

THINGS FALL APART IN RELATION TO RELIGIOUS CHANGE: A CRITIQUE

Eze, Okorie Igodo, Ph.D
Department of Religion
Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo.

Abstract

The Igbo traditional society of pre-colonial Nigeria was a typical scene of the grim encounter between western civilization and traditional religion. The idea of a new god who saw everything about African religion as evil was not acceptable to the traditionalists. They fought to protect their culture but were overpowered by the white man whose superior firepower was dreaded. In the end, the white man succeeded in demystifying the fear surrounding evil forests, destroying in the process bad elements such as human sacrifice, killing of twins and other evil practices through his religion. This paper therefore examines Chinua Achebe's work "Things Fall Apart" in relation to religious change brought to the Nigerian society by the Europeans. This study is a critical analysis of the impact this change has brought with a view to highlighting the problems of the dislocation of the people from the cherished values, virtues and morals of their culture. Adults now behave like youths and the youths are reckless in the way they think reason and relate with one another. The result is the irrepressible corruption which has characterized the modern Igbo society. It is like a generational curse which has refused to go because all efforts to get the youths imbibe these ethical principles has proved abortive. This accounts largely for the degeneration of Igbo society. Government should harness the moribund legacies of the traditional system of government such as the priesthood and diviners in order to provide alternative means of settling disputes, of determining the truth in disputed matters, oath taking, foretelling the future to protect the Nigerian society against death, killing of innocent people, heinous crimes, corruption and all sorts of pestilence that have become the order of the day.

KEYWORDS: Religious change, Change, Critique.

Introduction

Change is the phenomenon that violates all things but itself. It is the unsolicited, inevitable agent that transforms all things material and most things immaterial. What joins all things is the roaring current of change, a current so powerful that it overturns institutions, shifts our values and shrivels our roots. Change is the process by which the future invades our lives as it now does to various Nigerian and even global cultures. The Nigerian society just like every other dynamic

society is susceptible to change. As Idowu (1962) put it, there must be modification with adaptation or extinction in any culture that interacts with religion. Change is the only thing that is constant in life. Therefore, change may be seen as a happening or an event which when occurs has certain impact on the society. The impact may be negative or positive. Religious change in this context therefore means the change or transformation which has occurred as a result of the interaction between Christianity and

traditional religion in Igbo society for instance.

Achebe in "Things Fall Apart" x-rays the impact of change brought into his society by religion with the coming of the European missionaries and colonialists. In the words of Metuh (1987), African traditional religion is basically a way of life of African people. this was supported by Ugwu (2001) when he said that at the beginning, Nigerians lived a supposedly idyllic, happy and harmonious life and strictly observed the cultures of their communities but no sooner had Christianity arrived than there appeared dissident members of the Nigerian communities. Prior to the coming of the European missionaries, colonialists and traders, the Igbo lived like one, spoke like one and acted like one in the true spirit of community consciousness. Madu (2003) added that the Igbo recognized that they are not alone but that they exist in a community of other beings. They also recognized that one's survival is inextricably tied to the survival of other beings within the community hence they lived for one another. Mbiti (1969) buttressed this point when he said "I am because you are and because you are therefore I am". The Igbo also held onto a unified view of reality in which the heavens, the earth and the underworld and their inhabitants exist and operate in a web-like manner for harmony and stability of the whole system. Of prime value to the Igbo is human life, its preservation and enhancement.

Madu (2004) did not agree less when he concluded that the Euro Christian tradition and scientific technology actually inflicted deadly blows on Igbo culture, determined to puncture once and for all the hub on which Igbo society rotates. This has resulted in divisions

among communities which once acted like one. Achebe (1958) recollected that the white man came and his coming broke this unity. In the process, many heads rolled, new words, new usages and new applications gained entrance into men's heads and hearts and the old society gradually gave way. The process continues till date. It is therefore evident that Christianity has had an unprecedented, profound and perhaps, a devastating impact on the customs and tradition of its host community throwing up in its wake all sorts of social flora-from psychedelic churches to dysfunctional marriage including co-habitation, vulgar dressing and all kinds of strange trends and experiences.

Things Fall Apart and Religious Change

Achebe looks back at his Igbo society especially at the period when the white man arrived as a missionary and an administrator. This coming of the Europeans with their religion brought a lot of changes in Igbo society. The impact of these changes is so far-reaching that our cultural heritage seems to have disappeared and is now replaced by strange ones. This explains why their value system has gone down the drain, their customs and tradition are seen as old fashioned and the judicial functions of elders and oracles have been replaced by the youth syndrome which has dealt a devastating blow on the nation's security system as crime and injustice have become the order of the day. This was accentuated by Malogo (2011) when he said that the Nigerian present varies greatly from the Nigerian past, so different that our awareness of the extent of the changes has been repressed and we regard as ordinary what is extraordinary.

This was aptly captured by Obierika (cited by Achebe, 1958) in his accusation of the white man, he said, the white man came quietly and peaceably with his religion, we were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay, now, he has won over our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. He put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. Our culture and its value have suffered severe corruption from our food to our arts, from our language to our interactions, from our technology to our architecture and even in our relationship with our environment and every other thing in-between.

The church in its early years was seen struggling for a place in a society bound by age-long traditions, taboos and expectations. Occasionally, the church was hindered in its work by overzealous converts. Many members of the Igbo society including titled men who were the custodians of our culture were now being converted by the church. The white man set up a government with courts that had judges and court messengers. This new religion could be likened in Okonkwo's words to an abominable religion which has settled among the people. Because of this religion, "a man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can now curse the gods of his father and ancestors like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns against his master". Many people abandoned their customs and tradition and embraced Christian tradition. This has actually affected or influenced the people in the way they think, behave and relate with brothers and sisters. Christianity, schools, trading and government all combined to dislocate the old order.

Ugwu (2001) in his submission agrees that these combined forces affected such African cultural traits as polygamy, secret societies, idol worship, respect for elders

and other aspects of African culture. To him, this religion condemned polygamy and upheld in its place monogamy but Africans from time immemorial had this as part of their cultural heritage. This is depicted in Okonkwo's humiliation at learning that his son Nwoye had joined the missionaries. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifices and finding nothing but ashes of by-gone days and his children praying to the white man's god.

Ugwu (2001) recalled that as a result, the powers of most of the divinities and deities are thereby undermined, underestimated and consequently viewed with contempt and levity. The very important instrument of detecting crime and culprits in the Nigerian society such as oath taking has been discarded with the arrival of this religion. People now follow the prescriptions of this new religion in oath taking instead of the traditional method which is more effective, efficacious and result-oriented. This undoubtedly has provided a fertile ground for moral decadence and the vices in our social system. People now commit crimes with reckless abandon because their value for custom and tradition has been tampered with. Our value for elders has also diminished.

The loss of community consciousness or spirit which is the basis of Igbo existence and unity was reflected in Okonkwo's action when he killed the leader of the messengers sent to address them at the market square. They were being cut off from interacting with their gods as many people were being converted to the church including the titled men who were the custodians or the rock on which the cultural heritage of the people were built. So, things fell apart. It is unfortunate that a

people who used to be bold and brave were now turned into some sort of weakling. This was highlighted in Okonkwo's expression of disappointment at the havoc the white man's religion was causing. He said, this is a womanly clan.

The Impact of Religious Change on the Nigerian Society

As Nwabueze (2004) contemplated, the indigenous African community being a society governed by immutable rules of custom in its essential nature, a static society whose continued existence excludes change caused or imposed by factors external to it, a change of the type and magnitude brought by the impact European colonialism is well calculated to shake its very foundations, upturning or at any rate undermining pre-existing customs and tradition, social and political institutions, system of values, morals and beliefs as well as cults, rituals and sanctions associated with them. The European colonialism in Igbo land necessarily involved a fundamental interference whether intentional or otherwise with the culture and moral value of the colonized. Its intention was to replace them with the radically different European ones supposed to be superior in both form and content. Consulting oracles Achebe (1958) recalled is a tradition and a religion among primitive Igbo societies. But this tradition has long been upturned by forces of change. Nwabueze (2004) in his submission asserted that the cultural foundation and politico-religious structure of the indigenous African societies were not of course the only things upturned or undermined by European colonialism, the very personality and mentality of the African were also affected by this sudden but gradual change. He had lost his self-

confidence, self-reliance and capacity for independent thought and action, in short all the qualities that make a man. These were replaced by the mentality of dependence, of servility and mimicry. A part from the biological usage, the words "brother and sister" are words that held the Africans together as one tribe and one nation. But the white man has punctured this unity with new words like cousin, nephew, niece, uncle, aunt, step-father, step-mother, half-brother, half-sister and so on. It is unfortunate that this change, adulteration or corruption that has characterized African values and culture has left the African worse than the white man met him. It is the reason why men of obviously questionable integrity are heroes of our time, our traditional rulers double speak, the old has lost the respect of the young and our graduates leave school without character and learning. It is the reason the only utility of the other man is how well he serves our purpose; his humanity is of no significance or importance. We are no longer our brother's keeper because the erosion of our values has killed in us the community spirit and consciousness. There are values according to Olugbamila (2011) that have been assisting our people in the past in terms of environmental protection and moral values, all of which we threw away. Nowadays, people assume that everything pertaining to traditional religious festival is evil and satanic.

This erosion of African values has banished Africans from their culture so much so that most religious leaders now describe some African religious practices as fetish, thereby discouraging their members from participating in such festivals. This invading current of change as Ogundele (2005) put it shows how integrity, merit and selfless service have

been sacrificed on the altar of sycophancy, selfishness and bad leadership. It also shows how gullible and narrow-minded politicians have turned the instrument of governance to that of terrorism and victimization. As a result of these, evil now pervades the polity while human rights have been denied and public funds syphoned or diverted into private accounts. In his contribution, Ayodele (2012) says, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the traditional religion has the authority and interpretation vested in the priests and diviners. These priests and diviners had the final say on all forms of sacrifices to the gods. It was generally believed then that without such sacrifices, believers after death would miss heaven or eternity with their god. As western civilization took its toll, these diviners and interpreters modified the appeasement of the gods by using animals, fowls and chickens. Even our sense of aesthetics has been pulverized. Today, the beautiful woman is the one who turns out thin and fair skinned. Her feminine beauty is no longer appreciated based on her ebony black skin. Indeed, this cultural decline is an index of national decay. When the phrase “the good old days” is expressed, it is a nostalgic feeling or romantic hankering after the values and aesthetics of the past, that is, the cultures that gave us identity. Instead of the bold and brave person he used to be, the Igbo putting into practice what the European missionaries had been preaching to him now felt inclined to forget the privations of this world so as to enter the kingdom of God. The gods, goddesses and jujus which spread across Igbo land at the time the missionaries arrived formed an important part of African traditional system of government, religion and culture, providing as they did, a means of settling disputes, determining

the truth in disputed matters, oath taking and foretelling the future to protect the community against death, disease, famine, infertility and other kinds of pestilence. All these coupled with the cult of ancestors are central to the system of religion in the traditional communities but all these ceased to be with the coming of the European missionaries or the new religion.

Much as the religious change brought by the missionaries was corrosive and detestable, it phased out bad and despicable practices such as human sacrifice and killing of twins. This was depicted in an answer given by the white man to the question about his god when he told the people of Mbanta that the gods they had named were not gods at all. They were gods of deceit who told them to kill their fellows and destroy innocent children. The gradual disappearance of evil forests and the seeming reintegration of the *osu* or outcasts into the Igbo society although, there are still pockets of resistance is a proof of the fact that the Igbo of the pre-colonial Nigeria lived in an incurable state of ignorance assuaged by superstitious beliefs.

While some may be delighted at the extinction of the bad elements in the traditional religion, it is important to note that there are some of these elements that are still being missed. They include the moonlight plays that people enjoyed while they gathered in the village square, sang together and played together. This inculcated in the children the culture of living together and loving one another. Among other benefits, the moonlight gathering promoted a high level of mutual understanding and cooperation as various families came together in love and unity. Also, the two ominous speeches at Okonkwo's farewell dinner for his

Mbanta relations seem to have captured the reckless and degenerating state of affairs in the present Igbo society. The good philosophy of the *umunna* which hinges on the loveliness of mind and deep sense of oneness seems to have been lost and gone with it are honesty, hard work and good sense of moral responsibility. The youth who are supposed to uphold the sacred laws and tradition of the community for the proper functioning of the society are the worst affected because, they have abandoned this good legacy to embrace the corruptive tendencies of the new and foreign religion or western civilization.

Recommendations

Government should organize seminars, conferences and workshops to educate the people on the need for cultural revival.

Corruption is better fought when the people are made to be aware of the consequences of violating the golden rule which is the hobnob of natural justice.

Elders should monitor the youth's development in order to guide them towards the acquisition of moral values, virtues and a sense of hard work.

The instruments of detecting culprits in the Nigerian society such as oath taking should be revived for the sole purpose of detecting crimes and dispensing justice to the people since our justice system has collapsed.

Government should put in place a legal framework to encourage such ethical practices as decent dressing, good moral values, respect for elders, respect for human dignity and the sacrosanctity of human life.

Conclusion

Things fall apart talks about the change brought to the Igbo society by the church,

European missionaries and colonialists. The Igbo society is a society that acted like one and had everything in common. Of utmost value to the Igbo were respect for the elders and maintenance of the traditional system which sustained the culture and value systems of the people. Activities of the missionaries during and after the colonial period touched the things that held the Igbo together and things fell apart. The Igbo people that lived and acted like one abandoned their customs and tradition and followed the white man. The coming of the new religion made them to abandon their gods and age-long tradition and customs which were the things that held them together; the community spirit vanished as they could no longer act together.

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