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ROLE OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONCERNS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S
THINGS FALL APART

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ABSTRACT

In this paper Achebe has portrayed the customs, traditions, norms, superstitions and values of Igbo society such as their judicial system, killing of twins, role of earth goddess and their harmony with nature. They were deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people that the daily lives of Igbo people were governed by them.

Keywords: Igbo society; social, political and religious concerns.

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Chinua Achebe, who has taken upon himself the role of a teacher or interpreter devotes more than half the text to portray the social and religious customs, myths, legends, beliefs, superstitions and taboos of the Igbo people which were deeply rooted in their consciousness. At the thematic level, Achebe explores meticulously and faithfully the cultural and social patterns of the Igbo society.

At the thematic level, Achebe explores meticulously and faithfully the cultural and social patterns of the Igbo society. They were deeply rooted in them as they lived in close harmony with nature. They respected the seasonal changes, prepared themselves for the best and the worst and these rituals shaped their consciousness and daily lives. They had their own social system and cultural practices. The daily lives of Igbos were governed by their belief in gods and goddesses whom they dare not challenge. All the actions in the novel are judged by what is acceptable or not to 'Ani' the earth goddess who governs and controls their society.

Men and women work together in the fields in planting and harvesting. In fact, the earth is visualized as feminine and as such, it is feminine power that controls the agricultural society of the Igbo. The violation of the sanctity of the earth Goddess, Ani, who is the source of all fertility, is the most fundamental kind of sacrilege and has an ethical and moral basis which in turn is rooted in the agricultural life of the clan. Okonkwo's downfall occurs because of offences committed 'against the earth' during the week of peace.

Male success in Umuofia is measured in marital ability and farming prowess, expressed in the number of titles, wives and barns of yams one possesses-and not in cowries (a form of currency) or in family status alone. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the Igbo's meritocratic rather than hereditary, social system. In

Umuofia, "a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (8). This is fortunate for Okonkwo, who inherits nothing from his title-less father and who achieves financial success only because of his tireless efforts as a share cropper for another farmer.

Achebe details meticulously the customs, superstitions and beliefs of Igbo society. The greatest importance is given in this novel to the description of religious beliefs and practices whose omnipotence they dare not challenge, not only because these are so significant a part of community life, but also because it is these beliefs that are later to be shown as being challenged and breaking down. For instance, people go for advice to an oracle that is believed to be living in a cave, guarded by a priestess who is also its spokeswoman. People believe that the cave is full of spirits. In fact the spirits are everywhere. Often, the spirits of the ancestors walk about in the Igbo environment.

The oracle of the hills and caves is the final authority of justice on all social and political matters of the village. It represents their ancestral gods. Worshippers go to the oracle with awe and reverence to know all about their future. Personal disputes are settled in public by the nine *Egwugwu*, the judges. "It is communal self-criticism, and relaxed and in the last resort we all want the same things.... at that level we can say the community triumphs, and that it spreads its own light and reason" (Fanon 37). He also points out the evil side of the society in the form of the ruthless laws of a tribal society, its treatment of women and children, and the customs of discarding new born twins etc., represents the evil and the backward aspect of tribal society. Marriages and feasting ceremonies form an important part of culture and society. Feasting is associated with times of harvest and the most important among them is the feast of *New Yam* as it signals the beginning of the new farming year and the meeting of kinsmen.

Superstitions imbue the world of the Igbo society as described by Achebe. The birth of the twins is considered evil and twins that are born are put in an earthen pot and left in the jungle or evil forest. There is the description of the "Ogbanje" or evil children who are born only to sicken and die and take birth again and again in the womb of the mother. Such children when they die are thrown away so that they will not dare to take birth again. If a man is afflicted with stomach ailment, he was also left in the forest for he was considered to be an abomination on mother earth.

The 'osu' or outcasts are ostracised from the clan and buried in the evil forest. They cannot shave their long tangled hair, for if they do, they believe they will die. The python is a revered creature and is allowed to roam freely. To kill it is a sin, which has to be atoned for.

Polygamy is considered to be an out-dated and discriminatory practice in the modern world. But women in the polygamous society of the Igbo are not considered as inferior or subjugated. A man may take several wives according to his wealth and status, the senior wife is feared and respected. A woman is married after a sufficient 'bride price' is paid for her by her husband. She has her own hut in her husband's compound. At a meeting the wives are invited for a drink of palm wine with the men. Maltreatment of wives is frowned upon, as is shown by the instances when men complain about their wives, beat them and they are made to atone for it by elders. Okonkwo, who beat his second wife in the week of peace, is made to pay for it.

When Okonkwo is exiled from Umuofia, he goes to live in his mother's village. He is depressed about this, until he is reminded by his relative Uchendu that his mother like all women is buried here with her own kinsfolk as is the custom. Men and women work together in the fields in planting and harvesting. In fact, the earth is visualized as feminine and as such, it is feminine power that controls the agricultural society of the Igbo. The violation of the sanctity of the earth Goddess, Ani, who is the source of all fertility, is the most fundamental kind of sacrilege and has an ethical and moral basis which in turn is rooted in the agricultural life of the clan. Okonkwo's downfall occurs because of offences committed 'against the earth' during the week of peace. 'Ezeani', the priest of earth goddess punished Okonkwo who had committed a sin during the week of peace. Goddess punished him as she refused to accept his Kola-nut. On another occasion, he killed accidentally the son of his kinsmen Ezeudo whose funeral he attended. Although Okonkwo had killed the boy accidentally, yet he accepted the punishment imposed on him by the community. He was sent into exile for seven years.

Igbo society had their own judicial system to settle the disputes of the community and the justice of earth goddess for this murder was that the people of community set fire to Okonkwo's house, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was merely nothing but the tradition that they were cleaning the land polluted with the blood of clansman. The most impressive achievement of *Things Fall Apart*, writes, David Carroll, 'is the vivid picture it provides of Igbo culture and society at the end of the nineteenth century.' (Carroll 30). The characters of *Things Fall Apart* illustrate the conduct of war, religion, the social roles of men and women in a relatively fixed and secure system.

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