



LUND UNIVERSITY

Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology

Centre for Languages and Literature

English Studies

The Portrayal of Religion in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ENGK01

Degree project in English Literature

Spring 2017

Centre for Languages and Literature

Lund University

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Abstract

In this essay, the portrayal of religion as well as the role that religion plays in Igbo community in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is examined, as well as the impact that the missionaries and their religion had on Igbo society. Chinua Achebe was well acquainted with Igbo society and portrays it honestly. He openly discusses and criticizes aspects of both Igbo society and the missionaries and the aspects that came with the missionaries, such as a court. The importance of language is also discussed as it is one major reason that Achebe's novel is considered an important novel within the field of postcolonialism. It is argued in this essay that Achebe questions the traditional Western perspective of rationality and morality with his portrayal of religion.

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Introduction

Chinua Achebe is one of the most famous and published African authors and is often referred to as The Father of African Literature. He wrote poetry, essays, political commentary, and children's books but is most famous for his novels, mainly his first published novel *Things Fall Apart*. The novel depicts life in a small fictional Igbo Nigerian village called Umuofia. We follow a man named Okonkwo who is known for being the best and toughest wrestler. Okonkwo is a stern man who overcompensates with aggression and masculinity out of fear of becoming like his father, who was a lazy man and unable to support his family. As the story develops, the clash between Igbo society and the Christian religion and its missionaries becomes increasingly intense and the story ends in tragedy.

Achebe depicts the everyday life in an African village, thereby showing the beauty and complexities of Igbo society, while also criticising certain aspects of that society, such as the treatment of twins. We also learn about Igbo religion and customs and see how religion is a fundamental pillar in Igbo society, which will be examined in this essay. The latter part of the novel shows the Westerners arriving in their village as missionaries. Achebe explores the effects that the missionaries and Christianity have on the Igbo society.

With his portrayal of Africans in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe challenges how Africans previously have been projected in European literature. In one of his lectures, he argues that Europeans have regarded Africa as “the other world” (Achebe, “An Image of Africa” 15). Joseph McLaren claims that *Things Fall Apart* was written “at a time when the most prevalent works of fiction about Africa were written primarily by Europeans” (19). Achebe's motives are clear from the beginning; he wrote to educate and to crumble the prejudiced view Europeans had of Africans. The novel has received much attention among critics for this reason. McLaren writes that “[b]y portraying the cultural life of the Igbo [...] Achebe was able to counter Western images of Africa” (24). Likewise, Alison Searle observes that “Achebe scrupulously creates the sense of a rich and coherent social fabric that has formed its own ideas about whites and their culture” (n.p.). She continues to argue that Achebe switches the narrative perspective from what had previously been the norm: “Instead of gazing through the eyes of the European, the text displaces the assumptions of imperial narrative, and grants the terms of reference and mediating perspective to the usually suppressed ‘other’.” (n.p.).

Prior to Achebe's novel, African characters in Western literature were often portrayed as flat and were based on prejudice. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* serves as an example of this. In his novel, the Africans are described as savages, close to animals. The following extract serves as an example of the novel's main character's attitude towards Africans: "And these chaps too had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield" (Conrad 52). The novel as a whole can be said to reflect the view that Europeans had of Africans. Achebe reacted strongly to Conrad's portrayal of Africans and has been very vocal about the racism in the novel. *Things Fall Apart*, offers a contrast to the image portrayed in *Heart of Darkness*. Unlike the flat characters that Conrad portrays in his novel, the Africans in *Things Fall Apart* have great depth. Okonkwo is a complex character. The same characteristics that bring him wealth, respect and prosperity are also the ones that drive him towards his tragic ending. He is ultimately driven by fear of becoming like his father, Unoka, who was lazy and unable to provide for his family. Okonkwo does not show affection or other feelings besides anger; he considers feelings to be feminine and that which is feminine is weak. These traits have made critics compare Okonkwo to the Greek heroes of Homer. Matthew Bolton describes Okonkwo as "reminiscent of Achilles, another proud and brooding warrior, or of Ajax, slow of speech and quick to anger" (75). In fact, the entire novel has been compared to works such as Homer's great epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, due to its presentation and representation of the Igbo people's history and culture (Bolton 73).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe wanted to give Africa a voice of its own. He also wanted to crush the prejudice and racist portrayals of Africans in literature. In a lecture in 1974, Achebe talked about the ignorance on the subject of African history and reflects on why we are so ignorant on the subject: "Quite simply it is the desire - one might indeed say the need - in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" and mentions "[...] Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work that I know displays that Western desire and need which I have just referred to" (Achebe, "An Image of Africa" 15). Achebe's novel is a great example of the concept of postcolonial writing as described in *The Empire Writes Back*, which is regarded as one of the most important published works within the field of postcolonial studies, and it is especially Conrad's novel that Achebe is writing back to.

In his novel, Achebe shows the importance of religion in Igbo society and how intertwined religion and community are with one another thus making it impossible to discuss one without also discussing the other. This essay will investigate how religion is portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* and how the novel's representations of Igbo society and the Christian missionaries are connected to postcolonialism. Furthermore, I will discuss the impact of Christian missionaries and their religion on Igbo society in the novel. *Things Fall Apart* focuses on and explores the clash between the two religions from a postcolonial perspective. It will be argued that the portrayal of religion in *Things Fall Apart* reflects some of the main ideas of postcolonialism, questioning the traditional Western perspective on rationality and morality.

Achebe and Igbo Society

Achebe's own life serves as a solid foundation of knowledge about Igbo society and the roles of religion. He was born in Eastern Nigeria in 1930. His parents were Christian converts, but Achebe's grandfather and his uncle on his father's side were still followers of the traditional Igbo religion. His grandfather was a well-respected man within the community who had taken all but the highest title. Growing up partly with his grandfather meant that Achebe could learn about Igbo society, since his grandfather told him about what it was like before the missionaries arrived. As a young boy, he partook in regular meals as well as festival meals of traditional culture and as an adult, he changed his name from a Christian name to an African name (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 67). Living in and experiencing the Igbo culture on a daily basis gave him the perfect foundation to capture it all so accurately in his novel.

The fact that his grandfather still followed the Igbo traditions did not mean that Achebe did not experience Christianity. He grew up in the care of people of both Christianity and the traditional Igbo religion, which meant that Achebe daily experienced the two religions first hand as he partook in both religions' religious activities. Growing up in this way meant that he saw and learnt the positive as well as the negative aspects, giving him a great understanding of both religions, and the ability to offer a unique perspective of the two religions as well as of the impact that the Christian missionaries had on society, since he could hear about it from people who experienced it personally. Eric Njeng observes that "Achebe's

biographical inclination is evident in the novel” (3). Since Achebe uses and displays his great depth of knowledge about Igbo society and Christianity in *Things Fall Apart*, religion is portrayed in a nuanced way, not only showing the reader the good aspects, but also the aspects which he is critical of in both religions. According to McLaren, Achebe’s purpose with the novel is to “give an insider’s view of an African society” (McLaren 23) and with his first-hand experiences, he offers a fresh and new perspective on Africa and African communities – a perspective that differs greatly from what Western literature has previously offered us.

Another important aspect of Achebe’s authorship is that he was bilingual; his native language was Igbo and at the age of eight he began learning English. He said that he probably spoke more words in Igbo, but that he “definitely wrote more words in English” (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 67). The fact that Achebe knows both the language that he writes in and the language that is spoken by the people in the book gives the story even more authenticity. Nevertheless, he has been criticised for writing in English. Obiajunwa Wali argues that “[t]he whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing, is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture” (qtd in Sickels 44). However, if one presupposes that Achebe’s intention with his novel was to educate Western society about Igbo culture, then he had no other choice but to write in a language that is accessible and familiar to Westerners. Had the novel been written in an African language, this purpose would have been lost.

Achebe’s knowledge of language is important to the novel, not only because it is “a crucial ingredient for a different story” (Lynn 58) from the ones that had been written about the colonization before *Things Fall Apart*, but also because language and the art of communication is central in Igbo society. On several occasions, the importance of language is mentioned and exemplified, and Achebe’s ability to use his knowledge of Igbo language has also been acknowledged by critics. Thomas Jay Lynn argues that the novel’s language is “natural, fresh, and distinctive” since Achebe uses “untranslated Igbo words and phrases, translated Igbo speech and idioms, and traditional Igbo oral art such as proverbs, folktales, and songs” (60). One example of a folktale, which also shows the power of language, is the story about a tortoise, which is told to children in the novel. The tortoise “had a sweet tongue” and “his speech was so eloquent” that he managed to convince the birds to give him a feather each, allowing him to make a pair of wings and fly up into the sky (92).

Igbo Community and Religion

One of the positive aspects of Igbo society as portrayed by Achebe is that it is self-reliant. The African village in the novel is “materially and spiritually self-sufficient” and thereby offers everything its inhabitants need, according to Alan Levine (n.p.). The community fulfils its inhabitants’ physical needs; the people grow their own crops and raise their own cattle. Although men and women grow different crops, the most important thing in the society is that everyone contributes to the growing of crops as well as the production of meat and other animal products such as milk and eggs. Achebe provides an example of the production of food in *Things Fall Apart*: “The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for the goats, and each wife built a small attachment to her hut for the hens” (13).

The animals also contribute to the other part of what makes the village self-sufficient, namely the spiritual fulfilment. Since animals often are used as sacrifice, they enable and facilitate the inhabitants’ religious traditions. This is not the only example of how religion is a natural part of everyday life to followers of the Igbo religion. In Achebe’s depiction of the typical Igbo compound, it is clear that Okonkwo has the possibility of expressing himself spiritually at home: “Near the barn was a small house, the ‘medicine house’ or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits” (13). Being spiritual and religious is important for the entire society, since it “unites everyone into a clan, giving them a sense of purpose and attachment. Its religion connects the people to the heavens, the earth, and the land and places everyone in the social order” (Levine n.p.).

As mentioned in the introduction, religion and community are intertwined with one another. A clear example of this can be seen in the village’s communal meeting, where two families come before the Egwugwu to settle a dispute. The Egwugwu are villagers that dress up as masked ancestral spirits, each one representing one of the nine villages of the clan. No one knows the identity of the masked ancestral spirits, but we do learn that Okonkwo is one of the nine Egwugwu. The Egwugwu, which acts like a court, allows both sides to plead their case and then they come to a decision, which is carried out and people accept it. The gods,

goddesses, ancestors, and elders are all included in the community and make decisions based on the community's best interest to bring peace and order to the villages.

The ancestors, or the living-dead, are crucial and central figures in the Igbo community. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu explains how the African community includes the dead, or the living-dead, since a person who has passed away "remains an active participant in the religious life of the community" (51). The Igbo communities hold festivals in their honour; the villagers sacrifice and honour them in their everyday lives, which can be exemplified by the breaking of the kola nut. Presenting a kola nut to your guest is customary and it is said that "he who brings kola brings life" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 5). When breaking the kola, it is also customary to pray to the ancestors: "As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies" (6). This way of including the dead in the community is different from Western traditions. In Christianity, it is customary to pray directly to God thanking him for blessing you with food and blessing the food you are about to eat. However, in Igbo religion you pray to your ancestors. The ancestors are still considered family members and are expected to influence the gods and goddesses in your favour, which is illustrated in *Things Fall Apart*, where Okonkwo's attitude towards the ancestors can be seen. He believes that the ancestors have the ability to affect the well-being of his family: "He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-whine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children" (14).

Igbo society has a very strong sense of community and the community's well-being is always put ahead of the individual's well-being. The priest of the earth goddess calls in on Okonkwo for beating his wife during the week of peace when enraged because she has neglected her duties as a wife and not prepared his meal, which could possibly have devastating consequences for the entire clan:

We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil. [...] The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish. (29)

This is a visible example of how interlaced religion and community are. Even in punishment by the gods and goddesses, the whole community will be punished for the mistake of one individual. In order to atone for his mistake, Okonkwo is told to make sacrifice to the gods.

This is crucial for society's well-being. Achebe shows that he is well acquainted with the Igbo community and their religion as he manages to capture the essence of their strong sense of community and gives an insight into one of the reasons for it being so strong. Okonkwo's situation illustrates the system that is described by African theologian Kwesi A. Dickson:

A society is in equilibrium when its customs are maintained, its goals attained and the spirit powers given regular and adequate recognition. Members of society are expected to live and act in such a way as to promote society's well-being; to do otherwise is to court disaster not only for the actor but also for society as a whole. Any act that detracts from the soundness of society is looked upon with disfavour, and society takes remedial measures to reverse the evil consequences set in motion. (qtd in Asamoah-Gyadu 47)

This strong sense of community does not stretch any further than the village. However, we learn that there are nine villages and that it is not uncommon that they are at war with each other. In war times, there are no signs of human compassion for fellow human beings. Okonkwo was the first man in the village to bring home a human head from Umuofia's latest war, adding his fifth skull to his collection, which he seems hopeful to add more to. Okonkwo uses his first skull as a cup which he drinks palm-wine from at great occasions (10). To a Westerner, drinking out of a skull that you have claimed in war might seem barbaric. However, this is a matter of perspective and culture. In Okonkwo's village, it is tradition to collect the skulls of the enemies fallen in battle. Claiming that the Igbo people are barbaric savages simply because their traditions differ from the ones in Western culture creates the image of Igbo people as morally inferior, when it is actually only a question of viewpoints. Westerners' tendency to view themselves as Africa's big brother will be discussed more closely later in this essay.

The community puts the important decision of going to war in the hands of the Divinities. More precisely, they consult The Oracle, who is a central figure in Igbo society and plays an important part when it comes to making decisions regarding the village as a whole. This means that the decision of participating in an armed conflict is not based on choice, greed, or desire for power. The following sentence also suggests that Umuofia needs the moral justification and approval from the Oracle before entering war: "And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle – the Oracle of the Hills and the caves" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 12). Ignoring the Oracle's decisions seems to be unheard of as Igbo people do not believe that they will stand a chance in a war without the Oracle's blessing: "And there were

indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded agadi-nwayi¹ would never fight what the Ibo call a *fight of blame*” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 12). The gods and goddesses do not appear to punish the village for neither war nor the brutality that supposedly comes with it, as long as the war they are about to wage is justified by the Oracle, demonstrating the fact that the Oracle has a very high status in the Igbo community.

The fact that religious figures participate in war and that they are feared for their powers in war further highlights how community and religion are in unity with each other. Umuofia is feared by its neighbours for their power as well as for their powerful medicine-men and priests with their magic abilities, both of which are used in war (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 11). Authoritative figures and religious figures also cooperate when making decisions regarding the clan. Achebe exemplifies this in the incident where a girl from Umuofia is killed during a visit to the market in the neighbouring village of Mbaino and the community of Umuofia is offered a young man and a virgin as compensation for the crime that has been committed against the whole clan. The elders decide what is to happen with the girl while the Oracle makes the decision regarding Ikemefuna, the young man:

The elders, or *ndichie*, met to hear a report of Okonkwo’s mission. At the end they decided, as everybody knew they would, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, he belonged to the clan as a whole, and there was no hurry to decide his fate. (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 12)

Ikemefuna is placed in Okonkwo’s care, and his fate illustrates the fact that the Oracle has an important role in other contexts than war as well. It functions as the village’s moral compass, justifying violence and matters of life and death within the community. In “Principle and Practice – The Logic of Cultural Violence in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”, David Hoegberg discusses the killing of Ikemefuna. Even though Okonkwo becomes fond of the boy, he actively participates in his death, which has been ordered by the Oracle. This is an example of what Hoegberg refers to as “culturally sanctioned violence” (147), that is, violence that has been justified through traditions, the divinities, and the influential people in the society.

The culturally sanctioned violence is part of what Levine refers to as a “warrior culture” (n.p.). A warrior culture is “happily hierarchical, harsh toward some of its own inhabitants and cruel towards outsiders [...] and ritualize[s] brutality” (Levine n.p.). Throwing

¹ An agadi-nwayi is a medicine which can be used in war (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 12).

twins into the evil forest is an example of ritualized brutality while ostracizing the Osu – who are outcasts for their beliefs in other gods – is an example of harshness and cruelty towards outsiders. The opening lines of the novel support the argument that it is a warrior culture: “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat” (1). It is evident that Okonkwo earns huge fame for his fierceness and strength; two attributes that the Igbo community highly values, apparently so highly that Achebe chooses to begin his story with the quoted lines to accentuate the values of the community.

Taking titles contributes to the hierarchical nature of the clan. How members within the village of Umuofia socially interact with each other illustrates this in a clear way. Okonkwo snaps at a man who has not taken any titles and talks down to him, showing a feeling of superiority towards the man without titles:

Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: ‘This meeting is for men.’ The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man’s spirit. (25)

Okonkwo can be ruthless towards men he does not regard as his own equal or of higher status. He also feels ashamed of his father, Unoka, as Unoka did not pass on any titles to his son (18). It is not only Okonkwo who reflects these hierarchical values. Even though Okonkwo has taken titles and has showed his fierceness and brutality in war, the old man questions Okonkwo’s aggressiveness, which would suggest that age as well as titles is revered in their hierarchy. However, as expressed in the novel “if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 8), showing that although age is of some importance, achievements are ultimately valued the highest.

The negative aspects of having a hierarchical structure and a warrior culture are in some ways criticised in the novel. The first part of the book ends with Obierika questioning the ways of Igbo society after an incident involving Okonkwo. When a crime is accidentally committed, as is the case with Okonkwo, the customs are to cleanse the land which he has tainted by the blood of a clansman. This is performed by a large crowd of men who storm Okonkwo’s compound. Justice of the earth goddess is brought by the men when they demolish and set fire to his house, destroy his barn and kill his animals. There are no personal

motives, the men “had no hate in their hearts against Okonkwo” (117) – it is merely a ritualistic procedure, and Obierika participates in the actions. This way of trying to cleanse the land of the evil that has been committed is, as argued by Asamoah-Gyadu, a further example of how society takes remedial measures to reverse the evil consequences set in motion. The incident leads to the questioning of Igbo society by Obierika: “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?” (118). This is a significant incident for up to this point nobody has been critical towards or questioned Igbo society and its customs. This suggests that there are individuals who are open for changes, and it is similar questions that later make Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son, convert to the new religion.

There are Igbo characters within the novel that question Igbo society, and it can be argued that they mirror some of Achebe’s personal reflections. Throughout the first part of the book, Igbo society and its ways of life are presented and Achebe offers a new perspective of life in Africa, challenging the earlier portrayals of Africa and Africans in works such as the previously mentioned novel *Heart of Darkness*. Searle argues that “Achebe deliberately attempts to construct a variegated, unsentimental and empathetic image of Igbo life *prior to* their personal contact with white missionaries, English culture and imperialism” (n.p.), suggesting that Achebe portrays a very honest and real picture of Igbo life. He highlights their strengths, but also ponders on their flaws instead of trying to cover them up. I argue that by choosing to end the part of the book that introduces and explains the Igbo society with questioning this society, Achebe demonstrates his ability to be critical of certain aspects and customs of Igbo society even before the arrival of the missionaries.

The Missionaries

Things Fall Apart depicts the first encounters between Africans and white men from a new perspective, namely that of the natives. Since the story is shown from the perspective of Igbo people, the European missionaries that come to their village and interrupt their everyday lives become representations of the unfamiliar, as argued by Searle: “the Europeans are shown

from an African perspective as potentially inexplicable aberrations from normal standards of reference” (n.p.). This perspective is part of Achebe’s intentions of writing back to earlier depictions of these encounters, breaking the patterns of what is considered familiar and unknown in stories that portray Africa.

The first instances where a white man is mentioned reflect the view of white people as the unknown others. They are said to have no toes and a leper is believed to be a white man (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 69-70). These examples illustrate what Searle argues, “that a complex of different ideas and rumours were circulating among the Igbo before they met the missionaries” (n.p.), which indicates that Igbo people also had preconceived ideas about the unfamiliar white people, just like the Europeans had about black people. Achebe further captures this in his novel when rumours from Mbanta, a neighbouring village, are spreading “that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgement in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 146). Achebe’s depiction of the white man directly challenges the Western perspective of the encounters, as it offers us the other side of the story and also portrays the feelings of insecurity and fear among Igbo people of what the consequences of the arrival of the white man might be.

This fear results in the consultation of the Oracle for guidance in how to approach the situation of the arrival of the white man. Once again, a religious figure acts as an active factor in the decision-making of the community, for the first time providing a prophecy. The Oracle tells them that “the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 130). The Oracle describes the first man as a “harbinger sent to explore the terrain” (130) and says that he will come back with many more men. This prophecy and the influence of the Oracle intensifies the fear of the white man and his intentions, and so they decide to kill the man.

The arrival of the missionaries has a dividing effect on the African villages. It is clear that the inhabitants of Umuofia and the neighbouring village of Abame lack strategies for dealing with the arrival, and therefore it separates the inhabitants into groups that want to be passive and go on with their daily lives on the one hand and groups that want to arm themselves against the white men on the other. The consequences of the killing of a white man in Abame illustrates this situation. After having killed the first white man that arrived, the inhabitants of Abame go on with their everyday lives, as if nothing has occurred.

However, more white men arrive shortly after, and the village is obliterated. Okonkwo and his friend's reactions demonstrate that they believe that the inhabitants of Abame should have acted differently. Uchendu believes that "[t]hose men of Abame were fools" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 131) and Okonkwo agrees that "[t]hey were fools [...] They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and their matchets even when they went to market" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 131-132). Searle argues that "Okonkwo's disdain for their chosen course of action illustrates that the African response to imperial culture was not uniform and simplistic" (n.p.). As mentioned earlier, the sense of community does not stretch any further than the village's borders, and as demonstrated by the passage above, the arrival of the missionaries creates a new difference of opinion between the villages.

Achebe's portrayal of mission in his novel is complex and he introduces characters that differ greatly from one another both in personality and in their approach to conveying their religious message. Searle writes that "[i]n order to understand the role of mission in *Things Fall Apart* it is essential to appreciate the attenuated portrait the novel provides. Several models of approach were adopted during the historical process of transmission, and Achebe differentiates between these" (n.p.). This differentiation can be exemplified by the two missionaries Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith. Mr. Brown, who is the first missionary to arrive, has a very friendly and peaceful approach to his mission compared to Mr. Smith, who has a much more unsympathetic and uncompromising approach. Mr. Kiaga, Mr. Brown's interpreter, is similar to Mr. Brown in his approach. He is very kind and sympathetic, and has a greater understanding of the Igbo society than Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith due to the fact that he is a native.

The arrival of Mr. Brown does not disrupt the clan a great deal. His friendly approach leads to a positive and welcoming atmosphere in the village. As described by Searle, Mr. Brown "sought to develop a relationship of trust with the clan, deliberately restraining the excesses of more zealous converts and establishing a friendly dialogue with leading members, such as Akunna, who welcomed the missionary into his home". The welcoming attitude of Akunna demonstrates that Mr. Brown is not seen as an intruder, which might be due to the fact that Mr. Brown not only makes it a priority to discuss his religion, but also wants to learn about the Igbo religion. He discusses religion every time he visits the village: "Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his obi talking through an interpreter about religion" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 169). The portrayal of Mr. Brown once

again correlates with Achebe's own life. Achebe writes about the first missionaries in his essay "Named for Victoria, Queen of England": "Apparently the first missionaries who came to my village went to Udo Osinyi to pay their respects and seek support for their work. For a short while my great-grandfather allowed them to operate from his compound" (66). The similarities between the missionaries that visited Achebe's great-grandfather and the character of Mr. Brown suggest that Achebe is drawing from his personal life and making use of his experiences and knowledge of the subject. The character of Mr. Brown is friendly, not intrusive, and does not try to force anyone into converting, which is the main reason that life in the Igbo village continues without major disruptions. This changes with the arrival of Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith is portrayed as the opposite of Mr. Brown. He is introduced to the reader as "a different kind of man" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 174), and Searle argues that "[h]e fits the stereotype of the missionary as an arrogant imperial agent, often implicitly constructed by postcolonial discourse as the pre-eminent model of evangelistic endeavour" (n.p.). While Mr. Brown is open-minded and kind, Mr. Smith is narrow-minded, uncompromising, unforgiving and ruthless. The differences between Mr. Smith and Mr. Brown are reflected on in the novel, and it is clear that Mr. Smith is not very sympathetic to his predecessor: "He condemned openly Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 174). These methods lead to the destruction of the balance that Mr. Brown has created, which ultimately has devastating consequences. Searle argues that the biggest reason for the devastating consequences is that Mr. Smith "was not prepared to engage in amicable dialogue, nor did he distinguish between religious and cultural matters" (n.p.). His lack of will to engage in dialogue, and the consequences that this attitude has, demonstrate the importance of communication in general as well as in Igbo society.

The fact that the missionaries are depicted in a diverse way shows that Achebe is careful of not making the same mistakes when portraying the foreign as Westerners have done when portraying Africans as the unknown in for example Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. There are several missionaries and they are depicted in various ways, all with different characteristics. One of the reasons for this is that Achebe sees the benefits and the positive aspects that the missionaries brought as well as the negative ones. In his essay "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" Achebe writes: "But the bounties of the Christian God were not

to be taken lightly – education, paid jobs and many other advantages that nobody in his right senses could underrate” (65). This suggests that Achebe is very open to certain parts of what the missionaries brought with them. Mr. Brown represents the positive aspects of the missionaries, such as bringing education to Umuofia and showing respect towards the villagers and willingness to learn about their customs and religion, while Mr. Smith represents the negative aspects of the missionaries, which caused the destruction of Igbo society.

Mr. Smith’s view of the inhabitants of Umuofia and Conrad’s portrayal of Africa and Africans in his novel *Heart of Darkness* are two of many examples of racism and prejudice. In his essay “Colonialist Criticism”, Achebe reacts to another example of racism, namely a comment made by the famous theologian and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize 1952 Albert Schweitzer who said: “*The African is indeed my brother, but my junior brother*” (qtd in “Colonialist Criticism” 3). Achebe feels that this comment reflects the attitude of Colonialism when it was at its peak. The Western World sees the African as a younger brother who needs the guidance of someone more knowledgeable than himself and as someone who, with guidance, someday might grow up to become an equal. This attitude can be seen in the discussion about right and wrong, rationality as well as ethics and morality.

What is considered moral and rational is based on perspective, and the attitude above presupposes that the perspective of Western society is superior to the ones of other societies, even though this is not necessarily the case. The values of Western society are influenced by history, tradition, government, and religion. This is not all too different from the values of Igbo society, which are based on the same pillars – the pillars just happen to differ from those of Western society. Western society and Igbo society do not have the same history or traditions, nor are they influenced by the same religion. However, this does not mean that one is superior to the other, it just means that they are different from one another. Assuming that Western values are superior to African morals and ethics, like Conrad and Schweitzer did, easily leads to racism and the desire to enlighten and develop the African societies. This can be seen in literary criticism as well. Hoegberg argues that critics take one of two sides in the analysis of the killing of Ikemefuna; they either try to justify it using culturally sanctioned violence as an argument, or they condemn the killing, thereby applying “Western standards of humanism” (147). Based on Igbo values, the killing is not immoral nor irrational, and judging the killing from a Western perspective and assuming that this judgement is the correct one, and therefore viewing Igbo society as irrational and unethical is not only unfair, it also reveals a lack of understanding of Igbo history and traditions.

One example of a character that tries to force Western values on Igbo society is the District Commissioner, who seems to believe that Westerners are superior to Africans in terms of rationality and morality. The arrival of the missionaries meant more than the establishment of a church and Christianity. The missionaries also brought a government and “[t]hey had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 164). The District Commissioner arrives in a foreign country and ignorantly starts making new rules that the locals must obey, and if they fail to comply with the rules, they are sentenced to prison where they are treated as slaves. Men could be punished and thrown in prison for throwing away twins into the evil forest, although this was an act that had to be done according to the rules of their own society. Men of title and who are of high honour in the villages are held as prisoners for breaking the white man’s laws and are forced to bid personal errands for the District Commissioner such as gathering wood and clearing the compound. Ignoring and dishonouring highly respected men further disturbs the balance that Mr. Brown had built with the natives.

The District Commissioner is also depicted as both corrupt and greedy when he settles a case about disputed land. When Okonkwo asks Obierika what happened to the land Obierika answers that “[t]he white man’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” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 166). Furthermore, it is interesting to note the fact that The District Commissioner is the only person in the novel whose name we do not learn. This anonymity allows for the interpretation of him as simply a representative of the feeling of superiority that Europe felt as a big brother towards junior brother Africa as Schweitzer expressed it.

The court and the problems it brings to Igbo society illustrate the clash of two societies and the devastating impacts of colonizing a country. On the one side, there is Igbo society, its customs and culture, which, according to Syed Fagruheen is “heavy in traditions and laws that focus on justice and fairness” (22). On the other, there is the new government of the white men who come to implement their own laws and customs, which divides the village of Umuofia. Obierika explains his view of the situation when asked by Okonkwo if the white man understands their customs. It is clear that the white man’s lack of knowledge of Igbo language, culture, and traditions upsets Obierika, and that he is dejected by the establishment of the white man, which has caused the division of the clan:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (166)

The passage summarizes what is argued in this essay, namely the importance of language, culture and religion in Igbo society, some missionaries' inability to understand and respect Igbo traditions and therefore trying to force Western values of morality and rationality on Igbo villages, as well as the consequences of this clash.

Conclusion

In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe uses his life experiences, thus giving the depiction of Igbo society and the missionaries authenticity. He provides a nuanced insight into everyday African life in a village with a strong sense of community, welcoming outsiders to learn about their community and religion. He intimately knows the customs, traditions, and religion of Igbo people, which allows him to accurately capture these aspects of Igbo society in his novel. The story of the missionaries arriving feels more honest and real than previous depictions of colonization which were written from a Western perspective. Choosing not only to depict Igbo society, but also choosing to write about the arrival of the missionaries in their community and exploring the effects of their arrival further strengthens the case for *Things Fall Apart* as an important postcolonial novel, which directly challenges for example Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Achebe openly shows the strengths and weaknesses of both Igbo society and the missionaries and everything that the missionaries brought with them, such as the Christian religion and the Western laws. Throwing twins into the evil forest and the treatment of the Osu are examples where Achebe is critical of Igbo customs, while the education that the missionaries offer is an example of a positive aspect of the missionaries' arrival. Several characters that greatly differ from each other are shown on each side, which means that Achebe explores the effect that the different characters and their traits have on each other by the way they interact. Mr. Brown manages to live peacefully in Igbo society as he shows

openness towards its religion and traditions and daily communicates with the people while Mr. Smith's methods have devastating effects on Igbo society. The main reason for this is Mr. Smith's lack of willingness to communicate and as language and speech are so important to the Igbo people this has devastating effects.

Language is not only important for Igbo people, but also for the novel itself. The fact that Achebe chose to write in English shows that he intended for his novel to be read by Westerners, while the fact that some Igbo words and phrases are untranslated demonstrates that he knows the importance of language within Igbo community. He balances between making Igbo community accessible and understandable by translating some proverbs, expressions, and folktales, while at the same time trying to maintain the authenticity of Igbo people by not translating others. The use of language combined with the portrayals of morality and rationality, which question former depictions of Westerners as morally and intellectually superior to Africans, makes the novel important from a postcolonial perspective.

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