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بِوَسِيْلَتِي اِسْلَامٌ اَنْبَارًا يَجْنِبًا مُلْمَعِنًا

THE ENCOUNTER OF CHRISTIANITY WITH
TRADITIONAL AFRICAN *IBO* RELIGION: A STUDY
OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S "*THINGS FALL APART*"

BY

MUSA YUSUF OWOYEMI

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
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KULLIYYAH OF ISLAMIC REVEALED
KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN SCIENCES

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
MALAYSIA

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This thesis is dedicated to the Glory of Allah and to the memory of my dearest parents Alhaji Abdul Rafiu Owoyemi Yusuf and Mrs Moriyike Eboade Rafiu Owoyemi Yusuf who have both answered the call of the almighty creator, Allah.

Oh Allah, shower Your mercy and blessing on them as they did on me while I was small and for putting my feet on your path and showing me what wonders lies in holding on to You even when they will no longer be here to watch over me – and indeed they are no longer here. But as they taught me, You are forever here and in all places.

All praises are due to You Oh Allah!

ABSTRACT

This research work examines the encounter of Christianity with Traditional African Ibo Religion in Nigeria, as recounted in the novel “*Things Fall Apart*” by Chinua Achebe. This particular work is a novelty because it has attempted to do a study of religion through a novel, which is seen primarily as a fictional narrative. But going by the maxim that it is not all novels that are fictitious, this thesis set about studying how two religions, Traditional African Ibo religion and Christianity, related with each other and what happened when they met in a battle for the minds and souls of the people. Moreover, this particular novel in question provides a perspective of what happened in the Ibo society of Nigeria, albeit, in a subtle way using imaginary characters, when Christianity, with the assistance of Colonialism, entered the hinterland of the nation. Using the historical, narrative, analytical and critical methodologies, this research scrutinized the novel thoroughly in studying this encounter and came out with a number of findings which could help in future encounters of religions, especially as the world is now a place in which religions are bound to come into contact with one another quite often and in variety of ways. Among the findings that were reached by this research is that, the whole encounter was marred by monologue, injustice and intolerance, and, at the same time, the methodology of approach was wrong and inhuman. In the light of this, the research recommends a four fold method of phenomenology, tolerance, dialogue and criticism, which could be referred to as *Phenotodiacritism* in all future encounters of religions, especially in the Globalized world of today, and it also affirmed that religion, as a phenomenon, could be studied through a novel in a field which could be called Novelogy of Religion, just as we have Psychology, Sociology etc of religion.

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(Phenotodiacritism)

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APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage in Uşûl al-Dân and Comparative Religion.

Ibrahim Muhammad Zein
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage in Uşûl al-Dân and Comparative Religion.

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This thesis was submitted to the department of Uââl al-Dân and Comparative Religion and is accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage in Uşûl al-Dân and Comparative Religion.

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Mohamad @ Md.Som Sujimon
Dean, Kulliyyah of Islamic
Revealed Knowledge and
Human Sciences

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references and a bibliography is appended.

Name: Musa Yusuf Owoyemi

Signature..... Date.....

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ABSTRACT (ARABIC).....	iii
APPROVAL PAGE.....	iv
DECLARATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Research Problem.....	4
1.3 Research Question.....	5
1.4 Research Objective.....	5
1.5 Research Scope.....	6
1.6 Research Methodology.....	6
1.7 Review of Literatures.....	7
CHAPTER 2: IBO CULTURAL MILIEU.....	19
2.1 The Ibo People and Their Society.....	19
2.2 Ibo Traditional Religion.....	34
2.3 Christianity and Colonialism.....	37
CHAPTER 3: THE AUTHOR AND THE NOVEL.....	51
3.1 The Author.....	51
3.2 The Novel from a Religious Point of View.....	57
CHAPTER 4: THE ENCOUNTER OF CHRISTIANITY WITH TRADITIONAL AFRICAN IBO RELIGIONS.....	76
4.1 Doctrines and Customs.....	76
4.2 Conversion: Over-Zealous and Moderate Converts.....	99
4.3 The Methodology of Approach.....	109
4.4 Language and Symbol.....	115
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS, RELEVANCE AND RECOMMENDATION.....	124
5.1 An Analysis of the Encounter.....	124
5.2 The Relevance of the Encounter.....	138
5.3 Recommendation for Future Encounter of Religions.....	142
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION.....	145
6.1 Findings.....	145
6.2 Conclusion.....	151
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	153

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

ب	b	ط	æ
ت	t	ظ	ç
ث	th	ع	'
ج	j	غ	gh
ح	ā	ف	f
خ	kh	ق	q
د	d	ك	k
ذ	dh	ل	l
ر	r	م	m
ز	z	ن	n
س	s	ه	h
ش	sh	و	w
ص	ā	ء	'
ض	ā	ي	y

Vowels and Diphthong

ا	a	آ	ā	أ	á	اَ in pause form	ah
إ	i	إِ	á	أِي	ay	اَ in construct form	at
أ	u	أُ	â	أَو	aw		
أَو	âw	أَوَّ	ww	أَي	áy	أَيَّ	yy

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

The religious encounter between Christianity and the Traditional Religion of the Ibo people of Eastern Nigeria, as recounted in the novel, “*Things Fall Apart*” – the magnum opus of the giant African writer and novelist Chinua Achebe – is the basis of this research work.

Though, it looks ironic that one wants to do a serious research on a great phenomenon like religion through a novel, which is usually seen as a book for relaxation or amusement and whose themes are usually fictional. But, the fact of the matter, however, is that beneath the amusements and fictions that novels usually portray are very serious societal issues and events, which touch virtually the life of everyone in the society, especially at the times of great changes and events, which reveal a lot about the way and life of a people and their actions and inactions, shock and surprise, joy and sorrow at that particular point in time. Added to this is the fact that each novel goes a long way in conveying to the general public, the feelings and thoughts of the author himself and individuals in the society during these times of great changes and events.

Likewise, it is a well-known truth in the literary world that it is not all novels that are fictional, for some are serious discussions and narrations of current issues in the society or historical events in the past in a subtle and relaxed way. This novel, “*Things Fall Apart*”, is in this category, and that is why its critics have accused the author of

writing anthropological materials as novels. While others simply say, it is a novel quite all right, but he only included anthropological materials in it, as he narrates his story.¹

Furthermore, it is obvious that this book is even more relevant in the field of religious studies – especially in sociology and psychology of religion – when one looks at the fact that it is not only a narrative novel but also a sociological and psychological material as attested to by Palmer in his book, “*An Introduction to the African Novel*”, where he said: “one of the signs of this novel’s excellence is the brilliance with which Achebe has demonstrated the interrelation between sociology and psychology, between environment and character” and “Achebe’s treatment of Okonkwo’s subsequent development shows his subtle understanding of human psychology” but while “*Things Fall Apart* does rely heavily on sociology, ... it is neither didactic nor tedious”.²

Moreover, religion itself is a phenomenon that permeates all the life of human beings without leaving anything out. To do a study of it through a novel, therefore, will only serve to make it go round its complete circle and also make a statement that has always been there with it even more clearer – that is, it is the phenomenon that gave birth and contains all other phenomena in the society and not the other way round, as some will want us to believe. Perhaps, it is this also that motivated Tinu Ruparell and Markham to make the statement, in their book “*Encountering Religion*”, that “no education is complete unless it has included the study of the world religions and the

¹ E. Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel: A Critical Study of Twelve Books*, Heinemann Educational Book Ltd., 1972, p. 60.

² Ibid., pp. 53 & 60.

phenomena of religion”³. In other words, even novelists too, like Chinua Achebe, realize that, for their writings to be meaningful and produce the true picture of the society and the needed effects that they want to create in the minds of people, it must include a serious discussion or narration of the society’s religious beliefs and practices. To say that Achebe has been very consistent in doing this is an understatement, and this is perhaps, why his novels are usually of world class and a must read for all.

So also, this study is even more relevant today where the homogenous societies that everyone formerly lived in have been shattered by modernity and modern life. This modernity has turned the world into a global village where many religions are now encountering one another and many cultures coming to a meeting point. This particular situation now requires a form of understanding and tolerance, more than ever before, so that all the people in a society can co-exist peacefully. Moreover, as Professor Seyyed Hussein Nasr rightly observes, to fail to take cognizance of the presence of other religions, today, is to either lose faith in one’s religion or to have a conception of the Divinity, which places a limit on the Divine Mercy.⁴

Based on all the above and on the fact that this novel, as the author himself affirms, is a true account of the event that happened when the White Colonial masters came to Nigeria and entered the Eastern part of the country, with Christianity as their official religion and which they hoped to convert their host to. One is inclined to do a study of

³ I. S. Markham, and T. Ruparell, (eds.), *Encountering Religion*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, U.K, 2001, p. 4.

⁴ S. H. Nasr, “Islam and the Encounter of Religions” In the *Journal of the Islamic Quarterly*, Volume X, Numbers 3 and 4.

how their host reacted to this situation, since they already have their own traditional religion, beliefs and customs, and the kind of conflict that aroused as a result of the encounter between these two religions.

In the light of this, this thesis will study the encounter of Christianity and Traditional African Ibo Religion, as recounted in the novel, *“Things Fall Apart”*, by looking at the whole spectrum of the encounter through religious lenses using the tools of religious studies. Such issues as their encounter in the areas of doctrines, customs, beliefs, languages, symbols and their methodology of approach to each other will be thoroughly examined and brought to light, as explained in the book. By so doing, this study will serve to benefit all in the future encounters of religions, as it hopes to proffer ways and methods of avoiding whatever mistakes were made in the encounter and grounding the plausible and good approach employed in their approach to each other.

1.2. Research Problem

This research wants to explore an avenue, which is always a problematic one amongst all religions – that is, their encounter with one another – by doing a study of the encounter of Christianity and Traditional African Ibo Religion. The purpose here is to examine this encounter thoroughly, so that by so doing, it will bring to light, their mistakes in their encounter with each other, which caused a lot of problems and damaged the social setup when both religions met. Just as it hopes to examine their plausible and good points, which could have been explored to achieve the needed co-operation and tolerance that they so much desired then and which would not have lead to the problems that the society encountered when they both met.

Moreover, since all religions still continue to encounter one another today – with the same crisis and mistakes repeating themselves – it is hoped that a study of this encounter will help in proffering ways and methods by which religions could encounter one another and relate together without causing so much pains and destruction to the society, as this encounter under study did, and so that with such an approach, co-operation and tolerance, harmony, security and peace will prevail in the society.

1.3. Research Question

In the light of what has been stated above, the questions that this research seeks to answer are:-

Did the Christian Missionaries act in good faith in going to Africa?

Was the encounter just and on an equal ground?

Did the encounter lead to the advancement of the people's society spiritually (since this is what all religions seek to do)?

Was the method adopted in the encounter the right method?

Was the encounter a successful one and was the society better off after it?

Was the encounter relevant to the situation of things today and is there any lesson or lessons from the encounter that can be of benefit to all religions today?

Is it true that a serious study of religion could be done through a novel?

1.4. Research Objective

The objective of this research is to look at the encounter between two religions, Christianity and Traditional Ibo Religion in Nigeria, their methodology of approach to each other, the lessons that could be learnt from the encounter and its relevance to the

present day situation of things concerning the encounter of religions; so that whatever conclusion is reached will serve as an avenue for greater co-operation and tolerance among all religions today. Finally, it also aims to show that religion could be studied through literary works, just like any other area of specialization through which religion had been studied in the past – hence the choice of the book or novel under study, “*Things Fall Apart*”.

1.5. Research Scope

As the title of this research shows, the scope of this research will be limited to exploring the novel, “*Things Fall Apart*”, by doing an in-depth study of the encounter of Christianity and the Traditional African Ibo Religion as narrated in the novel. However, the focus of this study will be on their encounter with each other, the differences between them, their doctrines and customs, the issue of conversion and the conflict that it generated; the methodology of approach to each other, and the effect of the differences in their languages and symbols on their encounter.

1.6. Research Methodology

The methodologies that will be employed in this research are historical, narrative, analytical and critical methodologies. The historical method will be applied in explaining the historical background of the Ibo people and their society, the Colonial masters and Christianity, the Ibo Religion and the life of the author. The analytical methodology will be applied in examining the novel from a religious point of view – basically from psychological and sociological views – while the narrative, analytical and critical methodologies will be utilized in the encounter of the two religions, their

doctrines, customs etc. Finally, the analytical and critical methodologies will, once again, be used in the analysis that will be given at the end of the research work.

1.7. Review of Literatures

Due to the new challenges that religions are now facing in this present age, and the fact that people are, nowadays, generally more tolerant with each other on the issue of religious beliefs, many scholars are now turning to the issue of the encounter of religions in order to see and know what actually went wrong along the line; when these religions met and to see if there is anything good in their meeting through which unity and co-operation could be achieved today. So also, in order that religion adherents will take lessons from their past mistakes, so that such mistakes will not be repeated in their bid to co-operate with one another and fight their common enemies, which is personified in modernity and secularism. Likewise, based on the need to reach an accord on how people can use religion to achieve a peaceful co-existence for mankind – after all the evils that had been perpetrated by the evil minded people in the name of religion.

Talking about the African religions and their experience in the encounter of religion, one can say that it is the most profound, as this encounter is of two fold – within and without. Within refers to the encounter amongst these religions themselves and without, refers to those religions that came into the continent from other continents.

Among the scholars who have written about the African religions and have captured and explained, vividly, these two types of encounter is Chinua Achebe, in one of his

novels titled “*Arrow of God*”. In this novel, Achebe narrates vividly, with captivating interest, the rivalry and encounters among the different gods and their adherents in the Ibo society and by extension, the African society in general. He shows how the gods struggle for control amongst themselves and how their adherents are divided and at loggerhead on which god is most powerful and which is to be most revered in the community. As this was unfolding, Christianity came in, which marks not only the destruction of the leading god in the community and his priest, but also the erosion of all the other smaller gods, who could not unite the people nor solve their urgent problem, which the Christian evangelist capitalized on to win the people over to his side.

It is also Achebe who wrote about the encounter of Christianity and the Ibo religion in his novel “*Things Fall Apart*”, which this thesis intends to explore. Here, he gives a vivid account of the crisis that the coming of the Christian religion created in the Ibo society in Nigeria and the end result of that crisis.

The work of Cyril Okorochoa also sheds some lights on African religion. In his book titled “*The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Ibo of Nigeria*”, he analyzes the reason and motivating factor for the mass conversion of the Ibo people of Nigeria to Christianity. According to him, the primary cause of the mass conversion of the people to Christianity is due to the search for salvation and power and not economic reason as some scholars had said. The Ibo people, he says, are pragmatic in their belief and since they see a new religion, which not only destroyed their gods, but also humiliated them by the destruction of their shrine; they believe that the god of the white man must then be more powerful than their gods. It could be

that salvation and power, which to them, come in the form of prosperity in the world and in worldly affairs, lay with this new god of the white man, hence their mass movement into the new religion. Furthermore, in the book, he discusses the different aspects of the Ibo beliefs and how they make use of this in their day to day life. To them, religion is not a private issue but a living experience which operates in their daily life and activities; hence their worships of many gods, which they believe, influence the different domains of the human life.

The work of A. E. Ayandele titled "*The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria*" also discusses the Ibo people and the factors responsible for their mass conversion to Christianity. According to him and Caroline Ifeka in her work entitled "*White power: Social Structural Factor in Conversion to Christianity, Eastern Nigeria*", the main motivating factor for this conversion is basically sociological. He says, the Ibo people's quest for political as well as economical power were the main thing that drives them into converting en-mass to Christianity, as they believe that by following the white man's religion and learning his language, it could help them achieve a better living and a better position in the scheme of things in the Nigerian society.

Another work which gives an insight into the Ibo community and their religion is that of Cosmas O. Obiego entitled "*African Image of the Ultimate Reality: An Analysis of Igbo Ideas of Life and Death in Relation to Chukwu – God.*" In this work, he highlights the different spheres of the Ibo people beliefs and culture and their interaction with their environment, which goes a long way in forming their worldview. He explains the position that God holds in the Ibo cosmology, and how they view Him

– not leaving out the Ibo’s world view about life and death and the hereafter. Likewise he explicitly explains the issue and position of the devil and evil in Ibo belief.

So also, the article by C. N. Ubah titled “*Religious Change among the Igbo during the Colonial Period*” gives an insight into the Ibo religion and the Ibo society. In this article, Ubah discusses the three concepts of Supreme Being, Divinities and Ancestors as conceived and worshipped in the Ibo religion. Furthermore, he discusses the interaction between the Ibo religion and Christianity and their area of disagreements affirming the fact that there “was absolutely no meeting point between the two religious cultures”. The role of the Warrant Chiefs and the aid rendered by the Colonial masters in taking Christianity to the hinterland of the Ibo people is explicitly discussed by him. According to him, these Warrant Chiefs used the Christian missionaries to either assert their influences and power over the people – because of the development that the coming of the missionaries bring to the community, as in the building of schools and the provision of other social services to the people – or to oppose a rival group in the tussle for power.

Likewise, he points out the technique of conversion used by the missionaries and those who responded to their mission call and the reason for their response to this call. He also discusses and explains the reason for the mass conversion of the Ibo people to Christianity, saying that it was due to two factors, which, he says, are “the tolerant nature of Igbo traditional religion” and “the structural and organizational weaknesses of Igbo traditional religion”. According to him, the mass conversion of the Ibos is not due to economic or social reasons as some scholars affirmed, but rather, he says, it is due to the accommodative attitude of the Ibo people to the new faith, as they refrained

from persecuting or fighting any of the new converts. Secondly, he says, the traditional religion had no common leadership structure or a common deity which could serve as a rallying point and it also lacked a missionary approach like that of Christianity. Thus, he says the people easily deflected from their ancestral religion to the new faith without any hassles.

However, he says finally, despite the fact the people have converted to Christianity, they still hold on to a lot of their beliefs and practices for practical purposes, especially in areas where Christianity has failed to answer or find solution to their day to day problems of life. Thus, to the people, he says, Christianity is just another addition “to the large corpus of their religious culture”, albeit, helping to bring to the fore the dormant belief in the one Supreme Being, which had been in the background before their coming.

One other book which is quite important here is that of Edmund Ilogu, titled “*Christianity and Ibo Culture*”. In this book, he discusses the Ibo religion and its interaction with the changes brought about by technology, modernity and Christianity.

First, the author looks at the Ibo society, discussing its religious beliefs and practices. Then he discusses the interaction between the two religions, their area of conflicts, especially on the issue of the killing of twins, human sacrifices, burials and etiquette. He pointed out how the Christian missionaries tried to stop these barbaric act and their efforts in redeeming some of the twins and human beings that were earmarked for killing. How the missionaries also help to save the new converts from the trouble of

giving prolong and wasteful burial to their dead parents and relatives is also discussed by him.

However, the mistake of the missionaries in condemning unnecessarily some of the ethics and moral values of the Ibo people, instead of integrating it and through it making the Christian religion indigenous and acceptable to the people, also forms part of his discussion in the book. He, in the same vein, discusses some of the injustices and inhumane treatment meted out to the people by the missionaries and some of their racial attitudes to the people and black missionaries like themselves.

The missionaries, he says, brought Christianity into Ibo land as a foreign religion and made it a foreign religion, by not removing its 'foreignness' through adaptation and assimilation, due to their non-compromising attitude, since they have already closed their mind on finding anything good in the ethics and values of the Ibo people. According to him, this attitude of the missionaries did not help the course of the missionaries, as many Ibo men find it difficult to comprehend and live the kind of life that was being presented to them. This, he says, is more keen and obvious on the issue of taking the Ozo title – which, he says, gives social prestige to a person in the Ibo society. Polygamy – which the people find difficult to do away with – and on the issues of morality, generally, and problem solving of the day to day issues of life of the people.

These challenges, he says, was however, taken up by the problem solving churches of Aladura and Pentecostal, which in turn leads to their proliferation in Iboland. These twin churches, he points out, knew the feelings and needs of the people and therefore

adapted themselves to solving the worries and problems of the people by assimilating and adapting themselves to the useful values of the people while still retaining their Christian identity.

Likewise, he says, on the technological and modernization front, the Ibo society was greatly dislocated as a result of these twin sociological issues. According to him, these two issues lead to the abandoning of the Ibo communal way of life and moral values, as many were simply carried away by the luxury presented by technology and modernity. The Ibo moral values and ethics were thus abandoned for the immoral ways of the white men, especially the white traders, who were living a shameless life of immorality among the people and whom the people were emulating, especially the young ones.

In conclusion, he says, all these issues add up to militate against the acceptance of Christianity and the adaptation of Christianity to the African life style, thereby making it to still look like a foreign religion, which is akin to the African way of life and which is in-adaptable to its environment contrary to the spirit of universality of the religion itself. He, therefore, proposes that Christianity should be made more African through adaptation and assimilation of some of the African ethics and values, since the Christian ethics can be and are indeed compatible with some of the African ethics and moral values of life.

Without taking away the merits of the non-Africans who have written on the African religions, it will suffice to mention a few of them here. Among those writers whose works are directly linked to the Ibo people and religion are, Simon Ottenberg "*The*