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GOD(S) FALL(S) APART: CHRISTIANITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*[1]

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ABSTRACT. *This paper studies the confrontation between Christianity and the Igbo religion in Chinua Achebe's first novel in the context of colonialist appropriation. An analysis of the techniques used by the Christian missionaries to infiltrate the fictional world of Umuofia is complemented with a discussion of the main characters of the novel in their relation to religion and their roles as facilitators or opponents of the colonization process. Gender issues are also briefly dealt with as Christianity is seen as "effeminate" by the natives and some female Igbo characters.*

> Achebe has suffered the misfortune of being taken for granted: the intricate and deep structures that inform his narratives are rarely examined, except on an elementary introductory level, and the ideologies that inform his narratives and his theoretical reflections rarely seem to have the influence one would expect from Africa's leading novelist. Clearly, Achebe has been a victim of that kind of "first" reading which Roland Barthes condemned as the consumption of the text, a reading which erases the problematics of the text and its contradictory meanings in its quest for the artifice of continuity. (Gikandi 1991: 2)

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) narrates the final collapse of Umuofia, an Igbo nation in present day Nigeria, due to the arrival of the white man in the

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late nineteenth century. This arrival was gradual, and one of the techniques employed to destroy Igbo society was the infiltration of Christian missionaries who introduced new ideas and undermined the local system of beliefs. The final surrender of Umuofia, symbolized by the suicide of its great warrior, Okonkwo, was preceded by an increasingly aggressive challenge to its local religion and sacredness.

Although there have been numerous studies of this novel since its initial publication half a century ago, the role of Christianity and its confrontation with local beliefs have not been sufficiently discussed in the context of colonialist appropriation. Studies by Killam (1969: 24-34), Peters (1978: 104-110), Wren (1980: 23-59), Okoye (1987), Gikandi (1991: 24-50), Rhoads (1993), MacKenzie (1996), Begam (1997), or Nnoromele (2000), among others, have certainly tackled this issue, but mostly from a cultural, social or historical perspective that emphasises Igbo social and religious values, without analysing their dialectical relationship with those of the Christian colonialists and the way Achebe constructs that relationship in his fiction. This is not surprising if we bear in mind that although the novel seems simple, as Solomon O. Iyasere (1974: 74) has written, "it is deceptively so. On closer inspection, we see that it is provocatively complex, interweaving significant themes". The aim of this essay, then, is to explore the role of religion in colonial domination by focusing on three phases in the relationship between the Christian Church and the Igbo tribe whose demise is traced in Achebe's novel: the evangelists' attempts to secure the sympathy of the destitute and marginalized; the increasing belligerence – mainly on the part of new converts – towards the local gods; and the desecration of the masked spirits, which meant the effective end of the clan's main socio-spiritual institution.

It is important to understand that the process of evangelisation cannot be taken only as a mere strategy of domination. Within the relationships between the Christian Church and the clan there are people and times of peace. Although some apparently tolerant attitudes may be regarded as another part of this deliberate process of domination, this is not necessarily the case. In spite of the existence of a very clear link between the activity of the missionaries and the establishment of colonial government, it would be excessive to confer on all the missionaries' deeds a political significance. Their role in the collapse of Igbo society was very important, as will become clear, but that does not mean that their only motivation was to subdue the Africans.

The first time we learn of the Christians is at the end of Okonkwo's exile. The new religion is considered "foolish" and its followers are seen as a harmless flock of *efulefu*, useless people who are not really attached too much importance.

Although the local priests curse the new religion, warning against "the new faith [which] was a mad dog that had come to eat it [the clan] up" (Achebe 2001: 105), the Christian Church is just seen as a group that has led worthless people astray with weird ideas. Later on the missionaries make their first public appearance, and the whole act is presented in such a way that it is impossible for the people who gather to listen to take the missionaries seriously. First of all, the interpreter, through whom the white missionary's words are put into the Igbo language, expresses himself in an odd and confusing way, giving rise to much joking among the locals. This fact makes the missionary's speech even more unreliable, and underlines his condition of stranger in the eyes of the locals.

The missionary's speech is the first given by the "white man" in the novel and reveals many attitudes of the new faith which may be used as a guide for future events. To begin with, the people of Mbanta are told about a brotherhood which is not based on blood-links.[2] This new concept, that allows white and black men to be brothers, opposes the main brotherhood of the Igbos: the clan. Next, the speech belittles the local religion as well: "He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone" (106), and subsequently threatens those who follow it: "Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil" (106). Despite the local metaphor used to explain the Christian hell to the Igbos, there is a lack of understanding and a direct rejection of the local religion. This prejudiced view comes from the Europeans' claim to be messengers of a god that is the only true one. Thus the first approach of the missionaries is fundamentally aggressive, because it is not based on acceptance or understanding but is single-mindedly oriented to imposing a worldview and erasing another.

A further interesting detail is that the "white man" promises to bring some "iron-horses" and condescendingly smiles about it. As will be discussed later on, the Christian Church offers as gifts objects that have never been seen before, playing with the fascination that they can generate among the locals. The bicycle, regarded as an iron horse by the Igbos, is the first example. In this way the white man attempts to transform African bewilderment before new objects into a halo that presents the whites as superior, and even supernatural, in the eyes of the blacks. This stratagem was widely used during the European conquests of the

2. Excellent examples of research on such cultural aspects are the already classic studies of primitivism and syncretism by JanMohamed (1984) and Kortenaar (1995). Both are very good illustrations of the confrontation between Igbo and Western values and the techniques used by Achebe to communicate this to audiences alien to Igbo culture.

Americas, not only as a means of conversion, but also to encourage the Indians to exchange materials that were highly priced in the West.

The missionary ends his speech with a very important remark, which is misunderstood and will later lead to conflict. He says that "your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm" (107), at which assertion the Igbos, who experience their gods in a very lively and direct way, burst out into laughter. For the Igbos, who lived in continuous and very real fear of their ancestors' rage, the statement that their gods "are pieces of wood and stone" (107) is palpable nonsense. For them, as for the Christians, their god is not a mere concept, but a vivid reality; more than a matter of ideas or beliefs, it is a matter of felt experience. The encounter between the missionaries and the locals ends with an engaging tune that captivates the ears and hearts of a few, while the majority is confused and amused in equal parts. The sweetness of the song is another way of attracting people's attention by colourful means, while the message remains mysterious.

Apart from the "gay and rollicking" song (107), that seduces the heart of Nwoye and other Igbo young men, the chief weapon of the missionaries is to strike at the weaknesses of the Igbo society. The rejection of twins, the practice of human sacrifice and the pushing of people ("destitutes" or outcasts) to the margins of the clan were traditions that had never been questioned before. In the first speech delivered by the evangelists those traditions, which have led to some Igbos being alienated from the clan, are challenged as a proof of the fallaciousness of the local religion. These taboos are all rooted in religious beliefs, and are straightforwardly followed by the whole Igbo clan. In the first part of the narration, before the arrival of the Westerners, outcasts or twins who are abandoned play a very minor role. The only "destitute" of importance is Ikemefuna, defined as a "Christ-figure" by Jonathan A. Peters (1978: 106), whose sacrifice motivates in some way Nwoye's later conversion.[3] This shows how these people start to count when they join the Christian

3. The execution of Ikemefuna is of course a result of the gods' decree, although Okonkwo's participation in it does not respond to that decree, as Solomon O. Iyasere (1992) has explained, but to his own ambition and fear to be deemed weak by the rest of the community. David Hoegberg (1999: 72-75), on the other hand, has analysed this episode as part of the cultural boundaries existing between Christians and Igbos, and deals specifically with the killing of Ikemefuna as a parallel case to the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Many other critics have studied this issue of the killing of Ikemefuna. Worth mentioning in connection with the religious confrontation between Christians and Igbos are Damian Opata (1987), who considers Okonkwo's behaviour as "an unconscionable act" and "instinctive" and Emeka Nwabueze (2000: 171-172), who prefers to regard the incident as another aspect of the dualism prevalent in the novel: "Achebe expresses the moral duplicity and ambiguity of norms that guide the Igbo society through the enormous influence of the gods on the life of the society. Dualism also arises from the fact that both god and humanity should be placated differently in order for harmony to exist".

Church and play a new role in a new society. There is no place for them in the clan and the Church takes advantage of this by giving them back their lost dignity and encouraging their integration.

So it is not surprising that the first convert we know about, though he does not belong to these marginalized groups, does not subscribe fully to the values of the clan. Nwoye suffers the brutal repression of his father, who does not find him virile enough, and he is quite hurt by the sacrifice of his quasi-brother, Ikemefuna. The ritual murder of his friend and the continuous demands of his father, who wants him to be someone he is not, make him more receptive to the new faith.[4] But "it was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it" (Achebe 2001: 108). As was the case with most of the other newcomers to the faith, what moved Nwoye to conversion was not a deep understanding of the Christian religion, whose ideas were pretty alien to the Igbo mindset, but a sense of relief from the tight social schemes of the clan. Another newcomer was Nneka, a woman who had given birth four times to twins, one of the biggest taboos of the clan. She found a refuge from her husband and family, which had become increasingly hostile towards her, because of the "unsocial" behaviour of her womb, to the extent that they considered her flight to the Christians "a good riddance" (111).[5]

In this first stage the clan still regards the converts as worthless people who are not fully sane. There is still a strong association between the Christian Church and the unsocial individuals of the clan. The fact that the Church is given a place in the Evil Forest denotes some disdain – albeit passive – on the part of the locals. The striking news that the church built there has survived to the limit of time tolerated

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4. An interesting discussion of this issue, in connection with feminism and the role of the mother and other women in the novel, is to be found in Biodun Jeyifo (1993). Curiously enough this scholar explains Nwoye's adherence to the colonialist ideology as a symbolic disavowal of "the national-masculine ethic that is embodied in his father's personality and doomed resistance" (Jeyifo 1993: 855), and further elaborates on the "historic separations consummated by colonial capitalism", that "divided fathers and sons and 'native' men from 'native' women" (855). The gender issue is not without relevance in the novel and particularly in relation to Christianity since, as Ato Quayson (1994: 132-133) has noticed, the Christians are initially perceived by Igbos as "effeminate" and are thus amusing and tolerable. Also valuable is the gender-oriented discussion of the protagonist and the female characters in the novel in Kwadwo Osei-Nyame (1999). Other interesting treatments of these issues are Opara (1998), Bicknell (1998) and Nnaemeka (1998), who discuss women's roles not only in *Things Fall Apart* but also in other novels by Achebe. Nnaemeka (1998) particularly rejects the accusations of sexism or misogyny brought against Achebe for his first novel, on the grounds of the cultural and social setting of the Igbos.

5. An analysis of the mythical and symbolic values of this character, as well as of the problematics of womanhood and motherhood in the novel, is carried out by Traoré (1997: 66), who rejects current "critical theory and cultural assumptions about gender" as they "are borrowed from alien epistemological systems that have very little connection with the ideology or construction of *Things Fall Apart*".

by the gods gives more strength to the new faith. This reveals how much the Church was integrated into the Igbo social and religious schemes. They consider it a part of their own system of beliefs; they change names, habits and gods, but not the basic system of beliefs. When the church survives in the Evil Forest it becomes more Igbo because it had been firmly expected that the local gods would destroy it there. When the power of the Church seems to overcome that fate it is no longer regarded as merely invulnerable, but also grows far more popular. It gains more adepts and becomes a new source of power for the Igbo mindset. The "white man's god" has proved that he can surpass the local gods, and thus many people turn to him in recognition of his strength. God is not an abstract being who dwells somewhere in heaven, but a very real and living force that intervenes in the human realm. As the agent which grants human wishes through its power, it is quite reasonable to worship and please the god that seems to be more powerful. Those who join the Christian Church do not do so on any intellectual ground, but because of some direct experience of its power. Thus, there is no substantial change in the minds of the Igbos, they are just changing the names of their sources of divine power: the basic system of beliefs remains unaltered.

The Church grows in numbers. Some Igbos turn Christian and the Church turns more Igbo. As the number of converts rises some of them try to "overstep the bounds" (114) and challenge the clan and its beliefs. This first incident between the clan and the Church reveals that the converts are still holding an Igbo worldview while zealously exhibiting their Christian adherence. They go to the village to proclaim that "all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines" (114). What is the point of defying a dead man, or in this case, a dead god? What is the need to fight something that does not exist? Of course the "overzealous" converts do not feel that their old gods are dead; they have experienced their power and, though they now reject those times, they do not feel those experiences were delusive. They have changed one god for another. They have replaced their source of divine power, but they have not shifted from their old mentality. The new god they have embraced is as alive as the old ones and, because they have been told that the new one is the only true god, now they try to kill the old ones. They want to kill the old gods and they encourage themselves to do so by thinking that they are dead. But how can they kill a corpse? They do not see the gods of the clan as dead and false, they see them irritatingly alive and true, and they want to fight that life and truthfulness that still pervade their perception.[6]

6. The importance of the values of the clan, of the world and ideology of Umuofia, is such that some critics have even referred to Umuofia as the true protagonist of the novel: "The protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* is not Okonkwo, but Umuofia" (Ker 1997: 125).

The converts project this inner cultural tension outwards and set out to fight the heathen gods they pretend have never existed. Of course, the clan cannot tolerate outbursts that challenge the pillars of society. They do not feel their gods particularly threatened, but they feel that their relationship with them will certainly degenerate if they do not repress the converts. The Igbos are not really concerned about the truthfulness of their gods. For the clan they are mere sources of power that guarantee the social and cosmic order and satisfy human desires. As long as that works there is no further problem. But they would be very careful not to displease the gods. If they are displeased or unattended they will not accomplish their tasks, thereby generating dramatic repercussions in the human realm.

Another sign of the "Igboization" of the Church is the incident with the *osu* – "outcasts" – who try to join the Christian community. The new Christian flock shows its reluctance when the outcasts of the clan express their will to join the community. They do not accept that this is a matter linked to religion or superstition, but something inherently aberrant: "You are our teacher, and you can teach us the things of the new faith. But this is a matter which we know" (115), one of the converts says. Once again, this attitude reveals that the converts, despite their change of faith, still hold on to their old beliefs. The final incorporation of the outcasts, once the reluctance of the newcomers is defeated by Mr Kiaga's arguments, made the Church overcome another obstacle to egalitarianism. This egalitarian identity, sealed with the arrival of the most feared *osu*, helps to create a new and growing personality separate from the clan.

A dramatic split between the Christian Church and the clan is close to occurring when the rumour that Okoli has killed the sacred python is spread.[7] There is no certainty about whether the rumour is true or not, but curiously enough it originates in the Christian community. The people of the clan are utterly puzzled. Nobody had ever imagined that the sacred animal could be killed willingly; it was just unthinkable. It is supposedly spread within the Church but some members of the congregation, including the chief suspect, Okoli himself, deny it and say that such a thing has never happened. We might discard the possibility that Okoli is the victim of a conspiracy on the part of some member of the community. What the episode seems to reveal then is that there must be some radical attitudes within the Church. This does not mean that the Church is radical itself. The pacifying manner of its head, Mr Kiaga, avoids an imminent confrontation between the two sides. But some of the converts are still willing to defy the clan, and to kill the gods they proclaim

7. An interesting discussion of the religious role played by the python in this novel, as well as in other works of fiction by Achebe, can be seen in McDaniel (1976).

have always been dead. As we can see, what underlies the mentality that fuels the rising aggressiveness is great confusion. It is the confusion of pretending to be something they are not and of trying to fight what they were – and still are. It is something more than a schizophrenic conflict of identities. It is the rejection of certain symbols and patterns and the adoption of new ones, while the old worldview is still there. This can be highly destructive, because we are not dealing with the confrontation between two different identities, but the split of a single mentality between those who live in accordance to it and those who try to destroy it while still trapped within it. This was one of the boundaries that colonialism built up. By encouraging locals to become Westerners the colonial discourse split identities in this way, leading to the annihilation of many societies.

War between the clan and the Church is circumvented by Okoli's death, which is seen as the consequence of the blasphemy he had supposedly committed. Gods' intervention prevents men from taking sides and trying to solve the affair by themselves. As Okeke says in the public assembly, "It is not our custom to fight for our gods" (117). The statement reveals that the gods had never been questioned before, or at least had never been mixed up with politics or war conflicts; also that their effectiveness had always been self-evident. Many Igbos do not regard the converts' attempts to kill their gods as an offence against them, but against the gods. Only Okonkwo and a few others realize that the challenge to the local gods is after all a challenge to the local culture, and that its ulterior motive is the destruction of the clan. He perceives that the gods and ancestors are an essential part of their cultural identity and sees the offences against them as an offence against the clan as well. Besides, other clansmen regard the gods as something more universal and less "Igbo"; they do not have the particular feeling that the gods that are being challenged are "their gods", but just "the gods". As long as the Christians are challenging "the gods", whose rule is universal, the clansmen do not consider it their business at all. That is why they regard the missionaries as crazy, because they are defying the powers of Earth, Water and so on, ignoring their strength. They view the Christians as blind men walking towards a fire, but they do not consider their temerity as a threat.

However, as time passes and the Church and white men's culture become more and more influential, there is a feeling that all started with the arrival of the missionaries. In the last part of the novel we notice how the local society has been subjected to a white government, supported by some non-Igbo Africans, who are repressing and enslaving them. This government is openly protecting the Church and punishing the Igbos for practising their traditions. Towards the end Obierika expresses the desolation that has overcome Umuofia in these words:

> he [the white man] 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. (129)

This means that the Igbos have finally become aware of the plot. They are now conscious of how the colonizers, by introducing new ideas that disparaged the local traditions, were putting Igbo unity to the knife and planting the seed that would bring destruction to their community. The clan becomes a victim of its own innocence, of its inability to see through and beyond the "foolish" behaviour of the Christians.

However, what seals the clan's fate is the desecration of the *egwugwu*, the masked spirits that were the messengers of immortals and those who administered justice. Interestingly enough, the desecration was carried out by Enoch, an "overzealous" convert, who was the son of the priest of the snake cult. The fact that he is the son of a local priest may explain his fervent efforts to make show of his Christianity. In particular, he is said to have killed and eaten the sacred python either as a rite of initiation for radical converts, or as part of a recurrent rumour that is intended to tell us something about the person concerned. Unlike the rumour about Okoli, which was received with great distrust and then given the lie, there is no such reaction in the case of Enoch. The rumour that he has killed the sacred python seems to be a medal that attests his merit. This shows how the relationships between the clan and the Church have now changed, and how the way of dealing with provocation and conflict has also changed in line with the political events.

Even though the killing of the python was considered a serious crime among the Igbos, it bore no comparison with the unmasking of a masked spirit. The society of the masked spirits was the most sacred, secret and respected institution of the clan. It linked the spiritual and the political powers and was the administrator of justice. Its members were noblemen, who had undergone initiation rites and were bound always to remain hidden behind their masks. If the merest suspicion about the "worldly" identity of a masked spirit was considered taboo, the unmasking of one of them was regarded as an extremely serious offence against all the clan's traditions and beliefs and an assault on the respect owed to ancestors. While wearing the mask they were no longer mortals, but immortals, and became the means and medium used by the ancestors to express their will and rule over the clan.

The unmasking of the masked spirit occurred because the festival of the earth goddess fell on a Sunday and the Christians needed to pass through the village, where the masked spirits were imposing their rule. The spirits granted their request to be able to transit the village, but as they passed through, Enoch defied a spirit, was beaten and, in retaliation, tore off the mask and… "the other *egwugwu* immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children, and led him away" (136). The most sacred thing is exposed to profanity, the mysteries are abruptly revealed, the power of the ancestors is reduced to a game of men. When something that has been kept under wraps is suddenly seen, a great power is lost, the power and fascination of the unknown. When the real object is seen, all the ideas that surround it vanish. The solemnity of the masked spirits becomes a masquerade. Thus Enoch uprooted the main pillars of society, the belief that kept them together, the authority that all the people accepted. Furthermore, the uprooting was done by someone who was no longer subject to the laws of the clan, which he had chosen to abandon. This made the deed even more damaging, because by showing the profane face of the local religion Enoch reasserts his conversion and mocks the system he is trying to destroy. The mocking is possible, of course, because he is protected by the authority of the white man, which would not allow the locals to molest the Christians for reasons not only of religion but also, needless to say, of politics. The masked spirits were a social, political and religious institution and their desecration is a very serious challenge to the local rule.

The political system of the Igbos was based on a system of spiritual beliefs which bonded Igbo society together and kept it subject to one law. With the arrival of the missionaries that system of beliefs was challenged and Igbo society started to collapse inexorably in a process which culminated in the annihilation of the local power and the establishment of colonial rule. For its part, the white man's government also went hand in hand with religious authority, its power being supported by the Church.

So, as we have seen, the role of the Christian Church in the process of domination is significant because, due to its evangelical efforts, many Igbos abandon their culture in favour of a Western cultural product; and the shift of beliefs in turn causes a split in Igbo society. The distance between the two sides widens when the converts succumb to a sense of superiority and decide to destroy the symbols of the local culture in a display of belligerence which gradually intensifies as the Christians start to feel increasingly protected by the colonial government.

Finally, the provocation of the locals becomes a tool for the colonizers to encourage the former to react against the foreign institutions, thus giving them a pretext for repression. The Church and the colonial rulers need conflict in order to survive and flourish. They need not only to split the Igbos, but also to keep the Church and the clan perpetually on the brink of war, if they were ever to justify their attacks on and erasure of local authority.

To sum up, Chinua Achebe presents in *Things Fall Apart* the whole strategy of European domination, which is based on the disempowering of a people, firstly by introducing a series of (mainly religious) ideas that openly challenge their beliefs from a foreign perspective; secondly by generating a conflict between those who are learned and embedded in those new, Christian ideas, and those who are not; and thirdly by establishing a government that protects those of its subjects who gathered around the Church while harassing those who do not, with the purpose of progressively erasing every sign of local culture. Furthermore, it is vital to note that the introduction of a new conceptual language (in this case, Christianity), which is assumed by some colonized subjects to be superior, does not efface the basic mindset of the local culture. The coexistence of both generates among the locals an internal conflict around their very identity which fuels bitter animosity towards those who do not uphold the same intellectual tenets.

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