

Diana Akers Rhoads, "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*"

That Achebe sees the best of Igbo village life as offering something of the ideal is suggested by an interview in 1988 with Raoul Granqvist [in *Travelling: Chinua Achebe in Scandinavia*. Swedish Writers in Africa, Umea University, 1990]. Achebe, talking of the importance of ideals, refers to the example of village life based on a land of equality. "This," he says,

is what the Igbo people chose, the small village entity that was completely self-governing...

The reason why they chose it [this system] was because they wanted to be in control of their lives. So if the community says that we will have a meeting in the market place tomorrow, everybody should go there, or could go there. And everybody could speak.

Since Achebe is not the first to write of Africa, he must dispel old images in order to create a true sense of his people's dignity. Works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* see Africans as primitives representing Europeans at an earlier stage of civilization, or imaging all humanity's primal urges which civilization hides. Firsthand European accounts of the colonial period, such as the district commissioner's *Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* in *Things Fall Apart*, reduce the African experience to an anthropological study told from the white man's point of view. Achebe reveals that the Europeans' ideas of Africa are mistaken. Perhaps the most important mistake of the British is their belief that all civilization progresses, as theirs has, from the tribal stage through monarchy to parliamentary government....

The Igbos, on the other hand, have developed a democratic system of government. For great decisions the *ndichie*, or elders, gather together all of Umuofia. The clan rules all, and the collective will of the clan can be established only by the group. Further, as is appropriate in a democracy, each man is judged on his own merits, "according to his worth," not those of his father, as would be appropriate in an aristocracy or an oligarchy.

Within this system the Igbos as a whole reveal themselves more tolerant of other cultures than the Europeans, who merely see the Igbos as uncivilized. In other words, the Igbo are in some ways superior to those who come to convert them. Uchendu, for example, is able to see that "what is good among one people is an abomination with others," but the white men tell the Igbos that Igbo customs are bad and that their gods are not true gods at all. Unlike the Europeans, the Igbos believe that it "is good that a man should worship the gods and spirits of his fathers" even if these gods are not the Igbos' gods. While the European tradition allows men to fight their brothers over religion, the Igbo tradition forbids them to kill each other: it is an abomination to kill a member of the clan. Further, the long history of Crusades and holy wars and of religious persecution in Europe occurs because men can fight for gods, but it is not the Igbo "custom to fight for [their] gods." Rather, heresy is a matter only between the man and the god.

The Christian missionary in Mbanta objects to the Igbo gods on the belief that they tell the Igbos to kill each

other, and, in fact, the gods are invoked in the fighting of wars against another village— though not indiscriminately, only when the war is just. At times the oracle forbids the Umuofians to go to war. The Europeans in *Things Fall Apart*, however, kill far more in the name of religion than the Igbos: the British, for example, wipe out the whole village of Abame in retaliation for the killing of one white man.

The Igbos do not fight each other because they are primitive. Achebe implies the existence of the conditions in Nigeria which historically led to the need for war as a matter of survival. The land, consisting of rock underlying an almost nonexistent topsoil, was very poor and thus would not support large numbers of people. Planting soon depleted the soil, and so villagers were forced to move further and further afield to find land which would yield a crop to support them. Okonkwo's father, the lazy Unoka, has little success planting yams because he sows on "exhausted farms that take no labor to clear." Meanwhile, his neighbors, crossing "seven rivers to make their farms," plant the "virgin forests." As the population of Nigeria increased, land and food were insufficient to provide for everyone. The novel seems to make the turning point in the alteration from plenty to scarcity some time between the generation of Okonkwo's Uncle Uchendu and that of Okonkwo, for Uchendu speaks of "the good days when a man had friends in distant clans." Although the state of constant warfare was hardly desirable, at least it provided a means for survival....

The Christian missionary, then, is mistaken about the perversity of the Igbo religion: some wars are inevitable if the clan is to survive, but war is not indiscriminate. Religion is a factor both in limiting war and in supporting it when it is just. In the latter case war might be seen as a deterrent to future crimes against

Umuofia. Neighboring clans try to avoid war with Umuofia because it is "feared" as a village "powerful in war," and when someone in Mbaino kills a Umuofian woman, "[e]ven the enemy clan know that" the threatened war is "just."

In fact, the Igbo have a highly developed system of religion which works as effectively as Christianity. The Igbo religion and the Christian religion are equally irrational, but both operate along similar lines to support morality. To the Christians it seems crazy to worship wooden idols, but to the Igbos it seems crazy to say that God has a son when he has no wife. Both systems of religion look to only one supreme god, Chukwu for the Umuofians. Both supreme gods have messengers on earth, Christ for the British and the wooden idols for the Igbos. Both religions support humility; the Igbos speak to Chukwu through messengers because they do not want to worry the master, but they deal with Chukwu directly if all else fails. Both gods are vengeful only when disregarded. If a person disobeys Chukwu, the god is to be feared, but Chukwu "need not be feared by those who do his will."

In addition to revealing that the original Igbo religion is not inferior to Christianity, Achebe makes it clear that the demoralizing current state of political affairs in Africa is the result of European interference rather than simply the natural outgrowth of the native culture. The Igbos have a well-established and effective system of justice which the British replace with the system of district commissioners and court messengers. Disputes in the tribe which cannot be resolved in other ways come before the *egwugwu*, the greatest masked spirits of the clan, played by titled villagers. Hearing witnesses on both sides, for example, the tribunal comes to a decision in the case of Uzowoli, who beat his wife, and his indignant in-laws, who took his wife and children away. In this dispute the *egwugwu* try to assuage each side. They warn Uzowoli that it "is not bravery when a man fights a woman" and tell him to take a pot of wine to his in-laws; they tell Odukwe to return Uzowoli's wife if he comes with wine. The system helps to dispel hard feelings by refusing "to blame this man or to praise that"; rather the *egwugwu*'s duty is simply "to settle the dispute."

Although the conditions in Nigeria require warlike men for the survival of the village, the Igbos have realized the danger of such men to their own society. Warriors must be fierce to their enemies and gentle to their own people, yet spirited men can bring discord to their own societies. The tribe has institutions to control the anger of its own men. For instance, there is a Week of Peace sacred to the earth goddess. Moreover, as indicated earlier, killing members of one's own clan is forbidden, and even inadvertent death such as Okonkwo's killing of Ezeudu's son must be expiated. Recognizing the need for Okonkwo to distinguish between friends and enemies, Ogbuefi Ezeudu calls on Okonkwo to tell him to have nothing to do with the killing of Ikemefuna because the boy is too much like a family member: "He calls you his father."...

In addition to supplying a workable system of government and institutions supporting moderation and morality, the Igbos have an economic system which redistributes wealth in a manner preventing any one tribesman from becoming supreme. As Robert Wren asserts [in *Achebe's World*, 1981] *ozo* requires that every ambitious man of wealth periodically distribute his excess. In order to take any of the titles of the clan, a man has to give up a portion of his wealth to the clan. Okoye, in *Things Fall Apart*, is gathering all his resources in preparation for the "very expensive" ceremony required to take the *Idemili* title, the third highest in the land. As Achebe explains in *Arrow of God*, long ago there had been a fifth title among the Igbos of Umuaro—the title of king:

But the conditions for its attainment had been so severe that no man had ever taken it, one of the conditions being that the man aspiring to be king must first pay the debts of every man and every woman in Umuaro.

Along with the representation of the viability of Igbo institutions in a world without Europeans, Achebe gives a sense of the beauty of Igbo art, poetry and music by showing how it is interwoven with the most important institutions of the clan and by creating a sense of the Igbo language through his own use of English. The decorating of walls and bodies or the shaving of hair in "beautiful patterns" recurs in various ceremonies. Music and dancing are a part of Igbo rituals which call for talent such as that of Obiozo Ezikolo, king of all the drums. Stones become the means of inciting men to strength, of teaching about the gods, and of generally passing on the culture....

In addition to portraying the dignity of Igbo village life, Achebe makes it clear that the Igbos did not need the white man to carry them into the modern world. Within the Igbo system change and progress were possible. When old customs were ineffective, they were gradually discarded. Formerly the punishment for breaking the

Week of Peace was not so mild as that meted out to Okonkwo, an offering to Ani. In the past "a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve." Such changes were likely to be brought about by men who, like Obierika, "thought about things," such as why a man should suffer for an inadvertent offense or why twins should be thrown away.

Although Achebe has the Igbo culture meet certain standards, he does not idealize the past. Probably the most troubling aspect of Igbo culture for modern democrats is the law that requires the killing of Ikemefuna for the sins of his clan. Achebe's description of Ikemefuna makes him a sympathetic character, and it is difficult not to side with Nwoye in rebelling against this act. Nevertheless, Igbo history does not seem so different from that of the British who think they are civilizing the natives. A form of the principle of an eye for an eye is involved in Mbaino's giving Mbanta a young virgin and a young man to replace the "daughter of Mbanta" killed in Mbaino. It is the Old Testament principle cast in a more flexible and gentler mold, for the killing of Ikemefuna is dependent on the Oracle and thus is not, like the Old Testament law, inevitable. Further, the sacrifices of the virgin to replace the lost wife and of the young boy become a way to "avoid war and bloodshed" while still protecting one's tribe from injustices against it. Achebe, then, seems to depict this episode in terms which relate it to the development of the British, while also sympathizing with the impulses to change in Obierika and with the revulsion of Nwoye against the sacrifice which to him is so like the abandonment of twins in the Evil Forest. The sacrifice of the virgin, of course, is also a reminder of the sacrifices of young virgins in the classical literature which is so basic a part of the British heritage....

Although Achebe depicts the treachery and ignorance and intolerance of the British, he does not represent the Europeans as wholly evil. Both the Igbo and the British cultures are for Achebe a mixture of types of human beings. Okonkwo and Mr. Smith are warrior types who will not compromise when their own cultures are threatened. Okonkwo favors fighting the Christians when in Abame one of them kills the sacred python, and he favors war with the Christians in Umuofia. In the end he cuts down the court messengers who come to disband the meeting in Umuofia. Likewise, the Reverend James Smith is against compromise: "He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness." Mr. Brown, on the other hand, is more like Akunna or Obierika. He and Akunna are willing to learn about the other's beliefs even if they are not converted to them. He and Obierika are thoughtful defenders of their own cultures. Mr. Brown recognizes the difficulty with a frontal attack on the Igbo's religion, and so he favors compromise and accommodation. Obierika realizes that if Umuofia kills the Christians, the soldiers from Umuru will annihilate the village.

Achebe's novel, then, depicts for both Africans and Americans the actual and potential sources of modern Nigerian dignity. *Things Fall Apart* suggests that the perpetual human types recur in all cultures and that all effective civilizations must learn to deal with those types. Revealing the Igbo ability in precolonial times to incorporate the variety of humans in a well-functioning culture, Achebe refers his Igbo society to a series of standards which both Africans and Americans can seek as goals—a degree of redistribution of wealth, a combining of male and female principles, compelling art and poetry and music, tolerance, democracy, morality, a sound system of justice and, perhaps most important, the capacity for meaningful change. Lending veracity to his depiction of Igbo history by remaining clear-sighted about cultural weaknesses which need correction, Achebe depicts a worthy precursor of a healthy and just modern civilization.

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