

A COMPLEX WEB OF CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS: FROM TRIBAL TO COLONIAL

2. When the 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?

In essence, the European "reforms" to the African culture reflected a complex attempt to subvert the Ibo people's way of life in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, replacing the established society with a new European-dominated governing system under the philosophy of Kipling's analogy of the "White Man's Burden". The major changes undertaken by the European imperialist government affected the lives of thousands in the African territories impacted by this action, including the south Nigerian Ibo tribe. Resulting in complicated changes that had both benefits and shortcomings for the Ibo people, the creation of a new class system, a different version of judicial administration, and a differing connection to the spiritual life of its citizens marked this transition from tribal governance to European colonialism.

The European viewpoint on the governmental and legal system was formed on the basis of a class system superimposed over the traditional Ibo approach of the seniority system within the tribe. Noting this new system had caused him to "mourn for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women" (183), Okonkwo's overpowering emotions indicate this cultural breakdown in governance. The failure to integrate the two systems to form a new government, or at least to respect the other culture's unique views, caused the inherent destruction of the distinct native culture by conquering Europeans. Exemplifying this new system of imperialistic justice, the conversation between Obierika and Okonkwo over the brutal European process of "justice" through torture and imprisonment forces the reader to consider "the knife [used to break the bonds] that held [the Ibo people] together" (176). The whole concept of class-based government appears sadly ironic as "the low-born and the outcast" (174) join the colonizers' Christian religion only to be ensnared in a new class position from the foreigners' viewpoint – a position of pacified savages. By destroying the positions of the elders through the leadership of the tribe, especially in the closing scenes of the text, the Europeans' actions managed to eliminate the African government already in place; while through their perspectives they were "[pacifying] the primitive tribes of the Lower Niger" (209), the District Commissioner's actions covertly managed to destroy the citizens' connection to their native environment and cultural ancestry.

On the issue of judicial administration, the new European system emphasizes physical punishment for illegal actions while the African cultural justice focuses on preservation of one's self-pride. The Ibo culture, as shown by Okonkwo's self-imposed exile and climatic suicide, focused on protection of one's honor; meanwhile, the new colonial government focused on the traditional Western forms of punishment through monetary and physical penalties. The evolution of the tribal leaders' behavior from their stubborn defiance at their initial imprisonment to their grudgingly forced statement of "yes, sir" (194) during their brief prison terms shows how the cultures differ. Respect of own's personal *chi* and self-image drove many of Okonkwo's actions, especially in light of his father's failed masculinity. Additionally, the reactions of tribal individuals and white colonizers to the suicide of Okonkwo, especially Obierika's denouncement of the colonial officials' "[driving Okonkwo] to kill himself" (208). Obviously, the internal psyches of the two groups differ, as the Ibo tribal members flee to preserve their dignity while the Europeans expect individuals to face the punishments of an official judicial system.

While spirituality and religion both have roles in the respective governmental systems, the roles of both the native African polytheistic religion and the Christian religion of the European imperialists differ in several critical ways. Okonkwo's lament of the tribe's failure to block the spread of the religion highlighted the issue of religion as a facet of governmental structure – "he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one" (176). The symbolic knife referred to in the text as the divisive European control over its religious converts caused an internal conflict, weakening the tribe to outside influences. The schism between Nwoye and Okonkwo in the text highlights the clear differences between the two factions. However, the essential similarity is the direct connection between the religions and their respective cultures and governments. Both religious leaders – Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, and Mr. Kiaga of the Christian faith – proclaim strongly that the opposing side is completely incorrect or, in Chielo's words, "the excrement of the clan" (143). As shown by the climatic ending of the text, the religious affiliation of the clan members demonstrates these citizens' allegiance to the governmental systems.

In conclusion, the issue of perspectivism for both the native Ibo people and the European imperialists plays a role in understanding the changing legal and governmental system. As shown by Achebe's profound text in *Things Fall Apart*, the complicated effects of this collision of cultures profoundly changes the ethnic nature of the African government, replacing it with a European-style colonial regime.
