#### Extracts from E Hendrix Chinua Achebe: A Critical Dialogue on Cultural Relativism

In Chinua Achebe’s novel, the indigenous clans and tribes of the lower Niger display some rather disturbing cultural conventions. Consider, for example, the public display of severed human heads on the obi’s (houses or huts), the practice of human sacrifice to pagan gods (the murder of Ikemefuna is a clear example), the abandonment (and thus imminent death) of twin babies in the evil forest, the mutilation of stillborn babies, the battering of women, and the total exclusion of the Osu (outcasts), depriving them of everything the clan or community has to offer. Achebe makes no effort whatsoever to hide these aspects of the indigenous culture. Quite the opposite, he takes a lot of time to exhibit these customs (all the way up to page 95) and he also doesn’t refrain from showing their negative effects and repercussions on its society. Ironically, in the novel it is precisely these customs and practices which plant the seeds that will eventually destroy their culture and, in the end, we see how the Umuofian culture was challenged, tested and found wanting:

“Does the white man understand our custom about land?”

“How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”

What Okonkwo and Obierika fail to see in this passage is that what held them together (their customs, their culture), was the very thing that divided them. The Umuofian culture lost because of its internal contradictions: its own customs simply antagonized too many people. What struck me most about the novel was the pivotal role of Christianity. From its very beginnings Christianity focused on the mourning, the meek and the persecuted.

And so, even during the Roman empire, this religion found its biggest supporters among slaves and proletarians. In the lower Niger, again, all the victims of the indigenous culture find compassion and refuge in the arms of the church; like Nwoye (Okonkwo’s son) who never forgave his father for the death of Ikemefuna, like the Osu, the outcasts, who were finally treated like human beings, like Nneka, whohad lost eight children because they were twins, and was hated by her in-laws because of it…..

In my opinion, the main tragedy of the novel is not the fact that the white man has come, nor the fact that the indigenous people convert to Christianity (which under father Brown functions as a counter-hegemony), but it is the loss of independence and the lossof self-determination of the clans of the lower Niger.

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