

# **Achebe, Freud, Durkheim and the Encounter of Sacred Traditions: A Religious Exploration of Things Fall Apart**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the magnum opus of Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, through the lenses of religion by looking at the encounter of Christianity with Traditional African religion as recanted by the author in the novel. However, in going about this, the paper, using the critical and textual analysis methods, tries to put the question of the religiosity of some of the characters in the play to the scrutiny of the concept of the origin of religion as proposed by Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim in their works. The idea is to see if religion in the Ibo Africa community and as recanted by Achebe have their origins in the propositions of these two western scholars. The result, based on the narration of Achebe shows that in terms of Freud, this is far from the truth and it is hard to fully grand his theory in the African religions as posited by Achebe – although one finds some semblance of his submissions in this epic encounter of religions in Achebe’s novel and in the society and character of some of the actors, but nonetheless, it does not support his proposition fully as expected. As for Durkheim, to large extent, his propositions conform to the narration of Achebe in the novel and support his theory but it cannot fully explain the religious rigidity of the main character in the novel Okonkwo. On the encounter of the two religions, the paper posits that it was an encounter which destabilizes an otherwise stable and progressive society.

**Keywords:** Religion, Christianity, African Religion, Ibo, Tradition, Encounter

## Introduction

There is a particular thing that is common to all the novels of Chinua Achebe and that is the fact that they are all based on the happenings or events in his society and that includes the religion or religions of his society. *Things Fall Apart* tells the story of Nigeria shortly before and after the arrival of the colonial masters and the conflict that their arrival generated in the society as well as in the religious sphere. In *No Longer at Ease*, which is a follow up of *Things Fall Apart*, he depicts the crisis that young educated Nigerians were facing at that time, as they tried to balance their new world view with what they already had before. He shows that the education that was presented to them as a gold mine did not after all make them a better person morally and likewise the new society that evolved as a result of the coming of the colonial masters cannot be said to be better than their former community, as it is full of hitherto, unheard moral bankruptcy, materialism and extreme individualism. His third novel, *Arrow of God*, shows that despite the many years of colonial rule and the missionary work of Christianity, the people still believe and hold on dearly to their religion and culture. Although they are aware of the presence of the colonial master and his religion and of the fact that they have to reckon with him in all that they do, yet they remain firm in their believe and only letting some of their children, whom they believe will only be their representative in the white man's way, to go to school to learn. The fourth novel of Achebe, *A Man of the People*, focuses on the corrupt ruling educated elites and whose fall he prophesized in this novel, which eventually happened that same year the novel was published. His last major novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, is a description of the military dictatorship that was prevalent in Nigeria then – nay the whole of Africa – and the problems and betrayals it espouses.

Thus looking at the whole spectrum of his works, one will see that the primary concern of Achebe is his society, its people and of course their religion. He is convinced that, though the colonial masters have brought some very important changes to his society, yet they cannot claim that their culture and religion is superior to that of his people – even if it has its own flaws, so also does their religion and culture have their own flaws too and it cannot, therefore, be a judge of another culture, another religion and another people.

In the light of the above, this article intends to look at his magnum opus, *Things Fall Apart*, from a religious point of view by using the tools of religion especially as posited by Freud and Durkheim to see how well this novel fits into the discourse on sacred tradition and if the postulations of Freud and Durkheim can actually explain the concept of religion in the Ibo community. The paper also intends to briefly highlight the encounter of the two sacred traditions discussed by him in the novel – that is Christianity and Traditional African Ibo Religion.

In order to do the above, this paper will analyze the novel and try to affirm or dispel some of the submissions of Freud on the psychological concept of religion and likewise the submission of Durkheim on the sociological concept of religion. Likewise, it will briefly state the encounter between Christianity and Ibo religion as seen in the character of the protagonists in the novel. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn from this analysis at the end of the discussion.

## A Religious Exploration of *Things Fall Apart*

The novel, *Things Fall Apart*, takes its title from a poem named *The Second Coming* written by W.B. Yeast, an Irish poet. The relevant lines of this poem to the novel are:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, as Achebe reads this poem, a clearer picture of what happened to his people when the colonial masters invaded their, hitherto, peaceful and tranquil community came to his mind. This must have informed his own conclusion too when he points out, through Obierika, one of the characters in the novel, saying: “Now he has won our brothers and our clans can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”<sup>2</sup>

The novel tells the story of the people of Eastern Nigeria, their social setup and religious life before and immediately after the coming of the colonial masters, as missionaries, traders and administrators. The white man came and his coming destroyed the unity of the clan which, hitherto, acted like one and in the process, many things changed, as new applications, new words and new usages entered into men’s heads and hearts and the old community gradually gave way to a new society. Thus, many heads rolled, heroes died and families split up.

The author weaves the story around the life of a man, Okonkwo – who represents his community – and the religious crisis that the Ibo community experiences as a result of its meeting and contact with another religion – Christianity. Okonkwo is painted as a person who one can refer to as a conservative traditionalist in the modern sense. He is devoted to his religion and culture. He so much believes in the truth of his religion that he is not ready to forego it for any strange religion which he believes has nothing to offer him. He is so rigid that he does not even give the new religion a pint of thought or consideration. He does not see anything good in the new religion as he believes that a man, no matter the circumstances, should follow the religion and custom of his people. He sees those who abandoned their religion for the new religion as betrayers<sup>3</sup> and he believes so much in the use of violence to settle scores that he is ready to use it on the new religion.<sup>4</sup> He does not think it worthwhile that a stranger should come and make other people practice his religion. Added to this is his ambition to retain the status quo in his community so that he can aspire to the highest level possible in this community. He is intransigent and rigid to the extent that he fails to see the changes going on in his community and how it is being gradually transformed into a society.<sup>5</sup> In the process, he is consumed by the power of this change.

At the beginning of the novel, one comes across Okonkwo as a hard working man, who started from scratch to become one of the leaders of his clan, through personal efforts.

*...Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he had begun even in his father’s lifetime to lay the*

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<sup>1</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, with Introduction and Notes by Alboje Higo, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 2002, p i.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 124 - 125.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 3, 113, & 124.

<sup>5</sup> I have used the term community to refer to Umuofia before the coming of the white man because, the other term society, is a more loose kind of word which refers to a social setup with many races and different kind of people with many differences. While community, on the other hand, is a much more close term which refers to a people who have a lot in common and whose life is that of a greater co-operation and closer affinity to one another. In other words, they share a lot in common than those of the people in a society, where everyone is concerned with his own affairs and which may have different racial groups. Thus, community is more appropriate to the people before the white man’s coming, which turned that community into a society is different group of races came with the white man as his messengers, police, traders, etc. thereby shattering the communal life of the people.

*foundations of a prosperous future. It was slow and painful. But he threw himself into it like one possessed. And indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death.*<sup>6</sup>

However, since he lives in a community which recognizes individual worth and not the worth of one's father or family, he rises quickly to the position of prominence.

*Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washes his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders.*

*He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars.*<sup>7</sup>

Although Okonkwo has achieved a lot in a short time, yet he is ruled by fear and anger and this is where the psychological part of him comes to be known. But this psychological fear cannot explain his religiousness in the Freudian sense of the cause for religious belief and origin of religion.<sup>8</sup> If anything, it is the exact opposite of Freud's psychological fear for religiousness. Okonkwo is not afraid of the gods. This is apparent when he breaks the rule of the week of peace by beating his wife. He is aware of the sacredness and importance of that week and of the wrath of the goddess of the earth (*Ani*), if such a thing is done, yet he defies the rule. The importance of the peace week is made clear when the Priest of *Ani* says:

*Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her. .... The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish.*<sup>9</sup>

Even though he is repentant, after committing this offense and paying the fine, as specified by the priest, he still almost commits another grievous crime when he shoots at his second wife, knowing very well too that that will draw the wrath of the goddess of the earth on him and may lead to his total banishment from the clan. Also in the case of the killing of Ikemefuna, who belongs to the whole clan as he was given as a ransom for the killing of the wife of Ogbuefi Udo by his father in Mbaino, although he was warned by Ezeudu not to be part of the expedition that will kill the boy because it could draw the wrath of the gods on him, since he is like a father to the boy – his friend, Obierika, also draws his attention to why he should not have been part of the expedition, giving the same reason. Yet he still goes ahead

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<sup>6</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p.13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> According to Freud, when a child is young, he/she sees the father as his/her protector from all forms of evil and all forms of harm that may want to come his/her way. The father is loving to him/her and he readily provide for the child showing him/her and warding off any harm from him/her. However, as he child grows up, and becomes an adult, he/she finds out that he/she cannot do without this protecting figure of the father, especially in facing some of the difficulties of life, so the child imagines a figure even more powerful than the father in the form of a god "whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection."(S.Freud, p. 30). This way, he says, the idea of religion, nay God, is formed in the human mind. See S. Freud, *The future of an Illusion*, James Strahey (trans. & ed), W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1961, pp. 26, 30, 38 & 54.

<sup>9</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p.22.

to kill the boy, as the god of the Hills and the Caves has commanded. But one thing is clear, and that is the fact that he does it, not because the god commanded it, but because of the fear of being thought of as weakling. Achebe says concerning this: "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak."<sup>10</sup>

Thus the fear of Okonkwo does not make him a religious person; rather, it makes him go against the rules of religion and against the very thing that should have struck fear in him. Achebe readily captures this fact and the factor responsible for his fear, which turns out to be his driving force.

*Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness...*<sup>11</sup>

But having said the above, looking at the life of Okonkwo, it is clear that he does not have a godly figure in his father. He loathes his father right from his young age and his father is never a source of protection for him, which according to Freud, would have helped him to form the notion of a guardian god in his later life.<sup>12</sup> Thus he does not have that opportunity which Freud asserts breeds the notion of god and religion in man. But Okonkwo is religious to some extent and it is his devotion to his religion and culture that eventually leads to his death. So also he has a notion of god and hold dearly to it. The question then is what creates this notion of god in him, since he lacks the background, in his father, which could have helped him to form this notion according to the Freudian postulation?

Talking about human instincts, which according to Freud, are always suppressed by the prohibitions brought about in the name of religion and on which religious beliefs based its survival,<sup>13</sup> one can see from the life of Okonkwo that his instincts are never suppressed, as he constantly finds an outlet for them. All his wishes are done, even if it is against the rule of his community and he constantly pays for it dearly. This non suppression of his instincts however confirms Freud's assertion that it will lead to destruction,<sup>14</sup> as Okonkwo is eventually destroyed by his instinct when it is being suppressed by the white man and his community, which refuses to fight on his side and behaving in a way that he loathes most – weaklings. He says to Obierika, his friend, after his return from exile and was briefed about the activities of the white man:

*"Perhaps I have been away too long" Okonkwo said, almost to himself. "But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?"*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> S. Freud, *The future of an Illusion*, James Strachey (trans. & ed), W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1961, pp. 26, 30, 38, & 54.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 12 - 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 18 – 19.

<sup>15</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 124.

When he and other clan elders were imprisoned by the white man and later released, he plans to take his revenge even if his people refused to fight.

*As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man's court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But [if] they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself.<sup>16</sup>*

However, that is not to say that Freud's psychological submission about the oppression of human instincts does not apply in this novel. It readily applies to Okonkwo's community and the new converts to Christianity. The instincts of these people are being oppressed by their community and the cruelty of their gods. They, thus, readily find an outlet in the new religion. The law of their community is not just to them and like Freud says, they form the rebellious part of that community, which has for long suppressed their instincts.<sup>17</sup> This is seen in the case of Nwoye, the son of Okonkwo, whose life is the exact replica of what Okonkwo experienced when he was young, but this time, in a different direction;<sup>18</sup> the Osu people (out casts), who are denied all rights in the community because they have been dedicated to the gods; the down trodden (*efulefu*) who cannot measure up to the demands of their community and Nneka, who had delivered twin children on four different occasions and all were thrown into the evil forest, because they are thought of as being evil. Thus all these people find an outlet and a relief for their personal instincts in the new faith.

However, even this outlet itself, that the people found, still turns out to be a religion, which also has its own do's and don'ts and which, as is shown in chapter eighteen of the novel, leads to the reversion of one of the converts to his old religion, when he protested the presence and admittance of the outcasts (*osu*) into the new faith. Thus the same thing is being repeated, perhaps one can say, in a more sophisticated and more tolerant culture or perhaps, because it is the only alternative available to the people.

Going back to the question raised above, on what is responsible for the religiosity in Okonkwo? In answering this question, one definitely has to look elsewhere, and that brings us to the sociological aspect of the novel.

Looking at the novel, it will be observed that the community that Okonkwo lives in is one which does not make a dichotomy between what is religious and what is not. Everything is interwoven and one can hardly make a difference between what is secular and religious as we have it nowadays. The action, both private and public, and daily lives of the people are all tied around what pleases and displeases the gods. There is nothing like a private affair, as everyone lives a communal life in a system where values and modes of behavior are dictated by the community. The notion of right and wrong is decided by the community and every individual in the community is expected to follow and obey it, without questioning. Whatever the gods decide are carried out without questioning their judgment for their wishes must be done to avoid their wraths. Thus to uphold and adhere to the values and ideals of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> S. Freud, p. 15.; this fact was also pointed out by E. Palmer, when he says, "The secret of the new faith's success is precisely that it offers a refuge to all those whom the clan, for variety of reasons, regard as outcasts. If the clan had not been so callous towards its underdogs, the white man's religion would not have taken hold. As it is the Osus, the parents of twins, and all those held in contempt because they have, taken no titles who flock to the missionaries banner." (p. 58)

<sup>18</sup> The ironical part of Okonkwo's life and that of his son, Nwoye, is that while Okonkwo resents his father for his weakness and his lack of manly valour, his own son resents him for his excessive manliness and valour, which causes the estrangement between both of them and finally leads to the conversion of his son to Christianity.

community is to uphold and practice the religion, culture and tradition of the community and to be part of the community. This seems to echo the sociological definition given to religion by Emile Durkheim when he says:

*A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.*<sup>19</sup>

In other words, as it is apparent from the novel, Umuofia has its own sacred things which it expects all its community members to keep sacred, its own beliefs and practices which all must obey and respect and a breach of which could draw and attract some punishments so that the wrath of the gods will not be melted out to them all. On the bases of all these things, the community gains its strength and based its organization as a social setup. The harder a person tries to keep the sacred things sacred, uphold these beliefs and carry out these practices and do the bidding of this community, the more respect and honor the community gives to him and the more success comes to his way. Okonkwo is a person determined to succeed in this society and he knows very well that for him to succeed, he has to do all that his community expects of a person and one of which is the worship of what they worship and the doing of all the rites which constitutes religion to them. Thus, his religiosity can be said to be a product of the social system of his community and a demand of his community as one of their members. This is apparent in the way he builds his house, where he sets aside a place of worship, as is the accepted practice among his people.

*Near the barn was a small house, the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children.*<sup>20</sup>

The fear that this tradition may not be continued after him is one of the things that grieve his mind when his eldest son, Nwoye, converted to Christianity.

*Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his father crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days.....*<sup>21</sup>

What is very clear from the novel is that, to a very great extent, Okonkwo is a product of his community, his manly valour, his temper and his obsession with status, prestige and power are all what his community have created in him. His community values and reckons with all these things and sees it as the hall mark of a man, which is why he despises his father for being a failure, because he (his father) failed to measure up to the standard of the community. This explains his anxiety over the nature and future of his eldest son, Nwoye,

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<sup>19</sup> E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Joseph Ward Swain (trans.), The Free Press, New York, 1965, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

when he says: “I will not have a son who cannot hold his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it is apparent that – to a very large extent – everything that Okonkwo is, is what his community expects from him even though, in his bid to express these things he overdo it and this eventually leads to his destruction.

*Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders.*<sup>23</sup>

One other observation about the social setup of Okonkwo’s community is the fact that every individual is expected to have a personal god, which they refer to as *Chi*. This confirms Durkheim’s observation that even in a ‘church’ the community may, in addition to the general worship that is done together, expect an individual to have his own personal form of worship which he performs on his own and which does not necessarily mean a separation from the rest of the community.<sup>24</sup> In the Umuofia community, one sees the whole community coming together to perform certain rites of worships and observing festivities together. But in addition to that, individual has his own personal god, *Chi*, which he pays homage to, and an ancestral shrine where he worships his dead fathers and makes sacrifices to them, which is what the community expects from all its members.

However, with the coming of the white man, the social setup of the community was upset and two religions were pitched against one another with the natives abandoning their ancestral religion to join the new religion – Christianity, which offers some of them a relief from the tedious and cruel demands of their ancestral religion. This situation is readily captured by one of the elders speaking on the eve of Okonkwo’s departure from his mother land, where he had been in exile, to his father land – Umuofia.

*An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter’s dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan.*<sup>25</sup>

Having said the above, however, to assert that the totality of the religiosity of Okonkwo is the product of his society is to reduce the Ibo religion to a social phenomenon and it is to be guilty of reductionism. Although his community and social setup has a lot of influence on his religious attitude, it does not explain his rigid attitude and his refusal to change as his community was changing – for that is supposed to be the parameter of measuring his religiosity and since that parameter has changed or is changing, he ought to follow it too and change in accordance to the changes going on. So also is the case of others like him, who refused to change their religious beliefs as changes are going on in the community – which is responsible for instilling in them the ideas of religion.<sup>26</sup> Thus, one can

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> E. Durkheim, pp.61-62.: This is apparent in Chinua Achebe’s description of Okonkwo’s personal god in page 10.

<sup>25</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 118.

<sup>26</sup> This is exactly what Opoku meant when he said: ‘There were also those Africans, who rejected the message of Christianity altogether and stuck to the religious and cultural traditions of their forefathers, seeing in them more meaning and significance than what the missionaries preached,’ (K. Asare Opoku, “Religion in Africa during the Colonial Era”, in A. Adu Boahen, (ed), *General History of Africa, Volume vii, Africa under Colonial Domination 1880 – 1935*, Heinemann, California, UNESCO, 1985, p. 527.)

say that beneath the social factors are a strong and an unshaken belief that religion is a very important aspect of life and that it has and plays a significant role in the life of man. This very much is apparent in the fact that though the people accepted the changes going on in their society,<sup>27</sup> they nonetheless refused to change their religious beliefs even though some of these beliefs have been proven to be false.<sup>28</sup> Added to this is the fact that they do not quarrel with the white man in practicing his religion, since they recognized the fact that it is natural for every human being to have his own religious practice or to follow the religion of his people.<sup>29</sup> Their quarrel is in the abandonment of their religion by their own people for the white man's religion, the forceful usurpation of their rights, the disruption of their community, and the condemnation of their religion, customs and beliefs by the white man.<sup>30</sup>

With the introduction of the white man to the scene, the rigidity in Okonkwo comes to the fore and the great battle for survival between the two religions begins. Okonkwo is vehemently against their intrusion into his community and one sees him calling for action to drive them out by force. He sees no reason why they should be allowed to stay and he sees those who abandoned their traditional religion to join the white man as betrayers of their ancestors – this also lend credence to the fact that beneath the social aspect of his religiosity, there is a strong inner conviction to it, otherwise, he would have simply moved along with the tide of change and try to adjust to it and the new religion. Quoting him, Achebe says:

*Okonkwo...said that until the abominable gang was chased out of the village with whips there would be no peace.*<sup>31</sup>

*"Let us not reason like cowards," said Okonkwo. "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. That is what a man does.*

*These people are daily pouring filth over us, and Okeke says we should pretend not to see.*"<sup>32</sup>

*To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination.*<sup>33</sup>

Okonkwo is so vehement in his opposition to the new religion that when his eldest son, Nwoye, accepted the new faith, he flares up in anger ready to break his head, without asking for his son's reason for doing so. But for the intervention of his maternal uncle, he could have done worse things to him.<sup>34</sup> However, immediately he returns home from exile, he calls his remaining five sons together – even the smallest among them, who is just four years old and could hardly comprehend him – and warns them sternly against joining the new religion and at the same time informing them that he has rejected their brother and that he is no longer his son or their brother.

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<sup>27</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 126.

<sup>28</sup> In the case of the Christians living in the evil forest without dying and their taking care of twins without any evil thing happening to them.

<sup>29</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 134.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 124 & 134.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

*You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck.*<sup>35</sup>

Thus, it is clear from the above statement of Okonkwo that he has an inner conviction that his children's religiosity and worthiness as a person lies in their espousing his religion and values. Likewise, he wants his sons to be an epitome of the values of his community. He sees those who abandoned their ancestral religion for the new religion, as worthless people whom he compares to women, who are seen as a symbol of weakness in his community.

One may add, in passing, that the Ibo community, like many others, is a male dominated one in which females are relegated to the background. This is apparent throughout the novel itself where the females are only seen but not heard and they have little or no say at all in all the affairs of the community – even on the issue of religion.<sup>36</sup> The female are generally seen as a weak sex and part of the property of the husband, who has absolute control over them and can take as many of them as he wishes to marry without limit.<sup>37</sup>

The way Okonkwo runs his house and deals with his wives points to this fact. This also explains why he compares his eldest son to a woman in the quotation above.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Nwoye has become a person who has no worth or say in the affairs of his community and he is now merely a property, which can be kicked about anyhow by all.

However, Okonkwo seems to be alone in his rigidity about the new religion and the new dispensation, as some of his kinsmen and women have adjusted to the new reality. They see the new religion as a necessary evil, which at least its head missionary, Mr. Brown is in firm control of because of his subtle approach and restraint. Moreover, the community itself is undergoing a process of change, which his kinsmen are happy about as it has brought more wealth to them.

*There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store, and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia.*

*And even in the matter of religion there was a growing feeling that there might be something in it after all, something vaguely akin to method in the overwhelming madness.*

*This growing feeling was due to Mr. Brown, the white missionary, who was very firm in restraining his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan.*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 121 – 122.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.; Chapters 8 and 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 13 - 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 9 – 11, 21 - 22 & 27 - 28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

With the departure of Mr. Brown, however, comes Reverend James Smith, and according to Achebe, 'he was a different kind of man'. In other words, Rev. Smith is a rigid conservative, in the mould of Okonkwo, who lacks the subtle approach and diplomacy of Mr. Brown. Describing him, Achebe says:

*He condemned openly Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battle field in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal.*<sup>40</sup>

With a person like Rev. Smith, on the other side of the divide, Okonkwo meets his match and the series of events that followed the meeting of these two rigid extremists on the opposite divide, leads to the final battle of supremacy between these two religions, which comes to a frenzy climax with the death of one of them – Okonkwo – who lacks the superior power and state machinery that the other side employs in their encounter with each other. With his death follows the demise of his religion and the final demolition of his community, which was turned into a society by force. Echoing this, Obierika says 'ferociously' to the white man, the District Commissioner: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..."<sup>41</sup>

In other words, Okonkwo and everything that he stands for, his religion, customs, tradition and indeed his community as a whole, is no longer worth more than a 'dog' all because of the encounter brought about by 'a lunatic religion'. Furthermore, what is clear from Obierika's words is that, though Okonkwo is a no nonsense hot temper person, before the coming of the white men, the presence and activities of the white man, especially in converting his son to their religion and destroying his community, greatly affects him psychologically and dictates what he later becomes, as his community and culture alone could not have produced this kind of rigidity and adamant attitude that he exhibits towards the end of his life and how he ends his life which is a taboo in his community. That is, the white man's presence and religious activities produce a different personality in the person of Okonkwo.

Thus, it is apparent that the story of this novel also revolves around the encounter of two religions, the Traditional Ibo Religion and Christianity, in a fight for supremacy and converts, even though the latter religion – Christianity – was accompanied by the motive of colonialism using religion as a cover up for this motive.

## Conclusion

The exploration of Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*, above shows that the novel has many parts to it and it is indeed worthy of its worldwide acclaim even after more than fifty years of its appearance. It is clear that the novel is relevant to the field of religion as explained above and it is worth the attention given to it in this article.

While there have been many writings about the theories of Freud and Durkheim, their applications to this novel aptly help to see the relevance or otherwise of their theories to the Ibo African Religion.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 130

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 147

The theory of Sigmund Freud fails to apply to the origin of the religiosity of Okonkwo, Nwoye and by extension their community. Likewise the concept of instinct for religiousness does not apply to Okonkwo, the main character in the novel, it nonetheless applies to the new converts to Christianity who are considered to be effeminate in their community and who are not able to measure up to the tough custom of their community; but were able to find an outlet for their natural instinct in the new faith. However, the problem here is that what they resorted to is itself a religion and this still remains problematic when view from the Freudian concept which will advocate a non-religious outlet for their instinct. This in itself shows the fact that man is by nature religious and religion is a very important component of his life even if theorist like Freud tries to explain it away.

As for the Durkheim theory, while it readily applies to Okonkwo because he was partly religious because of the demands of his community, it nevertheless does not explain all of his religiousness as we see him going time and again against his community social norms and changes which ordinarily he ought to follow if he were religious only because of his community. But, what is apparent is that apart from the demands of his community, he has an inner conviction about religion and its importance in the life of a human, hence his tenacity to his religion and refusal to change along with the community. However, Durkheim concept of a personal god, within the larger concept of a general god – is a permanent feature of the Ibo African religion and it is well practiced in the community of Okonkwo as seen in the novel.

Finally, it is apparent that this work of Achebe is a rich fountain of religious encounter and it is relevant in the field of religion just as it is in its proper field of literature. It gives one a glimpse of what the people experienced as a result of the encounter of Christianity with their traditional religion and the events that unfolds in one of the African communities as a result of the coming of the white man with his religion to the African continent.

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