



**Trabajo de Fin de Grado**

**«BRITISH COLONIALISM IN NIGERIA AND KENYA:  
A POST-COLONIAL STUDY THROUGH  
*THINGS FALL APART AND THE RIVER BETWEEN*»**

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## **0. Abstract**

This project offers a critical perspective on how the British rule was established in Nigeria and Kenya during the High Colonialism period in Africa, with the purpose of analysing the intense changes that the intolerance of the settlers produced over the native communities. On this matter, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* constitute the major example to illustrate the Igbo and Kikuyu pre-colonial societies. Furthermore, both novels reveal the deep cultural conflicts that arose as a result of the British imposition.

Key words: British colonialism, colonialism in Nigeria, colonialism in Kenya, postcolonialism, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Things Fall Apart*, *The River Between*, Igbo, Kikuyu

## **Resumen**

Este trabajo ofrece una perspectiva crítica sobre cómo se instauró el sistema de gobierno británico en Nigeria y en Kenia durante la época colonial en África con la intención de analizar los intensos cambios que la intolerancia por parte de los colonos produjo en las comunidades nativas. En este sentido, *Things Fall Apart* de Chinua Achebe y *The River Between* de Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o constituyen el mejor ejemplo para ilustrar las sociedades precoloniales Igbo y Kikuyu. Además, ambas novelas revelan los profundos conflictos culturales que surgieron como resultado de la imposición británica.

Palabras clave: colonialismo británico, colonialismo en Nigeria, colonialismo en Kenia, poscolonialismo, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Things Fall Apart*, *The River Between*, Igbo, Kikuyu

## 1. Introduction

What is the first thing that comes to our mind when we think about literature in English studies? Most of the texts that appear in our university syllabus are literary works written by British or North American authors; nevertheless, literature written in English embraces a huge number of artistic productions from all parts over the world. As we all know, literature reflects the cultural features of the society in which it emerges and, at the same time, the cultural recognition is a source of empowerment. For that reason, we have felt it was necessary to focus our project on African literature written in English in order to emphasise that other points of view, such as those from writers born in former colonised countries, are also expressed in this language and must be equally studied. Therefore, in this project we have aimed to look into African perspectives about British colonialism and its legacies in the native communities throughout Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1938) respective novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *The River Between* (1965).

Consequently, we have chosen these two novels in particular for a few main reasons; the first one is based on the relevance of Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as leading figures in African Literature. Both of them are renowned authors whose careers have not only been exclusively literary, even if they are majestic men of letters, but they are also representatives of a constant activism that reclaims the recognition of the African tribal arts and culture. On the other hand, the second reason for our choice is related to the novels' importance and location. Both novels are benchmarks in post-colonial studies, and the best example to approach the pre-colonial tribal societies. Moreover, while the plot of *Things Fall Apart* is located in Nigeria, in *The River Between* the writer transports the reader to Kenya; therefore, it is relevant for our work to compare two novels that are placed in two opposite horizontal points in the African continent. Consequentially, the main purpose of our work is to conduct a contrastive analysis between these two literary works by keeping in mind firstly, the circumstances that promote these literary creations; secondly, how these texts are a vivid portrait of the social, religious, juridical, political, linguistic, and the rest of the cultural features of the native tribes that are mentioned in each of these works (the Igbo in Nigeria and the Kikuyu in Kenya) before the arrival of the British colonisers; and thirdly, the manner in which British institutions performed in

this encounter, how deeply the native populations were affected by this historic event, and the way all of this is reflected in both novels.

Regarding the structure in which we have organised our work, we have considered opportune to divide the body of the text into three main sections. In the first one, we have conducted a brief historical tour around the causes that led to the distribution of the African continent among the Europeans; straight away, we have focused on how the British imposition was accomplished in Nigeria and in Kenya, two countries with multiple and diverse realities, and the consequences that the colonial period had on both of them. Then, in the second section we have evaluated in which way the colonial period and the Eurocentric perspectives within the educational system instituted on the colonies were directly related to the birth of the African Literature, and the relevance of Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o within the creation and the production of African texts. Moreover, we have intended to explain the intentions with which both authors provide a faithful recreation of the ethnic Igbo and Kikuyu communities through the novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between*; and how they achieve a credible description capable to reach the readership. Finally, in the third section we have aimed to execute a more detailed analysis by comparing, with a post-colonial critic vision, the major themes that both novels have in common; taking into account the pre-colonial characteristics described through the Igbo and the Kikuyu's clans, the way in which the characters face the changes that the British colonialism produces upon all the aspects surrounding their traditional cultures. In this way, we have gone in depth in the fundamental role that Christianity and the civilising mission played in the British colonial strategy, as well as other notions related to African tradition in conflict with the colonist imposition that we have developed throughout all the section. In the last subsection, having still in mind the conflict produced by the arrival of the settlers, we have included a brief gender study relating to how the concepts of masculinity and femininity are relevant in the novels, and the way in which they are significant for the construction of the characters' identity. In addition, we have felt convenient to provide, in the appendix section, a summary of both novels in order to facilitate more details about their storylines for those who might not have read the novels before.

As we have seen in the preceding paragraphs, the methodology that we have used is based on a post-colonial study and a contrasting thematic analysis. For that purpose, we have consulted diverse bibliographic sources; such as works and essays written by the

novelists themselves, where they reflect their critical thinking about colonialism and its legacies. This is the case of Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, among others. Moreover, for the historical framework and the post-colonial theory, we have especially followed Martin Meredith's book *The State of Africa* and James's Booth's *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*. On the other hand, regarding the thematic aspects of the analysis, we have made use of numerous subject-specific works, most of whom are academic articles.

## **2. The Scramble for Africa**

We have considered that it is necessary to do a tour of the historical framework in which the two novels that we are analysing throughout this work are developed. For that purpose, we have to date back to the end of the nineteenth century, where one of the events that has most marked the history of humankind took place: the distribution of the African continent among the European forces at that time. The lust for power generated by the Industrial Revolution and the growing capitalism gave rise to a New Imperialism, therefore European leaders sought in other continents the necessary resources to increase their political prestige.

Notwithstanding Portuguese naval troops began exploring the African coast in the middle of the fifteen century, the European diplomats' knowledge about the expansion and cultural wealth of the large African landmass was quite limited. Nevertheless, the successful impact that those expeditions had in the Portuguese economy stimulated a political interest in the other European countries, which by the middle of the nineteenth century had settled throughout the continent's coast (Meredith 1). The existing tensions between the different nations that had established colonies in the African continent grew after the aforementioned Industrial Revolution, which required new raw material and cheap labour. This power struggle, inevitably, produced a violent conflict which was tried to be resolved in The Berlin Conference of 1884. Complex affairs such as the control of the slave trade and the promotion of the humanitarian idealism were supposed to be the main purpose of the consultation, nonetheless the meeting was just a performance which had as result the division of Africa at the hands of the European powers. As a matter of fact, the lack of awareness from the Europeans about the geographic constitution of the continent and its significant role in the configuration of the countless African ethnics was revealed:

When marking out the boundaries of their new territories, European negotiators frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the map, taking little or no account of the myriad of traditional monarchies, chiefdoms and other African societies that existed on the ground. Nearly one half of the new frontiers imposed on Africa were geometric lines (Meredith 1).

The unnatural borders hence altered significantly the predisposition and original organization of the different cultural groups. Consequently, in some cases the new state limits "cut through some 190 culture groups. In other cases Europe's new colonial territories enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups, with no common history, culture, language or religion" (Meredith 1). There were even realms which had been historically opposed to one another that were forced to be beneath the same colonial territory, thus creating inner severe conflicts. Settler colonies thereupon became established and strengthened at the expense of pushing out, oppression, utilising, and even murdering the indigenous populations (Wolfe 387), and "scores of African rulers who resisted colonial rule died in battle or were executed or sent into exile after defeat" (Meredith 3). Simultaneously, throughout the establishment of the settler colonies in Africa, naval power and shipping, commerce, missionaries, military officials, and civil society associations all played an important role in "opening up the globe to European domination" (Fitzpatrick 84), thus beginning the era of the High Colonialism.

## **2.1 British colonialism in Nigeria and Kenya, two different realities**

Whether we talk about Nigeria or if we talk about Kenya, both states are the result of multiple diverse realities that were submitted under British colonial power to coexist within imposed limits. These two countries before the arrival of the settlers were territories where different cultures, languages, religions and histories coexisted without fixed barriers that could contained or framed them under a common unity, they were:

A mosaic of lineage groups, clans, villages, chiefdoms, kingdoms and empires – were formed often with shifting and indeterminate frontiers and loose allegiances. Identities and languages shaded into one another (Meredith 154).

That is why the arrival of the British colonizers in these lands unbalanced the original order between the different cultural groups that cohabited and accentuated the pre-existing confrontations (Booth 26).

In terms of managing the new colonies, the British government mostly aimed for an indirect rule system in almost all their African dominions, inasmuch as it reinforced the local administrations in charge of the heads of the tribes under the paternalistic

supervision of the British officials. In this manner, officials made use of "African authorities to keep order, collect taxes and supply labour, that involved a minimum of staff and expense" (Meredith 6). Nevertheless, the administrative model that the British settlers carried out in Nigeria and Kenya presents many differences due to the original background in which the cultural groups in each country were organized and also to the relationship they maintained with the British imposition.

At first, what is today referred as Nigeria was three separate colonial protectorates that were administered severally: Lagos, The North, and The South. It was in 1914 when Lord Lugard unified them under the name of Nigeria and started an Indirect Rule management (Booth 25). However, this kind of governing had a greater acceptance in the northern territory, where the Hausa-Fulani emirates had a feudal aristocratic system, so they were used for a military and administrative control. It is for this reason that the British indirect rule was successful in this territory inasmuch as the previous organizational chart that the Islamic tradition had in the Hausa-Fulani people who had internalised values of discipline and law obedience. In this instance, the administrator Frederick Lugard left the Fulani emirs in charge of levying taxes, civilian controlling, and the justice administration on their behalf, in exchange, they could conserve their own autonomy and muslim religion. Moreover, it should be noted that the northern territory comprised approximately thirty percent of the total population of Nigeria at that time. (Meredith 75). On the other hand, the western region whose capital was Lagos, comprised twenty-one percent of the population of the nation and its chiefly community was the Yoruba group. This territory was formed by numerous states run by kingly chiefs, the Obas. For that reason, the Yoruba did not virtually rejected the indirect rule, because they already had a system where traditional rulers used to choose warrant chiefs that dictated decisions (Meredith 76). Finally, there was the eastern region, which was the poorest of all and constituted eighteen percent of the population. In it, the majority group were the Igbo, whose society lacked political kingdom. For the Igbo people the social consensus was established by a patriarchal democracy, which was in charge of preserving tradition and enforcing law. This collective consensus was opposite to the British system, so in the "acephalous village societies of the Igbo of southern Nigeria, chiefdoms were invented" (Meredith 76) since it did not exist a hierarchical system. It is important to highlight the impact that the totalitarian colonial regime had on the Igbo community, inasmuch as we

are going to go deeper into this aspect later on, since it will be of great help once we proceed to analyse the plot of the novel *Things Fall Apart*.

After the Second World War, the British government was the only colonial force that contemplated the possibility of establishing a system of self-government in its African territories (Meredith 10); but in order to insure this plan, Great Britain considered that: "Africans needed to be introduced to the business of government with careful preparation step by step" (Meredith 11), simultaneously:

Administration was kept into a minimum; education was placed in the hands of Christian missionaries; economic activity was left to commercial companies. The main function of the government was limited to, maintaining law and order; raising taxation and providing an infrastructure of roads railways (Meredith 5).

As the Hausa-Fulani of The North, the Yoruba of The West, and the Igbo of The East constituted quite separate social and political entities, the colonialist's attempt to bring an orderly administration finally causes chaos and demoralisation. And at the same time, "a common result of the imposition of warrant chiefs was the exacerbation of local rivalries" (Booth 26). Those internal conflicts between each region increased at the sight of a possible independence, each community was jealous of the power that the others had. In the middle of these confrontations, there was a group shaped by the remnants of minority cultural groups. This collective was equal to a third part of the population and it was composed of two hundred fifty different tribes and languages (Meredith 76). The other three bigger and stronger groups controlled the minorities, so for that reason those minority groups advocated a resilient central government that could protect them from the will of the biggest ones. At the same time, the block made for the minorities played an important role as a counterbalance to the power of the three major ethnic groups (Booth 27). In 1954 in order to find a constitutional arrangement that satisfied so many diverse interest, "each region was given its own government, assembly and public service and allowed to move separately towards self-government". But later, the independence constitution of 1960 provided for federal structure that allegedly could balance regional interests (Meredith 77).

In relation to the notion of Nigeria as a nation the politician Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who later became the first federal prime minister of an independent Nigeria said in 1948:

Since 1914 the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any sign of willingness to unite... Nigerian unity is only a British invention (qtd. In Meredith 8).

In the same vein, Sir Hugh Clifford, Governor General of Nigeria between 1920 and 1931 described Nigeria as: "A collection of independent native states, separated from one another by great distances, by differences of history, and traditions, and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers" (qtd. in Ayu 2). Consequently, Iyorchia Ayu, a former Nigerian Senator who was elected President of the Senate during the Nigerian Third Republic, aimed that in 1914 there was an important scepticism from the British Colonial Empire by planning the amalgamation of different groups within the arbitrary imperial boundaries to create Nigeria as a united nation (2).

On the other hand, the British occupation in the east, and more specifically, in Kenya (where the novel *The River Between* is set) was accomplished by more totalitarian methods than the type of indirect rule established in the west, as we have seen in the case of Nigeria. The British Empire established the East of Africa Protectorate in 1895, which in 1920 was designated as the colony of Kenya. The territory belonging to Kenya has always been a multi-ethnic land since its origins, nevertheless the predominant cultural group was and still is the Kikuyu one (Hornsby 21). Kenya Colony was sternly transformed:

From a lightly populated pastoral and agricultural area with no fixed borders or broad political authority into a functioning twentieth-century state. It was an artificial creation, following no natural boundaries, built through the imposition of will and technology by a small number of Europeans on a reluctant African population, directing African labour (Hornsby 21).

In the period of the Second World War, thousands of African troops were recruited for war service and from the British colonies around 340,000 Africans served in the British army (Meredith 8). Notwithstanding the expectations, the result of the war brought frustration and restlessness in Africa; the soldiers returned to the continent with "new ideas and skills, wider experience and a high expectations about the future, many believing they had earned the right to demand some share in the government of their own countries" (Meredith 9) but instead of a recognition from the British government, they found "unemployment, high prices, poor housing, low wages and consumer shortages" (Meredith 10). Nevertheless, the Kikuyu and the Maasai were stripped of their lands and

the vast and fertile Highlands (Hornsby 22), where they lived by farming and cattle, were relinquished to the white veterans as a reward for their services: "European settlers acquired huge landholding, establishing the basis of large-scale commercial agriculture. In Kenya the fertile White Highlands were designated for their exclusive use" (Meredith 7). The Kikuyu people are a group with a deep attachment to the land<sup>1</sup>, so after the unfair and abusive snatch of their territories they began to revolt against the white authority and formed political groups. In response to the rebellion of the Kikuyu, who demanded their lost lands, the colonial authorities ordered to suppress and subdue them. The measures taken by the British against the Kikuyu civil population were extremely violent, in parallel white settlers projected their fear on the nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta, who requested the Kenyan self-government and independence. By contrast, "the repression they ordered, far from crushing the rebellion, turned into full-scale war" (Meredith 79), this war, called The Mau Mau Uprising lasted from 1952 to 1964. Under a Eurocentric point of view:

White settlers, colonial officials, missionaries and the British government were unanimous in regarding Mau Mau as a sinister tribal cult affecting a largely primitive and superstitious people, confused and bewildered their contact with the civilised world and prey to malevolent designs of ambitious politicians (Meredith 79-80).

Such was the case of the official Colonial Office report published in 1960 in which it was declared that the Mau Mau was a subversive movement "based on the lethal mixture of pseudo-religion, nationalism and the evil forms of black magic" (Meredith 80). But finally, even if at first instance the white leadership was regarded as an indispensable for economic development in Kenya because they considered that "African people of the region had come into contact with European colonisation relatively recently, compared to West African, they were considered to be several generations behind in terms of political advancement" (Meredith 78), after the riots and the uprising of the Kikuyu, the British officials began to rethink their strategy and a possible independence, which would not come until 1963.

Therefore, in the aftermath giving an overview of the colonial period in Nigeria and Kenya, it is possible to conclude that although both nations suffered British colonialism in several forms, in both cases the African communities' balanced state was strongly

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasize the link and adherence that joined together the Igbo community with the land, we are going to develop this question in depth later on.

altered by the western imposition. This violent upheaval generated severe consequences in the autochthonous people. Along with our work, we are going to address some of those consequences such as the transformation of African societies, hybridity, cultural identity, and power relationships are dealt with through the novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between*.

### 3. African literature

After the Second World War, English studies in schools and higher institutions became systematised along the British colonies. All the contents were taught from a Eurocentric point of view, the syllabus of subject areas such as history and literature showed only the British reality, completely ignoring the African one as Ngũgĩ asserts in his collection of essays entitled *Decolonising the Mind: The politics of language in African literature*:

African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world in the immediate environment, was Eurocentric (93).

Nevertheless, a new generation of African students started to question the underlying assumptions behind the educational system that they had inherited. This new perspective was depicted in the words of the writer in the same collection:

Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves (...) with Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective (94).

Likewise, this struggle for recognition was extrapolated to the vision of literature, which had been used by colonial forces "as part of the whole ideological mechanism for integrating a person into the values of a dominant class, race, or nation" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 99). It is therefore that literature had been a tool of manipulation used in the domination of Africa thus far. It is noteworthy that it was a method of alienation for the autochthonous societies under a colonist viewpoint, this kind of fiction "dehumanized the African subject-peoples and fundamentally determined the understanding of them (...) but it became a means of justifying oppression and exploitation" (Witte 125). In his 1974 essay, "Colonialist criticism", the writer Chinua Achebe accused European novelists of portraying Africa in ways that justified its sacking and subjugation (Gilley 649). Shortly after, in his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" he referred to Conrad as a "thoroughgoing racist" since his description on Africa and its inhabitants as wild, dark and uncivilised (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 173). In contrast, as the Nigerian novelist eloquently expressed, the African culture is not simple, even if the European perspective has often wanted to generalise and stereotype it. On the contrary, the fusion of elements that define the African identity are very complex. Consequently,

in "Message from Chinua Achebe" he conceived his role as an African writer in connection with a political claim: "The last five hundred years of European contact with African produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light, and now the time has come for Africans to tell their own stories". Accordingly, Achebe directly appealed to all the African writers on the continent for the purpose of contributing to a definition of themselves, writing their own stories in the global history. The novelist was aware of the import fact that Africans must recognise the relevance of their experiences and value the power of their voices in order to share their perspectives with the rest of the humankind. In this sense, in "Message from Chinua Achebe", the writer emphasised the fundamental role that fiction and literature had in creating an image in others mind: "One of the greatest things literature does is allow us to imagine; to identify with situations and people who live in completely different circumstances, in countries over the world". Therefore, in the 1950's an African literary production written in English began to emerge written by a young well-educated African elite as a response to the western discourse and also as a necessity of African people to express their own experiences and get others identify or empathize with them. That new African literature reflected "the destruction or undermining of a traditional way of life, and at the same time an attempt on the part of the African writers to reinstate the beauty and validity of their native culture" (Dowing Rothwell 74).

As this could not be any other way, after having reviewed the reasons that led to the birth of an African literature, in the following sections we are going to stress the most important facts about the author bibliographies in relation with their oeuvres as well as those important aspects about the context in which the novels that form the basis of our work emerged. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* highlight the major results of British colonialism altering the African identity. As we will see, both writers utilise a literary device which helps them to define their common identity as African individuals: returning imaginatively to the pre-colonial past. Through this recourse the novelists "attempt a re-creation of traditional life as it was before the European intrusion" (Booth 6).

### 3.1 Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe (1930 - 2013), born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe but later rejected his Christian name, was a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic. Achebe is probably the best known novelist, not only from Nigeria but from the whole continent of Africa, he became famous with his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which since its publication has sold more than 20 million copies and been translated into more than 50 languages. He grew up in the Igbo town of Ogidi, in eastern Nigeria. His parents were convinced by the representatives of the British government to abandon their conventional religion and to convert into Christianity; indeed his father was one of the earliest Igbos to become a missionary. However, by the time Achebe went to school the most significant changes caused by the intervention of colonialism had already taken place. For this reason Achebe was brought up in the Christian faith, nonetheless he remained interested in the more traditional Nigerian beliefs. He graduated in English at the University College (now the University of Ibadan) of Nigeria, in 1954<sup>2</sup>. The education that he received brought him in close contact with European literary traditions, but at the same time his curiosity about the history of his own country grew and he started filling the gaps of a story that was told to him just from the western vision.

As we have already underscored, Achebe was a key personage in the rise and continuity of anti-colonial ideology in Africa, notwithstanding he was never a simple rebellious figure (Gilley 646). Through his works, Achebe tried to reveal that the Europeans' ideals of Africa were mistaken and that before the whites' arrival the native populations had already developed efficient cultural systems. In "The role of the writer" he declared that the most communities in Africa had "a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (8). Nevertheless, mostly in his later years, Achebe also argues that "a key reason for the weakness of the Nigerian state is that it repudiated too much of the colonial legacy inherited from the British" (qdt. in Gilbert 646). Besides, in his final works he considered that British colonialism had even left positive legacies in Nigeria and that his generation was a very lucky one; with this words he stated in *There was a Country: A personal history of Biafra*:

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<sup>2</sup> "Biographical note" in Achebe, Chinua. *The African Trilogy: Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2010, pp. xix-xx.

The pace of change in Nigeria from the 1940s was incredible. I am not talking about the rate of development, with villages transforming into towns, or the coming of modern comforts, such as electricity or running water or modes of transportation, but more of a sense that we were standing figuratively and literally at the dawn of a new era (39).

Consequently, it is not surprising that he expressed his gratitude to a British English professor that mentored him during the literary process of *Things Fall Apart*, and also to the English editor (Alan Hill) and the British publisher (Heinemann). Achebe's thankfulness extended even to the British postal system (Gilbert 653), through which he sent the sole copy of the manuscript in 1956 for its edition in London:

One had a great deal of confidence and faith in the British system that we had grown up in, a confidence and a faith in British Institutions. One trusted that things would get where they were sent; postal theft, tampering, or loss of documents were unheard-of. Today [in Nigeria], one would not even contemplate sending of materials of importance so readily, either abroad or even locally, by mail (Achebe 42).

In conclusion, it seems that Achebe's own life reminds him constantly some of the benefits that the colonial inheritance generated in his career as the best known author in African literature. This makes sense since he was a product of the hybridization process that took place in all the African continent on account of colonialism. So finally, the novelist embraced the positive legacies that British rule left in Nigeria, but not without continuing the African historic and political demand.

### **3.1.1 *Things Fall Apart***

Chinua Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which title comes from the poem by William Butler Yeats' *The Second Coming*, received a significant worldwide acclaim and it is the most widely read and taught book in modern African literature. The novelist wrote this work shortly before the independence of Nigeria (1960) as a response to the misrepresentation and stereotypes of Africa described in the European writings. For that matter, Achebe conceived his novel *Things Fall Apart* for audiences in and outside Africa, in other words, he yearned for building a bridge that linked his African writing with the rest of the globe at and the same time he expected to address his fellow citizen. On the other hand, he pursued to provide a real picture of the pre-colonial Nigeria for those who had no previous knowledge or had racist preconceptions of traditional

African communities, seeing the Africans as savages that needed to be enlightened by the civilised Europeans. On the other side, he attempted to appeal to other Africans in order to reclaim their own history and the value of their culture (Campu 43) by illustrating in this novel that pre-colonial African communities were made up of complex social, juridical, political, and cultural systems.

In this literary work, the Nigerian novelist relates the reader his people's history, standing out both its vigour and beauty, and also its imperfections. Over the course of the novel, Achebe describes the traditional daily life of the Igbo people in a fictional hamlet in the south-eastern part of Nigeria called Umuofia during the late nineteenth century, nevertheless the arrival of the whites entails a turning point in the plot development. In this sense, the author involves the reader's sympathies through a "detailed evocation of a harmonious traditional culture before introducing the destructive and uncomprehending whites" (Booth, 7). The unexpected British intrusion entailed a culture clash for the natives, mainly because they did not know how to react to the sudden tactics performed by the missionaries: "the arrival was gradual, and one of the techniques employed to destroy Igbo society was the infiltration of Christian missionaries who introduced new ideas and undermined the local system belief" (Galván and Galván, 106). As a result the meddling of the colonist threatens to change almost every aspect of the Igbo society, such as their religion, family structure, political organization, traditional gender roles and relations, etc.

Achebe was an individual that reflected the notion of hybridity, inasmuch as he grew up under the colonial rule but at the same time he kept his ancestral ties. Therefore, he has the capacity to observe and analyse both the African and the colonial history from a more objective point of view, so this complex vision of colonialism is evident in *Things Fall Apart*. The book has often been criticized for "going too easy on the colonialists, even having gone so far as to suggest that the education and development brought by colonialism was a welcome intrusion into Igbo society" (Gilley 655), furthermore, some anti-colonial writers have accused the novel of being complicit and approving colonialism:

The colonialist culture and ideology are presented as better alternatives. No resistance is portrayed to either the colonialist or their ideology. The narrative reinforces the superiority of the colonizing culture. *Things Fall Apart* cannot be categorized as a literature of resistance (Mamuna Gahi and Ishad 104).

Furthermore, Achebe affirmed in his collection of interviews titled *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* that the British government did not destroy the Igbo culture, but disturbed it. Moreover, according to the novelist, cultures are constantly been influenced by others that may have some kind of advantage at a particular time; so most of the time cultures suffer challenges and pushes from other societies. However, he stated that a culture which is healthy will often survive:

It will not survive exactly in the form in which it was met by the invading culture, but it will modify itself and move on . . . So there is a need for a culture to be alive and active and ready to adjust, ready to take challenges. A culture that fails to take challenges will die (66-67).

Nevertheless, even if it can seem that Achebe was portraying the Igbo's auto-devastating potential through their weaknesses which could require change and which aid in its destruction, the author makes it clear that the Igbo community did not need the white man "to carry them into the modern world" because "whiting the Igbo system change and progress were possible" (Rhoads 67). In fact, when old customs were antiquated, they were gradually dismissed. As an example, when Okonkwo, the main character, desecrates the Week of Peace the oldest man in the village, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, reminds him that formerly the punishment for failing to maintain the peace during the sacred week was death: "A man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve" (Achebe, 24)<sup>3</sup>.

So, what Achebe really does in *Things Fall Apart* is to present a praiseworthy past, but also its imperfections that could be eliminated. He portrays the truth objectively, because he realises that "the history he is trying to re-create to give his people dignity will be credible only if it includes faults" (Rhoads 68). Moreover, these flaws can explain in somehow why the British were able to intrude and wreck the Igbo lifestyle.

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the novel *Things Fall Apart* are taken from the Everyman's Library's *The African Trilogy* edition. Henceforth, in relation to the text of the novel, we will just cite the page.

### 3.2 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938), originally James Thiong'o Ngugi, is an foremost academic world-renown Kenyan writer, award-winning, and whose work includes novels, plays, short stories, and essays (Waita 82). He was born in Limuru, in a truly numerous family, and grew up in the wider social and political changes occurring in Kenya at that time. In 1977, the year he published *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ's co-written play with Ngugi wa Mirii *I Will Marry When I Want* was performed, but it was censored by the authoritarian Kenyan regime six weeks after its opening. At the end of the same year, the author was detained and imprisoned for a year at a maximum-security prison in Kenya<sup>4</sup>. Throughout his time in prison, he swore that since that moment he would craft all his creative works in his native languages (Kikuyu and Swahili); during the stay he penned *Caitani Mutharaba-ini (Devil on the Cross)*. Later, he was exiled in Great Britain, but finally he moved to the United States where he has been teaching in several universities (Waita 82).

As we have already mentioned, Ngũgĩ was critical with the education he received. Originally, he developed a love of the Christian religious traditions and the English literary canon, but due to numerous pre-independence riots his mind-set changed dramatically. Without any doubt, an important fact was the jailing of his brother and the torture of his mother by the British government during the state of emergency in the Mau Mau rebellion (Iweala 12). It is for this reason that he is "an outspoken critic of the colonial rule, Christianity and also the post-colonial abuses of Kenyan authorities" (Sivasasipoorani, 416) and his works are recognised for Ngũgĩ attempt to challenge the dubious civilizing claim of the colonizers (Nasreddin 59).

Ngũgĩ is absolutely aware of his role as a writer and the large dimensions that his works can attain. For this reason, his preoccupations as an influence and illustrated person concentrate on five main issues: politics, economics, culture, history, and the role of the church in the Kenyan struggle for independence (Sanka et al. 7). Correspondingly, all these substantive issues are addressed by the author throughout his artistic career, incorporating them into his literary projects. As we are going to see, *The River Between*

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<sup>4</sup> "Introduction" in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *The River Between*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015, pp. iii-iv, p. iii.

perfectly demonstrates the novelist commitment to the Kikuyu society and his patent intention to value the Africans' pre-colonial history.

### **3.2.1 *The River Between***

Even if the first novel written by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o' *The River Between* (the second to be published in 1965) also profiles the author's people' style of life, in this case the Kikuyu society, in their first contact with the British settlers under the shape of the civilising mission, the novelist is in no way copying Achebe. Thus, even if both stories recreate a section of their communities' history by using a narrative of dispossession (not only of ground, but also of legacies, traditions, manners and beliefs), "their novels are very different both structurally and linguistically" (Downing 75). Moreover, *The River Between*, originally entitled *The Black Messiah*, symbolises an inflection moment in the novelist's life, the text demonstrates his transition from an amateur artist to professional literary agent. And what is even more important, it presents evidence of an evolution of his attitude toward the colonial institution (Iweala 12).

As this is a historical fiction nationalist novel, it chronicles some particular periods in the history of Kenya, in so doing, the author interweaves the life story of his fictional characters with those historical events, while voicing his political insights that underlay the plot. Although the novel is not dated in any specific timeline, it is quite clear that *The River Between* integrates two meaningful periods in the Kikuyus history. Firstly, the missionary movement of the 1900s, and secondly, the self-managed schools movement of the 1930s (Nasreddin 63).

The novel provides the readers not the impression that there was peace and serenity before the colonist got into their way of life and that there will be harmony when natives eject them, but the fact that a social responsibility exists and a duty for us to try to understand and respect to the African's memoir (Iweala 13). As the author suggests, the current tension in the story came before the British advent. From this point, we are introduced not to a pre-colonial utopia, but to a more complex scene in which colonialism exacerbates existing tautness, incarnated in the two ridges of Kameno and Makuyu. The fierce polarisation between dwellers of the two confronted ridges, in spite of their common language, genealogy and various customs and rites, is the compliance of an old

Kikuyu prophecy, which forecasted that "There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies" (Ngũgĩ 2)<sup>5</sup>. Those individuals, unquestionably, are the British coloniser. Most notably, it is the Christian religion brought by the white man, the main cause that critically accentuates the ancestral confrontation, especially due to its fight against female circumcision among other important aspects. The novel bears witness that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a master at placing conflict at the centre of the narrative, most especially at the expense of the characters that must live with the tension that surrounds the small community, which confront the interaction with the imperial power and the changes that it entails. In this sense, *The River Between* reveal an ambience of pressing and urgency, and a constant reflection, that distil into a beautiful and dystopian bildungsroman, which is set in a "vaguely fictional historical context around the time of the push by the British colonial religious infrastructure to eradicate female circumcision" (Iweala 13).

Clearly, we can conclude that Ngũgĩ used the novel form to approach substantial social and political issues. Hence, by means of *The River Between*, he "come to terms with events that he witnessed in his childhood in an attempt to represent colonialism from the point of view of the victim" (Nasreddin 64). In this manner, as well as in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *The River Between* is a perfect illustration of how the theme of the colonial impact is at the heart of most African literature written in English (Sivasasipoorani 417).

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes from the novel *The River Between* are taken from the 1965 edition by Heinemann. Henceforth, in relation to the text of the novel, we will just cite the page.

#### **4. Post-colonial analysis**

The portrait of the Igbo and Kikuyu societies deployed under Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's narratives, plays a major role in helping others to empathize with the Africans' reality and to avoid falling into the trap of prejudging Igbo and Kikuyu cultures in their novels. On the following pages, we will proceed to broach the main themes in *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between* through a post-colonial analysis. Because of this, it is essential to non-African readers, especially for European ones, to detach themselves from the preconceived notions that belong to the popular consciousness in order to conduct a detailed exploration of these literary works.

##### **4.1 Tradition versus Christianity**

In the colonial process, the British government fabricates an image of the African people with a Eurocentric cultural and political perception (Moore Gilbert, 173-174), in which Europe is perceived as the core of civilisation and humanity, so that implies the superiority of the western values (Witte 125). In this way, they found a defence for the invasion of Africa under an act of promulgation of the Christian faith, claiming to have the sacred mission of civilizing the indigenous population and providing them with the benefits of education and progress. Therefore, hiding their true intentions behind a religious labour to save the souls of the “pagan” Africans, the Europeans burst into their territories to accomplish an agricultural exploitation of the raw materials.

In *Things Fall Apart*, when the missionaries make their first public appearance in Mbanta, where Okonkwo is in exile, they are not taken seriously by the native people (102). The locals laugh at the interpreter, through whom the white missionary tries to communicate with them, because he expresses himself in an odd way. Igbo people see the white missionary as a stranger whose speech is unreliable due to "he told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone"(102) and that their gods "are not alive" and cannot do them any harm (103). Igbo people live in real fear of their gods, whose sources of power guarantee the social order, for that reason, they have to be careful to not displease them. Therefore, the missionary's words have no sense for them. But the

white man threatens those who follow the Igbo gods and explain that "evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil" (102) and tries to convince them that it exists only a true God, the Christian one. Consequently, British missionaries do not attempt to accept or understand the Igbo culture, instead of that, their purpose is to impose Christianity and erase the local religion. However, the Igbo religion is highly developed and its system works as effectively as the Christian does. Both, Christianity and Igbo religion, have one supreme god, in the case of the Igbo culture this divinity is called Chukwu (128). In the same way, the supreme god has messengers on the earthly life; for the British, the messenger of God is Jesus Christ, and for Umuofians, their wooden idols accomplish this purpose.

In order to achieve their goals, the white missionary tries to win people's favour by promising them to bring some "iron-horses" (102). The iron horse is actually a bicycle, but this object helps the whites to be seen in some way as "superior, and even supernatural" (Galván and Galván 107). Nevertheless, the white religion starts to gain converts, mainly people that do not fit in the Igbo society. Accordingly, the inhabitants of Umuofia become to be separated into two groups: those who have renounced the Igbo convictions and manners and have converted to Christianity, and those remain loyal to the tribe and its ancient beliefs. This strategy of divide and conquer is also employed by the Christian missionaries in the novel *The River Between*, where Chege predicted long ago the arrival of the white man. He told his countrymen that the invaders had already settled in the adjacent territories, taking away their land; nevertheless, people in his village refused to take him seriously (7). Shortly afterwards, the missionaries took up the surrounding lands with their religious preaching and converted to the Christian faith quite a few Kikuyus like Joshua. In so doing, the missionaries started through the act of converting natives "the first step of colonialism" (Sivasasipoorani 421). Joshua, the fanatic priest converted to Christianity, lead Makuyu citizens promoting the white man's religion and defaming all the traditional customs due to "the unerring white man" has called the Kikuyu god "the prince of darkness" (29). Consequently, a church has been built in Makuyu and the village has become headquarter for the activities of the Christians converts. On the other side, Kameno represents the redoubt of Kikuyu traditions, where Chege, (and after his death, the Kiama) advocates ancestral values and rites, such as is the case of circumcision despite its prohibition by the Christian missionaries. Nonetheless, in the description of Waiyaki's circumcision,

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o highlights the connection that this rite has with the notions of land belonging and religion:

The knife produced a thin sharp pain as a cut through the flesh. The surgeon had done his work. Blood trickled freely onto the ground, sinking into the soil. Henceforth a religious bond linked Waiyaki to the earth, as if his blood was an offering (45).

It is important to stress that the rite of circumcision is full of deep social and cultural principles, as Gikandi notes this practice is central and universal to Kikuyu identity:

The festivals and rites with both marriage and death hold, but a small place in Kikuyu imagination compared to the greatest of all ceremonies whereby the boy becomes a man and the girl a woman. By this rite of circumcision, with its implicated ritual, each individual passes from the condition of simply being the property of Kikuyu parents to that of a Kikuyu nation, with accompanying rights privileges and which obligations (qtd in Nasreddin 63).

Therefore, this practice is part of the initiation ritual in the Kikuyu society, which involves firstly a recreation called the second birth and secondly the process of circumcision that marks the transformation from childhood to adulthood. Through circumcision, the individual is linked to his people's land and culture, indeed, "it is a source of spiritual and social cohesion and order, in spite of the risk involved in the way the surgery is done" (Raïmi 17).

Concerning the controversy over the rite of Circumcision, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o alludes an historical fact; the commotion resulting from a 1929 order of the Church of Scotland Mission which prohibited circumcised members from attending mission schools (Iweala 15). The same happens in the novel when Reverend Livingstone decides that the children of those who defy "the laws of the Church" and continue "their tribal customs" will have to leave Siriana (60). So, Kikuyu people will have to renounce circumcising their children if they want them to go to the Christian School. Livingstone was supposed to be determined to learn the customs of the Kikuyu and not to repeat the same mistakes of the missionaries of the earlier generation "who had caused tribal warfare and civil strife because they could not appreciate the importance of tribal customs" (56); however, he becomes horrified by that "immoral" practice. Therefore, imposing his Eurocentric will, he states that circumcision has to be rooted out of there, "if there was to be any hope of salvation for these people" (56). For this reason, Waiyaki was forced to establish his own independent school called Marioshini, in which he recruits those who are not accepted in

the Christian one. By this way, Waiyaki pursue to provide the Africans with the benefits of the British education which seemed to be the sole way out of their state of political colonisation and cultural alienation. Waiyaki becomes a cornerstone of the rupture from Siriana and he strives for the development of an education adapted to the religious and social realities of the Kikuyu population (Diouf, 28).

Another important point to bear in mind the missionary intrusion is the peacefully way in which they were received by the natives. A clear example of that is portrayed by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. In the Igbo culture, solidarity is a fundamental value and all citizens in the community had internalised it. For that reason, when Okonkwo goes into exile in Mbanta his uncle and all his family help him to rebuild his life from scratch (91). Unfortunately, this sense of solidarity added to the Igbo faith in their gods and ancestors has as result the decision made by the rulers of Mbanta about what to do with the Missionaries' request of a piece of land to build a Church (105). After consulting among themselves, they give the white men as much of the Evil Forest as they care to take, inasmuch as the inhabitants expect them to be dead within four days because the forest was "alive with sinister forces and the power of darkness" (105). Nonetheless, nothing happens to them and, what is more, they start to build a new thatch house for their teacher (106). It is due to the fact that until the moment the nature of white people and their religion were unknown by the Igbos that they are confused about how to react. Conversely, the apathy behaviour of Igbo people towards the missionaries gives them the impression that the Igbo society is weak and that it can be easily manipulated under British education.

Inasmuch as the story goes by, the white man's rule becomes more and more influential; moreover, in the last part of the novel when Okonkwo returns from exile, we notice that the white District Commissioner is openly protecting the church in his village. So, in a first instance, the British begin controlling the people through religion and education, but then the colonial administration imposes its own hierarchical system which "delegates power from the queen of England trough district commissionaires to native court messengers" (Rhoads 63). Gods and ancestors in Igbo society are an essential part in the cultural identity, however, only Okonkwo and few others realise that "the challenge of the local gods is after all a challenge to the local culture, and that its ulterior motive is the destruction of the clan" (Galván and Galván 112). Obierika, Okonkwo's best friend

and also a respected man in Umuofia, expresses the devastation that has overcome in their land:

He [the white man] 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 (124).

Igbo spiritual beliefs are the base of their political system and cultural identity, their native religion is the main bond that keeps them together. With the arrival of the missionaries that system of convictions has changed creating confrontation and turmoil among the locals. For this reason, the Christian labour is the first step in the process of British domination by destroying the symbols of the Igbo culture and "in a display of belligerence which gradually intensifies as the Christians start to feel increasingly protected by the colonial government" (Galván and Galván 114). In the same way, as Sivasasipoorani points out, the author in *The River Between* "clearly draws our attention to the exploitation of the Africans in the field of education imparted by the colonizers" (423). It is blatant that the education imparted in the Siriana Missionary School has as its purpose to guarantee the interests of the British Empire, and that they want the new students to help them to rule those who resist the Christian insistence. Once the Christian education condemns the native rituals, customs and traditions, it starts in this way the destruction of Kikuyu culture by missionary religious education. For this reason, "church plays an important role impoverishing the souls in Kenyans by robbing them of their culture just as colonialism deprived them of their land and other material possessions" (Sanka 8).

#### **4.1.1 Literary techniques portraying tradition**

Albeit Booth affirms that "the degree of early missionary penetration and the level of educational development" obtained very positive results such as the emergence of writers of national significance (28), this statement shows a neo-colonial view, which disregards the native's cultural destruction and the Africans alienation under British

education. According to Booth, the use of a widespread language in literature, as it is the case of the English one, gives access to encompass a broader audience. He explains that bearing in mind the ethnic and linguistic diversity within the African nations, the use of the colonial language in public life and education is simply necessary, because to speak or write in a native language means to approach only a limited audience (57). Even so, Booth also sustains that the language is "an historical accident, imposed on Africa from outside" (62) and that the use of English as a literary medium causes frustration and conflict to the writers that have to express African life with the colonial language. In fact, considering that language is the very first link between people, since it is an essential part in both, the individual and collective identity (Tobalase, 83) in the novels the writers have wanted to evince this language issue. As much in *Things Fall Apart* as in *The River Between*, both Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o put into words the close association between language and cultural identity through the characters' voices. Taking into account that the white missionaries in *Things Fall Apart* impose their religion over the Igbo system of beliefs with no intention of comprehending their customs, Okonkwo knows about their intentions because they do not even try to speak the Igbo language, [Obierika]: "Does the white man understand our custom about land?" [Okonkwo]: "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" (124). Similarly, in *The River Between*, the author states that: "The white man cannot speak the language of the hills. And knows not the ways of the land" (7). So, having in mind that the novelists coincide with the language implications in the ethical identity, it may be questioned: how can Achebe and Ngũgĩ appreciate their native languages if they have written these novels in English?

It is well known that Ngũgĩ is aware of the role that language plays in the process of colonization and in the "long and the incomplete struggle to emerge from colonialism's shadow" (Iweala 10), indeed, as we have already commented previously in his latest works the author has taken the decision to write only in Swahili and Kikuyu. Meanwhile, Achebe differentiates between the "ethnic" and "national" literature and stand up for the use of English as a tool to unify the oral literary potential of African writers (Salami and Shoar 21). Even so, the two literary artists find a way to give their native languages the value they merit by portraying their beauty by means of various linguistic devices.

For this purpose, Achebe achieves a vivid and colourful recreation of Igbo language through a majestic use of myths and proverbs which provides a sense of orality to the text (Salami and Shoar 22). For Igbo people the use of proverbs in conversations is

a demonstration of wisdom and a sign of respect for their traditions. In *Things Fall Apart*, the novelist makes the reader aware of the importance of proverbs in Igbo culture with these words: "among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (7). As an example, when Okonkwo negotiates with Nwakibie to give him enough yams for share-cropping he takes with him palm-wine and kola nut as a gift and starts the conversation with a proverb: "A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his greatness" (16), in so doing, Okonkwo shows respect and politeness to Nwakibie.

Likewise, in *The River Between* the use of proverbs is not only useful to sketch the oral characteristics of Kikuyu language, but also meaningful. For example, the narrator explains "the oilskin of the house is not for rubbing into the skin of strangers" (3) which means that it is risky for Kikuyu people to disclose their secrets to a stranger, because this person could uncover their weakness and uses it against them. Going further, from the very beginning of the novel the author is revealing what is going to happen, because as the British were accepted into the Kikuyu land they have managed to discover the secrets of ancient tiny disagreements among the various tribes and will take advantage of that to further weaken the unity of the Kikuyu population (Sanka 12). Another form of verbal arts found in *The River Between* are songs. During the meeting between Marioshoni authorities, the pupils and their parents, they sing a song that calls attention to the need for the Kikuyus to change their methods in the battle against imperialism (Sanka 11). This protest song recognises the need for education because native people struggle is not of "spears and shields", but a battle of brains:

Father, mother

Provide me with pen and slate

I want to learn.

Land is gone

Cattle and sheep are not there

Not there any more

What's left?

Learning, learning.

Father, if you had many cattle and sheep

I would ask for a spear and shield,

But now-

I do not want a spear

I do not want a shield

I want the shield and spear of learning (93).

Besides that, another discursive element, in this case incorporated by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, is the folklore stories which help him to depict the Igbos' morality and way of thinking. Such is the case of the story of the tortoise that Ekwefi tells her daughter (67) which is an implement in developing the thematic significance of the novel, since the story deals with the power of language in convincing other people. In fact, the whole novel can be understood as being constructed in the form of an Igbo tale and, in addition, it can be postulated that Achebe's simple mode of narration and prose style in *Things Fall Apart* is quite deliberate and "dare to foreground the traditional Igbo storytelling technique" (Salami and Shoar 23). This storytelling model is also present, somehow, in *The River Between* by means of the myth of creation, which is narrated in the first chapter. The legend brings to light the ancient and profound Kikuyu beliefs, and underlines the importance of land to the native population. The creator, Murungu, awarded the land of Kikuyuland to Gikuyu and Mumbi, the father and the mother of the nation, by saying "this land I give to you, O man and woman. It is for you to rule it till, you and your posterity" (2). So, these words imply that "the land does not just become the inalienable right of Kenyans but there is a kind of a religious bond between Kenyans and their land" (Sanka 10).

Additionally, apart from Igbo proverbs and stories, Achebe employs another more straightforward technique to provide a full record of the Igbo communal life and enhance the oral features in his fiction. This strategy is called the hybridization through transliteration which is based on inserting a series of Igbo words into the English text at some significant points. These words are not translated so they have to be inferred from the context by the reader. The Igbo words appear in italic form and they are related to aspects of Umofians life, such as culture, religion, society, etc. and they can be considered "linguistic devices adopted by the novelist in order to gain a kind of localization within a discourse framed on the basis of a foreign language" (Salami and Shoar 24). A perfect example of this technique can be found in the description of a ceremony in which the nine

*egwugwu* representing each village of the clan are involved (63), the leading *egwugwu* shouts "Yaa!" and the elders of the clan replied "*Umuofia Kwenụ!*". The reader does not need to understand Igbo in order to comprehend the dialogue, because from the context it is easily inferred that this interaction is a kind of greet.

Achebe and Ngũgĩ appropriate the English language and make it theirs by reproducing attributes of African oral tradition. They are giving a sense of beauty to the Igbo and Kikuyu art, poetry and music by "showing how it is interwoven with the most important institutions of the clan" (Rhoads 67) and by creating a sense of the native African languages through their own use of English. So, after decades of hegemony presence of the language of their colonisers in the Igbo and Kikuyu society, the novelist reminds their compatriots not only the value of their African culture, but also the oral essence of their mother tongues (Salami and Sohar 23). In parallel, both of them make use of English as a double-edged sword in their novels because at the same time that they are rescuing their traditional cultures, they are using the colonial language to criticise British colonialism (Booth 79).

## **4.2 A power struggle**

Authority and governance in the Igbo society devolve upon a type of democratic system which is formed by the joining together of the elders of Umuofia, called the *ndichie*; that rules the clan under their collective decisions based on the knowledge about their cultural roots that their forefathers have passed onto them (11). Consequently, each man is judged on his own merits and according to his worth, not those of his father (8), as it would happen in an oligarchy or an aristocracy. Igbo people seem to be much more tolerant to other cultures than the British colonisers who merely see the Igbos as uncivilised (Rhoads 63). For example, Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle on his mother's side, argues that "what is good among one people in an abomination with others"(99). Furthermore, in order to supply a feasible rule system and institutions supporting equal opportunities, moderation and morality, the Igbos have an economic method which redistributes material wealth, in some way preventing not a single tribesman from dire poverty or in excess wealth. For example, in exchange for taking any of the titles of the clan, an Igbo man has to give up a portion of his wealth (Rhoads 66). Moreover, in

contrast to the European culture that in the name of God makes neighbouring villages to quarrel ones against others, in the Igbo tradition it is banned to kill a member of the clan. Even in the case of "female" crime (87), the inadvertent murders, as when Okonkwo's accidentally kills of Ezeudu's son, his crime has to be expiated and Okonkwo has to spend seven years in exile.

Ikemefuna's murder (44-45) is probably the most disturbing event narrated in the novel in relation with the Igbo culture, it seems even worse than the abandonment of twins in the Evil Forest, but the Igbos' behaviour is not so different from the British principle of an eye for an eye carried through in the massacre of Abame. When the first British scout arrives to the village of Abame, the natives do not know how to react since it is the first time that they see a white man. So the elders consult their Oracle, which tell them that "the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them" (97), and they decide to kill the stranger. In revenge, the British slaughter the whole population. This bloodbath horrifies Obierika, who claims that he has never seen anything like that before: "I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about the white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true" (99).

The clan is a victim of its own innocence and inability to see through the hidden motivations of the Christians. Some Igbos become aware of how the colonizers are putting pressure on Igbo unity by introducing their religion and new ideas that disparage the local customs (Galván and Galván 113). Nevertheless, when the British government appears, the Igbo traditional system of justice is rapidly replaced by the district commissioners and the court messengers.

The *egwugwu*, the masked spirit of the clan, links the spiritual with the political powers and is also the administrator of justice. When a dispute cannot be resolved by mutual agreement, the involved parties resort to the *egwugwu*, who, after hearing witnesses on both sides settles the dispute (66). In the Igbo system of beliefs the power of their ancestors is the main pillar of their society, so this divine power keeps them together under an authority that all people accept. In fact, the masked spirit is such respected that the merest suspicion about his worldly identity is considered a taboo. So, since the masked spirit is the most sacred institution in the Igbo society, the desecration of the *egwugwu* by Enoch, the "overzealous" convert (131), constitutes the worst offence against the clan's tradition. The profanation occurs because the festival of the Igbo earth

deity falls on a Sunday, coinciding with the returning of Christians that have gone to the Church and that need to pass through where the spirits are in order to get home. The spirits grant the Christians their request to transit the village, but Enoch defies the *egwugwu* and snatches his mask off, in so doing "the most sacred thing is exposed to profanity, the mysteries are abruptly revealed, and the power of ancestors is reduced to a game of men" (Galván and Galván 114). The mocking is possible because the British authorities protect the missionaries and the converts and do not allow those who remains faithful to Igbo traditions to bother the Christians for reasons not only religious but also politics. In addition, the Igbo law against killing another member of the clan do not allow them to threaten the converts to Christianity. When defenders of the Igbo ethical traditions finally respond to the Christians offenses and make their minds up to pull down the church building (133), it is already too late to make up the power that have been snatched from them. The District Commissioner is protecting the Church and its parishioners, so he incarcerates and humiliates the elders of the clan (135-137). Finally, the interruption of the meeting of the clan by the messengers that command to stop the event, displays a total lack of respect for the Igbo institution which underscores the end of the last vestiges of Umuofia's auto-determination. So, the political system of the Igbo community which is based on their spiritual beliefs has collapsed inevitably due to the consequences of the arrival of the missionaries. This process of cultural destruction culminates with the annihilation of the Igbo system of power and the enactment of the British colonial rule because the white man government goes hand in hand with the religious authority, and they support each other.

At the end of the novel, Igbo culture is presented for the very first time from the outside, as an object of "anthropological curiosity" (Campu 44) from the perspective of the representative of the British government, the District Commissioner. This character works as a symbol of administrative operation and tribal disintegration as he finds in Okonkwo's death a source of inspiration to title his book: *The pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (146). In the same way, the District Commissioner also de-emphasises and devalues Igbo culture by expecting to write only a paragraph of Okonkwo's death, since according to him, it can maybe be interesting reading, but only if its details are cut out (146).

In *The River Between*, another struggle notes above the cultural conflict: following the path paved by the missionaries, the British settlers seizure of the Kikuyu land. The

creation of vast plantations in the huge parcels of land of the Kikuyu people seems to be the principal impulse of the colonial enterprise, which has been kept hidden so far (Nasreddin 60).

Therefore, it is important to have in mind the deep attachment of Kikuyu people to the land in order to understand that the misappropriation of the Kikuyuland by British settlers causes a resilient stir among the natives that culminates into the Mau Mau movement (Nasreddin 65). In *The River Between*, this tense atmosphere is captured in the political discussion in the teachers' office, which brings to light what is happening all over the Kikuyu territory where the colonial rule has been preparing the ground for occupation:

Take Siriana Mission, for example, the men of God came peacefully. They were given a place. Now see what has happened. They have invited their brothers to come and take all the land. Our country is invaded. The Government Post behind Makuyu is a plague in our midst (64).

The retrieval of the usurped land is polarised along "two conflicting courses of action" (Nasreddin 65). On the one hand, Waiyaki pursues a reconciliation aided by the colonial education that helps him to be worthy of admiration among the member of the clan because he has the role of being the bringer of the white man's magic and power. Because of this, he is expected to equip the tribe with the knowledge that he has about the British learning and their tools in order to make the tribe strong and wise enough "to chase away the settlers and the missionaries" (87). Nevertheless, his obsession to promote education makes him forget the immediate needs of his people whose lands are being taken away by the white settlers. On the other hand, the Kiama, the council of elders responsible for restoring the purity of the clan (95), encouraged by Kabonyi reminds Waiyaki that their fellow countryman are being forced to work in the same snatched lands, and what is even worse, new taxes are being imposed by the British Government. So Kabonyi considers it urgent to "drive away the white man from the hills altogether" (95) and presses for immediate action because he is dubious about the benefits of education.

The defencelessness of Kikuyu people of Kenya whose highlands will be dispossessed by the British colonisers seems to be portrayed with the failure of Waiyaki. Even if Kabonyi makes the most of Waiyaki's political naivety to use the tactic of the oath to accuse him with being a traitor, and ultimately, to dethrone him, Kabonyi's anti-colonial vigour is only fuelled by personal ambition and jealousy for Waiyaki, so he does not represent a viable alternative solution (Nasreddin 66). The novel ends, and no

guarantee is given as far as the fate of the country is concerned; the power struggle for the Kikuyus' land is unforeseeable, as it is suggested in the last paragraph:

The land was not silent. Two ridges lay side by side, hidden in darkness. And Honia River went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising the dark stillness, reaching into the hearts of the people of Makuyu and Kamenno (152).

To sum up, both Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in their respective novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between*, represents the whole strategy of European domination, which relies on disempowering the native population. In order to achieve their objective, the British government firstly introduces a series of religious ideas through the civilising mission with the purpose of challenging the tribal system of beliefs and creating confusion; secondly, through Christian education and cultural alignment, they generate a conflict between those who internalise the colonial ideas and those who fight to preserve their traditional customs and native identity; and thirdly, they establish local governmental units ruled by British commissioners that protect the church and the converts, while harassing those who do not by "progressively erasing every sign of local culture" (Galván and Galván 115). Added to this, the colonial system not only accomplishes a moral indoctrination, but it goes far beyond by extrapolating its aspirations to a material level with the appropriation of the Africans lands and natural resources. Having said that, it is necessary to highlight that the introduction of the new colonial institutions and, with them, their patterns of behaviour and social and cultural practices based on concepts of British superiority among the native tribes produces not only an unsettled coexistence of those who surrender to the colonial power, and conversely, those who do not want to give up their national structures, but it also creates in the African subjects "an internal conflict around their very identity" (Galván and Galván 115). All of that leads to an embittered animosity between those who until the arrival of the white men had always lived as one people united under the same cultural roots, but which will never be the same again.

#### **4.3 Ethnic identity and cultural hybridisation**

As mentioned above, the British colonial impact on the Nigerian and Kenyan societies has as a result a crash of cultures; which causes cultural hybridisation in some

individuals, particularly in the younger generations, and a longing for recovering their ethnic identity in those more bound by tradition.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo must be placed in the second group as he is the biggest supporter of the Igbo ancestral roots. He is a successful clansman in a society where his effort and determination are a model to be emulated by the young boy in the tribe. Nevertheless, after elaborately highlighting Okonkwo as a venerated powerful man in his clan, Achebe depicts his dramatic fall from grace (Varadharajan and Ramesh 152). Okonkwo firmly believes that conservative men from Umuofia have lost their place in the Igbo society and that their authority cannot be taken seriously anymore as Western ideas have softened their way of acting facing Christians' offences; so Igbo men have turned to weaklings due to the white man religion (Tobalase 82). In fact, things that normally would never take place in the Igbo society have begun to happen with the arrival of the settlers, such is the case of young men starting to reject their customs or disrespecting the elders by contradicting their orders. As Tobolase affirms, the first evident defiance towards the notions of masculinity and respect for the elders in the African culture is the case between Okonkwo and Nwoye. Nwoye is Okonkwo's eldest son and "the traditional heir to the family kingdom" (Tobolase 84), however, he internalises the message of the missionaries since he does not feel that he fits in the predefined role that Igbo society and his father impose on him. In fact, Okonkwo had always suspected that his first son was weak and the supposed lack of manliness of Nwoye concerns Okonkwo even before the arrival of the colonial ideologies. For that reason, the interruption of Europeans is just the trigger of Nwoye's rebellion against his father, but not the cause (Tobolase 85). For Okonkwo "to abandon the gods of one's father and go about with lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth abomination" (108). Nevertheless, his fear goes much further than just losing Nwoye, he is afraid of suffering dishonour and disloyalty from his entire household if they join to the new religion:

Suppose when he died all his male children decide to follow Nwoye's step and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation... if such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth... How could he have begotten a woman for a son? (108).

To make matters worse, the disregard for elders and titled senior men on the clan is also carried out by the untitled messengers of the white man, who "dehumanise them

and treat them like common criminals (Tobolase 86) by shaving off their hair and hitting them with sticks (137).

Consequently, numerous studies have considered Okonkwo's character as a tragic hero archetype and categorised his story as the tragedy of the decline or destruction of Igbo old values and customs due to the invasion of the Europeans. However, most of these interpretations have remarkably disregarded the fact that this classification is a result of an evaluation complied with Eurocentric criteria (Salami and Shoar 25). Therefore, if Okonkwo is an archetypal tragic hero, his hamartia has to be his inability to comprehend the new reality that surrounds him, in which his traditional culture has been altered by the religion and the ideas brought by the British. In fact, Salami and Shoar maintain that "the true tragedy was in fact brought about by colonial intolerance leaving no room for Igbo voices to be expressed" (26). Hereto, Adade-Yeboah and Owusu add that Okonkwo's tragedy has as a crucial factor that in spite of Okonkwo efforts to be respected in the clan by reaching numerous titles and many achievements, since he commits suicide and that practice is a discreditable act, he died the same "dishonoured death as the father he has always scorned (39). A different way of understanding Okonkwo decision to hang himself is provided by Tobolase, who considers Okonkwo's death as a completely selfish act. He applies his own law to the British abuse against the clan and kills the messenger of the white man, but in so doing, he has not the wish of the rest of the clan in mind, so he is just avenging himself (83). Moreover, the cowardly act of hanging himself "contravenes the belief of the same society he claims to be" (Tobolase 83).

However, the prevailing view regarding the cause of Okonkwo's death is the one that supports that Okonkwo is not able to adapt himself to the changes that the colonisers have set up in Umuofia. Varadarajan and Ramesh state that Achebe prepares the readers "to witness the fall of Okownkwo", to this effect the author contrasts the impulsive and temperamental nature of the main character with the rationality and good sense of his friend Obeirika (154). Whereas Okonkwo refuses to be reasonable and is a blind defender of the Igbo traditions, Obeirika is aware of "the inadequacies of some of the Igbo customs" and is prudent enough to accept the weak points of the Igbo culture and reconsider their legitimacy (Varadarajan and Ramesh 154). Therefore, making reference to Okonkwo's personality, Tobolase adds that his most detrimental flaw is precisely his reticent attitude to accept the changes taking place in the Igbo society in which he has not only grown up,

but where he is also a local celebrity. For that reason, he sums up that Okonkwo is not able to adapt to the western ideas that are challenging the traditional Igbo values (83). Going further, Gilley contemplates that the problem surrounding the clash of cultures is not limited to the impact that it has on Okonkwo's character, but to the whole Igbo society. According to Gilley, Achebe argues that as the Igbo people were used to living isolated without any contact with the outside world, they were bound to have "a difficult encounter with modernity with or without colonialism" since at any given time this first contact with the western culture and its principles would take place in the history of humankind (656). As a matter of fact, Gilley claims that the author reflects in the novel that the challenges that colonialism brought were inevitable (657). In addition, Rhoads upholds that in spite of the intolerance and the ignorance of the British towards the natives, Achebe does not represent the white man as wholly evil; and what is more, according to the novelist both the Igbo and the British cultures are "a mixture of types of human beings" (Rhoads 69). To this idea should be added Tobolase's assertion about how Achebe depicts the two different societies in the novel, since neither the African nor the Western culture are idealised, as both have their own faults (84). In *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, the novelist declares in relation with the Igbo and the British societies: "I'm not concerned with which is better, the old or the new, the African or the European; both have possibilities, imponderables, and ambiguities" (66-67). Nevertheless, in contrast with Achebe's benevolent statements about the role that the British colonial governance roles in the transformation of the Igbo society, Varadharajan and Ramesh agree that even if it is obvious that the Igbo society is reluctant to change and that this can be the main reason for the fall of Okonkwo in the novel, however "it is very clear that the changes should take place spontaneously and not by force" and that the Igbo society has been victim, and Okonkwo its scapegoat (151).

On the other hand, in *The River Between* the characters that most notably tackle the clash of cultures are Waiyaki and Muthoni, two young Kikuyus whose lives and decisions are deeply distraught by hybridisation. At the beginning of the novel, Waiyaki is introduced as a typical hero; he is a boy "tall for his age" and he has "a well-built, athletic body" (6), but what is even more significant, is that he has the right curiosity and bloodline as he is the son of Chege (Iweala 14), an elder statesman and a prophet from the Kameno ridge. Waiyaki is the chosen one to save his people from the intrusion of the white man, due to the fact that he comes from the lineage of Mugo wa Kibiro, a prominent

seer. However, at the end of the novel Waiyaki's destiny seems to be fateful and hopeless. In order to properly understand Waiyaki's feelings it is important to highlight that his education at the Siriana School plays a large role in changing his attitude towards the British colonisers. That education makes him realise about the positive elements in the British culture and convinces him that those elements could be imported to the Kikuyu community, and as Sivasasipoorani affirms, this belief leads him throughout the text to "follow a middle course between the two antagonist positions" (424). Waiyaki's fundamental goal is to achieve reconciliation of the two groups, the converts to Christianity and the devoted to the customs of the tribe, by offering his people the western education that he has been taught and, at the same time, remaining loyal to the Kikuyu religion. Nevertheless, although he plays the role of the "nationalist redeemer", the new ideas that he has acquired from the British education cause him to live in a battle between "his national duty and his personal convictions" (Sivasasipoorani 424). So, on the one hand, he takes the responsibility of being the saviour of the Kikuyu customs and religion; but on the other hand, he trusts in the power of the missionaries' education and, also, he falls in love with Nyambura, the sister of the foremost Christian devotee. All these contradictions cause him to live feeling an inner solitude and he is often anxious about the unity of the clan and his educational project (Sivasasipoorani 426). For this reason, Waiyaki's internal conflicts can be understood as a crisis of identity typically suffered by individuals that are the result of the hybridisation of two very different societies in any colonial situation; as is narrated in the novel: "Waiyaki did not want to be identified with either side, he was now committed to reconciliation. But (...) things have gone from bad to worse. Each group seemed more arrogant and confident in itself than ever" (110). In addition, even if Waiyaki becomes a powerful figure for the community, he finds himself in a constant struggle with Kabonyi, who represents the eldest generation and the most conservative values in the Kiama. As Iweala states, Waiyaki understands the Kiama's important labour in the clan, as well as his function within it. Nevertheless, he fails to appreciate the limits of the European education in effecting change in the recovering of the Kikuyus' land (18). Therefore, it is through Waiyaki that the reader is able to see the recognition underlying Ngũgĩ's work: "the ills of colonialism cannot be treated with the tools of colonialism"; the author drives this idea further and insinuates that to accept that "colonial tools can heal cultural rifts is to exhibit a lack of respect for indigenous cultures" (Iweala 18). The impossibility to establish a common bond and repair the cultural rupture between the two ridges of the same tribe after the intervention of colonialism is showed

by Waiyaki's reflections: "perhaps there was no half-way house between Makuyu and Kameno" (86).

The other character that tries to find a middle ground is Muthoni, who believes that she can be faithful to Christianity and to his father's way of thinking, while at the same time becoming a member of the tribe through the Kikuyu practice of circumcision, which turns her into "a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges" (26). As Iweala declares, she offers her body "as a locus of compromise for two competing worldviews, attempting to reconcile them, and to bring about a utopia, through simple force of will" (17). But she is unaware that the wound that the white man has opened between the two ridges will never heal. In spite of her attempts to be both Kikuyu and Christian, the end result for her is dramatic as in her death bed she proclaims euphoric: "I am still a Christian, see, a Christian in the tribe. Look. I am a woman and will grow big and healthy in the Tribe" (53), however, she dies. For the elders in Mayuku, the death of Muthoni clearly shows that "nothing but evil would come out of any association with the new faith" and for Joshua and the Christians in Kameno the explanation of her death is that she was "an evil spirit sent to try the faithful" and it is clear that "nothing but evil could come out of adherence to tribal customs"(58). So, since Muthoni's death the tragedy and the resolution of the novel are announced: the conflict increases, and no solution will be found for a reconciliation.

According to Sivasasipoorani, unlike Waiyaki who pursues a social interest and represents a model to be emulated, Muthoni is presented just as a lonely figure that is not able to cause any major change in the society and who follows a personal interest in order to satisfy a particular need (427). In addition, for the scholar Apollo Amoko, Muthoni's character makes sense "only when she is seen to repudiate shallow ill-conceived multiculturalism" (qtd. in Iwela 18).

Apart from that, it is also relevant to contrast Waiyaki and Nyambura's religious tolerance in contrast to Joshua and Kabonyi's fanaticism. For example, Waiyaki visualizes his love for her as "something passed between them as two human beings, untainted with religion, social convention or any tradition" (76). This love story is significant because of the impossibility of its consummation since for Waiyaki to marry an undiscussed and Christian girl is a sign of high treason and vice versa. Even so, Waiyaki's declaration of love is also a try to unite the tribe divided by religion, despite the fact that it can cost them their lives. At the end of the novel, the uncertain fate of the lovers has the appearance of

having a fateful result, which indicates that the tribe is not yet ready to close the wound (Sivasasipoorani 427).

In conclusion, even if both novels have a dramatic ending, what the authors sought to transmit in each one is totally different. While it is true that such Chinua Achebe as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o are both individuals that have experienced in first-hand the feeling of being a result of hybridization; for Achebe, despite the damage it caused, the positive legacies of colonialism are indisputable, while for Ngũgĩ the British imposition had severe implications that still resonate in the African societies. For this reason, Okonkwo is a flawed hero because of his inability to adapt to the new colonial culture; in such a way, the author targets the source of the problem in the hermetic nature of Igbo society. On the contrary, Waiyaki's decline is caused by the discrepancies that have emerged due to the despotism of the white man, which has accentuated ancient rivals up to the point of making impossible a reconciliation.

#### **4.4 Masculine and feminine roles**

In *Things Fall Apart* a patriarchal society, with a patriarchal discourse is displayed by male-dominated institutions of Umuofia during the precolonial era. The entire Igbo society is organised upon the combination of the male and the female roles, and the relationship between men and women is fixed by a set of rules and norms (Rhoads 65). Men have to work hard in order to be properly masculine (Maduagwu 311), their virility is measured by the amount of agricultural land and the number of titles and wives that they can afford. So, in this polygamous society, women are used as mere commodities and as symbols of power (Ouarodima 116). According to Rhoads, Igbo culture usually denigrates the personal and social characteristics that are associated with womanly behaviour (66). A clear example of that is the word *agbala*, a denomination given in a derisive way to a man who has not taken a title or that feels fear or sensitivity, and which also means "woman" (12). As Okonkwo's father was said to be an *agbala*, the main character is obsessed with all the aspects related to the concept of femininity in the Igbo culture, rejecting even the "feminine" virtues of patience, tenderness, and tolerance (Quayson 233). On the contrary, Okonkwo builds his life on the principles of hyper-

masculinity such as violence, rage and a destructive uncontrollable temperament (Tobalase 83). His aggressive behaviour especially affects his family:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness (11).

In fact, Achebe reveals openly that Okonkwo beats his wives; the first time that it is described why he beats up Ojiugo, his third wife, the narrator justifies his action; Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to prepare the afternoon meal (23.) By displaying Okonkwo's perspective, the narrator passes judgement on Ojiugo's thoughtlessness and irrationality, and does not allow her to explain herself on her return (Quayson 237). Instead of that, the reader just know that she is heavily beaten. Due to the anger that Ojiugo's inconsiderateness causes in her husband, Okonkwo forgets that it is the Weak of Peace, a time where no violent act is allow, and even when is reminded by his other two wives, he does not ceases because he is not "the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for fear of a goodness" (23).

In the same way, Okonkwo encourages his male sons to think like a traditional Igbo man by inviting them to sit with him in his *obi* and narrating them masculine stories of fighting and violence (39), while girls must be with their mothers in the kitchen where they are told feminine stories. Nwoye wants to do the best to please his father, for that reason he complains about women and tries to convince himself that he must be masculine in spite of the fact that he still enjoys his mother's stories rather than his father's ones (40). Nevertheless, Okonkwo's implication in Ikemefuna's murder drifts them apart up to the point of with the arrival of Christianity Nwoye finds a place where he is safe and moves away from his father's ruthlessness. In so doing, Nwoye commits high treason against the clan and Okonkwo repudiates his effeminate son; moreover, he warns the rest of his sons of what will happen to them if they join the white man religion:

I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him... If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck (122).

Later, Okonkwo's turbulent request to waging war against the white man religion and institutional imposition did not have full support from other men in the Igbo clan, and

for this reason he compares them with women, since they have failed the expectations of what he considers to be masculine: “He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women” (129).

On the other hand, it is also important not to forget the role of the woman in the clan. As Uncle Uchendu explains to Okonkwo:

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you (94).

Therefore, women are depicted mainly as caregivers of the children, whose duty is to obey and help their husbands. This view of the role of the woman in society is obviously phallogocentric since it supports the notion that women have no place or voice in the clan (Strong-Leek 30). In fact, women contain themselves of expressing their knowledge and thoughts, and instead of that, they have to keep it in secret. For example, it is revealed in the narrative that Okonkwo's wives know the reality behind the masked spirits, but they keep this information within themselves (64). In addition, Nnolim claims that the description of Igbo women in the novel is sexist and degrading, and observes that the marriages are not happy, and that there are not romantic moments between Okonkwo and his wives in the story (qtd. in Ouarodima 111). Besides, in the novel Igbo women are usually called after their husbands or their sons (Ouarodima 112), like is the case of Okonkwo's first wife, who along the text is known as "Nwoye's mother"; in this way women's identity in Igbo society is always intricately related with their belonging to a man, or their relation to him.

The only two female characters that are passably developed by the narrative are Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, and her daughter Ezinma (Quayson 238). Strong-Leek affirms that the characterization of Ekwefi is significant to the reading from a feminist standpoint since she is a well of knowledge, love and fierce independence in relation with other female characters (30). In the past, Ekwefi was married to another man but she was in love with Okonkwo. Moreover, her desire for him was so intense that at the first opportunity she abandoned the other man in order to marry Okonkwo. Nevertheless, Okonkwo does not value her love and devotion. Furthermore, her daughter Ezinma feels a great devotion for his father, however, even if he loves her, Okonkwo's male chauvinism

does not allow him for appreciating Ezinma as a person (Strong-Leek 32). So, instead of admiring her for her strength and loyalty, he just laments the fact that she is not a boy: "If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit" (48). Nevertheless, when Okonkwo and his family returned from exile, Ezinma vanishes from the story and is never referred again. That can be highly problematic since it can suggest that after the meeting of the two cultures, one of the consequences is that in the struggle there is no space for women (Quayson 240). This theory coincides with Ouarodima's opinion, which affirms that the encounter with the colonial rule reinforces the patriarchal values that discriminate against women (112).

Turning to Okonkwo, numerous critics have noted that his failure is principally due to a "neurotic concern with manliness" (Quayson 233). This view is also supported by Strong-Leek, who thinks that Okonkwo's downfall is in large part caused by himself as he has seed of self-destruction, which are deeply rooted in his internal battle to be the antithesis of his feminine father (29). Consequently, he commits suicide because he could not live in a society where the main principle that has driven him throughout his whole life, masculinity, is no longer part of the Igbo culture (Tobolase 83).

If we now analyse gender roles in *The River Between*, it is easy to recognise in the Kikuyu clan a patriarchal social system very similar to the Igbo one in *Things Fall Apart*. For Kikuyu people the family is a fundamental base of the social structure. Before the arrival of the British, Kikuyu families were either polygamous or monogamous, the number of wives depends on the man's wealth, so it was perceived as a sign of achievement, "the bigger the number, the greater the recognition of responsibility in the Kikuyu society" (Raïmi 22). It should be taken into account that like in the Igbo culture, to take a spouse involves a payment or dowry to the woman's family.

The cause of women's subjugation is explained by Chege, he affirms that according to Kikuyu oral tradition, women were tough and demanding, so men began to resent their hard hand and made their mind up to rebel in a crafty way; they conspired to impregnate all the women of the tribe at the same time. In so doing, once women were pregnant, they became vulnerable and men took advantage of the situation to depose them and took over leadership. Since that moment, the Kikuyu society became a patriarchy. After his father's reason, Waiyaki understood why his mother owns nothing (15). Therefore, women's position in the Kikuyu society is exactly the same that in the Igbo community, they are a property of their husbands and second-class citizens. In fact, it is

strictly forbidden for Kikuyu women to take part in the political affairs, and what is more, they are formally excluded also from juridical matters (Raïmi 23). So the clan's issues are run only from the male point of view, and women must obey and accept their orders. In this sense, we can compare Joshua's behaviour as a stubborn and selfish head of the household with Okonkwo's character. Nyambura obeys his father just because she fears his anger (26), and in the same way, his wife Miriamu has abandoned her Kikuyu beliefs and renounced her belonging to the clan due to his husband: "Her faith and belief in God were coupled with her fear of Joshua. But that was religion and it was the way things were ordered" (34).

As we have previously stated, the practice of circumcision is fundamental in the Kikuyu society and it is a symbol of the transition into adulthood. For women, circumcision has even greater importance since it opens the door to the institution of marriage, which is a means of wealth transfer for their families (Iweala 16). Chege talks in this way about the significant relation between female circumcision and marriage: "Who had ever heard of a girl that was not circumcised? Who would ever pay cows and goats for such a girl? Certainly it would never be his son. Waiyaki would never betray the tribe" (37-38). However, Chege has little to fear since all his daughters were circumcised and well married (38); considering that being married and having children is all that women can aspire to achieve in a patriarchal society, from their father's point of view, Chege's daughters have nothing to complain. Nevertheless, as Waiyaki is a boy he is expected to be the saviour of the clan, and he can have his own aspirations as it is a case of his educational project.

Jomo Kenyatta, the first leader of independent Kenya, tried to explain the controversy over female circumcision:

For the present it is impossible for a member of the tribe to imagine an initiation without clitoridectomy. Therefore the abolition of the surgical element of this custom means to the Giyuku the abolition of the whole institution (qtd. in Iweala 16).

Iweala, adds that perhaps the reader could feel discomfort due to the way that this subject is addressed in the novel, however, the issue is part of a debate that Ngũgĩ is laying on the table: female circumcision, "whether a primitive practice or an institutionalized customs, should be subject of intertribal discussion, not prohibitive decree" (17).

This leads us to think about Muthoni's character and her decision of being circumcised. It is important to emphasise that the characters that are relevant to the development of the plot, and whose actions or voices strongly influence in how the events take place in the novel, they are all men; as well as the same happens in *Things Fall Apart*. The only female character that takes the initiative is Muthoni, she rebels against her father's authority and makes her mind up following her own path. Nevertheless, her decision leads her to a dramatic death. One interpretation might be that Muthoni's death emphasises how this practice can be extremely dangerous to women health, regardless of the gender dynamics of both Kamenon and Makuyu. According to Graves, female circumcision is also a fundamental element that guarantees oppression in a sexist system that legitimates the subjugation of women. And he leaves us two main questions in relation to the legitimacy of the practice: is it comparable the violence of female circumcision with the violence of the colonisers toward the Africans?; is female circumcision an anticolonial exercise or, on the contrary, is just a patriarchal measure upon women in order to ensure their submission to masculine dominance?

In conclusion, both societies Igbo and Kikuyu before the arrival of the settlers are based on patriarchal social and cultural systems in which men and women have very distinctive roles. This sexist distribution of tasks and its implications in gender identity affects both male and female individuals. For example, Okonkwo's hyper-masculinity makes him suffer and does not allow him to express his feelings; in fact, his obsession with avoiding femininity is one of the main reasons of his fall. Nevertheless, women lose out in relation to men; since they have no voice in the society and are just mere "objects" for their husband's wealth. So, how does colonialism affect African women? Does colonialism provide them opportunities to improve their situation? Or, does it work as another method of oppression against women? From what the novelists depict in the texts, we can sum up that even if women were already oppressed in the pre-colonial communities, after the arrival of colonialism they are double oppressed as with the new religion Christ is the authority over man, man is the authority over woman. Lastly, we have to consider that is necessary to highlight that throughout this work we have chosen many times the expression "white man" in order to referring to the British or the Europeans. This election has a simple explanation, no white woman appears neither in *Things Fall Apart* or *The River Between*.

## 5. Conclusion

The unnatural borders imposed upon the new African states after the division and redistribution of the continent among the European forces due to the Industrial Revolution and the growing capitalism that gave rise to a New Imperialism, not only reflected the lack of awareness of the western countries on the predisposition and original organization of the different cultural communities within the continent; but it also unbalanced the original order between the different ethnic groups (Booth 26). Such is the case of Nigeria and Kenya, since both states are the result of diverse cultures and societies that were forced to coexist under the establishment of the British rule. In Nigeria, the British indirect rule system had a major impact on the Igbo population, given that their political organization was based on the social consensus that was opposite to the totalitarian colonial regime (Meredith 76). On the other hand, British occupation in Kenya was accomplished through even more despotic methods; as a matter of fact, after the Second World War, the colonial government rapidly appropriated the Kikuyus' vast and fertile lands, to which they had a deep ancestral attachment (Hornsby 22).

All the changes greatly affected the Nigerian and Kenyan population, and as was predictable, education in English studies became systematised along the British colonies. Moreover, all the syllabus was taught from a Eurocentric point of view as a method of alienation for the native tribes (Witte 125). Consequently, in the 1950's a new generation of African educated elite started to rise up against the racist description of Africa as uncivilised that justifies their oppression in the subjects that were studied in schools and higher institutions. Among those freethinkers, it is worth stressing the Nigerian Chinua Achebe and the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, since according to them Africans must recognise the relevance of their history and value their own culture. For this reason these writers have addressed a political issue in their novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between*; through which, both authors attempt to reinstate the beauty and honour of their native culture (Dowing Rothwell 74) as a response to the stereotypes of Africa described in the western writings. To this aim, in both novels the writers return imaginatively to the pre-colonial past by recreating, through a real description of the tribes' daily life, all the complex aspects that were part of the Igbo and Kikuyu tribal societies.

It is for this reason that, in order to achieve a credible picture that could give back their dignity to the Igbo and Kikuyu culture, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

portray the truth from a non-hegemonic perspective. In so doing, they present the imperfections that were also part of the tribal civilisations and that could be eradicated. According to Achebe, these flaws could explain in some way why the British were able to ruin the Igbo society (Rhoands 68). Meanwhile, in Ngũgĩ's novel, the author claims that colonialism notoriously exacerbates those faults; such is the case of the tensions within the two opposite ridges. What is certain, however, is that in both novels the arrival of the destructive and uncomprehending white man makes the characters confront the interaction with the new imperial power, which produces intense changes among them and transforms the Igbo and Kikuyu societies.

Through the comparative analysis between these texts we have been able to prove that by means of the portrait of the pre-colonial characteristics in the Igbo and Kikuyu societies and the description of the manner in which the British transform them, both authors lay bare the tactics used by the colonial strategy of domination. The first step is accomplished by the promulgation of Christianity performed by the Civilising Mission, which claims to have the duty of civilising the native populations by providing them the benefits of progress and education. The missionary intrusion was possible due to two main reasons: the Igbo and Kikuyu solidarity and the fact that they have never had any contact with the white man before, so they did not know how to react. Christian missionaries take advantage of the Africans' good will and begin to promulgate their religious beliefs. In so doing, they impose their faith and aim to erase the local religions without any attempt to accept, or even understand, the natives' systems of beliefs. Once the white man begins inserting his religious ideas, they start to cause confusion among the tribal population and some of the Africans reassess their faith, especially those who do not fit in their communities, so they convert to the new religion. The technique of divide and conquer is used by the missionaries in both novels. Additionally, the British colonial government achieves a cultural alienation of the African individuals thanks to the Christian education. This fact accentuates the tension between the two sectors, those who remain faithful to their ancestral beliefs and those who have chosen to follow the white man's religion. Finally, the British commissioners protect the missionaries and the local converts and establish local governmental unities. In *Things Fall Apart*, it is depicted how the British government replaces the traditional systems of governance and law with the district commissioners and court messengers, and at the same time in *The River Between*, the Kikuyu population is forced to hand over their lands and even pay

taxes to the British settlers. So, added to the moral indoctrination by the missionaries, the colonial government discredits and eliminates the whole political and juridical African structures in order to have free access to exercise their sovereign will over the Igbo and Kikuyu societies and lands.

Nevertheless, as a response to the resultant loss of tribal identity, and to the imposed education in the English language that such Achebe as Ngũgĩ received, both writers make use of diverse linguistic devices in the novels; which allows them to recreate the distinctive oral style of their native languages and give back to their cultures the sense of beauty and the value that they merit. (Rhoads 67). Therefore, they both make a use of the colonial language as a double-edged sword with which they criticise the British colonialism and, at the same time, they appropriate the settlers' language and makes it theirs.

However, even if the novelists share among them their status as individuals that are product of the hybridization on account of colonialism, and they equally conceive their role as African writers in connection with a political claim; there exist some noticeable differences regarding each author's perspectives above the legacies of colonialism. According to Chinua Achebe, the Igbo culture was not destroyed by the British settlers, and was instead disturbed. But cultures are constantly influenced and changed by other cultures, so if a society is strong enough to survive it will be able to take changes. On the contrary, Ngũgĩ is much more critical with the colonial abusive usurpation and appropriation of Kikuyu lands, and he is also a strong critic of the role that Christianity played in the colonization process that created these huge conflicts between individuals belonging to the same clan. Consequently, both standpoints can be perfectly distinguished in both novels regarding their dramatic endings. Okonkwo's fall in *Things Fall Apart* is due to his inability to adapt to the new colonial culture, since the challenges that the British rule brought were inevitable in a world where modernity was expanding (Gilley 657). Meanwhile, Muthoni and Waiyaki's characters in *The River Between* represent the typical crisis of identity that an individual resultant of hybridisation suffers in the middle of two very different societies in a colonial environment. Both of them try to achieve, somehow, a reconciliation between the two parties confronted in the same clan due to the intervention of the British religion. Nevertheless, the open ending of the novel reveals that the wound that the white man has opened between the two sections of Kikuyu land will never find a middle ground.

In the last subsection, we have analysed the male and female gender roles in the patriarchal Igbo and Kikuyu societies. In both novels, the role of women is basically phallogocentric, as they have no place or voice in the clan (Strong-Leek 30) and they are mere objects that belong to men. Therefore, Okonkwo neurotic concern with manliness, and all his efforts to avoid any characteristic that could be considered feminine, makes him suffer a self-demandingness during all his life and even drives him somehow to commit suicide. On the other hand, in *The River Between* we found that the most dangerous method to achieve a woman's subjugation is female circumcision. This ritual is fundamental for a woman in the Kikuyu society since it opens the door to marriage. However, many perspectives around the legitimacy of this practice are still discussed nowadays. According to a study conducted by UNICEF in 2013, the percentage of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years who have undergone this practice such in Kenya as in Nigeria is around 27%.<sup>6</sup> The most extended question is if female circumcision is an anticolonial practice that remains as a tool of tribal resistance or if, instead, the removal is just an effective method of female oppression. However, perhaps the most important question to be asked should be: even if it is a signal of ethnic identity, is it not a violation of women's rights? According to the World Health Organisation, this practice constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against girls and women and violates their rights to health, security and physical integrity<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, this controversial subject matter is still a cause for concern in the current situation for numerous women in Africa.

Lastly, what is clear is that the arrival of British colonialism affected the whole of the African population and generates deep conflict not only among Africans facing the colonial forces, but also between neighbouring clans, and even between the members of a same tribe. As we have also seen, even if the novels are located in horizontal points of the continent and reflects the reality of two different societies, the British colonialism produced very similar results in transforming both of them. However, even if it is true that African men suffered the settlers' cruelty, women took the brunt of the colonial imposition since they were twice as oppressed. Nevertheless, we understand the sexist role that women characters play in both novels, since they must be comprehended not only as regards the context of the publications, but also the moment in the African history to which they allude to. On the other hand, it is necessary to praise the work that both

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6 Source: "Sexual and reproductive health" in [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

7 Source: "Female genital mutilation" in [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

Achebe and Ngũgĩ, as many other African writers have done in order to rewrite not only African history, but the history of humanity itself, by displaying their truth against the western prejudices. Currently, the number of African writers is continuing to increase, and their writings develop together with the society. Such is for example the case of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a feminist Nigerian writer whose activism is present in all her works. What I mean is that Africa, and all the countries that make up the continent, constitute a complex reality that are constantly changing. So, it is our work as western readers to liberate ourselves from the trace that colonialism has left deeply rooted in our collective imagination and that in some aspects still remains in order to appreciate and enjoy the beauty and the quality not only of African texts, but of those from all over the former colonies. It is our moment to hear their story.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1 Summary of *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe pictures the rural style of life of the pre-colonial Igbo society through the story of Okonkwo, the main character, who is a wealthy and respected man in the Umuofia clan. Okonkwo, who was a hailed warrior in his youth, lives with his three wives and his offspring in one of the nine villages in lower Nigeria called Igedo. In his hamlet, everyone knows him for his ambition and determination, since he rose from nothing to a high position thanks to his own efforts through hard work. Okonkwo is embarrassed about how his father, Unoka, lead his own life, as he was a slothful man that died with debts and without honour. For this reason, Okonkwo has fought during all his life to be the opposite of what his father was; therefore, he is very demanding of himself and others. In this way, he has achieved great prestige, a barn full of yams due to his endeavours to be an efficient farmer, and a huge family in which he is a strict head of the household.

One day, as a reward for an offence against Umuofia committed by a neighbouring clan, and with the intention of avoiding a war, his community was given a virgin and a young boy. The elders' council stipulates that Okonkwo should take charge of the young boy, whose name is Ikemefuna, until they made a final decision about what to do with him. Thus, the boy lives with Okonkwo and his family for three years and becomes another member of the household, especially for Okonkwo's oldest son, Nwoye; who loves Ikemefuna like a big brother. Unfortunately, the Oracle eventually decides that the boy has to die, so a group of men takes Ikemefuna to the forest in order to kill him. For his part, Okonkwo, who fears being considered weak and emotional, decides to participate in the murder even if the elders advise him not to do so. During some days, Okonkwo feels affected for Ikemefuna's death because, even if he kept it a secret, he appreciated the boy. Nevertheless, shortly thereafter Okonkwo resumes his normal active life, through which the novelist continues relating the features of the clan's society and culture. Regrettably, Okonkwo's gun explodes in the funeral for Ogbuefi Ezeudu, one of the great men of the clan, and kills Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son. According to Umuofia's law, killing a member of the clan is a crime against the earth goddess. So Okonkwo must take his family with him into exile for seven years in order to atone his crime. Okonkwo bears the exile in Mbanto, his mother's homeland, in a bitter way. Even if he has a great faith

in his self-determination about his own destiny, Ikemefuna's misfortune, the accident and the exile are proof that a man cannot control his own fate. So, despite his efforts, Okonkwo is forced to start from scratch without the strength and enthusiasm of his youth.

While Okonkwo is in exile, the British missionaries arrive to both Mbanto and Umuofia, preaching the Christian religion which denies the Igbo's gods and religious beliefs. At first, the natives do not take seriously the missionary activity, and think they will not stick around for a long time. Nevertheless, the Christians start gaining converts, who are predominantly people who do not fit in the traditional Igbo customs, outcasts or men of low rank. Nonetheless, the acceptance of the Christian religion among some Igbos continues to grow exponentially. Such is the case of Nwoye, who is sick and tired of the strict and insensitive way of ruling of his father. Not surprisingly, when Okonkwo learns of his son religious conversion, he repudiates Nwoye for having betrayed the Igbo convictions.

To make matters worse, once his exile period ends and he can return to his hamlet with his family, Okonkwo finds Umuofia's community sadly changed. Many villagers have refused their conventional ideas and has joined the Christian church, and the rest of the population is doing nothing to prevent the white man from continuing to undermine their culture and beliefs. There are even fanatical and disrespectful followers of the white man's religion that struggle against their Igbo neighbours. And, what is worse, the British government has meddled in Umuofia and the other villages. In fact, the white District Commissioner, backed by British armed power, has come to snatch the leadership and now rules the territory. In addition, he starts to incapacitate and humiliate the elders, even judging cases from a Eurocentric point of view and being unaware of the Igbo political and juridical system. During the annual ceremony held in honour of the earth deity, one of the new followers of the Christian religion unmask the *egwugwu* (a masked dancer who impersonates a spirit in Igbo rituals) in public; this act represents a gross affront to the clan. This event is the trigger that makes the Igbo society finally respond to the Christians offences and, consequently, decide to demolish the church building. In response to this rebellious act, the District Commissioner asks the leaders of Umuofia (among who is also Okonkwo) for a meeting in his headquarters. But once they arrive there, they are imprisoned, humiliated, beaten and threatened. Finally, they are set free thanks to a fine which is paid by the rest of the clan.

Subsequent to the release of the leaders, people from Umuofia are called to a meeting in order to come to terms on how to respond to the white imposition; they have to choose either to start a war against the British or to try to live accepting their rule. However, some court messengers interrupt the meeting and order to stop the event. That provokes Okonkwo's anger, since the clan assembly is the heart of Umuofia's government system, in which all decisions are made democratically. Thus, by interfering in their gathering, the whites show a total lack of respect for the Igbo institution. Therefore, this act underscores the end of the last vestiges of Umuofia's auto-determination and self-identity. Driven by hate and fury, Okonkwo kills one of the court messengers; but the others escape because the rest of the clan does nothing to stop them. At that moment, Okonkwo realises that his people will not start a war and that nobody will follow him in his fight against the white man. Okonkwo refuses to continue bearing his people's destruction and humiliation by the British hands, so, deeply devastated and without any hope, he hangs himself.

## **7.2 Summary of *The River Between***

The novel's opening provides an exceptional explanation of the geographical situation where the plot is developed and its mythological significance. The two ridges of Makuyu and Kameno lay side by side, and between them there is the valley of life whereby the Honia River flows. In so doing, the river separates and, at the same time, unites the two ridges and the inhabitants that live in each one. Despite the river being a shared source of livelihood of water and playing an important role in the sacred circumcision ceremony, which is held on one side of its banks, it also represents the physical and figurative separation between them. This division comes from a long time ago, but however, the arrival of British colonial institutions through the Christian missionaries and their educational labour significantly exacerbated territorial rivalry. Many people in Makuyu have converted to Christianity, while the population in Kameno remain faithful to their traditional beliefs.

Waiyaki, the main character, is the only son of Chege, a respected elderly seer from Kameno. Chege reveals a prophecy to his son concerning a leader who will guide his people to the liberation from the white man. Undoubtedly, as Waiyaki is the last of a

long line of seers, he is the chosen one to lead and save the people of the ridges. For this reason, Chege sends his son to Siriana, where Livingstone, a British missionary, has opened a prominent mission school. His father thinks that there Waiyaki will learn the wisdom of the white man, which at a later time will help him to combat the colonisers using their own knowledge against them. Nevertheless, Chege warns his son not to contaminate himself with the whites' ideology and vices.

Simultaneously, as a contrary to conventional customs, Joshua is a passionate convert to the white man's faith who has become a Christian leader in Makuyu. Joshua not only denies, but also condemns the traditional beliefs, customs, and rituals; especially the one that concerns female circumcision. However, this practice is central to the identity and culture of the tribe. In fact, Muthoni, Joshua's daughter, who has been educated in the Christian religion, decides that she wants also to embrace the ancestral custom to fulfil womanhood. Thus, Muthoni rebels against Joshua and submits herself to circumcision in the same ceremony as Waiyaki also does. Nevertheless, female circumcision is much more dangerous than the male one, and her wounds get worse, so her health declines. Waiyaki tries to save Muthoni taking her to the hospital in Siriana, but ultimately she dies. The tragedy severely affects Muthoni's sister, Nyambura, who still loved her sister even if she disapproved of her choice. On the contrary, since the moment that Joshua knew Muthoni's intentions, he disowns his daughter, and conceives her death as a punishment of God.

Muthoni's death contributes to increase the tension between the two parties. As a result, the missionary school in Siriana expels children whose parents still uphold circumcision. For that reason, Waiyaki decides to build a number of schools for those kids in Kameno. Waiyaki has a great faith in education as a vehicle to achieve the reconciliation between the traditional identity of the tribes and the acceptance of new approaches. In fact, he is really excited to transmit the white man's knowledge that was given to him to those children who are keen on learning. People in Kameno start to admire Waiyaki and his clear potential not only as a teacher, but also as a prospective saviour that could empower the tribe to be sufficiently strong to face the white men. Nevertheless, Waiyaki is so focused in his purpose to educate the young population that he forgets to tend to other people's needs, as is the case of the struggle to regain the lands that the British have snatched from them and the taxes imposed on them. Simultaneously, the widening gap between the Christian converts and the traditionalists continues increasing.

In Kameno the elders create a secret organization called the Kiama, that is intended to ensure the purity of the tribe and the conservation of its morals; and which initially supports Waiyaki's educational proposal.

Waiyaki, for his part, often feels that he does not fit in any of the sections, and that he is caught somewhere in the middle. On the one hand, he appreciates the beauty of the values of the tribe and wants to keep loyal to them, but on the other hand, he believes that the white man can also provide some development to his people.

This is compounded by the fact that after diverse encounters with Nyambura, they begin to fall in love. Even if they both know that no one in their respective tribes would approve their relationship, Waiyaki asks her to marry him. But Nyambura, dreading her father's anger and the resulting consequence, refuses his proposal even if she loves him. Things get worse when Kabonyi, who once was a follower of Joshua but that later deserted, finds Waiyaki and Nyambura together. Kabonyi also knows about the prophecy and fears that Waiyaki could be the chosen one; moreover, his jealousy goes above and beyond, and he is determined to destroy his adversary. In various ways, Waiyaki tries to appease the uncontrollable hostility between the two sections, but contrastingly, both parties are fighting more fiercely than ever for their ideologies. Meanwhile, Kabonyi takes advantage of what he has discovered about Waiyaki and Nyambura's gatherings, among other things, to persuade the council of the elders to go against Waiyaki. Conversely, Waiyaki realises too late that the Kiama, led by Kabonyi, with strong traditional ideas, is more powerful and respected than his struggle for education, and that the tribe needs more than schools to push the British political power. Kabonyi put Waiyaki to the test in the presence of his people, and even if Waiyaki makes his case, Kabonyi brands him traitor and, when he brings Nyambura in front of Waiyaki, this one is not able to deny his love for her. In this way, Kabonyi demonstrates that his rival has broken the tribe's oath of purity. The novel ends with a bitter and heart-breaking open ending, leaving Waiyaki and Nyambura's destiny in the hands of the Kiama, without knowing what their fate will be.