

2. *When Europeans arrive in Okonkwo's village, one result is a new kind of government and a new kind of law. How do the new legal and governmental practices and institutions differ from those that preceded them? Are the changes good, bad, or something more complicated, and why?*

There is no such thing as an objective standpoint – neither in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart nor the world we think we know. It's all too easy for us – brought up with certain cultural assumptions, accustomed to certain ways – to claim that a secular court of trial provides far better legal procedure than a band of nine men masquerading as ancestral spirits. We'd applaud Mr. Brown's contributions to education and economy in Umuofia, thinking of those institutions' roles in our lives; we'd surely support the white men's ban on throwing away twins (had U.S. lawmakers admired that particular Ibo practice, this writer, for one, would have been cast out long ago). But the question cannot, frustratingly enough, be a simple one of right and wrong, good and bad; it is a more complex choice between the law of Umuofia and the law of the "white man." Umuofia law *mandates* the cast-off of twins, alienation of *osu*, and mutilation of *ogbanje* children, while European law *condemns* such practices – do we (or, distressingly, even Okonkwo's people or Mr. Brown or the DC) have the right to make the call? As Ajofia, the leading *egwugwu*, puts it: "We say [Mr. Smith] is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his" (Achebe 191). Other parts of the novel echo the same theme: Obierika's brother remarks that "what is good in one place is bad in another place" (Achebe 74), while Uchendu says that "[t]here is no story that is not true...what is good among one people is an abomination with others" (Achebe 141).

The complications run even deeper within the bounds of each culture. On the European side, intentions to spread love and justice are indistinguishably tangled up with a desire to assert the sheer superiority of one's own civilization. In Mbanta, Mr. Kiaga assures the *osu* firmly but with very real sincerity that "[t]he same God created you and [your people]. But they have cast you out like lepers. It is against the will of God, who has promised everlasting life to all who believe in His holy name" (Achebe 157). Yet his following assertion ("Only the word of our God is true") borders on arrogance and ethnocentrism (perhaps unintentionally). In Umuofia, The District Commissioner assures Okonkwo and the five other detained leaders of his sense of fair-mindedness ("If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others...I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people's houses and their place of worship"), then immediately adds: "That must not happen in the *dominion of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world*" (Achebe 194). Intentions shift, too, over time (the few seconds between the dryly respectful DC's exit and the court messengers' jeering maltreatment of the prisoners) and changing leadership (Mr. Smith's succession of Mr. Brown as missionary). What begins as a deep struggle over morality ends, bitterly and ironically, in a couple of idle observations about "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger" (Achebe 209).

On the Ibo side, the beauty of tribal ways is similarly interwoven with the ugliness. The much-valued art of conversation – speaking in indirect proverbs, "the palm

oil with which words are eaten,” and “skirting round the subject” (Achebe 7) – suggests that Ibo customs are at once rich and cumbersome; likewise, the insistence that the first wife drink before the others delays proceedings even as it upholds a beautiful tradition (Achebe 20). It is somehow comfortingly predictable that Umuofia is set in its ways (“At the end they decided, *as everybody knew they would*, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife”) but also terribly inflexible (Achebe 12). The spears of the *egwugwu* hold a real “metallic life” (Achebe 190), a truly breathless poetic power – and yet for all that, aren’t the so-called ancestors who administer justice in the clan mere masqueraders? Superstition can be hauntingly uplifting and hopeful, as in the young women who sit under the sacred silk-cotton tree with dreams of begetting children (Achebe 46) – and it can be alarmingly callous...Chielo is a kindly and motherly woman in village life, but there is “no humanity” (Achebe 106) in her role as priestess of Agbala...Nwoye is not swayed to the European ways by cold doctrine, but ultimately by the “vague and persistent question...of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed” (Achebe 147) because the spirits ordained that it should be so...

And there is the ultimate question: if the Europeans *are* right in feeling the tribe is more flawed than they themselves are – even if they are right – can any number of flaws be ugly enough to upheave completely the beauty of “the grand, old way” (Achebe 166)? If the Europeans’ legal protection of twins and *osu* is something to be desired, isn’t there something equally admirable in emphasizing the group – gathering not out of necessity but because “it is good for kinsmen to do so”? Should we respect Nwoye for embracing personal conscience, or condemn him for refusing to value something very different, but perhaps as beautiful – “the bond of kinship...what it is to speak with one voice...” (Achebe 167). Isn’t the “frantic rhythm” of tradition, like the drums that beat wildly through the wrestling matches, “the very heartbeat of the people” (Achebe 50) – for better or for worse?

Okonkwo compares the European intrusion to a man defecating on another’s floor (Achebe 158-9); Obierika’s words are milder but somehow as forceful: “[The white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe 176). Is it better for Okonkwo’s village that “[t]hings fall apart,” that “the center cannot hold” – is it better to get rid of the old, imperfect practices, and rebuild? Or is, as Yeats says, “[m]ere anarchy...loosed upon the world”? Nothing is “black and white,” as Mr. Smith believes. He sees black as evil – and black is *not* evil, but neither is white. Nothing is black and white – neither in a cultural clash nor within the scope of this world, where everything is somehow deeply magnificent and deeply flawed.