

# THE STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY: CULTURAL AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN ACHEBE'S **THINGS FALL APART** AND **NO LONGER AT EASE**

## A LUTA PELA IDENTIDADE NACIONAL: CONFLITOS CULTURAIS E ÉTNICOS EM **THINGS FALL APART** E **NO LONGER AT EASE**, DE ACHEBE

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### **Abstract**

By colonizing Nigeria in the early 1900s, the British ruled over a vast ethnically diverse population. Their presence set about cultural and political changes which were decisive to determine Nigeria's future. In his novels **Things Fall Apart** (1958) and **No Longer at Ease** (1960), Chinua Achebe, one of the greatest Nigerian writers, show us the struggle present in a colonized Nigeria. The main characters seem uneasy as they see themselves amidst fast pacing changes, and they seem unable to adapt to them. What is Nigeria? What does it mean to be Nigerian? With these questions in mind, this article points out and discusses the characters' struggle for national identity throughout these novels, comparing and contrasting the period and society in which each character lives as well as their dismay.

**Keywords:** Achebe; National identity; Struggle; Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

What constitutes a Nation and the idea of belonging to it? How can one consider himself part of a Nation when one lives in a country with diverse and rich ethnic culture? According to Czimblamos (2004) these questions are some of the main issues concerning nation building. In the novels **Things Fall Apart** and **No**

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**Longer at Ease**, both written by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, this idea of belonging to a certain Nation appears to be in contrast with the country's society constant changes. Both novels are set in different periods of the Nigerian history; the former being set at the beginning of the British Imperialist Colonization to Africa in the late 1800's and the latter being set some decades later when the British had already taken over the country completely and its system was already in place.

Nigeria, which is the most populous country on the African continent and one of the most populous in the world, has been severely exploited by the European colonizers throughout the Colonial and Imperialist Periods. At first Nigeria was used for its trade ports by the Portuguese and the Spanish while they would also benefit from the slave trade there. After having abolished the slave trade in 1807, the British decided to patrol the African west coast in order to help prevent it, having taken over the Nigerian territory in the early 1900s. However, slavery was only completely abolished in the country in 1936.

By colonizing Nigeria, the British Empire ruled over more than 250 different ethnic groups, contributing to a rich and varied culture; each of these groups had their own language and customs. This ethnic diversity resulted in the presence of over 500 languages, including the official language, English, which was chosen mainly due to the fact that, after Nigeria's independence in 1960, it was spoken by a great part of the population.

As stated by Czimblamos (2004) the fact that there are a large number of different languages in Nigeria, it is not really considered to be an important factor in determining one's national identity. Religion also does not play an important role when it comes to identity since the population is mainly divided into Muslims or Christians and only around 18% still resorts to indigenous rituals. Instead this ideal started coming from predominant ethnic groups, mainly Ibo and Yoruba, who decided to teach the "ideals of nation and nationalism through writing".

In both novels, Achebe, who is part of the Ibo ethnic group, depicts the culture and customs of his people. He depicts the Ibo society amidst these constants changes, whether by the invasion of the British Empire or by the system already in place and constantly clashing against traditional values.

### **Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease**

In **Things Fall Apart**, first published in 1958, the theme of the fall of the African tribes after the beginning of the British Imperialist colonization is one of – if not – the main theme. The main character, Okonkwo is highly regarded by his tribesmen as a warrior and he holds a prestigious position in their society as being the village leader. Okonkwo believes in the strength of the male gender and submission of the female, he values tradition so highly that he cannot accept the changes which are taking place around him due to the British presence. After killing a young boy Okonkwo took in as his own son, his life starts spiraling down, leading to his own and family's exile.

During his exile, the white man's presence starts to generate some changes in his village. After his return, Okonkwo and other tribal leaders decide to try taking control over of their native land and power by burning down the local Christian church built by the British. As a result of this attempt, they are sent to jail for some time, humiliating the village leaders even more. Okonkwo, adamant to take over control once more of the village and banish the white man's presence, summons a meeting to organize an uprising and to declare war against the British. However, one British messenger tries to stop the meeting and Okonkwo ends up killing him. The other messengers were released by the other members of the village and Okonkwo saw then that the village's fate was lost. He then is found dead by the British soldiers after having hanged himself and by committing suicide Okonkwo taints his reputation, since suicide is frowned upon in the Ibo's tradition.

In 1960, Achebe published **No Longer at Ease**, which is considered the sequel to his 1958's novel **Things Fall Apart**. Achebe tells us the story of an Ibo man called Obi Okonkwo, who is Okonkwo's grandson and Nwoye's son, both characters from the previous novel. Obi was chosen by the Umuofia Progressive Union to go to England and study law so that upon his return to Nigeria, he could help his people and the British colonial society. However, he then decides to change his major and graduates in English instead. The novel starts with Obi's trial as he is being charged for having taken a bribe. We then are taken back to his return trip back to Nigeria. Obi has a love relationship with an *osu* girl named Clara, meaning that she is part of a group of social outcasts. According to Ibo's traditional values, an Ibo man cannot marry an *osu* woman. Obi tries arguing with his father about his relationship, believing in the fact that they are a catholic family, thus Ibo's traditions should be taken into consideration. His family does not approve of such relationship and Clara decides to call off their engagement and announces that she is pregnant.

Obi then arranges for her to have an illegal abortion. Clara then has some complications and decides never to talk to Obi again.

After hearing about his mother's death, Obi enters in a state of depression and does not go home for the funeral. After recovering from his depression, he starts accepting bribes as a way to financially establish himself once again and also as a way to accept the notion that corruption is an integral part of Nigeria. After a while, Obi decides to take one last bribe, however, he did not know that he was under an investigation and that the bribe he took was actually part of a sting operation which resulted on his arrest and trial, bringing us again to the fact that opened the first chapter of the novel.

## **Comparative Reading**

### **The hybrid quality of African Literature**

Literature has always been present in African culture; however, it was mostly done in form of stories, tales and poetic verses which were shared orally during rituals and festivities. The written form has been strange to many African cultures and was brought to Africa by the colonizers. According to Dathrone (2011), "the novel is the only literary kind that has been totally imported and imposed over the indigenous tradition" (DATHRONE apud MALEKI; NAVIDI, 2011, p. 11). The African literature written in English is actually a hybrid of these oral traditions with the written novelist form. However, writers such as Achebe broke with the traditional writing guidelines set by the Europeans and thus came to birth the sense of a postcolonial literary identity.

According to Maleki and Navidi (2011), most African writers have found in the art of writing novels a perfect medium to portray the chances and cultural differences between the colonizers and the colonized. By doing so they brought "their oral and rustic tradition to a point of culmination and fruition in a universally accessible form" (MALEKI; NAVIDI, 2011, p. 11). On the other hand, this movement was not seen lightly by the European writers, who saw these writers and people as being "semi-

literate marginalized blacks”. The colonizers held only their points of view and values as being true and imposed them over the colonized.

Achebe tries to prove the idea that the Africans have their own culture, values, society and history. He says:

The writer's duty is to explore in depth the human conditions; African people must know how to value their heritage, understand their history, and possess a strong ethical code that condemns injustice and corruption wherever they occur. In African case, therefore, novel and history are the same – the novel is history, it is a record of the history as Africans have seen and lived it (ACHEBE, apud MALEKI; NAVIDI, 2011, p. 12).

According to Maleki and Navidi (2011),

their literary existence is also, to large extent, their own and worth mentioning. One can freely learn and adopt a language like English, but not the tradition. Thus, African heroes and characters are representatives of their own land, people, culture and tradition and each individual is a paradigm of the society (MALEKI; NAVIDI, 2011, p. 12).

Writing in English, however, comes to satisfy the need of a lingua franca and the necessity to build bridges between the many different ethnic groups present in Africa. During the Imperialist Period, English was seen by the colonized as the language of the oppressor, of the white man who exploited their land and people and destroyed African culture by imposing his.

After colonization, English starts playing the role of a neutral language. As said before, there is this great mix of different languages and ethnic groups in Nigeria. By saying that one specific language would be the official language, it would bring about, not only political conflicts of interest, but also even further oppression and discrimination.

If one were to establish Ibo, which is the language spoken by Achebe's ethnic group, as Nigerian national and official language, one would be affirming its superiority over the hundreds of other languages present in the country. This would also mean that Ibo would be considered the “true natives” and that the other groups would have to learn Ibo, whereas by adopting English as the official language brings the same challenge to all ethnic groups. This same phenomenon also took place in other African countries as well as in India and in the Caribbean Islands, where after independence English was also chosen as their official language.

Throughout **No Longer at Ease** we can see dialogues written in English, written in what is called *broken* English and others written in English but that were actually being spoken in Ibo by the characters:

Obi dragged another chair to his table and Mr Mark sat down  
'And what can I do for you?'  
To his amazement Mr Mark replied in Ibo:  
'If you don't mind, shall we talk in Ibo? I didn't know you had a European here.'  
'Just as you like. Actually I didn't think you were Ibo. What is your problem?'  
He tried to sound casual.  
(ACHEBE, 2008, p. 78)

We can also see how the speakers change from one language to the other, having Ibo and English as two different languages but at the same time having both present in their daily life and being used freely. One could switch easily from Ibo to English or vice versa to fit one's need for privacy or according to which language would fit best the occasion.

'Good! See you later.' Joseph always put on an impressive manner when speaking on the phone. He never spoke Ibo or pidgin English at such moments. When he hung up he told his colleagues: 'That na my brother. (...)' (ACHEBE, 2008, p. 70).

He sent Charles and asked him in Ibo (so that Miss Tomlinson would not understand) why he had not fulfilled his promise. Charles scratched his head and renewed his promise, this time for the end of December.  
'I shall find it difficult to trust you in future,' Obi said in English.  
'Ah no, *Oga*, Mster. E no be like dat I beg. I go pay end of mont prompt.' He then reverted to Ibo. 'Our people have a saying that a debt may become mouldy but it never rots. There are many people in this department, but I did not go to them. I came to you' (ACHEBE, 2008, p. 88).

There are, on the other hand, some small scenes on the book in which Ibo is spoken and written in English. However, these are only representations of short traditional phrases which were uttered during ceremonies held by the Umuofia and therefore, Achebe probably thought those could not be translated.

'*Umuofia kwenu!* Shouted one old man  
'Ya!' replied everyone in unison  
'*Umuofia kwenu!*  
'Ya!  
'*Kwenu!*  
'Ya!  
'*Ife awoluOgoliazuan'afia*', he said.  
(ACHEBE, 2008, p. 71)

Achebe recognizes these cultural differences and does not imply any kind of judgment onto these two novels. As a result of colonization, English can be used as a bridge to connect these different cultures, but they would never actually be truly depicted, portrayed and represented using a language that is not their own.

### **A road to downfall**

One could compare the downfall of the two main characters of both novels as representative of the African cultural downfall. In his novels, Achebe deals with the conflict between the past – culture, tradition – and the present – the British presence and colonization: the changes which were brought about in Nigerian culture, the destruction of ethical traditions in lieu of the rise of new economical, political and religious values, the conflict between old and new, the political corruption and the value of justice.

Okonkwo is lost amidst the fast pacing changes around him. His unwillingness to adapt and change brings him each day one step closer to his downfall. Obi, the Nigerian scholar just back from England, is trapped between his family who values tradition, despite being Catholic, and the new ideals brought by the established British system. Both characters are respected by their peers and they both are held high in their cultural society. However, their identities are corrupted by the invasion and presence of the foreign: an alien culture so much more powerful than their own.

Okonkwo fights for the survival of his ethnic values. The idea of having the Ibo culture being overthrown by the British as they expand their power and culture and economic power leads him to organize an uprising to try to gain his tribe power and place back. He fights for tradition in the early 1900s against a force and entity much stronger than him and his kinsmen. Obi, on the other hand, fights against tradition and refuses to bow down to it when it comes to marrying Clara. Obi, who is set some years apart from his grandfather Okonkwo, lives in a completely different Nigeria as it was previously presented to us in **Things Fall Apart**. In **No Longer at Ease** the Umuofia tradition is still present; however, it is not as valued as it used to be. Obi argues with his father when he refuses to accept his marriage to Clara. Obi says that tradition should not play a role, since according to Christian values there were all the same and what old traditions said should not be taken into strong consideration

anymore. In the same retrospective, Okonkwo argues with his son – Obi's father – when he decides to convert to Christianity, seeing this act as his being weak and, in a way, as his betrayal to Okonkwo's struggle against the British invasion.

In **No Longer at Ease** we have also the role of Mr. Green, a British man, who believes Nigeria is completely damned and entrenched in corruption, whereas we have Mr. Brown in **Things Fall Apart**, who brings the message of hope and the idea of compromise, understanding and non-aggression.

Obi had long come to admit to himself that, no matter how much he disliked Mr. Green, he nevertheless qualities. Take, for instance, his devotion to duty. [...] Here was a man who did not believe in a country, and yet worked so hard for it (ACHEBE, 2008, p. 96).

Mr. Brow, the white missionary, who was very firm in restraining his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan. [...] Everything was possible, he told his energetic flock, but everything was not expedient. And so Mr. Brow came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith (ACHEBE, 2009, p. 178).

These two characters, however, come to show the other side of the story. Achebe tries depicting the forces behind the British colonization in Nigeria and how this affected and changed the common man. Mr. Brown and Mr. Green are the white man's representation. Mr. Brow, the protestant pastor who brings the message of hope and peace clashes with Okonkwo constant dissatisfaction towards the British presence, leading Okonkwo to act violently. Mr. Green, the white man who does not believe in Nigeria but still works hard for it, contrasts with Obi's fate when he actually gets corrupted and starts taking bribes.

Mr. Brown and Mr. Green are not the only portrait of the British influence in these novels. In **Things Fall Apart** we can see it being shown clearly in the last paragraph of the novel when we find out about the title given by the District Commissioner to the book he is writing: "*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*". In **No Longer at Ease** we also have the idea of corruption being something natural in Nigeria being directly expressed. When being interviewed for his job at the Civil Services, Obi was asked by the Chairman of the Commission, who is British, if he had decided to take on a job at the Civil Services so that he could take bribes. These secondary characters and passages are important to help lead Okonkwo and Obi stray and set them on their descending spiral from which they cannot seem to escape.



## The British influence and its consequences

According to El-Dessouky (2010, p. 100), the Colonizers did away with *ebu*, the government system used by the Ibo people. They incorporated jails and a new system of laws and rules. They brought in hospitals, schools, courthouses and took over Umuofia. By doing so, the missionaries were protected under the law and the schools taught the natives how to read and write in the Colonizer's language; English was starting to take place in Nigeria.

The weakening of Ibo culture in comparison to the characters' personal weakness is also a strong point present in Achebe's novels. Okonkwo is seen as strong and a leader as he repudiates the idea of being seen as weak – a trait often associated to the female gender. He cannot cope well with his son being happy with the white culture and religion. His internal and external fights lead him to the weakest of all acts according to Ibo tradition: Okonkwo commits suicide and is found hanging from a tree.

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead.

"Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him," said Obierika. [...]

"Why can't you take him down yourselves?" he [The District Commissioner] asked.

"It is against our custom," said one of the men. "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers." (ACHEBE, 2009, p. 207)

Obi's weakness is also constant in **No Longer at Ease**. His lack of discipline and his strong-willed personality lead him into making many bad choices such as: not being able to manage his finances properly, arranging an illegal abortion for Clara and in the end, his acceptance of bribes. His constant intention of maintaining his image of being a promising person brings him to his downfall.

The sudden impact of the insurance notice had woken him up to the real nature of his financial position. [...]

At the end of the month he would have to renew his vehicle licence. A whole year was out of the question, but even a quarter alone was four pounds. And

then the tyres. He could possibly postpone renewing them for another month or so, but they were already as smooth as the tube. [...]  
As soon as he finished his lunch he immediately set about introducing sweeping economy measures in his flat. [...] He started off his lunch by complaining that there was too much meat in the soup.  
'I'm not a millionaire, you know,' he had said. [...]  
Every switch in the flat lit two bulbs. Obi set about pruning them down. The rule in the future was to be one switch, one bulb. [...]  
'In the future the water-heater must not be turned one. I will have cold baths. The fridge must be switched off at seven o'clock in the evening and on again at twelve noon. [...]' (ACHEBE, 2008, p. 91-92).

Both characters are so afraid of showing their fears and weakness that they actually become blind to their mistakes and are unable to learn from their past actions and adjust to their changing scenario and grow into the future.

El-Dessouky (2010) says that:

The force was too powerful, strong, and sophisticated for such common people to fight. Achebe tells the story with an understanding and personal experience in both English and Native cultures. Achebe realized that neither of the cultures are bad, but they are simply different (EL-DESSOUKY, 2010, p. 101).

As stated by Maleki and Navidi (2011, p.13) regarding Okonkwo's downfall:

[...] his death is a suicidal fragmentation of the whole Ibo society. Hence, the fall of Okonkwo is about all loss of identity in the historical situation and primordial past.  
[...] the conflict between individual and society on two levels: internal and external, that individual's own relationship to his surroundings that are undergoing socio-economical change and his reactions against external influence that affect his society. These also destroy old order and create new values and meanings for each and every custom and convention (MALEKI; NAVIDI, 2011, p.13).

Both characters represent the downfall of oneself as well as the African downfall. By committing suicide Okonkwo accepts the idea that his whole identity is lost and his values will no longer be valid and be held true in his society. By accepting his bribes, Obi crumbles down to Mr. Green's prejudices that Nigeria is culturally corrupted in its nature. The colonizer presence brought about these changes in society; the slow death of tradition and the slow rise of new preconceived ideas and beliefs.

## Conclusion

As it was discussed in this paper, the complexity present in Okonkwo's and Obi's society constantly clashing against African and British values is one of the main points present in Achebe's novel. However, how can one actually talk about the ideal of belonging to a national identity, when there are so many different cultures living inside the same country? Even African Literature itself is a result of a mixture of traditional African oral form and the written form brought and introduced by the European, which was referred to in section 3.1.

Achebe himself is part of one of the most important and influential Christian cultural group in Nigeria, but at the same time, we can see in Nigeria the influence of Hausa-Fulani as one of the predominant Muslim group in the country. How can Nigeria establish a true national identity when there are so many different languages and ethnic groups in this "cultural soup" that was a result of the British colonization? As I have argued, the ideal of the characters' struggle for national identity and belonging to a group is actually the main reason for the characters' dismay and descent.

## Resumo

Ao colonizar a Nigéria no começo do século XX, os ingleses dominaram uma população com uma vasta diversidade étnica. Sua presença resultou em mudanças culturais e políticas que foram decisivas para o destino da Nigéria. Em suas obras **Things Fall Apart** (1958) e **No Longer at Ease** (1960), Chinua Achebe, um dos maiores escritores nigerianos, nos mostra o conflito presente na Nigéria colonial. Os personagens principais demonstram não conseguir se adaptar a uma sociedade em constante mudança. O que é a Nigéria? O que significa ser nigeriano? Com estas questões em mente, este artigo assinala e discute o conflito destes personagens em busca de uma identidade nacional, comparando e contrastando o período e a sociedade em que eles se encontravam.

**Palavras-chave:** Achebe; Identidade nacional; Conflito; Nigéria.

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