

CHINUA ACHEBE

Things Fall Apart, 1958

In this selection from his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe imagines the arrival and impact of some of the first Anglican missionaries among the Ibo people of Nigeria — his own ancestors — after 1857. Missionaries were among the earliest European colonialists. The first missionaries went to the Americas with the Spanish conquistadors in the decades after Columbus. But long after the conquistadors were replaced by professional soldiers, administrators, policemen, mining engineers, company agents, and other representatives of a more bureaucratic and industrial age, the missionaries continued to seek out souls to save beyond the frontiers of colonial settlement. What, according to Achebe, were the principal obstacles faced by the missionaries? What elements in Christianity attracted some Africans? What elements repelled others? Judging from this selection, how would you characterize the overall impact of Christianity in Africa?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Unlike Orwell and Conrad, Achebe is not describing historical events he witnessed, since he is writing about a period before he was born. And yet, he has a firsthand experience of Ibo culture. How does that experience make his fiction different from that of Conrad and Orwell? What does Achebe's fiction add to a historical understanding of missionaries in Africa? How would you compare Achebe with Conrad?

The arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one was a white man. Every man and woman came out to see the white man. Stories about these strange men had grown since one of them had been killed in Abame and his iron horse tied to the sacred silk-cotton tree. And so everybody came to see the white man. It was the time of the year when everybody was at home. The harvest was over.

When they had all gathered, the white man began to speak to them. He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying

Source: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1958), 101–09.

“myself” he always said “my buttocks.” But he was a man of commanding presence and the clansmen listened to him. He said he was one of them, as they could see from his colour and his language. The other four black men were also their brothers, although one of them did not speak Ibo. The white man was also their brother because they were all sons of God. And he told them about this new God, the Creator of all the world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone. A deep murmur went through the crowd when he said this. He told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived for ever in His happy kingdom. “We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die,” he said.

“Your buttocks understand our language,” said someone lightheartedly and the crowd laughed.

“What did he say?” the white man asked his interpreter. But before he could answer, another man asked a question: “Where is the white man’s horse?” he asked. The Ibo evangelists consulted among themselves and decided that the man probably meant bicycle. They told the white man and he smiled benevolently.

“Tell them,” he said, “that I shall bring many iron horses when we have settled down among them. Some of them will even ride the iron horse themselves.” This was interpreted to them but very few of them heard. They were talking excitedly among themselves because the white man had said he was going to live among them. They had not thought about that.

At this point an old man said he had a question. “Which is this god of yours,” he asked, “the goddess of the earth, the god of the sky, Amadiora of the thunderbolt, or what?”

The interpreter spoke to the white man and he immediately gave his answer. “All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky, you and me, and all of us.”

“If we leave our gods and follow your god,” asked another man, “who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors?”

“Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm,” replied the white man. “They are pieces of wood and stone.”

When this was interpreted to the men of Mbanta they broke into derisive laughter. These men must be mad, they said to themselves. How

could they say that Ani and Amadiora were harmless? And Idemili and Ogwugwu too? And some of them began to go away.

Then the missionaries burst into song. It was one of those gay and peppy tunes of evangelism which had the power of plucking at silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man. The interpreter explained the verse to the audience, some of whom now stood enthralled. It was the story of brothers who lived in darkness and in fear, ignorant of the love of God. It told of one sheep out on the hills, away from the gates of God and from the tender shepherd's care.

After the singing the interpreter spoke about the Son of God whose name was Jesu Kristi. Okonkwo, who only stayed in the hope that it might keep the missionaries from chasing the men out of the village or whipping them, now said:

"You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then." The crowd agreed.

"I did not say He had a wife," said the interpreter, somewhat lamely.

"Your buttocks said he had a son," said the joker. "So he must have a wife and all of them must have buttocks."

The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine.

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who lived in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the burning earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled.

The missionaries spent their first four or five nights in the marketplace, and went into the village in the morning to preach the gospel. They asked who the king of the village was, but the villagers told them there was no king. "We have men of high title and the chief priests and the elders," they said.

It was not very easy getting the men of high title and the elders together after the excitement of the first day. But the missionaries persisted, and in the end they were received by the rulers of Mbanta. They asked for a plot of land to build their church.

Every clan and village had its "evil forest." In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also a dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine-men when they died. An "evil forest" was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and

powers of darkness. It was such a forest that the rules of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them in their clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept.

"They want a piece of land to build their shrine," said Uchendu to his peers when they consulted among themselves. "We shall give them a piece of land." He paused, and there was a murmur of surprise and agreement. "Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They have a piece of land about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which they can show their victory." They laughed and agreed, and sent for the missionaries, whom they had asked to leave them for a while so that they could "whisper together." They offered them as much of the Evil Forest as they cared to take. And to their greatest amazement the missionaries thanked them and burst into song.

"They do not understand," said some of the elders. "But they will understand when they go to their plot of land tomorrow morning." And they dispersed.

The next morning the crazy men actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their house. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them all to be dead within four days. The first day passed and the second, third, and fourth, and none of them died. Everyone was puzzled. And then it became known that the white man's fetish had unbelievable power. It was said that he wore glasses on his eyes so that he could see and talk to evil spirits. Not long after, he won his first three converts.

Although Nwoye had been attracted to the new faith from the very first day, he kept it secret. He dared not go too near the missionaries for fear of his father. But whenever they came to preach in the open market place or the village playground, Nwoye was there. And he was already beginning to know some of the simple stories they told.

"We have now built a church," said Mr Kiaga, the interpreter, who was now in charge of the infant congregation. The white man had gone back to Umuofia, where he built his headquarters and from where he paid regular visits to Mr Kiaga's congregation at Mbanta.

"We have now built a church," said Mr Kiaga, "and we want you all to come in every seventh day to worship the true God."

On the following Sunday, Nwoye passed and re-passed the little mud-earth and thatch building without summoning enough courage to enter. He heard the voice of singing and although it came from a handful of men it was loud and confident. Their church stood on a circular clearing that looked like the open mouth of the Evil Forest. Was it waiting to snap its teeth together? After passing and re-passing by the church, Nwoye returned home.

It was well known among the people of Mbanta that their gods and ancestors were sometimes long-suffering and would deliberately allow a man to go on defying them. But even in such cases they set their limits.

market weeks or twenty-eight days. Beyond that limit no man was
willing to go. And so excitement mounted in the village as the seventh
week approached since the impudent missionaries built their church
in the Evil Forest. The villagers were so certain about the doom that
awaited these men that one or two converts thought it wise to suspend
allegiance to the new faith.

At last the day came by which all the missionaries should have died.
But they were still alive, building a new red-earth and thatch house for
their teacher, Mr Kiaga. That week they won a handful more converts.
For the first time they had a woman. Her name was Nneka, the wife
of Amadi, who was a prosperous farmer. She was very heavy with child.
Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each
time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away.
Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of
her as a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had
decided to join the Christians. It was a good riddance.

One morning Okonkwo's cousin, Amikwu, was passing by the church
on his way from the neighbouring village, when he saw Nwoye among
the Christians. He was greatly surprised, and when he got home he went
straight to Okonkwo's hut and told him what he had seen. The women
began to talk excitedly, but Okonkwo sat unmoved.

It was late afternoon before Nwoye returned. He went into the *obi*
and saluted his father, but he did not answer. Nwoye turned round to
walk into the inner compound when his father, suddenly overcome with
rage, sprang to his feet and gripped him by the neck.

"Where have you been?" he stammered.

Nwoye struggled to free himself from the choking grip.

"Answer me," roared Okonkwo, "before I kill you!" He seized a heavy
stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows.

"Answer me!" he roared again. Nwoye stood looking at him and
did not say a word. The women were screaming outside, afraid to go in.

"Leave that boy at once!" said a voice in the outer compound. It was
Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu. "Are you mad?"

Okonkwo did not answer. But he left hold of Nwoye, who walked
away and never returned.

He went back to the church and told Mr Kiaga that he had decided
to go to Umuofia, where the white missionary had set up a school to
teach young Christians to read and write.

Mr Kiaga's joy was very great. "Blessed is he who forsakes his father
and his mother for my sake," he intoned. "Those that hear my words are
blessed, their father and my mother."

Nwoye did not fully understand. But he was happy to leave his
father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters
and convert them to the new faith.

As Okonkwo sat in his hut that night, gazing into a log fire, he thought over the matter. A sudden fury rose within him and he had a strong desire to take up his machet, go to the church, and wipe out the entire vile and miscreant gang. But on further thought he told himself that Nwoye was not worth fighting for. Why, he cried in his heart, should he, Okonkwo, of all people, be cursed with such a son? He saw clearly in it the finger of his personal god or *chi*. For how else could he explain his great misfortune and exile and now his despicable son's behavior? Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a group of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. 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 another generation. 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, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth.

Okonkwo was popularly called the "Roaring Flame." As he looked into the log fire he recalled the name. He was a flaming fire. How could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate? Perhaps he was not his son. No! He could not be. His wife had played him false. He would teach her! But Nwoye resembled his grandfather Unoka, who was Okonkwo's father. He pushed the thought out of his mind. He, Okonkwo, was called a flaming fire. How could he have begotten a woman for a son? At Nwoye's age Okonkwo had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and his fearlessness. He sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smouldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply.