

Divya Bhaskar

Mr. Mahoney

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Stereotypes Fall Apart

We often focus on the differences between ourselves and a less familiar people rather than our similarities. Naturally, distinguishing individuals by cultures, appearances, or backgrounds helps build identities. However, this does not justify blindly typecasting one group of people as “inferior” just because they hold a different set of values, religious beliefs, or skin color. One major problem escalated by imperialism was simply the large misunderstanding of African culture. Many Europeans believed that African ways must be “corrected” for the native people to prosper. Undoubtedly, any group of people may benefit from the advances of Western medicine. However, the imperialists did not only seek to cure the diseases of Africans, but also spoke of “curing” the natives of their savage ways and practices. What dignifies one culture as “better” than another? Unfortunately, the man with the bigger gun often answers this question and writes the history books with his own portrayal of the natives in mind. Achebe thoroughly debunks European stereotypes in *Things Fall Apart* by transforming the perception of the Igbo natives from a bunch of “savages” into a relatable cultured people.

Achebe refutes the stereotype that Igbo people remain wild, helpless creatures by demonstrating the efficacy of their economy and strength of community. During the time Europe began exploiting Africa’s resources, the image of Africa consisted of a mysterious, disease-filled, forested, and primeval place. The term “African” was synonymous with “barbarian” or “uncultured.” Perry, author of *Sources of the Western Tradition* notes, “They [Europeans] were

repelled by the debilitating climate, impenetrable rainforests, deadly diseases, the great variety of black-skinned people and their strange customs. Seen through European eyes, Africans were illiterate heathen barbarians...”(Perry 251). Though Africans certainly lacked modern technology and medicine, Achebe points out the Igbo people were, by no means, “barbarians.” In fact, the Igbo people maintained an economy through their agricultural labors. While their economy remains delicate and somewhat dependent on the caprice of the monsoon, the Igbo people regard the yams of their farming with keen frugality. After describing the hours of tedious cooking, Achebe explains the custom of the Feast of the New Yam: “The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan [...] The new year must begin with tasty, fresh yams, and not the shriveled and fibrous crop of the previous year” (Achebe 37). The Feast of the New Yam suggests two important aspects about the Igbo people. First, the Igbo people value food highly. Unlike the prior stereotypes of the Africans as reckless, helpless beings, these natives carefully manage their food as their survival depends on it. Second, the Igbo people’s community and culture remains highly organized. Like other modern cultures, the Igbo people have a calendar of holidays intertwined with their religion. Each member of the community prepares for the holiday in a different way, much like any other holiday such as Christmas. The women cook different dishes, the men invite all the relatives, and the children excite themselves with the idea of presents. Though the Yam Festival remains a rather foreign custom to the Europeans, this holiday exemplifies the Igbo people’s hard work, organization, and economy—all aspects the Europeans stereotypes deny the Igbo culture of.

Hard work, and strength of community—these are hardly the qualities of an evil people. Yet, many European stereotyped Africans as demonic beings, void of a universal sense of

justice. These stereotypes are evident in a plethora of sources. In *Heart of Darkness*, upon hearing of Marlow's expedition to Africa, his aunt looks forward to Marlow "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (Conrad 76). Even Orwell, who condemns imperialism in *Shooting an Elephant*, refers to the native Burmese as "evil-spirited little beasts" (Orwell 1). Though Orwell castigates the Burmese and not the Africans, his comment embodies the general apathy and disgust the Europeans held for people of other imperialized cultures. Achebe counters these stereotypes by elaborating on the Igbo people's system of justice. During a case of abuse, Achebe delineates how the *egwugwu*, a group of prominent men who wear masks and act as a panel of judges, determine the outcome of a husband's abusive behavior toward his wife: "'Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman'" (Achebe 89). Though the *egwugwu* inspire fear, they resemble and act quite similarly to the modern Supreme Court. The *egwugwu* listen to both sides of the case, and call upon different witnesses. They interpret the Umuofia law and consult with each other to deliberate the consequences of Uzowulu's abuse. The *egwugwu* publicly condemn and humiliate Uzowulu for his ruthless actions, and empower women's rights by demanding the man begs his wife's forgiveness. In fact, the number of justices (nine) on the Supreme Court equals the number of men that serve on the *egwugwu*. The ways of the Igbo people do not seem so "horrid" as Marlow's aunt deems, or as "evil" as Orwell typecasts. If anything, the Igbo people's justice system seems scrupulous and ahead of its times. Thus, Achebe illustrates the universality of morality. The innate sense of right versus wrong resides not only within the Europeans but also within the Igbo people.

Certainly, the Europeans would agree that giving unconditional love to children constitutes a sense of morality. Achebe negates the claim that Africans were malicious beings by

revealing Ekwefi and Okonkwo's unconditional love for their daughter, Ezinma. Despite the villager's accusations that Ezinma is an *obanje*, a demonic child that continually dies and reincarnates itself through several births, Okonkwo and Ekwefi fight to keep their daughter safe and healthy. While Ezinma suffers through a horrible spell of sickness, Ekwefi tends to her with the utmost care:

And then suddenly she began to shiver in the night. Ekwefi brought her to the fireplace, spread her mat on the floor and built a fire. But she had got worse and worse. As she knelt by her, feeling with her palm the wet burning forehead, she prayed a thousand times. Although her husband's wives were saying that it was nothing more than *iba* [fever], she did not hear them (Achebe 81).

Meanwhile Okonkwo hurries to gather a medicine pot, and makes Ezinma respire through its healing steam. Though Okonkwo's wives dismiss Ezinma's sickness, her parents do everything within their power to alleviate her pain. Okonkwo and Ekwefi's unyielding devotion for their child discredits the stereotype that Africans are diabolical. Achebe illustrates that parents across all nations and cultures care and make sacrifices for their children. Achebe also displays this when Agbala, a priestess, calls Ezinma out on a spiritual journey during the night. Though Agbala forbids Ekwefi from following her and others assure Ekwefi that her daughter will return shortly, Ekwefi remains determined to follow the pair at all costs: "But Ekwefi did not hear these consolations. She stood for a while, and then, all of sudden, made up her mind" (Achebe 97). Even Okonkwo later admits to following the pair as he holds a soft spot for Ezinma. At this point, one could argue while Okonkwo loves Ezinma, he also cruelly kills his adopted son, fearing that refusing to do so would revoke his "manliness." While this seems to reinforce the European stereotypes, this action actually relates the African people more so to the Europeans.

Throughout class readings, such as *Hamlet*, killing for revenge or power appears to be ubiquitous within the play. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's abusive behavior toward women is accepted rather than questioned. Still, the horrible murder of the young boy in *Things Fall Apart* seems to demolish the image of African morality. However, Okonkwo's friend advises him to not kill his own son, indicating that this murder lies on the moral conscience of a violent individual, not on an entire people. Thus, Okonkwo appears similar to a European man, or any other person. He has some issues, and some strengths of character. Achebe portrays Okonkwo as a man with faults, just like people of other cultures, and not as an infallible demigod. Despite his shortcomings, Okonkwo (and Ekwefi) look out for Ezinma and risk incurring the wrath of Gods. Achebe's straightforward depiction of Okonkwo and Ekwefi's love and affection for their daughter invalidates the former characterization of Africans.

Most Europeans would agree that a culture should preach love as strongly as faith. Sadly though, during the colonialism era, many Europeans augmented the anti-paganism sentiment. Achebe disillusioned the falsified image most Europeans held regarding African religion. In his speech "The British Empire: Colonial Commerce and the 'White Man's Burden,'" Joseph Chamberlain bolsters the stereotypical attitude Europeans held toward the Africans' religion: "you cannot destroy the practices of [...] superstition, which for centuries have desolated the interior of Africa without the use of force" (Chamberlain 246). Chamberlain's comment highlights how many Europeans urged the abolishment of African religious beliefs and practices rather than acceptance. Achebe repudiates the idea of dismissing a religion simply because it remains "different." Instead, he calls for understanding of the Igbo religion and clarifies their beliefs. Akunna, the Igbo chief, illuminates the similarities between the Igbo religion and Christianity. While comparing and contrasting the two seemingly different religions, Akunna

mentions to Reverend Brown, ““You say there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth... We also believe in him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods””(Achebe 164). Reverend Brown responds to this by calling all of the other Gods “false” (Achebe 164). The dialogue between the two illustrates how the Europeans were unwilling to transcend their stereotypes. Since the Igbo’s beliefs are not a “carbon copy” of the Bible, they “must” be wrong. Achebe’s implementation of conversation between the two sheds light upon the Igbo people’s religion as Akunna urges understanding between cultures, and acceptance of similarities. Of course, the counterargument, which Chamberlain refers to as “superstition [...]that has desolated” (Chamberlain 246) is that the African religion has led to violence and atrocities. True, this notion remains indisputable. *Things Fall Apart* does reveal a dark side regarding practices of the Igbo religion, such as the slaughtering of innocent twin babies, and the adopted boy in exile. These killings are simply devastating. However, to be fair, the African religion was not alone in causing crime. One does not have to peruse far back into European religious history to find the bloodshed of innocent people in the name of Christianity whether this consists of witchcraft, religious wars, or blatant hateful discrimination against people of another faith. Achebe does not seek to shower the Igbo’s religion with accolades or even glorify it. *Things Fall Apart* does not portray the Igbo religion as perfection. His words only request that the Europeans let go of their stereotypes and respect it, just as Christianity is respected despite some of the tragic deaths that have occurred under its name.

Ultimately, Achebe changes the image of the Igbo people through *Things Fall Apart*. By displaying the various aspects of the Igbo culture such as holidays, the justice system, familial relationships, and religion, Achebe depicts the Igbo people just as any other people. His non-idealistic view of the Africans only strengthens the transformation of the perception of Africans

as “savages” to people. Revealing the faults as well as the strengths of the culture and characters allows the image of the Africans to seem real and believable. Toward the conclusion of his essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*, Achebe remarks “I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either [...]” (Achebe 8). Achebe wishes for Europeans to view the Africans just as people. *Things Fall Apart* conveys a larger message that if we begin looking beyond the skin color of people, we find that they contain the same morality, sentiments, and human hearts that truly unite us all.

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