), Common Wealth Poetry Prize (1974), Lotus Award for Afro-Asian Writers (1975), Book prize for Fiction (1987), Champion Award (1996), German Booksellers Peace Prize (2002) Dayton Literary Peace Prize (US) (2010).

The Book

The story chronicles the people of Africa (Igbo people in particular) and their ways of doing things. It revolves round Okonkwo, a well-known leader, throughout the nine villages because of his personal achievements unlike his father Unoka. "Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire" (3), in Umuofia. He had three wives and eleven children and a good friend called Obierika. Things took negative dimension for him when his gun accidentally killed a boy. This action as the tradition demanded, he must go on exile for seven years. He was received by his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta. He prospered as well there and participated in their communal lives indeed. "he was given a plot of ground on which to build his compound and two or three pieces of land on which to farm during the coming planting season" (103).

After seven years, Okonkwo happily returned to his clan. His people, their culture, religion and ways of live had been distorted by the white men. In fact, his own son Nwoye was among the people who accepted the Whiteman's religion. The community leaders resisted but were arrested by the missionaries, but things took dangerous dimension when Okonkwo campaigned for aggressive actions against the white men. Eventually, lives were lost on both sides. Okonkwo killed in anger a messenger and for his action, to avoid being captured and molested by the white men, he eventually took his own life as a real man.

All available empirical evidences point to the fact that the African continent suffered irreparable loses in both materials and human capacities from the hands of her once colonial masters. The continent hosted so many citizens of other countries and continents during the so called colonial period which lasted between 1870 and 1900, the continent faced a number of degradation from the North, East and South in the hands of the Western Asia and Southeast Asia. These Europeans, who came to Africa, were not without resistance from Africans against the attempt to colonize their countries, societies and clans as being portrayed vividly in our text *Things Fall Apart*. The coming of these European imperialists was hinged on four main factors, religious, political, social and economic impetus to boast their selfish economic interest. They pretended that religion was paramount but economic expansions took precedence.

According to Iweriebor (2008) "Most African societies fought fiercely and bravely to retain control over their countries and societies against European imperialist designs and military invasions. But the African societies eventually lost out" As stated earlier, the last resistance and eventually loss had its own causalities on both sides. Needed to be emphasized here is the aptness of using *Things Fall Apart* as our main text. It illustrates the state of African society before, during and after the European invasion. The causalities on both sides are adequately portrayed and personified with true to life characters in the story.

AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

Culture has to do with the particular characteristics and total knowledge about a group of people which cover their language, system of administration, social life, arts, behaviors, folklore, religion and total ways of life. It is the way of life of a people which has evolved from one generation to another. This view is not unfamiliar with what scholar like Schein (2003) opines as a set of basic solutions and shared solutions to universal problems of external adaptation and internal integration that have evolved over time, which are transferred from one generation to the next generation. So, people cannot be separated from their culture. Idang (2015) avers that "culture is often seen as the sum total of the peculiarities shared by a people". In the same vein, Obafemi (2008) as quoted in Adewumi (2017) opines that "culture is the fundamental of human existence and the human civilization, embodying in its dynamism, the totality of a people's response to the challenges of life and in a given environment".

All these constitute what Africans call their identities. Since each society is different and unique, the Africans are in various forms, the uniqueness cannot be too far from the cultural identities which make them a people with different background.

It is obvious from this exercise so far that culture makes a people different from other in terms of their beliefs and identities. These cultural identities are examined vis-à-vis their interplay with different ways of lives of a people as exemplified in our text *Things Fall Apart*. As demonstrated by Chinua Achebe, to sever a people from their cultural identities will never be a tea-party affair but rather a herculean task, if not an impossible adventure.

Colonization of Africa

All available records show that the continent of Africa suffered irreparable fatalities from the hands of European countries. According to Middleton (2002) "Between the 1400s and 1800s, Europeans began to take interest in Africa mainly the coastal regions... they established trading posts and engaged in commerce with local peoples". He avers further that colonialism refers to the establishment

of political and economic control by one state over another which had an enormous impact on Africa.

The European world powers saw great and fertile opportunities in Africa, this motivated the imperial Chancellor of German Empire, Otto Von Bismarck to convey a conference between 1884-1885 according to Horchschild (1999) to settle the political partitioning of Africa, he wanted not only to expand German spheres of influence in Africa but also to play off Germanys colonial rivals against one another to the German's advantage. He opines that "The Berlin conference was Africa's undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African continent. Another scholar, Tiwani (2015) in his article titled "The impact of colonization on the African Writer's Psychological Behavior" says that "Africa offered Britain, France, Germany and other countries an open market for trade that brought more from colonial power than it sold overall. African territory was randomly divided between European countries that tried to impose elements from their culture".

Westernization of Africa

It is important to state here that, the European method of socialization and civilization grew on a futile African land. The consequential effects of westernization of Africa cannot be unnoticed in the history of Africa development. According to Arowolo (2010) "Western culture and European mode of civilization began to thrive and outgrew African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices paved way for foreign ways of doing things as Africans became fully "westernized".

It is pertinent to state that the African ways of life, in terms of political setting, system of administration economic and social cultural milieu were forcefully decapitated by the Europeans through the machinery of selfish collaboration of some African leaders. The already existing and well-structured African societies were disorganized but not without stern resistance from some self-willed individual as we shall see in our analysis.

Also, it is observed that western ways of life were distinctively different from the African ways of life so as expected, the interplay would not be an easy

or a tea party affair. This position was opined by Settles (1996) that the imposition of colonialism of Africa altered its history forever. African modes, thought, patterns of cultural development and ways of life were forever impacted. The European contact with African people cannot be discussed without its blessings in disguise vis-à-vis it cultural interplay and its effects as portrayed in the analysis hereafter shall be of interest of this paper.

Textual X-Ray

As we have stated above, the coming of the white men into African land could be described as a blessing in disguise. The text *Things Fall Apart* is divided into three parts. The first part, chapter one to thirteen, tells us about the people of Africa and their ways of doing things vis-à-vis their culture, traditional belief, custom values, ways of life, communal life and economic cum social life. Part Two, chapter fourteen to nineteen, and Okonkwo's sojourn to his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta for years. He became great as well there and participated in their affairs. Part Three, which comprises Chapter Twenty to Twenty Five, describes the return of Okonkwo to his father's land at Umuofia. His involvement in the rebuilding and reclamation of his father's land, his resistance to the white men's ways of life and religion, and his untimely suicide are embedded herein.

Africans lived communal and peaceful life, where everyone was important. They did things in common, the people were blessed with nice weather coupled with rain and dry seasons, the following extracts portray the African situations. "When the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty... old men and children would then sit round log fires, warming their bodies" (p.4), "In the morning the market place was full. There must have been about ten thousand men there (9), "Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feast.... (23), "A palm oil lamp gave out yellowish light...each hut seen from the others looked like a soft eyes of yellow half-light set in the solid massiveness of night" (76), "As soon as day broke, breakfast was hastily eaten and women and children began to gather at Obierika's compound to help the bride's mother in her difficult but happy task of cooking for a whole village"(88), "...food was

presented to the guests. There were huge bowls of foo-foo and steaming pots of soup. There were also pots of yam pottage. It was a great feast" (94).

Africans had their own religious belief and tradition which they held sacrosanct before the Europeans came. "the medicine house or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and his ancestral spirit...worshipped them with sacrifices and kolanut, food and palm wine offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children" (12), "...Okonkwo broke the peace and was punished as was the custom by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess" (23). "Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility...was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan" (29). It is to be noted here is the interplay of the African religious belief and the Whiteman's religion. The white men condemned African that "...they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone. A deep murmur went through the crowd when he said this" (116), "All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit... your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm, replied the white man" (117). The villagers quickly questioned the white man's God. "These men must be mad, they said to themselves. How else could they say that Ani and Amadiora were harmless? And Idemili and Ogwugwu too? (117), "You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son, he must have wife, then? (118) "the Whiteman had indeed brought a lunatic religion" (142). The clashes between the clan and the white man's religion degenerated immediately Mr. Brown left and one Mr. Smith took over. One of the convicts, Enoch had committed an abomination and desecrated the religion of the clan. "one of the greatest crime a man could commit was to unmask an egwugwu in the public" (148), "The band of egwugwu moved like a furious whirlwind to Enoch compound and with matchet and five reduced it to a desolate heap. And from there they made for the church, intoxicated with destruction" (150). Clash of religions; the religious contact of the white men with Africans brought untold hardship on the people. The Whiteman's church was totally destroyed in retaliation for the abomination committed by a

convert by unmasking (murdering) the egwugwu. "Mr. Smith ... could not save his church when the egwugwu went away the red-earth church which Mr. Brown had built was a pile of earth and ashes "(152).

Another obvious interplay which the coming of the white men brought to African cultural identity is noticed in term of system of administration. Africans had a communal system of administering justice and setting dispute among clansmen, or villages. "Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral fest, he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him" (23), "... Okonkwo broke the peace of the earth and was punished, as was the custom, by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess" (23), "Ani, the goddess... the ultimate judge of morality and conduct"(29), "the whole village turned out on the ilo, men, women and children. "They stood round in a huge circle" (37), "large crowd began to gather on the village ilo as soon as the edge had worn off the sun's heat and it was no longer painful on the body " (70), No sooner had the white men brought their system of administration and imposed same on the people than crisis started between the white men and the villages. " the white men had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion" (124), "they had built a court where the district commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messenger who brought men to him for trial...the court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and also arrogant and high handed , they had prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law" (139).

The leaders and the elders of the villages were imprisoned, and made to do terrible jobs for the white men. "some of these prisoners were men of tittles who should be above such mean occupation"(140), "The Whiteman's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter "(141).

As started earlier, the white men's contact with African people has its own blessing in disguise. It must be pointed out here that despite all the

desecration, killing and religious condemnation the interplay has brought, it is expedient to say unequivocally that the white men brought good things to Africa, we have instances from our text, such as formal education, ability to read and write "the people sent their children to school to learn how to read and write, more people came to learn in his school and he encouraged them with gifts of singlets and towels, they work on their farm in the morning and went to school in the afternoon" (144), "he went back to the church and told Mr. Kiaga that he had decided to go to Umuofia, where the missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write" (122).

The so-called evil forest was turned to place of abode within a short time and the killing of innocent of twins was also stopped. "the evil forest was a fit home for such undesirable people. It was true they were rescuing twins from the bush" (124). The interplay also boasts the economic power of the villages and African in general which changed their economic power. "... but he (the white man) had also built a trading store and for the first time palm oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia" (142).

The white men also helped the villagers in terms of health facilities, which improved the health status of the villagers. People were greatly assisted to cure various forms of sicknesses and diseases. "Mr. Brown learnt ... he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia" (144). The white man's system of administration was introduced where courts were established and district commissioners were appointed. Court messengers and court heads were appointed to dispense cases and adjudicate justice in the event of dispute resolution, which the District commissioner described as "a peaceful administration ... and a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice" (154).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has been able to examine African in its states before the Europeans came into the continent. Its cultural identities, in terms of what actually made Africans unique people have also been looked at with particular attention on

the once peaceful and well-structured clan in the Eastern part of Nigeria.

The coming of the Europeans into African land, those agents that motivated and helped them boost their economic expansion were all discussed in this paper. Our text *Things Fall Apart* chronicles a typical African society. Also events that characterize the coming and the initial resistance of the villagers against the white men's culture, religion, trade, system of government form the basis on which the interplay took its negative consequences on both sides.

The paper also hinted that despite the dominant and powerful strong will of the missionaries, which was more than that of the villagers, both sides recorded their causalities in various forms and degree. Nevertheless, the interplay brought both negative and positive changes to the Igbo society and African at large.

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