

## The Conflictual Image of Christian Missionaries in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Ali Yiğit

Social Sciences Institute, Fatih University, İstanbul,  
& Kırklareli University, Kırklareli,  
TURKEY.

[aliyigit46@gmail.com](mailto:aliyigit46@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*With the missionary operations in Africa that started in late 15th and early 16th centuries, and continued for hundreds of years, Christianity has become one of the most common religion of Africa and an inseparable part of African literature. In this study, we aim to reveal what kind of missionary images and representations were made in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (TFA) and shed light on the conflictual Christian missionary images and representations. Achebe made numerous references to missionaries and their activities in his country directly or indirectly. According to the representations of Christian missionaries examined, missionaries in TFA present a paradox. On the one hand, they appeared in Achebe's fiction as people who built mission schools to educate the local children, and thus contribute to the development of literacy and civilization, and convert people in the regions they were found. However, on the other hand, they were presented as mischief-maker causing disagreements and breakup among the family members and tribes.*

**Keywords:** Chinua achebe, christianity, missionary images, and paradoxes

### INTRODUCTION

Christianity, missionaries and colonialism have an important place in African literature in European languages due to the deep and indelible influences they had on the life and destiny of both Africans and African writers. The well-known African critic, Simon Gikandi (2009, p. xi) posits that written African literature flourished and spread during the colonial period with to a great extent, the missionary schools. Supporting Gikandi, Abdul R. JanMohamed (1983) argued that:

Because the origin of the African novel lies in the transformation of indigenous oral cultures into literate ones and because this transformation is mediated by colonial occupation, the traumatic experience of that period is naturally reflected in the thematic preoccupations as well as in the styles and structures of first generation of African novels. (1983, p. 2)

Although the history of Christianity dates back to much earlier, especially in Ethiopia, its permeation into Sub-Saharan Africa was initiated in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the missionaries and colonists spread across the whole of Africa for the following several centuries. Therefore, in every part of the continent, one can come across the traces of missionaries and colonists in both small and large settlements. These missionaries, whether they were Reformists or Catholic, had a common purpose according to both religious and historical sources: to Christianize and 'civilize' the mostly pagan native Africans.

Centuries after their struggles to convert Africans into Christianity, the missionaries and colonists gained a considerable number of converts from almost all segments of society. Thus, they were successful in carrying out their mission. Yet, from the perspective of some of the African writers who were educated at missionary schools, the coming of the missionaries

to Africa didn't just bring Western religion, education and civilization. They were also responsible for many negative consequences to African culture. While the missionaries and colonists were generally perceived as people who struggled to evangelize and spread European education, culture and civilization, they were also responsible for triggering divisions, conflicts and many other problems still present in contemporary African society. In this respect, missionaries displayed a paradoxical image. This article addresses the question of how Achebe evaluated the presence of missionaries and their activities in his *Things Fall Apart*.

### CHINUA ACHEBE AND CHRISTIANITY

Chinua Achebe is one of the pioneers of African literature in European languages. David Carroll, one of the most dependable critics of Achebe, links the leadership of Achebe to his using the modern literary form: novel (quoted in Ogede 2001, p.2). Born in 1930 in an Igbo town called Ogidi of Nigeria to a Christian family, Chinua Achebe produced a wide number of literary and critical works. His father was an evangelist and also a teacher at a church but his uncle and many other relatives were followers of traditional Igbo religion. (Innes & Lindfors, 1979, p. 1)

The influence of his Christian past on Achebe is undeniable considering the fact that he frequently referred to both the African Christians and European ones in his homeland. Still when he was a child, he experienced the distinction between to be a Christian and non-Christian in his homeland. To be a Christian was a source of proud and superiority during his childhood while the latter one came to mean a source of inferiority. Achebe (1976) confessed this superiority complex in the Christian natives in his essay "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" as:

I was born in Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria of devout Christian parents. The line between Christian and non-Christian was much more definite in my village forty years ago than it is today. When I was growing up I remember we tended to look down on the others. We were called in our language "the people of the church" or "the association of God." The others we called, with the conceit appropriate to followers of the true religion, the heathen or even "the people of nothing." (1976, p. 95)

In the later terms of his life, he promoted a discontentment with this distinction and the inferiority complex the native non-Christian Africans were imposed. That is one of the main reasons why he started to criticize the colonial and early missionary period in his country in his novels. Yet this doesn't mean that Achebe adopted a hostile attitude towards the Europeans. In the interview he had with Serumaga, he underscored the fact that he is not a person who says Africa did not gain anything during the colonial period. (Duerden & Pieterse, 1972, p. 13) For him, Africa gained a lot from the Christian missionaries during the period of Europeans, but they lost more than they gained.

### CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY PORTRAYALS IN *THINGS FALL APART*

In many of his works, Achebe gave substantial place for Christian missionaries and their activities in Africa. Actually, although they were not central characters, missionaries gave direction to the flow of story. They are often portrayed as mischief-makers, dividers and supporters of the colonists. For Achebe, in some cases, they take sides with the colonists help them penetrate deep into Africa. For this reason, they have undue importance in the defeat of Igbo people. In some other cases, they help Africans get Western style education, benefit health services, roads and trade provided by the Europeans.

In *Things Fall Apart (TFA)*, there were basically two different missionary characters: Mr. Brown and Mr Smith. Achebe used a symbolic name 'Brown'. As the name implied, Mr. Brown was closer to the blacks both in color and character. He was portrayed as a friend to the natives and willing to help them. He spent hours with local people dealing with their problems, which gave the notion that the proselytization of Igboland was peaceable. In the novel he was described helpful and emphatic; "Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his obi talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learnt more about their different beliefs." (Achebe, 1958, p. 169) The basic reason why he became successful in Africa was that he empathized with the native religion and people. He didn't preach against the African traditions and beliefs, and thus, he improved his relations with the local people so much that he was given an important present 'a carved elephant tusk' which was a sign of dignity and rank by a respectable member of the community. Besides that, one of the great men in a village around Umofia gave one of his sons to be taught according to white man's knowledge in Mr. Brown's school. (Achebe, 1958, p. 169)

Mr. Brown had a great role in both convincing families to send their children to schools and helping the local patients get be treated in as he built a little hospital in Umofia as well as a school. He tried to persuade local people to understand the importance of being an illiterate person. This effort of him was shown thus:

He went from family to family begging people to send their children to his school. But at first they only sent their slaves or sometimes their lazy children. Mr. Brown begged and argued and prophesied. He said that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learnt to read and write. If Umofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them. (Achebe, 1958, p. 171)

Finally, Mr. Brown achieved to get more students from Umofia and he encouraged them to come to school giving them various gifts such as singlet and towels.

Unlike Mr. Brown, his successor, Reverend James Smith, kept a stricter way of evangelization not considering the sensitivities of the Africans. For him, the white Christians were superior to the black non-Christians and he didn't empathize with the non-Christians' local traditions and belief systems. As clearly described in Chapter Twenty-Two, he behaved intolerantly to the natives:

Mr. Brown's successor was the Reverend James Smith, and he was a different kind of man. 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 the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal. (Achebe, 1958, p. 174)

As it may be inferred from here, the children of light were the white Christians and the children of darkness were the black non-Christian people. Such kind of a sharp distinction over shaded the possibility of living together of the white Christians and black non-Christians peacefully as the former one other the latter. For this reason, later, more serious problems would emerge between the Christians and the native non-Christians.

In Chapter Sixteen, the Christian missionaries arrived at the Umofia, the village of Okonkwo who was the protagonist of the novel after they converted a considerable number of natives among whom Okonkwo's son, Nwoye was also found. That's why Obrieka, one of Okonkwo's old friends came to visit Okonkwo years later. In Obrieka's description of the

missionaries, they quickly spread to the region and gained many converts. However, the success of them was seen as a disadvantage for the local people. He stated that

The missionaries had come to Umofia. They had built their church there; won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages. That was a source of great sorrow to the leaders of the clan; but many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man's god would not last. (Achebe, 1958, p. 135)

Obriekie emphasized here that the coming of the missionaries disturbed the local people and the clan leaders because they began to change the social structure of the society dividing the Africans as Christian and non-Christian and the Christians were accepted as the people in the right path.

The division of the African people into Christians and non-Christians was felt not only by Okonkwo and Obriekie but also by one of the eldest members of *umunna* clan in Mbanta, where Okonkwo spent seven years in exile. While thanking to Okonkwo for the feast he gave on his leave, this old man expressed how dissatisfied he was with the activities of the missionaries especially for the young people. He thought it as a dividing force to the African clans and families stating:

But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong the bond of kinship is. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan. (Achebe, 1958, p. 157-8)

Referring to the experience Okonkwo lived, this old man spoke against the new religion because Okonkwo's son, Nwoye left his family to attend a missionary school. He was one of the strongest defenders of local belief system and severest critics of the new religion in Mbanta. From his perspective the new religion did no good to the local society but afflicted families and clans.

Missionaries were sometimes strict towards the un-Christianized Africans as seen in the situation of Obriekie who went to see and speak his friend's son, Nwoye; "What are you doing here?" Obriekie had asked when after many difficulties the missionaries had allowed him to speak the boy." (Achebe, 1958, p. 135) It is clear that missionaries didn't want their newly gained converts to be in contact with their non-Christian friends and relatives, which led to a social problem. In this respect, they were portrayed as dividers again. As Bernth Lindfors put forward, this sharp division pushed the Africans whether to choose the new religion and culture or maintain the old and traditional one, for this reason, they experienced an identity crisis. (Lindfors 2009, p. 172)

The division between the Christian and non-Christians deepened as the new converts began to refuse their past and family. For instance, when Obriekie asked Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, how his father is doing, Nwoye says "I don't know. He is not my father." (Achebe, 1958, p. 136) The reason why Nwoye rejected his father was that he embraced Christianity as a reaction to his father's ill-treatments. Since his father was a non-Christian and behaved him brutally, he didn't see him as father anymore. In the same way, Okonkwo didn't see Nwoye as his son after his conversion advising his other sons:

You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If anyone of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye no while I am

alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck. (Achebe, 1958, p. 162)

Being Afraid of the situation that his other sons may follow their elder brother, Okonkwo strongly advised them not to follow their brother's way because he found it terribly degrading and abhorring. He condemned not only his son but also the new religion. While he saw his fathers' religion as manly, he found the new one as womanly. In this way, he wanted his sons to be man following his own way through which for him they can be strong and respectable among their clan.

Achebe put forward that there was a mutual interest relationship between the white man and their native supporters and missionaries. For him, it was this triple relationship that caused conflict and upheavals among family members, clans and thus divided the whole continent as described in the words of Obierika who told Okonkwo:

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. (Achebe, 1958, p. 166)

In this paragraph, Achebe both summarized the core of his missionary and colonial criticism. He criticized missionaries and colonists as they degraded the local people and their culture. What Achebe added to these so called 'superior' groups were some of the natives who adopted Western religion and customs and then began to behave like them. In this respect, missionaries taught not only how to pray and live according to new religion but also how to insult previous customs and religion. This was what Achebe is severely criticized. For him, Africans didn't learn culture and religion for the first time from the Westerners; they had already had them before the Westerners arrived. (Lindfors, 1997, p.29)

The new converts not only refused their old religion but also disrespected it. Some of them were very excited and ready to attack the holy values of their previous religion. As an example, "Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines." (Achebe, 1958, p. 146) This mentality caused a conflict between them and their countrymen. They began to behave hostilely towards their erstwhile friends and relatives. In another place, a new convert who was very strong adherent of the new faith went and killed the sacred python which was accepted as the god of water and free to go wherever it liked. It was the most revered animal in Mbanta and addressed as 'Our Father' not only in Mbanta but also in the surrounding clans. This event initiated a serious conflict between the church and the native clans. Following this event, the natives decided to ostracize the followers of the new religion. (Achebe, 1958, p. 150) Thus, a social barrier was made up between the Christians and the natives.

In *TFA*, Achebe did not always refer to Christian missionaries negatively; he also showed how they benefitted the Africans. Being the pioneer of the European civilization in Africa was one of the most important positive images of the missionaries. They tried to build schools, and mini hospitals or health centers to help the natives get treatment service. Next, they brought European trade, technological items and transportation systems.

Embracing those outcasts of the society was a good example for demonstrating positive missionary image. In the African society where the story was based, there was a strict social

distinction or class structure. The men, the elders, chiefs of clans used to occupy the highest in this pyramid of class, and then women and children came. There was another group of people called *osu* who was the outcast of the society as described by a new convert who couldn't stand seeing an *osu* in the church in detail:

He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart- a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste- long, tangled and dirty hair. A *racor* was taboo to him. An *osu* could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. (Achebe, 1958, p. 148)

After they saw that the missionaries welcomed twins and similar abominations in the native society, these outcasts named *osu* went to the church hoping to be received, and as they expected, they were welcomed by the missionaries who didn't make any discrimination while receiving them. Mr Kiaga, the priest, received two outcasts asking them to have their hair shave off to which they reacted because of the fear of dying. Mr. Kiaga said:

Unless you shave off the mark of your heathen belief I will not admit you into the church. You fear that you will die. Why should that be? How are you different from other men who shave their hair? The same God created you and them. But they have cast you out like lepers. It is against the will of God, who has promised everlasting life to all who believe in His holy name. (Achebe, 1958, p. 149)

Convinced by the explanation of Mr Kiaga, the two outcasts shaved off their hair, which was a practice that put them in the same position with other *non-osu* people. This characteristic of welcoming the marginal of the local society both got the appreciation of these people and made them successful in Africa. In addition, such an attitude towards the outcasts showed that they were repairing an important crack or wound in the native society. Thanks to them, these people gained the privilege of living equally with other people. Therefore, in terms of abolishing a discrimination applied to some groups such as twins and *osu*, the missionaries had a very significant role.

## CONCLUSION

Achebe gave much space to the missionaries shedding light on their activities and interactions with the native tribes. He often criticized missionaries describing them as the people who caused division among families and clans and looked down the native traditions and beliefs.

He demonstrated that Africans did not learn the concepts culture and religion from these European missionaries; actually they had them before the missionaries came. In this sense, he achieved enlightening the young and the old that Africa had philosophy, dignity and religion. (Burness, Mata, and Hartnack, 2008, p. 86)

Achebe's reference to the words "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold." (Quoted Finneran, 1996, p. 187) in Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming", can be used as a metaphor for the colonialists and missionaries. Achebe used it to explain how things fell apart in Africa in this fiction. At the same time, he made the center where the European men such as colonists and missionaries stood, be questioned and criticized which gave way to the fall of earlier superior and dominant European or white man image.

As a result of the division led by the missionaries purportedly or unpurportedly in *TFA*, it ended with a tragedy; the tragedy of the Chief in the former one and the tragedy of Okonkwo in the latter one. As it was underscored by Arthur Ravenscroft (1969, p. 9) Christian missionaries brought not only personal tragedies but also public one. That was what Achebe drew attention to the issue of missionaries in his works. Yet, it can't be claimed that Achebe totally denied the benefits Africans got from the missionaries and their operations as clarified in the former sections.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. England: Penguin Books.
- [2]. Achebe, C. (1975). *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. New York: Anchor Books.
- [3]. Burness et l. (Eds.). (2008). *When Things Came Together Studies On Chinua Achebe*. New York: Heinemann.
- [4]. Duerden, D., & Pieterse, C. (Eds.). (1972). *African Writers Talking: A Collection of Interviews*. London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann.
- [5]. Finneran, R. J. (Ed.). (1996). *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. New York: Scribner.
- [6]. Gikandi, S. (Ed.). (2009). *The Routledge Encyclopedia of African Literature*. London & New York: Routledge.
- [7]. Innes, C. L., & Lindfors, B. (1979). *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*. London: Heinemann.
- [8]. JanMohamed, A. R. (1983). *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- [9]. Lindfors, B. (2009). *Early Achebe*. Eritrea: Africa World Press.
- [10]. Lindfors, B. (1997). *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- [11]. Ogede, O. (2001). *Achebe and the Politics of Representation: Form against Itself, From Colonial Conquest and Occupation to Post-Independence Disillusionment*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- [12]. Ravenscroft, A. (1969). *Chinua Achebe*. Harlow (Essex): Longmans, Green & Co.