

# Conversion and Corruption: A Study of Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease

## Abstract

Africa is the continent that was the worst sufferer at the hands of the colonizing powers. The colonial powers not only indulged in slave trade and genocide of the local population; but also changed the character of the society. Alien colonial Institutions were set up on the continents and Christianity was introduced to break the society. However, the consequences of these changes introduced/imposed by the colonial powers had deep repercussions. The people of the continent became corrupt an issue that is raised by almost every writer of the continent. The current paper studies Chinua Achebe's novel No Longer at Ease to find out a relationship between conversion and corruption.

**Keywords:** Conversion, Christianity, Africa, colonialism.

## Introduction

Africa has been called Dark Continent by the Europeans because so little was known about the continent. In the beginning of the colonization the continent could not be explored because of the existence of the dense forest and lack of not arable roads and navigable rivers. So the continent was called the Dark Continent because little was known about the continent to the outsider. After colonization many new connotative meanings were added to the word "dark" and dark become even "darker" because Africa was associated with cannibalism and a place where civilization did not grow. It remained a pre-historic land with people of Africa still leading a life that was termed uncivilized by the Europeans. Virender Pal writes that "African Literature is a curious term" (155) because African literature is the only literature that named after a continent. All the other post colonial literature have been named after the countries e.g. Indian literature, Pakistani literature etc. A huge body of literatures exists in Asia, but it has never been christened as Asian literature.

## Aim of the Study

Chinua Achebe has shown that corruption among the Ibos is a by product of colonialism. He is also critical of what Christianity has done to the Ibos. The current paper studies the connection between conversion of Ibos to Christianity and corruption prevalent among them.

## Review of Literature

The researcher has come across many papers on Chinua Achebe. These papers include C.A. Babalola's "A Reconsideration of Achebe's No Longer at Ease"(1986), Simon Gikandi's "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture" (2001), Philip Rogers' "No Longer at Ease": Chinua Achebe's "Heart of Whiteness"(1983) and Virender Pal's "Poles Apart: portrayal of Africa in the Novels of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2010)." The researcher has not come across any other important paper on the subject written recently.

## Duration of Study

The study was done during 2017 and 2018.

African literature has been termed as African literature because the continent was the worst sufferer of the colonial policies. The European powers were uniform in denigrating the continent. The people of every nook and corner were degraded as uncivilized, barbaric and brutes. The civilization was acknowledged only in Egypt in the northern part of Africa, rest of the continent was declared as barren landscape that was incapable of nurturing any civilization, the human being of the continent remained undeveloped next only to the apes. So narratives that emerged from the invaders only degraded the Africans. The African literature is called the African literature because of the uniformity of the response of the different

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African writers to the colonial narratives and imposition of European culture, language and religion by the invaders. Two of the continent's most important writers showcase this. Chinua Achebe dropped "Henry" from his name that indicated his affiliation to the Christianity. While Ngugi Wa' Thiogo went even a step further and rechristened himself to a Kenyan name from a Christian one: James Ngugi Achebe's Nigeria and Ngugi's Kenya are located on the two different extremes of the African continent; yet the response is so similar.

Achebe was the first revolutionary writer of the continent created by the White writers. He wrote his first novel *Things Fall Apart* as a response to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The novel not only shattered the stereotypes created by Conrad; but also established that Africa was not an uncivilized land. Achebe's work revolves around mapping the European's influence on the Africans. The novelist showcases in his novels that corruption in Africa is a direct outcome of European's influence on the innocent Africans. Similarly, he is also critical of the Christianity. In his novels, his character debate the merits of Christianity and native African religions; and in the debate native religions always emerge as philosophically sound, more pluralistic, humane and encompassing. The Current paper is a study of Chinua Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease*.

The novel *No Longer at Ease* must be read in continuation to *Things fall Apart*. *Things Fall Apart* starts with the description of African society in pre-colonial era. It was the time when the white started invading the Ibo lands and started changing the society with the introduction of Christianity and imposition of European culture on the Nigerian People. In the novel *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo's son converted to Christianity. *No Longer at Ease* tells the story of Obi, Okonkwo's grandson. In the novel Obi is the second generation Christian; the impact of Christianity is more visible. The second generation of the Nigerians is more corrupt and the proud Nigerians have become urban dwellers and slums (NLE 10) have started appearing in the Lagos. It is a society that is riddled by the corruption. "They are all corrupt" (NLE 3) declares Mr. Green about Nigerians. For the whites the colonial rule; but the roots of corruption are to be found in the geography and climate of Africa:

The fact that over countless centuries the Africans has been the victims of the worst climate in the world and of every imaginable diseases. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him western education. But what use is it to him? (NLE 3)

According to Mr. Green corruption in Africa is due to its climate and its geography but Achebe makes it clear that corruption in Nigeria emanates from the European institutions. Obi, the young scholar, faces corruption for the first time at the custom counter:

Custom formalities here took thrice as long as at Liverpool and five

times as many as officials. A young man, almost a boy in fact, was dealing with Obi's cabin. He told him that the duty on his radiogram would be five pounds. (NLE 24)

The boy offers to reduce the custom duty to "two pounds" (NLE 24). In the beginning Obi is taken a back at this rampant corruption in his native country. In pre-colonial Africa an institution like custom was not present. In pre-colonial Africa riches were earned by the dint of hard work. Obi's grandfather becomes a rich man by the dint of his hard work. Now the introduction of the European currency have made greedy and the establishment of European institution allowed them to earn money by unfair means to become rich.

In Nigerian society, the hegemony was decided by person courage and his boldness, but European rule has established new rule of hegemony in Africa. Now Westernized converted youth were given preference over the traditional Nigerians. Moreover, the introduction of European law and order machinery obliterated the traditional systems. So the people now free to use bribery to climb the ladder of Western hegemony. Even Obi and Christopher realize this:

To most of them bribery is no problem. They come straight to the top without bribing anyone. It's not they're necessarily better than the others, it's simply that that they can afford to be virtuous. But even that kind of virtue can become a habit. (NLE 16)

The western hegemony and institutions have made bribery look naturalized. Now if a person has to offer bribe to climb the ladder of hegemonic importance, then he also expect the same from his juniors. So the bribe in western institutions exists as a kind of stabilizing force. Obi himself remarks in this context:

But take one of these old men he probably left school thirty years ago in standard six. He has worked steadily to the top through bribery – ad ordeal by bribery. To him the bribe is natural. He gave it and expects it. Our people say that if you pay homage to you when it is your turn to be on the top well, that is what the old man say (NLE 16)

It is important to note that the white life style has become a temptation for the Nigerians. This temptation is a result of carefully devised policies of the colonial government. The native people of Nigeria were thrust with an inferiority complex. They were made to realize that everything associated with Nigeria was inherently inferior and evil, while associated with whites was superior and pure. The native who associated themselves with whites and colonial institutions also acquired superiority by the virtue of their contact with the whites. Moreover, association with the white institutions meant indemnity where the white institutions were supposed to protect

the people who worked for them. This is made clear by Achebe through an incident:

As a boy in the village of Umofia he had heard of his first stories about Lagos from a soldier home on leave from the war. Those soldiers were heroes who had seen the great world. They spoke of Abyssinia, Egypt, Palestine, Burma and so on some of them had been village ne'er-do-wells, but now they were heroes. They had bags and bags of money and the villagers sat at their feet to listen to the stories. One of them went regularly to a market in the neighboring village and helped himself to whatever he liked. He went to full uniform, breaking the earth with his boots and no one dared to touch him. It was said that if you touched a soldier, Government would deal with you (NLE 10).

The most important phrase in the above line is probably "ne'er-do-wells." Through these lines Achebe makes clear how the association with the whites changed the life of "ne'er-do-wells." Now these good for nothing people were not only rich, but also respected. Thus the association with a Colonial institution transformed the lives of these good-for-nothing people. This was a great inspiration for the people who wanted to earn money and respect. The Colonial institutions were believed to be powerful and technologically advanced; but the benefits of this technological advancement were available only to the people associated with the whites. "Soldiers were as strong as lions because of the injections they were given in the army" (NLE 10). All these myths perpetrated by the colonial regional, elevated the whites to the stars of the demi-gods. "If you see a white man take off your hat for him. The only thing he can not do is mould a human being" (NLE 10). Thus the temptation to associate with the demi-god was but natural, but associating with the demi-god also meant that you were inferior. So the inferiorly complex was instilled in the Nigerians. Babalola has called this process acculturation: "Achebe knows that some of his readers will at least discover for themselves how this novel responds in Vigorous way in the Nigerian society" (139).

Babalola christens the process of imposition of white culture as acculturation, but the process is really that of de-culturation because here the Nigerians were systematically shorn of their culture by whites. By bringing out the issue of corruption, Achebe brings out the strength as well as weakness of the traditional Ibo society. Eustace lamer rightly observes:

Characteristically, Achebe is as aware of the strength of traditional Ibo society as he is of its weaknesses, and the quality of his prose reflects the ambivalence of his vision holding the balance very

skillfully between admiration and gentle mockery (64).

The weakness of Ibo society is revealed by indulgence in the corruption and strength is shown by indulgence of Verbal duels of Ibo elders with the Christian missionaries. Brown rightly reminds us that "colonial experience has inverted definition of culture with a special significance" (21).

Now culture and religion are closely associated terms. To dismantle and disintegrate culture, dismantling religion was also important. Wherever "The European went the missionaries and scientists went with them. The work of these people was complimentary to the work of the soldier. While the armed man subdued the natives, the missionaries died even a greater job by destroying the belief system and ceremonies of the natives which had been instrumental in preserving the social order among the natives" (Pal, 256). Thus missionaries did a commendable job by dismantling the religion of the natives and making them believe that they were in fact deviant in observing their religious beliefs. For example, look at the song sung by the Nigerians in the novel:

The People which sat in the  
darkness saw a great light,  
And to them which sat in the  
religion and shadow of death  
To them did light spring up. (NLE 7)

By singing this song the Nigerians degrade their own ancestors were sitting the darkness and were not able to search the truth that was offered by the Christianity. Now making the natives believe that their belief systems were removed from the truth shows the success of missionaries in Nigeria. The locals were convinced of their inferiority.

All the western narratives written during the colonial period degraded the native religions. Tagore observed the bias of western scholars towards Indian religion:

For the western scholars the great religious scriptures of India seem to possess merely a retrospective and archeological interest; but to us they of living importance, and we can not help thinking that they lose their significance when exhibited in labeled cases-mummified specimens of human thought and aspiration, preserved for all time in wrapping of erudition (Cited in Singh Divyajyoti and Virender Pal 145).

The western response the religions of colonized people were similar in all the cases. Western thinkers, missionaries and colonial invaders treat native religions as superstitions. This led to the disastrous consequence for the natives who started believing that they were inferior and the burden of this inferiority. Complex played have with their lives. Achebe shows how Nigerians who converted to the religions of the invaders started hating their own people who stayed with their parent religion.

There have been several studies where the impact of conversion has been studied on the natives; but no study has been done to study the relation between conversion and corruption. There seems to be a relation between the two because both are dependent on individual decisions. Achebe in no longer at Ease makes it clear that there is a relation between conversion and corruption be it moral or economic. Achebe makes it clear that corruption is an outcome of western influence and that influence also includes conversion. Have a look at the song sung by the traders for instance:

An in-law went to see his in-law  
Oyiemu-O  
His in-law seized him and killed him  
Oyiemu-O  
Bring a Canoe, bring a paddle  
Oyiemu-O  
The paddle speaks English  
Oyiemu-O. (NLE 37)

The above lines refer to the moral corruption that has crept in the Ibo society. The crime like killing a close relation was considered an unpardonable sin. The song talks about the crime of an "in-law" against an "in-law", but the important thing is that "the paddle speaks English." So it is clear that the crime has been committed under the influence of the Whites. Now English is an alien language that has been adopted by the Ibos, with the language the Whit men have also crept in the Ibo society.

This brings back to the issue of relationship between conversion and corruption. Achebe further makes clear about the song:

To the Ibo mind it was the height of treachery. Did not the elders say that a man's-in-law was his chi, his personal God? Set against this was another great betrayal; a paddle that begins suddenly to talk in a language which its master the fisherman; does not understand. In short then, thought obi, the burden of song was "the world turned upside down." (NLE 37).

This shows that conversion has indeed affected the people of Ibo land. The morality has been lost somewhere.

Like in Things Fall Apart, the debate between the Christianity and Ibo religion continues here in No Longer at ease. The novelist also comments in the differences that are there between Protestantism and Catholicism, the two main denominations of Christianity. The song is:

O tasili Osukawu Oxyenkuzi Fada  
E misisi ya Oli awo-o  
Which translated into English is as follows:  
Palm-fruit eater, Roman Catholic  
teacher,  
His missus a devourer of toads  
(NLE 40).

These songs are derogatory of the Catholics. Through these songs Achebe makes clear that two major denominations of the Christianity are opposed to each other; On the other hands traditional beliefs

have remained peacefully with one another without any conflicts.

The difference between Christianity and Ibo religion is accentuated further by the dialogue between Ibo elder and Obi's father Isaac. The dialogue between the two is as follows:

'Bring us a Kola nut to break for this Child's return.'

'This is a Christian house', replied Obi's Father.

'A Christian house is where Kola nut is not eaten?' Sneered the man.

'Kola is not eaten here', replied Mr. O konkwo, but not sacrificed to idols. (NLE 41)

It is clear that converted Christians develop confrontationist towards the ancestral customs. The customs which were nurtured and followed by the ancestors of the converted people also. They term these ancestral customs as "heathen sacrifice" (NLE 41), but the traditional people are more accommodating. The tribal elder response by saying: "And we shall break it in the Christian way." (NLE 41) and prays like a Christian:

Bless this Kola nut so that we eat it.

It will be good to our body in the name of Jesu Kristi. As it was in the beginning it will be at the end.

Amen (NLE 42)

Mere Achebe clearly suggests that Ibos are more accommodating and more tolerant when compared to the newly converted Christians. Achebe also suggests that the traditional Ibo religion was more democratic when compared to Christianity.

Like many others in Umuofia, he went to Church once a year at the harvest. His only criticism of the Christian service was denied the right to reply to the sermon. (NLE 42)

### Conclusion

Thus the message in the novel is clear that introduction of Christianity only debilitates the social fabric and weakness the morality. The novel makes it clear that the native beliefs are the best for the Nigerians, but the problem of the missionaries was that they were blind to the merits of the Ibo religions because they believed that only and only Christianity was true. Cole and Scribner have commented:

But carrying such theories overseas without some awareness of their cultural roots and their very limitations, even in the cultures in which they arose carries with it the risk of experimental egocentrism-mistaking as universals the particular organizations of cognitive skills that have arisen in historical circumstances of our own society, and interpreting their absence in other cultures as "deficiency." (Cited in Pal, 254).

Thus colonialism and its policies played havoc with the life of Nigerians. An alien religion was

thrust upon them and foreign institutions were planted which altered the essential nature of the society and had disastrous consequences for the Nigerians.

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