

The Weakening of The Igbo in *Things Fall Apart*

By Ryan Mitchell

Towards the very end of *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo makes a speech in front of an assembly of devastated tribesmen, who had all less than a decade ago, been, filled with pride in the might of their tribe. He speaks aggressively saying: "Let us not reason like cowards. If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head... These people are daily pouring filth over us..." (159) His saying expresses the old philosophy of the Igbo people prior to the white man's arrival. Back then that philosophy was so intact with the tribes that if anyone insulted their religion, culture, rituals or elders, the result would be as violent as Okonkwo describes or worse. There would be no question about it or second thought. Even the slightest insults to the Igbo way would be met with an immediate decisive retaliation. Yet in the seven years that Okonkwo is away, the white man's power expands and the Igbo pride begins to rot away. In fact the decay becomes so widespread that while the white men are defecating on the floor of the Igbo people (metaphorically speaking) the Igbo are unsure if they should do something or just ignore the whites ('Do I shut my eyes?'). They don't even go to war when a sacred serpent is killed or a tribal meeting is forced to end. So, how did the Igbo, who were once the most powerful people in their domain, allow the constant insults ('filth') of the whites to be poured daily on them?

The conversion of many Igbo people to Christianity significantly contributed to their downfall. To understand these conversions we must first understand the reasoning that mobilized the missionaries and the white men in general. Almost all of their urge to convert the Igbo was driven by sheer ignorance. Rather than taking time to try and understand the Igbo way of life, they judged them based on prejudices and preconceptions of indigenous tribes as uncivilized, false-idol-worshipping beast-like barbarians. This idea couldn't be further from the truth. The Ibo people had their own complex rituals, laws and systems of government. They had their own ways to deal with every part of their world and were doing quite well until the white men arrived. Their religion didn't even worship false idols and was practically as monotheistic as Christianity. This point is shown clearly in a conversation between Akkuna and Mr. Brown: "It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu [God], as indeed minor gods were. But He made them for his messengers so that we could approach Him, through them." (179) When they worship a minor god, they are worshiping that god as a connection to the ultimate God similar to when Christians pray to saints. This fact should have been enough to show the Christians that both religions had the same core beliefs and principals. However, both that and the fact that their culture was extremely civilized and complex, didn't make a difference to the forceful white men, who were led on by ignorance of the other side and their own greed for power, land, slaves and natural resources essentially destroyed the Igbo way of life.

Another major question we must ask to understand the mass conversion of Africans to Christianity is: Why did so many Igbo find themselves attracted to the new faith? This is mainly because a lot of the Igbo felt disillusioned with the old faith and traditions. This disillusionment stemmed from a feeling of not

belonging and being isolated from most of the society. These people were often not part of the exclusive influential part of the tribe (of which Okonkwo was a member). Perhaps they were men without title, outcasts or simply felt that there was something wrong with the old way. Like Nwoye, for example, who finds that he wants to convert when he hears a song: "The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul-the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed...The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the palate of the panting earth." (147) The imagery of 'frozen rain' quenching the earth's thirst is about feeling a sense of satisfaction and freedom from the wrongs of the world that is not intellectual but rather simply something that seems right. Here Nwoye is thinking with his heart, not his head. Deep in his heart he had been feeling like the brothers in darkness. Although he couldn't understand why, something about the way things were seemed so wrong. It is this feeling of something being severely flawed about their society that resonated with many people and pushed them to convert.

It was the mass conversion of the Igbo to Christianity that crippled their power. When Nwoye went to Mr. Kiaga and joins the Christians, Mr. Kiaga says to him: "Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake." (152) This quote basically shows what the missionaries required of their converts: not only to reject the old religion but also to abandon the old Igbo traditions, lifestyle and culture. Mr. Kiaga is essentially saying that Nwoye has to choose between the way of his parents and the Christian way, and that he can't have it both ways. This movement of many Igbo to reject their heritage and culture (as well as the old faith) caused a giant rift inside every tribe. This rift began to create a massive division that tore up every tribe from the inside. This division was the weapon that ultimately led to the Igbo's destruction and yet there was no way that they could fight back: "There was no question of killing a missionary here, for Mr. Kiaga, despite his madness, was quite harmless. As for his converts, no one could kill them without having to flee from the clan, for in spite of their worthlessness they still belonged to the clan. And so nobody gave serious thought to the stories about the white man's government..." (155) Despite the fact that the converts had rejected all of the Igbo way they still were defended by Igbo law. The fact that they were still technically members of the tribe, gave them protection and the opportunity to spread the white man's ideas and religion. By doing this they continued to feed power to the foreign force and widen the division inside each tribe. All the while this is going on the white government is sneaking in. Brought in by the Trojan horse of religion, white government was able to spread its laws and authority, while the tribes people were distracted by the division. Towards the end of the book white man's government has dominated the tribes. What is left of Umuofia is a bunch of tribes people too afraid of harming the converts who were once their friends and family, as well as being extremely fearful of the powerful white government.

Throughout the years, despite all the changes, Okonkwo remained an embodiment of the old Umuofian spirit and philosophy. To the day he died, he held up the old pride and belief in fighting back no matter what the odds were. In exile, this spirit and belief stays permanently intact. However, back in Umuofia it had become so wrecked that by the time Okonkwo kills a white messenger in an attempt to bring the tribe to war, no one joins in with him. When he commits suicide, Obreika says to the white men: " That was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him, to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog" (208) His death is symbolic of the end of an era for the Igbo people. An era of pride and power that was slowly destroyed by the white forces. Fueled by ignorance and colonialist greed, they used religion to divide the Igbo people and increase their government's power over the land. It was through religion that they could divide families and destroy all the Igbo's strength.