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Africa and Europe in the World collapses from Chinua ACHEBE

DR SÃA LENO¹

ABSTRACT

The World Collapses is a fictional narrative that describes the contact between the Ibo of Nigeria and the European missionaries who came to evangelize them. The first moments of this contact were characterized by extreme violence on the part of both the Ibo and the white missionaries. With the complicity of their oracle, the abame men kill the first white missionary who came to propagate the Christian religion. The white missionaries accompanied by their black men of hands will slaughter all the inhabitants of Abame gathered on the day of the market. After these moments of violence, the white missionaries will eventually establish their religion thanks to the too rigid stratification of the social structure ibo: the left behind by traditional practices, the worthless men and the parents of the twins, will be the first to adhere to the new religion. The logical continuation of this accession is the establishment of the Catholic Church and with it, that of the new school and the colonial administration.

Keywords: Collapse, tradition, contact, violence, missionaries, world

I. INTRODUCTION

The African novel is one of the most capable literary genres to translate the facts of African societies. It allows you to know certain specificities of a society from which a novelist was inspired. A work of fiction, the novel seeks to account in a pictorial way, of the lived reality. "It is not a reflection of it, but a vision of the world that the novelist develops from a few key images" (MOURALIS Bernard, 1984. Literature and Development, p.491, Paris, Editions Silex).

It is therefore a vision of the world that the novelist proposes to us in his novel and, through the characters and their actions, we will be able to appreciate the relationship between the romanesque work and the social reality that is his source of inspiration.

¹ Institut Supérieur de l'Information et de la Communication de Kountia, Département du Journalisme, Conakry, Guinée. [Higher Institute of Information and Communication of Kountia, Department of Journalism, Conakry, Guinea]

We can thus observe that the originality of a novelist lies less in the theme developed in his work than in the way of organizing the plot of his novel.

"We know that, with the exception of cinema, the novel is perhaps of all the arts the one that most closely participates in the social phenomena that it aims to both translate and reveal. Stendhal already believed that a 'novel is a mirror wandered along the road', but one can think that this function of witnessing the social landscape is added another, much more important, which is the desire of men to situate themselves in a historical continuity and therefore to find at the level of the novelistic narrative their most concrete concerns" (CHERVIER Jacques, 1984, *Negro Literature*, p. 98, Paris, Editions Armand Colin).

In *The World Collapses*, Chinua ACHEBE's first novel published in English under the title *Things fall apart* (1958) and published in French in 1966 by *African Presence*, the author describes in great detail the first contact of the Ibo people of Nigeria with white missionaries.

The Collapsing World is an enigmatic and at the same time realistic title. At first reading, he conveys a meaning that goes beyond the reality he expresses. The reader could thus think of the collapse of an entire world, in the broadest sense of the word, of humanity itself, if he clings to the nominal syntagma "the world", and it is at this level that his enigmatic character appears.

When we carefully read the novel, however, we will discover this limited reality that the title translates. Indeed, a world is collapsing, but it is not all of Nigeria, nor all of Africa, nor even all humanity, but an ethnic group, a social entity of Nigeria which, as a result of contact with Europeans, is collapsing. It is in fact the disintegration, the collapse of customs, customs, beliefs and the social organization of the Ibo as a result of the establishment in their territory of Western missionaries. It is a story about the collapse of one culture as a result of contact with another that is totally foreign.

Some research has already been done on novel production in general by internationally renowned authors such as MOURALIS Bernard: 1980 and CHEVRIER Jacques: 1984. Other research has focused either on the critical study of Chinua ACHEBE's novel *The World Collapses*, or on a superficial approach to the conflict of religions developed there. This is FOUET Francis-RENAUDEAU Régine: 1980 and MORICEAU Annie-ROUCH Alain: 1983. All the publications of these authors deal superficially with the disintegration of the ibo culture following the establishment of the Western culture.

The originality of this article on "Africa and Europe in *The World Collapses* of Chinua ACHEBE" lies in the fact that it highlights the themes characteristic of the collapse of traditional ibo culture, including the brutality of contact, the conflict of religions and the

establishment of Western structures.

II. METHOD

Since this article is about a novel, we have used the qualitative method through documentary research and analysis of the content of the novel *The World Collapses* by Chinua ACHEBE.

Documentary research has allowed us to review the literature on the theme of this article, "Africa and Europe in *The World Collapses* of Chinua ACHEBE". These are documents that circumscribe the subject in general.

The same qualitative method allowed us to do a content analysis of the novel *Le Monde collapses* to highlight the illustrative axes of the decomposition of this traditional society.

To carry out this research, we have set ourselves a general objective and specific objectives that include:

(A) General Objective

The general objective of this article is to understand the different stages of the collapse of traditional ibo culture following contact with white missionaries.

(B) Specific goals

The specific objectives to be achieved are:

- Understanding the stratification of traditional ibo society;
- To understand the means used by missionaries to establish the Christian religion in ibo.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT OF THE NOVEL

Thus, the collapse of traditional ibo structures will be developed first through the brutality of contact and the conflict of religions and in a second, the Christian religion which will logically result in the establishment of the foreign school and the colonial administration.

(A) Contact: Features

The first meeting between the Ibo people and The European missionaries first aroused curiosity before leading to cruelty. This contact between men of different races and cultures was not smooth, without problems.

1. Brutality

In the novel *The World Collapses* by Nigerian writer Chinua ACHEBE, brutality manifests itself from the beginning of contact. While Okonkwo, the hero of the novel, was in exile in Mbanta in his maternal family, after the involuntary murder of the child of the deceased Ezeulu

during his funeral, Okonkwo and his maternal uncle Uchendu learn, through the Obierika Canal, the first violent manifestations of this contact.

In fact, the first white missionary who came to Abame was cruelly killed by the natives, for he was considered a danger to the survival of the clan, on the advice of the oracle, the deity charged with predicting the future of the community.

Obierika will recount in great detail the circumstances of this unfortunate event, during an interview between old Ochendu, Okonkwo and himself:

"He wasn't an albino. It was quite different... and he rode an iron horse. The first who saw him ran away, but he stood there giving them friendly signs. In the end those who feared nothing approached and even touched him. The elders consulted their oracle and told them that the stranger would break their clan and spread the destruction among them... So they killed the White man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree, for he seemed to want to save himself to go and call the friends of man" (The World Collapses, pages 167-168).

This bloody and deadly welcome reserved for the white man with the implicit complicity of the oracle of Abame, is contrary to African hospitality. Traditionally in the African environment, the foreigner is greeted with humanism and all possible honors. Faced with this stranger unknown and different from the Black, curiosity gives way to cruelty and the instinct to preserve the authenticity ibo will lead to the tragic death of this white missionary, despite his friendly attitudes towards the inhabitants of Abame.

Such brutality could only irritate the wise Uchendu, who blamed the inhabitants of Abame for their animosity:

"Ochendu cried audibly. Then he burst out:

- Never kill a man who says nothing. These men of Abame were fools. What did they know about this man?... These men of Abame were fools" (Ibidem, pages 169-170).

Indeed, as Uchendu says, these men of Abame knew nothing about this stranger. They should have approached him and listened to him to understand his motivations, despite the difficulties of intercomprehension. This violence directed against an unknown person who, moreover, has said nothing and done nothing wrong, is a threat to the balance of the clan. Faced with the cruel death of one of their own, one could only expect the violent reaction of the white men, for in agreement with their followers, they will massacre the inhabitants of Abame gathered almost all on the occasion of their market day.

"The iron horse was always attached to the sacred cotton tree. Then one fine morning, three

white men led by a troop of ordinary men ... came to the clan. They saw the iron horse and left (...).

During many weeks of trading, nothing else happened. They have a big market in Abame every other day, and (...) the whole clan meets there. That's when it happened. The three white men and a large number of other men have surrounded the market (...) And they started shooting. Everyone was killed except the old and sick who were at home" (Ibidem, pages 168-169).

Okonkwo will also call the inhabitants of Abame fools, but not in the same context as his uncle Uchendu. If for Uchendu their imbecility is explained by the fact of killing an unknown man besides a stranger who said nothing and who did nothing wrong, therefore an innocent, for Okonkwo they are fools because after the murder of the white man, they had to expect the reaction of this man's friends and always be ready for war, especially since their oracle had predicted: "They were fools," Okonkwo said after a pause. They had been warned of the danger that was coming. They should have armed themselves with their rifles and machetes even on their way to the market" (Ibidem, page 170).

But if the violence of the first moments of contact is at the level of men, the second stage of this violence will concern customs, beliefs, mores, in a word the culture of the Ibo: everything will be destroyed to be replaced by the new values, those Western, hence the full meaning of the title of the novel.

"The action of the novel taking place after 1850, at the time of the arrival of the Whites in the Niger Delta, ... reading the *World Collapses* thus allows us to see how the penetration of the West in Ibo society was achieved, and by what means an external civilization was able to establish itself in a universe as solidly structured as that of the Ibo" (Annie MORICEAU and Alain ROUCH, 1983, *Critical study of the novel Le Monde collapses*, page 67, Fernand Nathan, African News Editions).

2. The Conflict of Religions

The conflict of religions, an illustration of the conflict of cultures, is one of the most debated themes in written African literature. He was thus an important source of inspiration for such famous authors as Mongo BETI (*The Poor Christ of Bomba*, 1956), Chinua ACHEBE (*The World Collapses*, 1958) and Sheikh Hamidou KANE (*The Ambiguous Adventure*, 1961). These three authors have highlighted, through their novelistic works, the confrontation between traditional African and Western religion.

"It is significant that this conflict of religions is precisely the subject of three of the greatest works of African literature and that they were written by men as different of origin, language,

culture and religion as Mongo BETI, Chinua ACHEBE and Sheikh Hamidou KANE" (FOUET Francis - RENAUDEAU Régine, 1980. African Literature, Uprooting, page 215, Paris. The New African Editions).

What is interesting about the novel *Le Monde* collapses is the way in which the novelist Chinua ACHEBE relates the conflict of cultures through the conflict of religions. On the one hand, there are white missionaries who, in their process of evangelization, want to establish Christianity in the ibo environment and, on the other hand, there is the opposition of the indigenous peoples to any other form of belief different from their own. They do not intend to boycott the clan's ancestral beliefs.

Thus the arrival of the missionaries in Mbanta will cause great emotion at the level of the population.

"The arrival of the missionaries had caused considerable emotion in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one of them was a white man. Men and women, everyone went out to see the White (...) When they were all gathered together, the white man began to speak to them. He spoke to them through an interpreter who was an Ibo (...) And he told them about this new God, the creator of the whole universe and of all men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone.

A deep murmur ran through the crowd when he said that" (Chinua ACHEBE, *Le Monde* collapses, Pages 174-175).

The logical continuation of these words of the white man will be the immediate reaction of the Ibo who do not hear that this stranger calls their gods false gods, even if he later explains to them that the true God lives in heaven and that all men and women, after their death, will be judged by him. Deeply surprised and disturbed in his belief an old ibo is thus curious to know the true nature of this God of which the White speaks:

"At that moment, an old man said he had a question to ask. Which is this god of the rest of you, he asked, the goddess of the earth, or the god of heaven, Amadiora of thunder, or what? »

The interpreter spoke to the White and immediately gave his answer. "All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deception who tell you to kill your fellow men and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and he possesses the earth, heaven, you and me and all of us" (Ibidem, page 176).

When another member of the audience asks the question about the punishment of the Ibo by their gods if they adopted Christianity, the missionary's response will be an expression of the

opposition between traditional ibo culture and that of the West. For this representative of the evangelical church, these gods, who are in fact only pieces of wood and stones, can do nothing to them because they are not alive; they're harmless. Such a concept can only deepen the gap already existing between the Ibo and the newcomers; this provoked a strong reaction, which was translated into ironic laughter: "When this was interpreted to Mbanta's men, they burst into mocking laughter. These men had to be crazy, they said to themselves. Otherwise, how could they have said that Ani and Amadiora were harmless? And Idemili and Ogwugwu too? And a few began to leave" (Ibidem, page 176).

Okonkwo also has no shortage of negative reactions to these missionaries who foreshadow the destruction of the traditional structures and beliefs of the Ibo. He would have liked to have put these 'bulky' strangers out of the village, but he first sought to take the interpreter from his words about Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

"You told us with your own mouth that there was only one God. Now you're talking about his son. He must have a wife, so ?... The crowd approved (...)

I did not say that he had a wife (...) said the interpreter with some gene" (Ibidem, page 177).

The conflict of religion becomes more interesting in chapter 21 of the novel, when Chinua ACHEBE recounts an interview between Mr. Brown, a white missionary who cleverly approached the natives, and Akunna, one of the great men of the ibo community. This will be an opportunity for Mr. Brown to have enough information about the clan's religion, but above all an opportunity to know that it would be unwise to attack him without careful consideration.

"You say that there is a single Supreme God who made heaven and earth," Akunna said on one of Mr. Brown's visits. We also believe in Him and we call him Chukwu. He made the whole world and the other gods.

"There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown. Chukwu is the only God and all the others are false gods. You sculpt a piece of wood... and you call him god. But it's still a piece of wood" (Ibidem, page 216).

It should be noted that after this long three-page conversation (216, 217, 218) between the two men, each representing a specific religious conception, "neither of them succeeds in converting the other, but they acquire a better knowledge of their respective beliefs" (Ibidem, page 216).

(B) Establishing Western structures in Ibo country

If for some African localities the Europeans used armed force to establish Western civilization, in ibo environment, it is above all the social structure too hierarchical, too stratified that should

facilitate this implantation, even if the first moments of contact were characterized by violence. In a traditional ibo society in which there are, on the one hand, privileged men and clan members with legal rights, and on the other hand, the outlaws and innocent victims left behind by centuries-old traditions, the arrival of Europeans could only be a salvation for all the underprivileged. Thus, despite the difficulties encountered in its early days, the Christian religion, more tolerant than traditional beliefs, will take root and with it, the Western school and the colonial administration will also take root.

1. The Christian religion

As mentioned above, the establishment of Christianity in Ibo territory was a difficult task that required a great deal of tact and patience. The poor welcome that has been reserved for the evangelical missionaries in Mbanta (they will spend four to five nights outside when they arrive in this town) is crowned by the granting by the natives of a piece of land to these newcomers in the cursed forest, the evil place of the village, for the construction of their church.

If people could not take the risk of physically eliminating them (i.e. the memory of the murder of a white missionary that led to the rampage of Abame haunted them), they inevitably wanted them dead. Therefore, in their imagination, giving them a piece of land on their own request, in the cursed forest, was a way of mortgaging their lives, of putting them in harm's way with the guardian gods, and thus a way to eliminate them. So everyone expected the disaster to happen:

"The next morning these crazy men began to clean up part of the forest and build their house. The people of Mbanta expected them to all be dead within four days. The first day passed, and the second and third and fourth, and none of them died. Everyone was intrigued. And then it became known that the white man's fetish had incredible powers... Soon after, he conquered his first three converts" (Ibidem, pages 180-181).

But if so far no misfortune has threatened these missionaries, despite the rape of a prohibition that dates back centuries, namely to clear and build a church in the cursed forest, a place revered since time immemorial, the natives of Mbanta firmly believe in an inescapable misfortune that was to fall upon all these missionaries. It was to be, in the collective imagination of the villagers, only a problem of time, especially since their ancestors and gods were sometimes very patient to punish the transgressors:

"Finally the day came when all the missionaries should have already died. But they were still alive and building a new house... That week, they won a handful more converts. And for the first time, they had a wife. His name was Nneka.... Nneka had been fat four times already, and

four times had given rise to children. But each time she had twins, and they were immediately thrown away" (Ibidem, page 182).

The beginnings of a religious conception that would take on undeniable importance in the ibo environment had thus arisen. There will be a massive adherence to the new religion, of all those left behind in society: efulefu, worthless men, parents of twins, the untouchables or osu, and others who are disillusioned with traditional practices. The victory of the newcomers will be crowned by the accession of some titled men such as Ogbuefi Ugonna, one of the nobles of Umuofia.

Thus, as Obierika, a friend of the hero Okonkwo, will recognize, this adherence to the new European values has weakened the ibo clan. He does not prevent himself from recognizing the intelligence of the white man who allowed him to establish his religion.

"The white man is very smart. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We had fun with his stupidity and allowed him to stay. Now he has conquered our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one man. He planted a knife on the things that held us together and we fell apart" (Ibidem, page 213).

It is thus observed, as Obierika points out, that the establishment of Christianity in the ibo environment has precipitated the disintegration of its traditional values: the old beliefs have been relegated to the background and even the social fabric has collapsed.

2. The Western School

As with other places in Africa south of the Sahara, the Western school settled in ibo almost at the same time as the Christian religion. Moreover, it was a means used by European missionaries to facilitate the evangelization of indigenous peoples.

In *Le Monde* collapses, Chinua ACHEBE shows the circumstances of the establishment of the Western school at a time when Mr. Brown is facing resistance from the Ibo, determined to maintain their ancestral beliefs. This European school will therefore be a safe way to strengthen its influence and a means of social promotion for the Ibo.

To attract the people of Umuofia to adhere to the new values, Mr. Brown

"builds a school and a small hospital in Umuofia. He went from family to family begging people to send their children to his school. But at first they sent only their slaves, or sometimes their lazy children. Mr. Brown begged and argued and prophesied. He said that the country's leaders in the future would be men and women who would have learned to read and write. If Umuofia refused to send her children to school, foreigners would come from other places to

run them" (Ibidem, pages 218-219).

It will be noted that the strength of the arguments of the missionary Mr. Brown and the first results produced by his school, will undoubtedly encourage the Ibo to send their own children there, as was the case of the Diallobé in the ambiguous Adventure of the Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou KANE (1961, Paris, Editions Julliard). Like the Grande Royale (the older sister of the Diallobé chief) who asked the Diallobé to send their children to the new school despite its negative impact on their traditions, Akunna, one of the nobles of Umuofia, will also be one of the first indigenous people to accept sending the children to this school.

"Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. A few months of school was enough to make you a court messenger or even one of his clerks. Those who stayed longer became schoolmasters; and there were workers from Umuofia who entered the lord's vineyard. New churches were established in the surrounding villages and some schools as well. From the very beginning religion and education walked hand in hand" (Ibidem, page 119).

Thus, the more the school received many followers and established itself in several ibo villages, the more evangelization also progressed; which would inevitably lead to the collapse of authentic values.

3. Colonial administration

The colonial administration was the crowning achievement of the settlement of Europeans in Africa in general and in the ibo environment in particular. After the establishment of the Christian religion and the Western school, the colonial administration was only a logical follow-up, for it was necessary to seek to establish structures conducive to the management of problems at a time when relations between whites and natives were not quite serene. The colonial administration had to appear first as a means of repression before any economic objective.

"But already stories were spreading that the white man had not only brought a religion, but also a government. They were said to have built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect those who followed their religion. They were even said to have hanged a man who had killed a missionary" (Ibidem, 188).

Chinua ACHEBE describes some aspects of the functioning of this colonial administration that is not lacking in violence, although the District Commissioner will tell Okonkwo and his friends that the whites brought a peaceful administration to the ibo people so that they could be happy.

"But apart from the church, the whites had also brought a government. They had built a court where the district commissioner judged the cases in his ignorance. He had court messengers who led him to judge men. These court messengers were... arrogant and brutal. They were called Kotma... They guarded the prison, which was full of men who had broken the law of the White. Some of these prisoners had thrown away their twins and some had molested the Christians" (Ibidem, pages 210-211).

Faced with this new situation, Okonkwo, hero of the novel, commits suicide after killing a messenger of the Commissioner, sent to prevent the meeting of the clan.

IV. CONCLUSION

The World Collapses of Chinua ACHEBE is a novel that recounts with great interest the penetration of Europeans in ibo society and the means they used to establish their civilization in this solidly structured universe.

The first moments of this contact were characterized by violence on the side of both the Ibo and the Europeans. After the murder by the inhabitants of Abame of a white missionary considered by their oracle as a danger to the survival of the clan, the white missionaries and their followers massacred all the inhabitants of this village gathered on the day of the market.

Thus, "Started under the sign of destruction, relations between the two peoples could only continue in the same direction. But it will then be the destruction of customs and beliefs, not men: by becoming more peaceful, the means of imposing themselves will also become more insidious" (Annie MORICEAU and Alain ROUCH, 1983. Critical study of the novel *The World Collapses* by Chinua ACHEBE, page 67, Editions Fernand Nathan).

After this contact characterized by brutality, the Christian religion will eventually take root thanks to the too rigid stratification of the traditional ibo society. In successive waves, many ibo left behind, including efulefu, worthless men, parents of twins, the untouchables, in a word all disappointed in traditional practices, will be the first to adhere to this new religion. The logical consequence of this massive adherence to Christianity will be the establishment of the foreign school and that of the colonial administration.

While describing at length the customs and customs of the traditional ibo milieu, Chinua ACHEBE also implicitly shows a highly hierarchical community in which those left behind by centuries-old traditions were the first to adhere to the new values: those of the West. It is this massive adherence to these foreign values that will precipitate the suffocation of authentic ibo civilization.

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