Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 6 (55) No. 2 - 2013

# TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S "NO LONGER AT EASE"

**Adina CÂMPU**[1]

***Abstract:*** *This paper aims to find elements which point out the Achebe's reinforcement of the difference between African and European ways. "No Longer at Ease" explores the decadence of modern urban environment which is contrasted with the idea of rural piety and stability. The paper provides an analysis of various instances which point to this opposition and renders Achebe's position of siding with tradition and even manifesting nostalgia for the past. The conclusion is that the novel can be seen as a display of the conflict between the desire to retain traditional values and the recognition that change and assimilation are absolutely necessary for survival.*

***Key words:*** *conflict, colonialism, rural, urban, tradition.*

## 1. Introduction

Briefly speaking, Achebe was born in Eastern Nigeria, in an area first colonized by the British at the end of the nineteenth century. He obtained outstanding results at school and after graduating from university he became involved in journalism and writing. His interests include: the conflict between tradition and modernity, Christian history, African traditional religions, etc. His first novel *"Things Fall Apart"* has been translated into more than fifty languages and has achieved the status of archetypal modern African novel in English with many critics hailing Achebe as *"the father of African fiction."* (Booker & Gikandi 54) It was followed two years later by *"No Longer at Ease"* (1960), *"Arrow of God"* (1964) and *"A Man of the People"* (1966). These novels are concerned with traditional Igbo life as it clashed with colonial powers in the form of missionaries and colonial government. These early writings are also programmatic novels of nationalist self-assertion that interrogate the Eurocentric assumptions of colonial writing on Africa.

His deconstruction of Joseph Conrad's *"Heart of Darkness"* is also to be noted as its impact was so huge that nowadays Conrad criticism is divided into two stages: before and after Achebe.

*"No Longer at Ease"* is Achebe's second novel initially envisioned by the author as forming one final section of a single book. In the end that section and the projected preliminary one evolved into two separate novels. The preliminary section became Achebe's first novel, *"Things Fall*

[1] Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, *Transilvania* University of Brasov.

BDD-A20088 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.64 (2026-11-19 22:48:06 UTC)

*Apart"*, while the final section became *"No Longer at Ease"*, published in 1960, the year of Nigerian independence. *"No Longer at Ease"* forms a kind of sequel to *'Things Fall Apart"* but is set during a period just prior to independence – that is, not one but two generations after the period treated in *"Things Fall Apart"*. Although the second novel has not gained as large an audience as the first one it deserves acclaim as an influential, finely written and engaging work. The extraordinary effect of reading both should be noted.

*"No Longer at Ease"* traces the long-term impact of British colonialism in West Africa, dramatizes social and economic dilemmas still facing modern Africa and has helped lay a vital part of the stylistic as well as thematic groundwork for important works of African literature that have followed.

The book opens with the trial of Michael Obiajulu Okonkwo, referred to as Obi throughout the novel, who is accused of having accepted a twenty pound bribe. Then it jumps back in time to provide an account of how Obi ended up in that position. Thus, we find out that he had been the recipient of a scholarship to study in England and that, following his return he took a job as a civil servant. Obi had a radical position against corruption and he firmly believed in the young generation. A detail to be noticed is that the protagonist is the son of Nwoye, now Isaac Okonkwo, therefore the grandson of the central character in *"Things Fall Apart"*. A series of unfortunate events, among which a failed romantic relationship, the death of his mother and a poor management of resources, all transform Obi and lead to his accepting bribes in a reluctant acknowledgement that it was the way of the world he lived in.

## 2. A plethora of contrasts

This novel is relevant to the building of a nation and it traces Obi's course in life as he fails to fulfill his own vision of personal and governmental integrity. Thus, Achebe presents us a number of forces allied against the building of a future strong nation. In particular these forces undermine a sense of unity, as in the narrow factionalism to which one pompous speaker pays tribute at a UPU meeting:

*"Every town and village struggles at this momentous epoch in our political evolution to possess that of which it can say: 'This is mine"*. (Achebe 36)

Later, in the same scene, the narrator almost explicitly condemns the self-centeredness of the national outlook:

*"In Nigeria the government was 'they.' It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble"* (Achebe 37)

This selfish outlook clearly overlaps with the acceptance and practice of official corruption that the novel explores. From the very beginning, that is in the opening scene alone, we are told that civil servants frequently pay bribes to obtain a doctor's certificate of illness for the day so that they might leave work and hear the verdict in Obi's bribery trial. The writer shows that the problem lies not entirely in corrupt practices but in the wide social acceptance of corruption.

In "*No Longer at Ease"* official corruption is only one manifestation of the decadence that is tied to the modern urban environment. Contrasted with the idea of urban decadence and volatility is the idea of rural piety and stability. The conflict tradition versus modernity also translates

BDD-A20088 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.64 (2026-11-19 22:48:06 UTC)

as the conflict between rural values and urban ones.

Among the attractions of the city depicted in "*No Longer at Ease"* are cultural sophistication and variety, sexual freedom, and the availability of glamorous consumer items. The musical and erotic allure of the Lagos nightclub scene is vividly evoked in the novel. "*No Longer at Ease"* also considers the seductiveness and the psychological and moral effects of desiring and acquiring expensive consumer items. Achebe views these matters from multiple angles. Obi's evening with Clara and friends at a Lagos nightclub, *"The Imperial"*, abounds in sexual insinuation and longing, and the author evokes a vital beauty in the atmosphere, especially in the high life music and dancing; this scene of real and potential erotic license, in which dance partners are interchangeable, is then followed shortly by Obi's nearly sexual encounter with Nora a young teacher from Ireland. This is the first token of his fragile loyalty to Clara.

Prior to these events and almost immediately after he is appointed to his government post, Obi acquires a new Morris Oxford automobile, which becomes a focal point of Achebe's questioning of the materialism and uneven economic development that are associated with an urban, capitalist economy. Obi really cannot afford this car and its many related expenses (he even hires, for a time, a chauffeur), but he considers neither delaying its acquisition nor selling it when his debt takes on alarming proportions. In this and other respects he finds himself in the position of so many people in consumer cultures: unable to live without debts despite the fact that he had made so much money. This disproportion symbolized by Obi's car, is regarded as unhealthy for the future independent nation, which requires unity rather than leaders who use its wealth and formal education only to set themselves apart from the rest of the people. All this is suggested when someone waiting in a long line to see a doctor yells at Obi a telling rebuke in Pidgin for forcing himself ahead of the others:

*"You tink because Government give you car you fit do what you like? You see all of we de wait here and you just go in…. Foolish man. He tink say because him get car so derefore he can do as he like. Beast of no nation!"* (Achebe 173)

*"No Longer At Ease"* reminds the reader of the immense gap existing between the few rich people and the multitude of the poor. This gap is highlighted in the second chapter when the writer juxtaposes the slum area in Lagos, where there is poverty but also a rich social mosaic, with the city's luxurious Ikoyi district. The building in which Obi lives is in that district. In order to emphasize further the dubious quality of urban hierarchy, it is later revealed that whereas he, a highly successful African in the senior civil service, lives in this building, all its other occupants are only *"unimportant Europeans on the lower rungs of the service"*. Achebe questions the social exclusiveness signified by Ikoyi by likening it to *"a graveyard"* while characterizing the Lagos mainland, which includes the slums, as *"a bazaar"* and as a palm-nut kernel, *"shiny black and alive"* (Achebe 20) However the author cannot be accused of glamorizing the lives of the poor in the city, as is evident in his description of the slum, with its

*"wide-open storm drain from which came a very strong smell of rotting flesh from the remains of a dog which had no doubt been run over by a taxi"* and its *"night-soilman…trailing clouds of putrefaction"* (Achebe 17-18).

BDD-A20088 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.64 (2026-11-19 22:48:06 UTC)

Further, at the end of the scene set in a Lagos nightclub, the writer presents the realities of urban blight and again of social division in relation to Obi's car. When returning to it after dancing, Obi and Clara find that the fifty pounds in cash that was temporarily in the glove box has been stolen by the *"half-clad little urchins"* whom they encountered when they parked the car earlier that evening. One child sought, perhaps on behalf of his group, a three pence tip for looking after the car, but *"in principle Obi never gave anything to these juvenile delinquents"* (Achebe, *"No Longer at Ease"* 126). The connection between Obi's car and the poverty of the children is not arbitrary. Rather, it may be read as one of the novel's cautionary notes concerning freedom and prosperity: these cannot be enjoyed for long, either by the individual or the nation, if the poor are ignored.

### 3. Rural versus urban values

Achebe is not unjust though as he admits to the merits of the city. It is through the work the city offers to migrants from Obi's home district of Umuofia that they are able to collect enough money to establish the scholarship that provides him with an education in England—an education that they believe will benefit them (especially if Obi becomes a lawyer) as well as Obi. The city is the source of other, government-sponsored university scholarships (including ones to England), and the benefits of such an education and of university education in general are undeniable:

*"It was rather sheer hypocrisy to ask if a scholarship was as important as all that or if university education was worth it. Every Nigerian knew the answer. It was yes. A university degree was the philosopher's stone"* (Achebe 105)

However, there are so few university scholarships as compared to the demand that men and women are willing to resort to monetary bribery, and some women offer their bodies, to obtain them. From this angle one problem with urban modernity in Africa is not the economic and educational opportunities themselves, but rather the scarcity of such opportunities. Such scarcity makes it rather likely that a person in Obi's position will fall into debt. Despite having found a relatively well-paid job in Lagos, he is still bound by strong kinship affiliations, so the fewer the number of well-payed positions, the greater the portion of his income will go to family members.

One should also note the novel's descriptions of women wanting to obtain a scholarship by offering themselves to Obi who was in the position of helping them. It is another way of presenting the city as the site of immorality and decadence while the rural countryside is regarded as the site of virtues. An obvious contrast in this respect is offered by the singing. The only music in the city that the author depicts is that of the Imperial nightclub. The licentious nature of that music is reflected in its suggestive lyrics and in the rather lewd dancing it inspires. On the contrary, in Iguego, when Obi leaves for England the Christian community members sing religious songs, while when he returns a group of non-Christian women perform a song teaching a moral lesson – the need to cherish the members of one's family and place them before material wealth.

*He that has a brother must hold him to his heart,*
*For a kinsman cannot be bought in the market,*
*Neither is a brother bought with money…*
*He who has brothers*
*Has more riches than buy.* (Achebe 129)

BDD-A20088 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.64 (2026-11-19 22:48:06 UTC)

Therefore, the simple virtues associated with the countryside and the people there are highlighted by the singing of both Christian and non Christian songs.

Another contrast between the city and the country is presented by the scenes with the pillowcases. When he is about twenty-one, Obi visits Lagos for the first time, traveling the 500 miles from Iguedo, his rural Igbo village in Umuofia, to the city in order to take a plane to England for nearly four years of study. In Lagos he shares a room with his friend from school in Umuofia, Joseph, who worked in the city at that time. Obi is fascinated by the frank sexuality in *"this strange and sinful new world"* (Achebe 16) and when Joseph tells him about a former girlfriend, he mentions that she made the pillowcases in his apartment. On one of these Joy sewed the word *"osculate"* in multicolored letters. This word on the pillowcase as well as the appearance of Joseph's current, unnamed female companion, whose dress and makeup highlight some of her physical attributes, leave *"a nasty taste in Obi's mouth"* (Achebe 17) On the other hand, when Obi is back in his room at his parents' home in Iguedo four years later, he notices the brand new white sheet and *"pillow-slips with their delicate floral designs"* which are *"no doubt Esther's s work."* He thinks, *"Good old Esther!"* (Achebe 17) and remembers that she, his eldest sister, became a schoolteacher when Obi was a young child. These details, along with the devoutly Christian home, make the second allusion to a pillowcase standing in contrast to the previous one, a contrast that reinforces the novel's moral distinction between the urban and rural areas.

The main conflict in "*Things Fall Apart*" between Africa and Europe and especially that between the Igbo and the British may appear to have turned in "*No Longer At Ease"* into the conflict between British-imposed modernity (associated with the city) and African tradition (associated with the countryside). Achebe juxtaposes the two in pronounced ways, as I have suggested previously, but the situation depicted in "*No Longer At Ease"* is more complex than the one from the first novel partly due to the legacy of Christianity among the Igbos. Whereas in the first novel Christian missionaries are closely allied with British administrators in the colonial effort to destroy Igbo traditions, Igbo Christians in the second novel both suppress and sustain those traditions. The multifaceted role of these Christians demonstrates on the one hand, the long-term success of missionary efforts, and, on the other hand, the endurance of Igbo culture. As a pillar of the Christian community in the district of Umuofia, Isaac Okonkwo has asserted the priority of the new faith over and against Igbo religion through much of his life. In his own family he has done so with the support of Hannah, who converted as an adult and who *"sometimes showed more zeal than even her husband"* (Achebe 67). Obi remembers that at the age of four he refused, like his older sisters, to accept a neighbor's gift, a result of their mother's teaching, but embarrassed the sisters by adding aloud that they never eat *"heathen food"*. (Achebe 67) Isaac does not rigidly dismiss all aspects of the culture that he was born into as Nwoye, thus permitting the traditional presentation of the kola nut to guests, as long as it is not sacrificed to idols. Adult Obi's faith, however, has weakened, and he wonders about the consequences of saying to Isaac, *"Father, I no longer believe in your God"*. (Achebe 65) In addition Obi

*"used to wonder whether …his mother would not have preferred telling her children the folk stories that her mother had told her."* (Achebe 67)

BDD-A20088 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.64 (2026-11-19 22:48:06 UTC)

Hannah had done so with her daughters before Obi was born, but later Isaac forbade the practice because such tales were for "*heathens…not for the people of the Church"* (Achebe 66). But Achebe shows that the oral tradition is not so easily forgotten. The prohibition against folk stories by Isaac—who himself uses Igbo proverbs—was eventually breached by Hannah when she taught the young Obi a tale about the wicked leopardess in order that he could tell it to his class at school. The teacher encouraged the students to do so, and when Obi recounted the story he added some details of his own.

## 4. Conclusion

It can be noticed that Achebe manifests nostalgia for the past. Abdul Jan Mohamed says that

"*the protagonist ultimately falls not because he is alienated from society but because his character is ossified around certain traditional values."* (Janmohamed 168)

His decline is due to the fact that his naïve idealism prevents him from adjusting to the practical nature of a corrupt society. Obi's valorization of honesty and integrity represents a common aspiration of all cultures. But while Achebe criticizes the ossification of his character he seems to admire his values. While the protagonist's decline is due to his ossification, the society to which he belongs manages to survive because if its adaptability. The process of adaptation is a slow and painful one during which various aspects of indigenous and European cultures are combined during which the colonized must look for synthesis. Colonialism inevitably produces in the colonized society a period of chaos during which old values no longer apply and the new ones have not yet been found.

Thus, the novel can be seen as a display of the conflict between the desire to retain traditional values and the recognition that change and assimilation are absolutely necessary for survival.

## References

1. Achebe, C.: *No Longer at Ease.* New York. Anchor Books A Division of Random House Inc., 1994.
2. Booker, K. M., Gikandi, S.: *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia.* London. Greenwood Press, 2003.
3. Janmohamed, A. R.: *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa.* The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983.

BDD-A20088 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.64 (2026-11-19 22:48:06 UTC)