

## “THINGS FALL APART” IN “DEAD MEN’S PATH”, A STORY FROM CHINUA ACHEBE’S *GIRLS AT WAR AND OTHER STORIES*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Introduced in Igbo-land owing to colonialism, Western school proves intolerant of Odinani, the Igbo traditional religion, by closing “Dead Men’s Path”, a symbol of three realms of existence: the dead, the living and the unborn children. To claim the right of being practiced freely, Odinani wage war with the school. The ins and outs of these conflicts permits of postulating that “things fall apart” in “Dead Men’s Path”, a short story excerpted from Achebe’s *Girls at War and Other Stories*.*

**KEYWORDS:** “Things Fall Apart”, “Dead Men’s Path”, Intolerant School, Odinani, Igbo, Achebe

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Introduced in Africa with the advent of colonization and its civilizing mission, school as one feature of the white man’s ways, has clashed with *Odinani*, the Igbo traditional religion based on the ancestral veneration or what is referred to as the first faith of Africans<sup>1</sup>. As a result, the inherited religious practices have become obsolete, as shown in Chinua Achebe’s “Dead Men’s Path”, a short story extracted from *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972). This work is a collection of short stories in which the author attests to the culturo-spiritual conflict between the African culture and the European one<sup>2</sup>. Like in *Things Fall Apart* (1958)<sup>3</sup>, where the protagonist’s downfall is synonymous with the collapse of the Igbo

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<sup>1</sup> “The contact of the Africans with the Europeans marked the major conflict of cultures. It is one of the outcomes of colonialism. Most often, religion, social organization in which culture dominates, and political structure form the basis of culture conflict.” Nonyelum Chibuzo Mba, “Exploration of Achebe’s Thematic Preoccupations in His Selected Fictional Works”, in *Remembering Chinua Achebe*, Centre de Reprographie de l’Enseignement Supérieur de l’Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Cocody-Abidjan, 2013, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> “Achebe is considered as one of the most important figures in contemporary African literature. His novels [and short stories], which chronicle the colonization and independence of Nigeria, are among the first works in English to present an intimate and authentic rendering of African culture. His major concerns, according to Abiola Irele, involve “the social and psychological conflicts created by the incursion of the white man and his culture into the hitherto self-contained world of African society, and disarray in the African consciousness that has followed.” “Chinua Achebe 1930-” in James P. Draper, *Black Literature Criticism*, vol. 1-Achebe-Ellison, Detroit-London, Gale Research Inc., , p. 1, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> “Achebe’s first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is considered a classic of contemporary African fiction for its realistic and anthropological informative portrait of the Ibo tribal society before colonization. Set in the village of Umuofia in the late 1880s, when English missionaries and bureaucrats first appeared in the region, this book traces the conflict between tribal and Western customs through Okonkwo, a proud village leader, whose refusal to adapt to European influence leads

people's habits and customs including their religious traditions, in "Dead Men's Path", "things [also] fall apart". Such a hypothesis give rise to the following research question: "To what extent (= how much) do "things fall apart" in "Dead Man's Path"?" Phrased according to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the article attempts to show how school leads the ancestors' worshipping to be torn apart, and to "fall apart". If the expression "Fall Apart" refers to the breakdown, the term "Things" is a reference to the Igbo religious values appearing as "one of the biggest aspects of Ibo culture." (Kucharski, 2015: 1)

To demonstrate how "things fall apart" in "Dead Men's Path" because of school, sociocriticism will be used as a critical theory for textual analysis. The sociocritical approach may help the researcher to avoid being extremely subjective in his behaviour towards the selected short story, and therefore adopt, as Vladimir Nabokov propounds about the ideal reader's best way to read a short story, a "scientific coolness of judgement [which] will temper the intuitive heat [= subjectivity]." (Charters, 1991:4) So, a touch of "scientific coolness" will be brought out in the study by having recourse to Edmond Cros's concepts. Thus, only the text will be zeroed in on, because it is the depositary of the very materiality of the signifier. (Cross, 1991: 46) The essay falls into two parts. While the first section deals with a school intolerant of Igbo traditional religion, the second one shows an Igbo traditional religion at war with the school. What is at stake in the paper is that the curtain will be lifted on Occidental school's perverse effects on the "African soul"<sup>4</sup>, since it could be one major cause for Africa's underdevelopment<sup>5</sup>.

### **A School Intolerant of Igbo Traditional Religion**

With the appointment of Michael Obi as headmaster of Ndume Central School in January 1949, this rural school, which was formerly managed by the Mission authorities, changed from its status of "unprogressive school" (Achebe, 1972: 78), "[a] backward[school] in every sense of the word" (Achebe, 1972: 80), to an improved one, a modern one. Michael Obi's promotion as headmaster of Ndume Central School is not fortuitous. This choice can be justified by the fact that Michael Obi is not only "a young and energetic man" (Achebe, 1972: 78), but also because he is a brilliant teacher capable of meeting the challenge of modernization of the school. His youth, his energy, and his "sound secondary school education" (Achebe, 1972:78), are the assets which make him into a "pivotal teacher", a central pedagogue in the mission field. With a wealth of physical, intellectual and professional qualities, Michael Obi contemplates showing to his working circle his managerial competences: "I was thinking what a grand opportunity we've got at last to show these people how a school should be run." (Achebe, 1972: 79). Put differently, this appointment is a dreamed occasion for the promoted person to display to his colleagues his knowledge, his know-how and his life skills.

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to murder and suicide." James P. Draper, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1. The title of the novel derives from William Butler Yeats's poem titled "The Second Coming", written in 1919: "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." In Yeats's poem, Christian metaphors related to the Apocalypse are used and "Second Coming" symbolically refers to the ambience prevailing in post-war Europe. Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats's Figures as Reflections in Water*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> What is meant by "African soul" is simply Africa's genuine cultural, religious and spiritual values which grant Africans dignity and pride.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of "underdevelopment" refers to the poor socio-economic situation of a country where modern industrialization is limited. But Daniel Etounga-Manguelle argues that the notion of "development" is first and foremost culture-centered before being economic, technological and social. Daniel Etounga-Manguelle, in *L'Afrique a-t-elle besoin d'un programme d'ajustement culturel?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1990. Japan is a good example of a country which has become developed because of its awareness of the pivotal role of its cultural and spiritual identities.

As headmaster, Michael Obi is already turning over some ambitious projects for the school in his mind. Through his words to Nancy ('We shall make a good job of it, shan't we?')(Achebe, 1972: 78), Michael Obi's plans to turn Ndume Central School from a "benighted" school into a "new school" (Achebe, 1972: 79), is further revealed. Michael Obi's uttered words "make a good job of it", is tantamount to saying that the protagonist "had many wonderful ideas and this was an opportunity to put them into practice." (Achebe, 1972:78) One way in which the main character plans to implement these "wonderful ideas" is to embellish the school, to modernize it by growing beautiful gardens: 'We shall do our best [...] We shall have such beautiful gardens and everything will be just *modern* and delightful...'" (Achebe, 1972: 78) The morpheme "*modern*", which is italicized as a way in which the term is underlined by the author, has various progressive meanings. The first sense is related to the recent past; here, it is synonymous with the word "contemporary". The second sense is relating to the period from about 1500 to the present. But the actual meaning in which the word "modern" is used in the targeted context is totally different from the first two senses on which a system of values can be added. So the word could mean breaking with past practices related to the former administration of Ndume Central School. Viewed in this significance, the term "*modern*" undergoes a semantic migration and signifies "revolutionary", which is a desemantization or a rectification of the signification which transforms the vocable into an ideologeme<sup>6</sup>, according to Cros's redefinition of the word (Cros, 2003:163). The notion of ideologeme can be applied to the ideological functioning which is at work in the pre-textual or the social discourse. Cros's principle is that the structured organization of ideologeme is made up of socio-historical landmarks, as shown in "the tradition-modernity clash, effects of colonialism [and] apemanship prevalent in the society". (Djiman, 2013: 6) The confrontation between custom and modernity generates a false belief that African customary religion is valueless. Hence, the intolerance of school towards the Igbo traditional religion. Actually, the setting up of school as a colonial institution brings such actors as educated people to ape the white people's ways, so that what they do is not original at all. By behaving so, the latter appear as individuals alienated from their cultural values. As a result, they are neither Europeans nor genuine Africans. Michael Obi is a good example of the intellectual elite who despises Africa's traditional religion because of modernity. This one becomes his creed, something he most fervently believes in. Moreover, as can be noticed, the notion of ideologeme has an ideological role (Cros, 2003: 166), since, according to Althusser's definition in *Pour Marx* (1965), ideology is a system of representation endowed with an existence and a historical role in a given society. (Louis Althusser, quoted in Cros, 2003: 48) Cros himself considers it (ideology) as the product of a socio-historical situation. In regard to the aforementioned ideologeme, the representation at stake is a concept ("*modern*") which refers not only to Michael Obi's academic background, but also to his philosophy of life ("his passion for 'modern methods'") (Achebe, 2003: 78), with which he runs Ndume Central School, an "underdeveloped" institution, a "retrogressive" academy, which he plans to turn into a "fashionable" institute.

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<sup>6</sup> Edmond Cros redefines the concept of ideologeme: "Je redéfinirai l'idéologème comme un micro-système sémiotico-idéologique sous-jacent à une unité fonctionnelle et significative du discours. Cette dernière s'impose, à un moment donné, dans le discours social, où elle présente une récurrence supérieure à la récurrence moyenne des autres signes. Le micro-système ainsi mis en place s'organise autour de dominantes sémantiques et d'un ensemble de valeurs qui fluctuent au gré des circonstances historiques. » (Cros, 2003 : 165) (I will redefine the ideologeme as a semiotic and ideological micro-system underlying a functional and significant unit of discourse. The latter imposes itself, at a given moment, in the social discourse, where it presents a recurrence which is superior to the average recurrence of the other signs. The micro-system thus created becomes organized into semantic dominant characteristics and into a whole of values which fluctuate according to historical circumstances. (My translation)

With “modern ideas” or “modern methods”, Michael Michael Obi succeeds in modernizing the “bush school” by an enhanced pedagogy which improves students’ results, and by embellishing Ndume Central School. For “the new school” or the “modernized school” to come true, Michael Obi and his wife Nancy have devoted their entire life to the modernization project. The excerpt below enlightens the reader about the couple’s achievement:

Mr Obi put his whole life into the work, and his wife hers too. He had two aims. A high standard of teaching was insisted upon, and the school compound was to be turned into a place of beauty. Nancy’s dreamgardens came to life with the coming of the rains, and blossomed. Beautiful hibiscus and allamanda hedges in brilliant red and yellow marked out the carefully tended school compound from the rank neighbourhood bushes. (Achebe, 1972: 80)

As pointed out in the extract above, with its “dreamgardens” made up of attractive flowers, the embellished and modernized school contrasted with “the rank neighbourhood bushes” symbolizing the “Sacred Bush” whose access track is “Dead Men’s Path”. What is the latter like? Indeed, this path goes from the village to the bush through the school compound. One day, as he was admiring his accomplishments, Michael Obi was shocked to see an old woman taking the footpath. He purely and simply closes it to the villagers’ great displeasure, lest the footpath should hinder the modernization of Ndume Central School. (Achebe, 1972: 80) Such a unilateral deed expresses the main character’s refusal to allow the village dwellers to use the path again. In fact, Michael Obi does not understand why the school’s former headmasters have allowed the villagers to use the path. His utterances (“It amazes me” and “It is simply incredible”) (Achebe, 1972: 80), to one of his teachers who had been three years in the school, reveal the laxity of the school’s former heads. Though Michael Obi’s interlocutor is an educated person because he is a teacher, he explains to Michael Obi the importance of the footpath for the villagers. He says the following: “‘The path,’ said the teacher apologetically, ‘appears to be very important to them. Although it is hardly used, it connects the village shrine with their place of burial.’” (Achebe, 1972: 80) What do these words tell the reader about the person speaking? They imply that this character, whose African cultural identity remains intact despite the formal education he benefited from, is tolerant of the village people’s religious beliefs and practices carried out by the use of the footpath. This one is all the more preponderant that it links the village place of worship to the location where the villagers bury their dead, which means that the road at stake is very valuable for the inhabitants. In other words, it is the path through which the villagers practice their traditional religion by worshipping their ancestors and their gods. As a custodian of the customary religion, the priest of *Ani*<sup>7</sup> tells Michael Obi that the path’s benefits the locals. His utterances to the school headmaster read as follows:

‘Look here, my son,’ said the priest bringing down his walking-stick, ‘this path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of this village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart from it and our

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<sup>7</sup> The Igbo people are polytheistic, which means that they worship many gods. Like Chukwu who is the “supreme” god, and Agbala, the god that is able to tell the future and talk to the spirits of dead fathers, “Ani is the goddess of the earth and harvest. Many people in the Ibo village sacrifice animals to Ani to entice a good harvest for the year. She is called upon many times during the year to bless crops (i.e. the Feast of the New Yam). It is also said that it is a crime against the earth goddess (Ani) to kill a fellow clansman (chapter 13). Mike Kucharski, *Loc. Cit.*, “Religion-Things Fall Apart”, Web. 11 Feb. 2015, <https://sites.google.com/site/southwindsoribo>, page consulted on December 18, 2016. Ani is also referred to as Ala, the Alusi or goddess of the earth, fertility and mortality: “Ala (also known as Ani, Ana, Ale, and Ali in varying Igbo dialects) is the female Alusi (deity) of the earth, morality, death, and fertility in Odinani. She is the most important Alusi in the Igbo pantheon. In Odinani, Ala rules over the underworld which holds the deceased ancestors in her womb. Her name literally translates to ‘Ground’ in the Igbo language, denoting her powers over the earth and her status as the ground itself. Ala is considered the highest Alusi in the Igbo pantheon and was the first Alusi created by Chukwu, God almighty. Ala’s husband is Amadioha, the sky god.” Crayola, “Are There Any Experts On Traditional Igbo Religion? –Culture (1) Nairaland”, [www.nairaland.com/894542/there-experts-traditional-igbo-religion/1](http://www.nairaland.com/894542/there-experts-traditional-igbo-religion/1), page consulted on December 19, 2016.

ancestors visit us by itself. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born... (Achebe, 1972: 81)

The extract above highlights the three roles played by the ancestral footpath: First, the dead people leave the village by using the path; second, their forefathers call on them by the footpath; and third, the most prominent function is that the babies be born come to the village by using the ancestral path. NonyelumChibuzoMba emphasizes the three functions of "Dead Men's Path" in the following: "'Dead Men's Path' is an exposé of the belief of the Igbos in the relationship between the living and the dead ancestors and the unborn child. The path is symbolic of three realms of existence: the dead, the living and the unborn." (Mba, 2013:35) Thus, the villagers' past with "the dead", their present with "the living" and their future with "the unborn", are all linked to "Dead Men's Path". In other words, the "Departed's Road" regulates life in the village, since it is through the interconnection between these three ways of life that the village people practice their religion, which is referred to as *Odinani*<sup>8</sup>. Put differently, *Odinani* is a cult by which the dead ancestors are venerated. Not only is Michael Obi's refusal to "allow people to make a highway of [the] school compound" (Achebe, 1972: 81), tantamount to preventing the local population from practicing their religion, but also is synonymous with school's **intolerance of Igbo** traditional religion.

Michael Obi shows further his open hostility towards the ancestral footpath and the rituals associated with it by pointing out to the priest of *Ani* that the school cannot be used as a motorway by the villagers, and by suggesting him to build another pathway which does not cross the school yard:

'I am sorry,' said the young headmaster. 'But the school compound cannot be a thoroughfare. It is against our regulations. I would suggest you're constructing another path, skirting our premises. We can even get our boys to help in building it. I don't suppose the ancestors will find the little detour too burdensome. (Achebe, 1972: 82)

In the passage above Michael Obi's suggestion about the construction of another footway is highly problematic because it does not take into account the reality of facts. Really, if an entity should relocate, it should be the school and not *Odinani*. Why? Because, as shown in the words of the priest of *Ani* ('this path was here before you were born and before your father was born), the footpath had existed long before the school was constructed. So, since the school came later into Igbo-land, the quarrel could be justly solved only if it could relocate. This way the dispute over the path will be fairly resolved because no entity should be put first; on the contrary, it would be unfair to ask the village dwellers to build up another track that goes around the school yard. Furthermore, Michael Obi's terms ("We can even get our boys to help in building it" and "I don't suppose the ancestors will find the little detour too burdensome"), are words worthy of a mocker. He laughs at *Odinani* since he suggests asking school boys for their aid in constructing a new trackway, and he even makes fun of the forefathers by presuming that the small diversion will not cause any problems to them. Moreover, the centuries-old values attached to the path are deprived of originality with the proposal about schoolchildren's helping to build it anew. Such a trivialization denotes the idea that Michael Obi does not take the path seriously. In any case, Michael Obi shows that

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<sup>8</sup> "Odinani (Igbo: *òdìṅàṅì*) comprises the traditional religious practices and cultural beliefs of the Igbo people of southern Nigeria", Uju Afulezy, "On Odinani, the Igbo Religion", Niger Delta Congress, Nigeria, April 03, 2010, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odinani>, page consulted on December 19, 2016. Odinani or "O di n'Ani" in a literal sense means the following: "It is anchored on the Earth Deity, a creation of the Supreme Creator". The four complex constituents of the cosmos such as "Okike" (Creation), "Alusi" (Supernatural Forces or Deities), "Mmuo" (Spirit) and "Uwa" (World) are the fundamentals of Odinani. To these elements, into which the cosmos is divided according to the philosophy of the Igbo traditional religion, the golden rule of religion related to the useful coexistence on earth can be added. "The Fundamentals of Odinani (Igbo Religion)" by Omenani, on Nov. 12, 2012, [www.nairaland.com/549733/fundamentals-odinani-igbo-religion](http://www.nairaland.com/549733/fundamentals-odinani-igbo-religion), page consulted on December 19, 2016.

he has no spirit of compromise since he qualifies the villagers' footpath as a "thoroughfare", a "highway", which is a road hyperbole by which he overemphasizes the issue raised by the use of the path. Here again, the vocable "thoroughfare" proceeds from Cros's concept of "discursive formation" in which the language is reified so much so that the latter expresses the opposite of what it means. The term "footpath" denotes a very small and insignificant way as opposed to a "thoroughfare" or a "highway", which is a main road, a public road, especially a main direct road. Not only does the overstatement of the "footpath" viewed as a motorway, express Michael Obi's refusal to "re-open" the path to the villagers, but also it means that he does not care about their traditional religious practices. But most important, this road hyperbole reveals that the protagonist is hostile towards the worship of the ancestors. Faced with such an antagonism and such bigotry, the priest of *Ani*, who is an embodiment of African traditional culture<sup>9</sup>, teaches a lesson of religious tolerance to the headmaster. His words read as follows: "[...] If you re-open the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about. What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch." (Achebe, 1972: 81-82)

The old man's words ("What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch"), is an Igbo proverb which encapsulates his people's lore, a popular wisdom conveying social values. (Cros, 2003:123-124) Indeed, through this precept the priest calls Michael Obi's attention to the fact that he is an intellectual who shows no sense of concession, no sense of tolerance of the religious practices of the villagers. The animal metaphor, which is built up by the use of two types of large birds, the "hawk" and the "eagle", suggests that both kinds of birds of prey should be allowed to sit on the same narrow branch. Each sort of bird should have its place on the tree. In other words, both animals should coexist, and should tolerate each other. In the same way, school should play its role of instructing the village children, while accepting the villagers' traditional religion, the age-old practices of their (fore)fathers. As an interdiscursive event or a stock phrase characteristic of a transindividual subject, or belonging to a transhistorical and well-known wisdom (Cros, 2003: 39), the order ("Let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch") is both a proverbial sociogramme and a widespread ideologeme. As a renowned sociogramme, it expresses the common belief of the Igbo people. If Marc Agenot's definition is referred to, the notion of traditional ideologeme can be used to qualify this apophthegm, since it is defined as every maxim which underlies an utterance of which subject narrows down an articulatory relevance field. (Cros, 2003: 163) Indeed, through the adage, "egbeberegobere" ("Let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch"), the Igbo communicate the golden rule of their religion: Live and let live. (Omenani, 2012: 1) By the quoted saying, Achebe's people express their religious philosophy about the constructive coexistence which is needed on earth. Another proverb ("nkesiibeyaebenegosiyaebe o ga-ebe") (whichever says the other shall not perch, may it show the other where to perch), which is the "new-testament" version of the previous aphorism ("Let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch"), suggests that no individual should forbid his fellow being from having an anchor on the earth. This non-violent *modus Operandi* (a particular method of working) related to the Igbo ethos calling for a *modus Vivendi* (an arrangement that is made between people who have very different opinions or ideas, so that they can live together without arguing), is very much like showing the other cheek. (Omenani, 2012: 1) Turning the other cheek, when you are hit on the one cheek, refers to Jesus Christ's calls for tolerance and forgiveness in the New Testament. The protagonist's refusal to "re-open" the footpath in order to allow *Odinani* to be practiced by the villagers reveals Ndume Central School's intolerance towards the Igbo traditional religion. And since *Odinani* cannot exist and be practiced anymore because of its closure by Michael Obi, it could be concluded that "things fall apart" in "Dead

<sup>9</sup> Colonialism has brought about a conflict of cultures whose manifestations appear in the antagonism between Michael Obi, the headmaster of Ndume Central School, symbol of the Western civilization, and the village priest of *Ani*, guardian and incarnation of the African traditional culture", KOMENAN Casimir, "La crise des valeurs culturelles africaines dans "Dead Men's Path" de Chinua Achebe", in *Remembering Chinua Achebe; Op. Cit.*, p. 87.



Men's Path". The closing down of the footpath is synonymous with the loss of its values and importance, which also reveals its failure. Faced with Michael Obi's hostility, marginalization, and bigotry, the locals do not cross their arms; they react in such a way that what could be observed is an Igbo traditional religion at war with school.

### **An Igbo Traditional Religion at War with School**

When asked to "re-open the path" in order to avoid any quarrel, Michael Obi turns down the village priest of *Ani's* request bluntly. This blunt refusal can be accounted for by the protagonist's contention that dead men do not need footpaths, and also that the entire notion developed by the priest is fantastical. It is hardly believable in that Michael Obi's responsibility as a headmaster is to instruct the village children to mock at such superstitious beliefs. To the old man, he tells the following: "The whole purpose of our school [...] is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas." (Achebe, 1972: 81) From Michael Obi's opinion, "Dead Men's" request for a "Path" is a weird belief. For him, it is impossible for dead people to physically walk on "footpaths", since death is the end of every sensitiveness and motion. The activity of moving one's body about can only be done by the living, not the dead. That is the reason why, Michael Obi's educational mission is to bring the village school children to jeer at these religious practices, and flatly oppose them. As a matter of fact, Michael Obi holds the view that the worship of ancestors has nothing to do with school. To his mind, school and the veneration of ancestors are two things which do not go hand in hand. Such a standpoint can only be explained by Michael Obi's Cartesian spirit<sup>10</sup>, which accounts for his fascination for the Cartesians' methods referred to as "modern methods" in the story being studied. As a supporter of Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*<sup>11</sup>, in which common sense or reason, and above all the mathematician method based on scientific rigour, underlie the search for truth, Michael Obi cannot be convinced that a mere footpath is life for a whole village. In any case, the four rules of the Cartesian method, which read as follows: the rule of evidence (not accepting anything without examining it, and something is true only if it resists doubt); the rule of analysis (a problem is better solved when its difficulty is split up into its simplest elements); the rule of synthesis (a rigorous order is required for constructing knowledge); and the rule of numbering or enumeration (being assured that no element of deduction is forgotten in the reasoning), bring the protagonist to be skeptical about dead parents' leaving the world of the living by using a path; about forefathers' paying a visit to their descendants by a pathway; and about babies coming into life by a footpath. Put differently, Michael Obi is not at all interested in metaphysical matters concerning the traditional religion of the Igbo people. He seems to forget that even Descartes who resorts to the discursive method in order to control his reason and look for truth in the sciences, holds a metaphysics<sup>12</sup> by which the existence of God and the human soul are proved. No dialectics, a method for investigating and talking over concepts so as to discover the truth in which two conflicting notions are contrasted in order to pinpoint an answer encapsulating both of them, is experienced by Michael Obi who is portrayed as a brilliant intellectual. His intelligence does not allow him to go beyond the opposition between modernity and tradition. Cartesianism to which he belongs leads him to reject everything that is "traditional" and "old" in the Igbo microcosm. It is no wonder that Michael Obi is known for "his denigration of 'these old and superannuated people in the teaching field who would be better employed as traders in the Onitsha market'". (Achebe, 1972: 78-79) The words "old" (meaning not new or having existed or been used for a long time), and "superannuated"

<sup>10</sup> A Cartesian spirit is a frame of mind which is characterized by clearness, logic and rigour of the thought. The term "Cartesian" is connected with the French philosopher René Descartes and his ideas about philosophy and mathematics.

<sup>11</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, Paris, Hachette, 1840.

<sup>12</sup> Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy which attempts to comprehend and depict the nature of truth, life, and reality.

(signifying too old for work or to be used for their original purpose), with which Michael Obi qualifies his colleagues, show that the main character spurns old-fashioned people and their ideas. As a result, the terms “old” and “superannuated” are an indirect allusion to the headmaster’s “modern attitude”, which is the opposite of his work mates’ “outmoded behaviour”. Also, it is little wonder that Michael Obi is self-confessed for being straightforward in blaming his fellow workers for being narrow-minded: “He was outspoken in his condemnation of the narrow views of these older and often less-educated ones.” (Achebe, 1972: 78) Michael Obi, who treats his co-workers as being “old”, “superannuated”, “less-educated”, and also as having “narrow views”, can but despise and strongly rebuff the illiterate villagers’ traditional religious beliefs.

Michael Obi’s question to one of his teachers expresses even more his rejection of the old-fashioned beliefs considered as superstitious ideas: ““And what has that [the path and its traditional values related to the veneration of the ancestors] got to do with the school?”” asked the headmaster.” (Achebe, 1972: 80) The couple of words made up of such notional polarities as “that (= ancestors’ worship)/school” are ideosemes<sup>13</sup> directly transcribed in the text. These are semiotico-ideological articulations which play a pivotal role between society and textuality (Cros, 2003: 38). Through these ideosemes “that/school”, the sociocritical reading is not interested in what the text signifies (the opposition between the Igbo traditional religion and the school as an institution), but rather in what it transcribes, that is it finds its interest in the modalities of incorporation of history within the literary text, not at the level of the contents but on the plan of the forms, meaning the language and its manifestations. Therefore, these ideosemes are morphic elements linked with discursive practices. (Cros, 2003: 68) Worshipping ancestors was a socio-cultural and religious practice in the Igbo traditional society. As part and parcel of the Igbo culture, the ancestral veneration is a custom of which objective function consists in making the collectivity to be deep-rooted in the conscience that it has of its identity<sup>14</sup>. History, however, makes this Igbo culture and spiritual practice appear as the product of political issues, and ideological contradictions, with fluctuating contours, constantly rectified by the new social or historical questions which lead to fundamental representations or to renunciations. (Cros, 2003: 113) Such is the case of Michael Obi who renounces the veneration of ancestors because of his faith in school and its mission of education. Such a vision about *Odinanic* but lead the headmaster to decide upon the shutdown of the footpath. The narrator gives an account of how the closure has been carried out: “Heavy sticks were planted closely across the path at the two places where it entered and left the school premises. These were further strengthened with barbed wire.” (Achebe, 1972: 81) The words “heavy sticks” and “barbed wire” materialize the termination or discontinuation of the ancestral footpath. As a fence meant to protect the school’s precincts from any intrusion, the “barbed wire”, which is a material related to the white man’s ways, is wired with sharp points spaced evenly along it. As a protection device introduced by colonialism in Africa, notably in Igbo-land, “the barbed wire” fence is part of Michael Obi’s “modern methods”, since it is a barrier used to prevent entry into a place.

The protagonist’s aforementioned words represent an insult to the traditional African religion. As a result, it can be said of Michael Obi to be evil like the white man, as Okonkwo thinks, because the latter has defied the gods of

<sup>13</sup> For Edmond Cros, as a structuring element of a social practice directly transferred in the phenotext, the “ideoseme” is therefore an articulator, which is at the same time semiotic, inasmuch as it has structure systems of iconic or linguistic signs which are the products of representations to which every social practice is reduced, and discursive since it is directly carried in the phenotextuality, where it plays a structuring function of the same nature. In Edmond Cros, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>14</sup> “Religion is one thing that helps unify the Ibo village by sticking to their traditional values and by strengthening their ancestral ties.” In Mike Kucharski, *Loc. Cit.*, <https://sites.google.com/site/southwindsoribo>, page consulted on December 18, 2016.



Umuofia. (Mba, 2013: 38) Actually, when Okonkwo came back from his exile, he felt disappointed and complained thus in *Things Fall Apart*: "all our gods are weeping, Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping and all others; our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes." (Achebe, 1958: 143) In the same way, the ancestors are crying in "Dead Men's Path" because of Michael Obi's affront. Through his utterance ("Dead men do not require footpaths"), Michael Obi rejects the practice of spiritualism, the fact of conversing with a dead person. He seems to have wiped the slate clean, since he has forgotten that in the African culture death is not considered as the end of things. BiragoDiop held this view when he wrote that those who are dead have never left, they have changed their living place. (Diop, 1960: 64 and 66). The practice of spiritism brings characters like the village priest of *Ani* to use burial places as a means to meet and have conversations with the dead people by the intermediary of rites. (Tola, 2016: 38) That is the reason why the footpath "connects the village shrine with their place of burial". Moreover, the protagonist's words and act of closure of the footpath could be considered as *ajibeto Any*, the goddess of the earth, morality, death and fertility in the Igbo religion. By behaving so, the headmaster has committed a taboo in the community, a crime against the Earth Deity; he has desecrated *Any* because of the abomination committed on her earth. Such a detestation is called "*ajonjo or AruAla, AluAni*"<sup>15</sup> in *Odinani*.

Faced with Michael Obi's rejection of their beliefs, the village priest of *Ani* tells the headmaster that he may not believe in their traditional religion, but what they do in practicing such rituals is to follow the age-old practices of their ancestors: "but we follow the practices of our fathers." (Achebe, 1972: 81) It should be noted that as a minister of the Earth goddess, the priest of *Ani* is a "transindividual subject", or a "collective subject" (Cros, 2003: 105), because he represents the village community and its creed. What the priest of *Ani* has said is what Cros calls "discourse" in the sense that it refers to the specificity of the discursive practice of a "transindividual subject". This "discourse" ("but we follow the practices of our fathers") reveals the view that whatever Michael Obi may think about the ancestral path and its usefulness for the villagers, what matters to the villagers is that they perpetuate the religious practices and the culture of their forefathers. But the same "discourse" could also be judged to be a religious "sociolect"<sup>16</sup>, which is defined by Pierre Zima as a "discourse constituent of the semiotic competence of the cultural subject [...] and which organizes itself as a whole marked by a dynamic dominant characteristic" (Zima quoted in Cros, 2003: 38-39). The aforementioned "discourse" redistributes the "ideological formation", which Zima names in his own terms the "sociolinguistic situation" (Zima quoted in Cros, 2003: 38-39) of an era. But instead of using the expression "sociolinguistic situation", Cros has recourse to the phrase "discursive formation" (Cros, 2003: 198), which is generated by a "social formation", that is to say a social category, by the intermediary of the corresponding "ideological formation". Through the concept of "discursive formation", the reader can note that there is a reification of language which makes words lose their initial senses and thus become antonyms. To put things in other words, the signifier as well as the signified has no timeless value; the linguistic sign changes according to the dominant ideology. (Djiman, 2010: 35-36) In point of fact, in view of "school" and its "civilizing mission", which are words associated with ideological considerations, the ancestral practices become priceless

<sup>15</sup> Crayola, *Loc. Cit.*, [www.nairaland.com/894542/there-experts-traditional-igbo-religion/1](http://www.nairaland.com/894542/there-experts-traditional-igbo-religion/1), page consulted on December 19, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> For Greimas and Courtés, « Les sociolectes sont [...] des sortes de sous-langages reconnaissables par les variations sémiotiques qui les opposent les uns aux autres [...] et par les connotations sociales qui les accompagnent. [...] Ils se constituent en taxinomies sociales sous-jacentes aux rapports sociaux. », Greimas and Courtés, quoted in Edmond Cros, *Op. Cit.*, p. 198. "The sociolects are [...] kinds of under-languages recognizable by the semiotic variations opposing the ones to the others [...] and by the social connotations which accompany them. [...] They are composed of social taxinomies underlying social relationships." (My translation)

immaterial assets; they are viewed as things of no value. That is why, to the village priest of *Ani*, they simply represent objects of religious and cultural consumption which they follow because their parents did so in the past. To show the priest of *Ani* that those religious practices are things of no importance, Michael Obi calls them “pagan ritual[s]”, which the Government Education Officer might see, and disapprove of on the occasion of his imminent visit to the school: “What will the Government Education Officer think of this when he comes to inspect the school next week? The villagers might [...] decide to use the schoolroom for a pagan ritual during the inspection.” (Achebe, 1972: 80-81). By the noun phrase “a pagan ritual”, not only does Michael Obi claim for his membership of the Christian community, but also shows his rejection of the ancestral veneration. In other words, Michael Obi means that the rites practiced by the villagers have nothing to do with religion in the sense of Christianity. This also signifies that the locals worship old gods which have nothing to do with the faith of Christians. By acting so, Michael Obi shares the white man’s racist philosophy which runs that in (black) Africa, particularly in Igbo-land, there is a “spiritual void” (Achebe, quoted in Charters, 1991: 9). This means that (black) Africans do not have any religion, and may not have any culture at all.

Michael Obi’s option for the Old Testament’s philosophy of retaliatory action and intolerance (an eye for an eye (and a tooth for a tooth)), has been detrimental to his interests. His religious intolerance and his hostility against the village dwellers’ traditional beliefs have brought about far-reaching drawbacks for the school, and for the village inhabitants. As a matter of fact, two days after the closure of the footpath, a young woman giving birth in the village died in childbed, because the path by which the child was supposed to come in to be born had been closed by the headmaster. According to a diviner who was consulted at once, the death was due to the fact that the ancestors felt offended by the “thick sticks” and “barbed wire” used by Michael Obi to close the pathway: “Two days later a young woman in the village died in childbed. A diviner was immediately consulted and he prescribed heavy sacrifices to propitiate ancestors insulted by the fence.” (Achebe, 1972: 82) Such is the first downside of the protagonist’s refusal to “re-open” the ancestral footway. The second disadvantage concerns Ndume Central School, namely its partial destruction by the villagers who have vandalized the precincts. Not only have these discontented people trodden on the nice hedges and also on the beautiful flowers, but also they have demolished one of the school buildings, as shown in the narrator’s words: “Obi woke up the next morning among the ruins of his work. The beautiful hedges were torn up not just near the path but right round the school, the flowers trampled to death and one of the school buildings pulled down...” (Achebe, 1972: 82) The “new school”, which Michael Obi and his wife Nancy have dreamed about and achieved by hard work, has been destroyed. The renewed, embellished and modernized school can now be compared to a field of ruins. Worse, it has become a battlefield where a tribal-war situation has broken out between the school and the village. The unpleasant report from the white Supervisor, who calls on the school on that very day of the conflict, underlines the conflict between the school/the headmaster and *Odinani*/the village:

That day, the white Supervisor came to inspect the school and wrote a nasty report on the state of the premises but more seriously about the ‘tribal-war situation developing between the school and the village, arising in part from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster. (Achebe, 1972: 82)

Two important things can be noted in the Government Education Officer’s “nasty report”. First, he highlights the state of the premises of Ndume School, which has become the shadow of itself because of the vandalism of the hedges and the beautiful flowers. Second, he writes down that the tribal conflict which has broken out between the school and the village is partially caused by “the misguided zeal of the headmaster”. Here, it should be observed that the white Supervisor

weighs his words when he writes that this ethnic battle is caused “in part [by] the misguided zeal of the new headmaster”. The reader may wonder why not as a whole, but “in part”? “In part”, simply because the headmaster has failed to play the pacification card, the appeasement card, because he has been blinded by his “misguided zeal”. The “misguided zeal of the new headmaster” is nothing but his eager desire in going for his goal of a perfect school, for an irreproachable school which leads him astray. His “zeal” misleads him on account of his lack of compromise, which means that he should have settled the dispute by giving up some demands. Michael Obi has also failed to understand that his surrender to the request of the priest of *Ani* by re-opening the ancestral footpath, which is synonymous with his acceptance of the age-old practices of the villagers’ forefathers, would have prevented the cultural and religious clash to have happened. Furthermore, in Achebe’s “Dead Men’s Path”, it can be noticed that it is school as a colonial institution, which opposes the first religion of black Africans in 1949, in Igbo-land. Therefore, in “Dead Men’s Path”, the 1940s are shown as a time at which Africans lived at “the crossroads of cultures”, according to Achebe’s own expression. What is being meant by this phrase is that Africans have reached a period of time at which they must make a decision about whether to follow their own culture and religion or abandon them for the white man’s ways. If a short story writer like Achebe chooses the first option, and shows “a fascination for the ritual and the life on the other arm of the crossroads” (Chinua Achebe, quoted in Charters, 1991: 9), which is great interest in his ancestors’ religious and societal values, a character like Michael Obi opts for Western faith and culture, a civilization at variance with African tradition. Michael Obi’s choice results in spiritual intolerance which has triggered off a war which the Igbo traditional religion has waged on Ndume Central School. Consequently, Michael Obi appears as a cultural subject<sup>17</sup> mainly responsible for the religious clash broached in Achebe’s “Dead Men’s Path”. The discontinuation of “Dead Men’s Path” is a sacrilegious act which leads the sacred Igbo practices to be torn apart, that is, destroyed, and to fall apart, that is failing thoroughly. *Odinani*’s failure, which appears in the recourse to violence as a means to solve the dispute, is reminiscent of Okonkwo’s fiasco in *Things Fall Apart*, where the latter also failed doubly on account of his use of lethal violence against the colonizer’s messengers and also against himself, that is by committing suicide. From such aggressive deeds, it could be inferred that things such as Igbo culture and traditional religion collapse in *Things Fall Apart* and “Dead Men’s Path”. The footpath’s physical death reveals *Odinani*’s spiritual death. As a consequence, the ethos of the Igbo people has been deeply affected, for there is no worse decease than the metaphysical demise.

## CONCLUSIONS

Eventually, with the shutdown of the ancestral footpath by Michael Obi, it could be said that *Odinani* has really fallen apart in Achebe’s “Dead Men’s Path. The war that has broken out between Ndume Central School and Igbo traditional religion, has been caused by the new headmaster’s bigotry. Not only has the protagonist’s narrow-mindedness made *Odinanito* become obsolete, but also Ndume Central School has not been unharmed in the conflict. The modernized school has been ransacked and its head’s respectability tarnished. Here, the village priest of *Ani*’s lesson of religious tolerance taught to Michael Obi gains full meaning. If the latter had “let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch”, the dispute between Ndume Central School and *Odinani* would have been avoided.

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<sup>17</sup> Edmond Cros defines the term « cultural subject » as the subject who is perceived and expresses himself or herself as an “I”, who appears more or less in an illusionary manner, as a conscious responsible person for his say or for his deed, either as a “me” submitted to the gaze or undergoing the action. In Edmond Cros, *Op; Cit.*, 2003, p. 105.

Blinded by his passion for “modern methods”, Michael Obi failed to assimilate the Igbo precept conducting to peaceful social coexistence according to which he should exist, practice his philosophy, and let the other people live, too, by allowing them to follow their forefathers’ religion. Failure to implement this Igbo golden rule of *Odinani* promoting tolerance and mutual coexistence has brought about the spiritual clash in “Dead Men’s Path”. School and *Odinani* (the ancestral worship) should not be rigidly separated or opposed, but they should rather be allowed to coexist together, each of them playing its specific mission for the well-being of the community. Such is the philosophy of Achebe, the great short story writer who defines himself as a “worshipper of ancestors<sup>18</sup>”, whose role is to preserve the traditional values encapsulated in the Igbo culture<sup>19</sup>. Returning to these customary principles by carrying out “Cultural Adjustment Programmes<sup>20</sup>”, as suggested by Etounga-Manguelle, is a sine qua non for African nations to emerge from “Sustainable Underdevelopment<sup>21</sup>”, and embark determinedly on the road to “Sustainable Development<sup>22</sup>”. For, if school is a development factor, the fact remains that it has been one of the reasons for Africa’s backwardness because of its perverse effects on African civilization and spirituality.

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<sup>18</sup> N. Djangoné-Bi et R. Okafor, « Chinua Achebe ou la recherche d’une esthétique négro-africaine », in *Colloque sur Littérature et Esthétiques Négro-africaines*, Abidjan, NEA, p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> « It is the culture that a people have that embodies their values, those aesthetic and moral qualities that they consider important in their contact and interaction with one another, and with the universe. A culture then embodies a community’s structure of values, the basis of their world outlook, and how they see themselves and their place in the universe and in relation to other communities. It is the values that a people have that are the basis of their collective and individual image of self, their identity as a people, since culture is an ideological expression of the totality of the activities.” NgugiwaThiong’o, *Writers in Politics, Essays*, London, Heinemann, p. 9, 1981.

<sup>20</sup> The failure of IMF’s or World Bank’s « Structural Adjustment Programmes », which were economic reform programmes meant for helping countries facing great economic difficulties to get out of their economic crisis, leads Daniel Etounga-Manguelle, a Cameroonian economist, to suggest “Cultural Adjustment Programmes” in order to allow African countries to achieve true development based on change brought about by a “humanistic culture”. Internal regeneration by which Africans remain themselves while belonging to their contemporaneity, radical alteration of minds, and culture adjusted to modern realities will bring about technology transfer by Africans themselves.

<sup>21</sup> By this expression what is being meant is that Africa’s past, present and future remain unchanged. In other words, it refers to a state of African countries in which poverty and lack of significant modern industry last for a long time.

<sup>22</sup> The 1987 Brundtland Report defines « Sustainable Development » as « development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. », Brundtland Commission (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. United Nations.

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