

## Exploration of Primitive Nigerian Culture and Cross-Cultural Conflict in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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### Abstract

*This article explores the portrayal of primitive Nigerian culture and conflicts created by the emergence of new culture as reflected in Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart. African society is full of rituals practices and it cannot accept any kinds of changes directly and the colonial influence has created many problems in that culture and many of its values are lost. During pre-colonial period the influence of colonial culture has created obstacles for the conservative practices and conflicts have occurred between new culture and traditional culture. It applies qualitative method for the study of primitive culture and the conflict between two cultures. To make textual analysis of the novel the concept the multiculturalism, cultural change and loss of culture are used as theoretical tools. As secondary sources, articles about the writer and his novels, cultural issues and cultural misunderstanding have been studied to find how traditional culture loses its value when new culture is introduced and how people struggle to preserve their primitive culture. The findings provide evidence that in process of cultural change conflicts occur and finally fresh and new culture emerges there.*

**Keywords:** *Cross-cultural conflict, cultural change, cultural loss, multiculturalism, primitive culture, struggle*

### Introduction

*Things Fall Apart* revolves around Nigerian society which was predominantly traditional and full of rituals values. The Ibo culture was based on superstitions in

which people believed in oracles. By the portrayal of traditional Ibo civilization, the rustic culture is reflected and the introduction of Christianity created such primitive cultural values fall apart. The catastrophic climax of the indigenous system and the pervading of Christianity are the main concerns in the novel while analyzing it from cultural perspective. The Nigerian culture was based on narrow-minded concepts which would promote human sacrifice after decreed by the oracle. By referring Ibo culture and its fall the writer emphasizes the importance of change in any culture. As Diana Akers Rhoads mentions, “Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* represents the cultural roots of the Ibos in order to provide self-confidence, but at the same time he refers them to universal principles which vitiate their destructive potential”(61). The novel shows both primitive culture and the emergence of modern culture. Next, the primitive, Ibo culture would fail to provide people support and protection and they had to depend on Christianity for progress. In the name of the decree of the oracles or to please their gods and deities, the continuous promotion of injustice and inhuman activities is the main cause of the decline of the primitive culture. They were in fact promoting barbarism and injustice in the name of their religion or culture. The use of Ibo proverbs, folktales and vocabulary in the novel reflects native Nigerian culture because they contain primitive philosophy. They are important parts of the Nigerian oral tradition which is deeply rooted in the daily lives of the Ibos.

The novelist uses so many Ibo words in the novel to support his message to be conveyed. These original words demand special concentrations on them. By using these native contents the primitive culture is clearly reflected. The reflection of such primitive culture demands the inevitability of change because many weaknesses were apparent in that African culture. In this regard, David Whittaker and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska report, “*Things Fall Apart*, as the title suggests, is concerned with the dislocation of the African society caused by impact with another way of life. The reconstruction of Ibo village life is directed at revealing the forces at work both inside and outside traditional society that prepared the way for its eventual disintegration” (79). It shows the problem was created by the modern values. Though it was published during the time of pre-colonial age, it reflects the issues of modern period when there was struggle of European and Ibo culture. It is a portrait of the social and political problems which is struggling to solve its internal tension imposed by external forces. The novel mainly focuses socio-cultural aspect of Nigeria. As Patrick C. Nnoromele writes, “It is a text rooted in the social customs, traditions, and cultural milieu of a people. The characters and their actions are better understood when they

are examined in that light” (40). The characters in the novel become victim of cultural problem. Achebe himself in his lecture on February 18, 1975 expresses the comments from the young readers regarding *Things Falls Apart* that they became surprised and happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe (14). The reflection of the identity of native people in the novel has made many readers know about the culture of Africa because it is quite strange for them due to being aboriginal in nature. With this novel and by reflecting African culture, Achebe has gained top rank in African literary canon. He has also contributed a lot in process of reflecting African culture by the publication, reception and production of African literature in English. He has also inspired the new generation of African writers emphasizing not more on the issue of cultural conflict but in his handling of materials.

### Literature Review

Numerous critics have different views regarding Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*. Isidore Okpewho says, “*Things Fall Apart* is basically a story about the first encounters between a traditional (Ibo) community and the encroaching British colonial presence, a presence that brings into tragic confrontation two highly valued ideals of Ibo society” (8). Okpe who emphasizes about the colonial effect in traditional society and the confrontation resulted in tragedy. He points out the issue of colonial domination and still overlooks the issue of primitive culture and cultural conflict. Focusing on the meaning of the title of the novel, Abiola Irele writes, “*Things Fall Apart*, as the title suggests, is concerned with the dislocation of the African society caused by the impact of another way of life. The reconstruction of Ibo village life is directed at revealing the forces at work both inside and outside traditional society that prepared the way for its eventual disintegration (10). Irele emphasizes about the fragmented society by the introduction of colonialism and ultimately the traditional norms and values are shattered but he misses the issue of aboriginal culture and how cross-cultural problem.

Talking about the reflection of traditional culture, Abdul JanMohamed states that *Things Fall Apart* deals with the representation of oral culture and Achebe is famous in the sense that it is quite alien to Western readers (19). JanMohamed emphasizes about native African culture but he ignores the issue of cultural conflict that has undergone in many mixed cultural surrounding. Focusing the role of the protagonist of the novel, Whittaker and Msiska write, “*Things Fall Apart* focuses on the nature of Okonkwo’s tragic character, relating it to the way he chooses to interpret narrowly his society’s ideals of the ‘masculine’ and demonstrating how

his character comes to disavow the culture's 'feminine' values and principles"(10). They demonstrate male domination and narrow minded society through the central character but they miss the theme of cultural problem. Emphasizing the reflection of primitive culture through the novel, Onyekachi Awa says that Achebe presents African societies with their traditions, ideals, values and behavior to teach all about the beauty of African culture portraying the complex and advanced, social institutions of Ibo culture to replace a sense of pride in African culture and belief (16). Her concern is on the practices of African societies which are peculiar for other but she misses the theme of conflict after the arrival of white people in Africa. Many critics have raised voices about the novel and none of them have focused their criticism on the issue of reflecting the primitive society and cross-cultural problem. So this paper has attempted to fulfill the research gap by studying the novel from the perspective of primitive culture and cultural conflict.

### **Statement of Problem**

Achebe projects the theme of cultural loss and conflict concerning African society in which central character faces the tragic end. The Ibo people are guided by orthodox rituals and are confined in traditions. Due to their rustic and aboriginal beliefs they are always away from the culture of the modern world which constantly goes on changing. *Things Fall Apart* reflects that before the presence of British the Ibo societies have well-regulated system for harmonizing relations among people at all levels including the rustic cultural beliefs. In one sense the novel has shown the real features embedded in African society for its readers and in the other sense it has shown how arrival of British has played role in process of the loss of traditional African culture. The primitive culture does not accept any change and the influence of new culture created conflict in the society and some people lost their lives for the sake of their culture. This way, problem concerning old and new cultures is presented and this article replies the following research questions:

- a) What is culture and how does it change?
- b) Why does cultural conflict occur in societies?
- c) How do people respond when their culture is replaced?

### **Objectives**

This paper attempts to show how the Ibo people are living in Nigeria following their traditional, ritual practices and how cultural conflict is created in the

novel *Things Fall Apart*. It also aims to show the influence of colonialism in primitive culture in Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

This paper implements descriptive and exploratory method to answer the research questions. In order to find the issues concerning Nigerian culture and cross-cultural conflict, the novel *Things Fall Apart* has been taken as primary source. Related criticisms, scholarly articles, journals, and book reviews have been used as secondary sources. To prove the arguments theoretical dimensions of culture, cultural conflict, cultural change, multiculturalism, and cross-cultural issues have been used as theoretical methodological tools.

### **Culture as the Reflection of Human Identity**

Culture can best be defined as patterns of human assumptions which are developed or invented by a group of people to deal with its problems and are transmitted to generations as current ways to perceive. Being a property of human beings, it is shared as common learning output. It also refers to what individuals learn from people and lasts by creating customs, traditions and rituals. Ultimately it helps to shape human lives and positions surrounding them. Due to it, human beings are distinct from other creations of the universe. Regarding culture Raymond Williams writes, "Where culture meant a state or habit of the mind, or the body of intellectual and moral activities, it means now, also, a whole way of life" (xvi-xvii). Culture includes all aspects of human lives and everything has meaning in connection with social values. Likewise, Peter Newmark defines culture as, ". . . the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (94). Human values and norms are reflected through culture. Mainly, in tribal culture belief in gods, goddesses, supernatural forces and deities is interwoven. Some cultural groups give too much emphasis on warm hospitality and some others show simplicity as their special features. In primitive societies, people struggle to fulfill the needs of their existence. Regarding primitive culture Bruno Nettl reflects, "In many parts of the world today there are people who are conventionally called primitive. They have simple cultures with no system of reading and writing of their own, although they usually possess some kind of tribal organization"(1). As being the part of life, culture has become the distinct form to differentiate people of one area from the other. Being a broad term, culture includes many things like language, religion, social habitats, profession, art, music

etc.

In primitive societies people are uncivilized being uneducated in comparison with sophisticated modern societies. In such a context, the involvement of people is found in activities which are difficult to understand and for other people their practices are difficult to comprehend. Mainly, people believe in witches and supernatural powers which have malignant influences on their lives. For this, they engage in ritual activities and consult witchcraft, oracles and use magic as medicine for protection. Similarly, they use specific dress in process of the celebration of their ritual practices. These activities make the culture distinct in traditional sense because they determine their identity. Chun Wei Choo writes about cultural knowledge, “assumptions and beliefs that are used to describe, and explain reality, as well as the conventions and expectations that are used to assign value and significance to new information” (112). The conventions and values distinguish a community from others. Physical environment, nature and ecology have played significant role in shaping primitive culture from the earlier civilization. People in such societies are born and brought up being attached to nature and people in some places worship nature. They also worship natural entities like sun, moon, trees, rain, cloud and many other things as gods or deities. In the modern world culture includes broader areas including economy and politics as Paul du Gay et al. mention, “culture is now regarded as being as constitutive of the social world as economic or political processes. Not only this ‘culture’ has been promoted to an altogether more important role as theorists have begun to argue that because all social practices are meaningful practices, they are all fundamentally cultural” (2). In today’s contemporary world culture has become a matter of concern across all disciplines because meaning is given to social activities through culture. Mainly culture represents the society and values, gives identity, produces meaning of social activities, and also helps us in the process of consumption and regulation of the activities. Thus, knowledge of culture helps to make sense of all kinds of activities of everyday lives.

### **Cultural Change and Cross-Cultural Problem**

Culture is a social practice which is learnt by individuals to be socialized and on the basis of social change culture changes. The reason it changes is that it is concerned with human perfection, the state of intellectual development, body of the arts, ways of life such as physical, spiritual and intellectual. Traditionally, culture is regarded as the sum of best ideas and practices which make up the everyday lives. It incorporates the ideas of what is thought and said best in a society. Focusing on the

change in culture, Stuart Hall says, “In recent years, and in a more ‘social science’ context, the word ‘culture’ is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people, community, nation or social group” (2). On the basis of the change in political, economic, and social life the development and change in culture can be explored. Similarly, change in culture can be traced with great historical changes. In this regard, Raymond Williams opines, “The progress of culture is dependent on the progress of the material conditions for culture; and, in particular, the social organization of any period of history limits the cultural possibilities of that period. Yet all through history there is a constant interaction between culture and social organization” (289). Culture cannot go alone but it lags behind social organizations and changes with the change in social activities. With the development of relevant ideas, feelings, practices and human relations modern meaning of culture is determined.

Every society consists of a unique set of beliefs and interactions and in multicultural societies people live sharing and adopting values of each other. Such scenario requires polite social interaction and open-minded thinking. In cross cultural environment, expectations cross the boundaries and the society needs to build bridges of relationships among cultural communities by various means such as sharing ideas, listening to others, learning about the values of others, and being open to changes. When multi-cultural and cross-cultural societies are blended, intercultural society emerges and many of the old traditional practices transform. By the proper management the society can prosper whereas lack of harmonious relation may cause problem in such new environment. There is difficulty in handling cross and multicultural problems in uncivilized society. Educated people can adjust in the intercultural situation but conservative and illiterate people begin to revolt when new culture is blended with the traditional one. The world in modern era has become cross-culturally diversified which is now taken as granted as a boon of globalization but it can be turned if it is not handled properly. Focusing on how cultural conflict begins, Duane Elmer says that conflict happens between individuals or social groups separated by cultural boundaries and in complex societies many groups are formed and conflict occur at many different levels and when one group cannot trust the other groups (49). Due to differences of age, class, race, ethnicity, gender, value systems and personality many challenges appear in a society. The effect of these challenges may result from cultural clash to racial conflict, loss of life and property disturbing human values and norms. Intercultural tensions and conflicts are inevitable in the



global world where people of various culture meet and interact. Finally, the new and emerging culture becomes victorious and the traditional cultural ideas slowly shrink losing their power.

### **Aboriginal Culture in *Things Fall Apart***

Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, is a conservative man from Umuofia. He works hard and becomes rich. He also becomes a famous wrestler. He has managed his family powerfully having fiery temper. He is fully devoted to his culture Ibo. Similarly, he is always guided by fear of being a failure or defeated. The incidents of the novels increase his fear and ultimately he commits suicide. In their Ibo culture gods control every aspects of life from birth to death. Sometimes their gods pronounce human sacrifice through oracles. The way they celebrate their festivals also reflect their cultural identity. Encouraging young boys Okonkwo narrates them “stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed” (50). Many other traditional stories are told by the people and they clearly reflect their native culture. The elders of that village decide to kill Ikemefuna as ordered by oracle. As Ezeudu told Okonkwo, "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father"(54). The customs of that place also show that they are following barbaric and uncivilized culture. Ikemefuna is killed in sacrifice and Okonkwo involves in the murder and increases his fear. He had brought that boy as his son and that boy would call him father. Similarly, the birth of twins is regarded as evils and twins are put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest.

Due to the decree of the oracles, Okonkwo becomes ready to kill the innocent boy, Ikemefuna and he himself involves in murder. First another person attacks Ikemefuna and he runs toward Okonkwo for protection in the forest, "My father, they have killed me!"(57). Instead of protecting the boy whom he had brought up as his own son he attacks being guided by fear as, “Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak” (57). His conservative attitude has made him act this way and he never thinks of changing his orthodox belief. After the murder of Ikemefuna, the son of Okonkwo, Nwoye begins to behave differently. Okonkwo is haunted by the memory of Ikemefuna feeling himself guilty as, “He did not sleep at night. He tried not to think about Ikemefuna,-but the more he tried the more he thought about him. Once he got up from bed and walked about his compound. But he was so weak that his legs could hardly carry him” (59). Similarly,



there was no practice of reading and writing in Nigeria. When Christian missionary opened a school and motivated people to new culture, conflict occurred there. Due to heavy emphasis on ritualistic tradition, Ibo culture and its representatives, Okonkwo are already weakened and after the arrival of the White colonizers that Obierika, the society can no longer hold its tradition and the things have fallen apart. Both Okonkwo and Umuofia are at the threshold of historical transition.

Before the advent of the colonial power the people of Umuofia were living in communal agreement in an organic society of economic, cultural, political, familial and religious stability. The colonial rule turns the social stability into instability and disintegration. The title of the novel itself signifies that all the accepted values are shattered are no longer in order as they were in primitive culture. Colonialism has made them disordered by introducing new system. It imposes restrictions on those ritual performances which were regarded divine. The essence of Ibo is made inferior and meaningless and Okonkwo commits suicide being unable to bear the loss of their essence. The suicide of Okonkwo signifies the suicide of Umuofia's essence. The introduction of new culture has created difficulty for African culture. Christianity plays very strong role in starting and consolidating colonial rule and Ibo culture can no more hold its value. Christianity and European culture have dominated Ibo culture influencing in many ways and the Ibo ritual practices are almost over. In this regard, Mahbulul Alam includes that many of the Ibo rites are either lost or given up or forgotten or being increasingly neglected while some are being reinterpreted, partially preserved, and absorbed in or interpolated with Christianity (104). This way many conventional values of Ibo culture are shattered by colonialism. In fact, Okonkwo becomes the victim of primitive culture and cross-cultural problem.

### **Cultural Clash in *Things Fall Apart***

Cultural conflicts are quite common in globalized society where there is much cross flow of people. In process of cultural change and slowly old cultural values lose their grip when new culture is introduced. Sometimes there is clash within similar culture and sometimes the influence of modernity causes problem. In *Things Fall Apart*, the reflection of traditional Ibo culture is the real identity of rural Nigerian culture which is far from modern values and norms. The Ibo culture had pervaded the society in many ways as there were many rituals practices before the arrival of English. Their great faith in religion can also be presented by their belief in the existence of Chukwu. They believed that Chukwu is the Supreme Being, the creator of everything and there is no equals of Chukwu. The superiority of Chukwu is

reflected in the novel through the dialogue between Akunna and Mr Brown as:

‘You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth," said Akunna on one of Mr.Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods.’

‘There are no other gods,’ said Mr. Brown. ‘Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood--like that one’ (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved Ikenga hung), "and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood.’ (169)

The reflection of Chukwu throughout the novel indicates that the Ibo people are religious. It indicates how English people are trying to show Ibo culture is inferior saying that they worship piece of wood as God. They believe that gods and other deities help god playing intermediary role. Due to such belief they come in conflict with British missionaries that introduce monotheism. After the arrival of English, administrative structures were replaced by western ones and the imposed British rulers divided the Iboland undermining traditional Ibo structures.

In Ibo community there are many deities like goddess of earth, sky, and thunder. Including gods, deities, and goddesses, the Ibo people consult Oracle in some important occasions like before going to war. They also believe in personal god or chi and have a faith that a person cannot rise beyond the destiny of his chi. They have also given priority to personal spirit connecting it to religion. After the arrival of English many of the traditional Ibo values have been opposed and questioned. In this regard, Frank Salamone writes as, “In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, Chinua Achebe uses the opposition of masculinity and femininity to encapsulate the conflict between the British and Ibo, between the mission and traditional religion” (202). This way the novel shows the clash of African culture, religion, values and traditions after the arrival of English. Connecting with the domination of male over female, he further opines, “Achebe, moreover, depicts the Church as diluting the masculinity of the Ibo through their imposing English on them, thus easing them into a loss of their own language on proverbs” (204). The imposed rule of English has weakened the Ibo similarly how male domination has weakened the female status.

### **Conclusion**

Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* reflects the aboriginal Nigerian society known as Ibo. It was full of rustic values and traditions and people were proud of their primitive culture which was their identity. The society was guided

by many of the rituals practices of African society and people would believe in oracles as gods. After the arrival of English, many of the primitive values are lost and Christianity begins to flourish. The introduction of new culture has created clash between primitive culture and new culture. Okonkwo struggles to protect his land from the grip of colonialism but he fails. Ultimately, he has to commit suicide for the sake of his religion and culture which is endangered by colonialism. The culture reflected in the novel is primitive and the people in Ibo community are uneducated and uncivilized. They never think of bringing changes in their cultural values due to lack of reading and writing. Due to this reason, their culture has to face the attack of English and finally their culture is lost by the introduction of new cultural practices and religion. The novel shows the clash between rustic African lifestyle and the impact of colonialism in it. The cross-cultural conflict is the central issue of the novel which many cultures undergo these days. The primitive Nigerian culture is at the margin after English invaded Africa and Christianity began to dominate the aboriginal values. The tragic end of the central character, Okonkwo is the example of the loss of Ibo culture. This reflects that any culture which cannot cope up with changes gradually gets on the verge of extinction.

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