Sarah Doyle

Professor Eastley

English 295, sec. 7

17 April 2017

Nothing but a Tortoise

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, his implementation of parables, using animals as symbols, adds an underlying meaning to the story. One significant allegory, "The Feast in the Sky" focuses on the interactions between a tortoise and a group of birds. The tortoise, specifically, is a unique character in his position as a stranger among the birds and his reputation for being cunning, self-interested, and rude. Critics such as Tanure Ojaide point to Okonkwo as the tortoise due to his crude nature, which leads him away from the rest of his clan and ends in his ultimate downfall. However, the tortoise is immediately identified as an outsider. He must go to the birds to beg permission, showing he was not already one of them (58). The tortoise is also shown at the end of the story with a cracked shell, but with the ability to mend his shell (60). The characterization of the tortoise as a cunning intruder, a subtle pacifist, a greedy agitator, and ultimately, a dictator sets him apart from the rest of the animals, in a category all his own. Thus, this passage can be read in a variety of ways, the most obvious posing the tortoise as a representation of the white man, he who came to the clan as a stranger. He is filled with cunning, trickery, and new ways, able to be broken for a short time but always able to come back stronger. The nature of the tortoise is examinable not only within the novel, but also in the works of various critical theorists, as well as in other legends and stories. He is filled with self-interest and a personal agenda. Likewise, the white man imposes his own culture on what he views as a savage society—a society which, whether regarded as good or evil, has a long-standing tradition

that the white man completely destroys. As mirrored by the tortoise, the cost for failure to initially recognize an enemy can lead to drastic consequences, such as the annihilation of an entire way of life.

In order to understand this downhill journey, it is critical to first examine the ways in which the tortoise begins as an outsider among the birds, just as the white man is a stranger in Umuofia. When Tortoise first notices that the birds are preparing for a feast in the sky, he is very anxious to attend. However, his initial interaction with the birds is not a friendly one. They immediately recognize him, saying, "We know you too well," followed by accusations of Tortoise being "cunning" and "ungrateful," one who will shortly begin his "mischief" (58). Likewise, the Igbo people have a negative first impression of the white man. Although they have only heard stories of his trickery, the stories are not promising. The first white man to appear in the village of Abame was killed, followed by the destruction of the entire village (81). Now the white man has become a threat, his tortoise-like trickery revealed when they reason that he must have used "a powerful medicine to make [himself] invisible until the market was full" (81). In contrast, the Igbo people do not respond to murder by destroying an entire village. In the case of one clan member killing another, "the murderer is expected to hang himself" (18). If the murderer is from a different tribe, a "young virgin" will be provided as recompense for the murder, and a "young lad" will be executed in the murderer's stead (19). While the white man's customs differ from those of the Igbo culture, it does not excuse the killing of hundreds of people. Clearly, the white man has already established both his distrust for the Igbo people and his indifference to their gruesome fate. He has come, not to collaborate, but to dominate, and to replace the traditional Igbo culture with his own.

Despite the initial friction between the two groups, the white man's peaceful appearance in Umuofia masks his desire to convert the Igbo people to his ways. This desire for peace is demonstrated when Tortoise pleads that he is a "changed man," his "sweet tongue" eventually leading each of the birds to believe him and donate a "feather, with which he [makes] two wings (58). He even takes the name "All of You" to symbolize a sort of union between them (59). Comparatively, the Igbo people, though wary of the white man's presence, are subdued as he deals peacefully with their people and allows them to continue in their own ways. He then seeks land to build his church, a request which reflects a desire for belonging. While hesitant to give the white man land, the people ultimately give him a plot in the evil forest, a place considered to be sinful and worse than any other place in the village. In this way, the "feathers" that the white man has been given are almost a counterfeit. He is able to build his church, his "wings," but he is still not fully accepted. He is merely a tortoise, pretending to be a bird. However, Mr. Brown also builds a school, and his educational offering leads the clan members to believe that perhaps his presence will not prove detrimental after all (102). At this point, he is no longer merely living in the Igbo society, but is improving the lives of the people. His presence as a "sweet-tongued messenger" has pacified even the highest-positioned members of the clan, completely revolutionizing his status within the society (109). He is no longer a fellow guest, but a leader, a "king of the birds," one who seems to represent the Igbo people, when in reality he seeks to conquer and subdue them. Though not readily apparent, these peaceful actions will lead to firmer measures, leaving the white man in a place of power with the Igbos under his thumb.

One of the most critical moments in which this ascent to power can be seen is when Mr. Brown is replaced in Umuofia by Mr. Smith, thus changing the white man's friendly relationship with the Igbo people. When many "delectable dishes" are presented, Tortoise disregards the

needs of the birds, seeking all the food for himself (59). Suddenly, the *All of You* of the society is not a mere representative, but a dictator (59). His name is no longer a symbol of his supposed devotion to them, but his desire to truly dominate over "all" of them. Just as many of the birds are forced to "fly home on an empty stomach," the people of Umuofia are left without personal leadership in their own society (59). Many receive no "food," or privileges, at all, and are imprisoned instead, forced to labor for the white man and his law (99). The irony is that the white man was initially unaccepted, a trickster tortoise among birds. Now, through his craftiness, he has taken a position of authority over even the bravest of Umuofia. In using this subtlety, he divides the clan and overtakes them, not by blood, but by persuasion. Thus, the Igbo are overcome before they even realize what is happening.

Although all of the birds are unhappy with Tortoise's actions, Parrot shows an anger and determination which reflects that of Okonkwo. When the birds take their feathers from Tortoise, he devises a plan and asks them to "take a message to his wife," but all refuse except Parrot. Although "angrier than the others," he ultimately agrees to take the message. Tortoise asks him to tell his wife to "bring out all the soft things," however, Parrot instead tells her to leave the "hard things" (59). While the white men have provoked the Igbo before, the final straw is when Enoch, one of the Christian converts, unmasks one of the egwugwu in public, one of the greatest crimes he could commit against his former culture (105). In response, the egwugwu seek to take action in destroying the church. Among them is Okonkwo, who has played the part of an egwugwu before (54-55). Thus, Okonkwo is the Parrot. His name denotes that he is perhaps beautiful to look upon, but he has a loud and annoying voice, one that will be heard above all the rest. Okonkwo is continuously adamant that the white man be driven out through force, an anger

which mirrors that of Parrot; and while the other clan members recognize the danger the white man has brought, Okonkwo is the only one willing to take action.

The Igbo response to the white man's actions results in his dramatic, but temporary, downfall. When the egwugwu come to speak with Mr. Smith outside the church, he asks to be able to maintain control of the building (108), or to have the "soft things" brought out (59). However, the egwugwu assert that the church has "bred untold abominations" that cannot be allowed in Umuofia (108), a rejection represented by the "hard things" (59). Ultimately, when Tortoise jumps, he "crashes" to the ground and his shell "[breaks] into pieces" (60), just as Mr. Smith can do nothing to save his church (108). This moment of brief destruction causes the reader to question whether the white man will leave Umuofia, or fight back with greater force. However, the story clearly states that Tortoise did not die (59), a reality that creates suspense and foreshadowing. A wounded animal is even more dangerous than a healthy one, suggesting that the white man will return. With this return, however, will come a dictatorship that completely removes the Igbo from power. Like the village of Abame, the village of Umuofia will be extinguished, not through violence, but through dominance and the destruction of culture.

The true nature of the tortoise as a survivor is confirmed when the white man, although broken, proves his endurance by returning, angrier than ever. Following the destruction of the church, the "spirit of the clan [is] pacified" (108). However, this happiness is in vain, for the white man has not been killed, only his shell broken. Yet a medicine man is found and he is able to glue Tortoise's shell back together, until it is "not smooth" (60). Thus, the white man is simply a rougher version of his previous self, and he responds rigidly to the small attack of the egwugwu. The "medicine man," or the district commissioner, quickly heals the broken shell of the church with a request that all the Igbo leaders come to meet with him, purposefully sending

his “sweet-tongued messenger” to deliver the news (109). With his tortoise-like cunning, he tricks and captures the Igbo men (109-110). Ultimately, the people must pay a fine to release their leaders, which acts as the glue that restores the white man to his state of power (111). Through this analogy, the white man shows that his shell can be broken, but he cannot be so easily killed. Ultimately, he can and will maintain his power over the Igbo people, a people he has cunningly and expertly been able to conquer. Due to their inability to recognize the danger of the white man, the Igbo people have lost their personal rights and culture, even their very being.

After reading story of the feast in the sky, it is easy to compare the tortoise with Okonkwo, however, there are several tortoise-like characteristics which simply do not describe him. As Tanure Ojaide points out, he would seem an obvious choice, as the “’All of You’: an individualist in a communal society” (Ojaide 175). Evidently, the tortoise is an individualist, separate from the colony of birds, however, he was also initially rejected by them, while Okonkwo was not socially discarded from his society. Although he “did not have the start in life which many young men had” (Achebe 13), he is accepted by Nwakibie, a man of great position who helps him, saying, “I can trust you” (Achebe 15). Nwakibie quickly confides in Okonkwo, something the birds would not initially do for the tortoise. Tortoise is also noted as a great orator, able to convince the birds to accept him using his “sweet tongue” (Achebe 58). Okonkwo, on the other hand, has a “slight stammer,” and when his words fail him, he is sure to use his “fists” (Achebe 4). In this respect, he and the tortoise are very unlike, Tortoise acting in a deceitful manner, while Okonkwo makes his thoughts readily known. He may have a different opinion than the other clan members, however, his anger is obvious when present, more like that of Parrot than of Tortoise (59). And although he experienced a fatal ending, or shell-shattering crisis, his shell was never healed. His ultimate fate is death, while the tortoise, in contrast, lives

with a shell that is “not smooth” (60). Okonkwo couldn’t handle the pain and humiliation of a broken shell, so he ended his own life. This is an action which is very unlike the tortoise, an animal who is constantly fighting to save his own skin, regardless of the evils he must perform and the consequences that will result. In fact, Tortoise also seems better able to survive and succeed in his endeavors than the other animals. As Njoku points out, “in the affairs of animals the tortoise is immune to attack” (Njoku). Through his apparent knowledge and keenness, he can circumnavigate difficult situations, ones that would doom most others. Tortoise has a remarkable ability to survive, giving him an enormous advantage over the other animals. This is much more characteristic of the white man, a species whose nature is to dominate and survive at all costs. Thus, both the white man and tortoise conquer through subtlety, replacing tradition with their own views until they rise superior.

The legend of Tortoise and the birds is not the only in which Tortoise’s actions mirror those of the white man. In several other Igbo legends, Tortoise is characterized primarily by his self-interest, his justification for his actions, and his overall sense of superiority. In “The King’s Farm,” Tortoise refuses to help the chief’s wife when asked. He then realizes his mistake when Snail receives help instead of him, and in an effort to get what he wants, he kills the chief’s wife. Tortoise spends the rest of the story trying to cover his tracks (Amos 26). All of his actions within the story reflect his self-interest. His desire to maintain control leads him to rash, even extreme, actions, such as murder. The white man is clearly characteristic of being self-centered, conveyed in the district commissioner’s command that a fine of “two hundred and fifty bags of cowries” be paid. Like Tortoise, the white man also does not show remorse for his actions or a desire to change or make recompense. Instead, he exalts himself above the Igbo people with the rationale that they are nothing more than savages that the white men are bringing to God. In

reality, however, the white men have removed the Igbo culture and intend to replace it with their own.

The ironic turning point of the "The King's Farm" marks the true selfish nature of Tortoise, for he and the white man share a determination to remain at the top of the totem pole, undefeated by anyone else. When Tortoise learns that Snail was decorated for killing the Chief's wife, he goes to the Chief and complains that he is the one who deserves praise. Ironically, Tortoise would have been free from punishment were he to keep quiet, but his great selfishness would not allow him to see someone gain that which he could not have. Thus, Tortoise's self-centeredness is what brings his downfall. The white man is also self-interested in overtaking a race of Africans whom he "[considers] culturally inferior," and through "justification" and "guise," he achieves his personal desire; the "potential for commerce and natural resources" (Philosophy). Were his purpose simply to help the natives, he could have "won" this objective, simply through communication and peace. However, the white man's claim to "help" the natives is simply a blanket covering. In reality, he views himself as superior to them, in a position of rightness, whereas they are in the wrong. In making Africans an "other" to himself, he justifies enslaving their people and destroying their culture for his own personal gain.

Tortoise is well-known in American culture as well, through his triumph in the story of the tortoise and the hare. Herbert Hoffman seeks to uncover Tortoise's position within this fable through the use of a riddle: "Two bodies have I, / though joined in one. / The stiller I stand, / the faster I run" (Hoffman). This parable points to the reality that although Tortoise is characterized as being slow, he still triumphs over Hare, one of the fastest animals. Clearly, he is not what he appears on the surface, but is cunning in his method of ultimately "winning the race." Notice how Tortoise's means of transcendence do not involve the use of strength or agility to overpower

the other animals. Instead, he is deceitful. His greatest tool is that of trickery, the ability to make the animals think he is their equal, when in reality he seeks to become their superior. This characteristic is evidenced in the white man's initial appearance in Umuofia. Although he could probably kill all the Igbo people with the use of a gun, he chooses instead to live among them in peace. Even when the white men institute a new form of "government" with a "place of judgment," these rumors are treated as "fairytales" by the Igbo people, who think the strangers will soon be brought down by the wrath of the gods (89). It isn't until the people are divided that they realize what a threat the white man actually is, but by this point it is too late. According to an old anecdote, a frog placed in boiling water will immediately jump out. However, a frog placed in water of a normal temperature that is heated slowly will remain in place until boiled (Pant). This is exactly what happens to the Igbo people. They wait patiently for the white man to fall, but by the time they realize his power, he has already overcome them. They have already been boiled. Their culture, which they thought to be unconquerable, has been relinquished by the authority of the white man.

Ultimately, the true symbolic nature of the tortoise lies in Achebe's purpose for writing *Things Fall Apart,* or his reason for including the tortoise story within the novel in the first place. Although the novel is very centered on Okonkwo, his character is not truly challenged until the appearance of the white man. Achebe, having personal experience with the effects of colonial rule, is thus fully capable of exemplifying its effect on the Igbo society. As E.P. Abanime said, "It is easier to laugh over something that one has learned as a legend from one's grandfather than over something of which one has had direct personal experience" (Abanime). Achebe lived through the prejudice that colonialism and Christianity brought to Nigeria. More than anything, he laments that during his time living in Nigeria, Igbo culture had all but vanished. He says that

"we have accepted everything alien as good and practically everything local or native as inferior" (Achebe, 1964). Now, the Igbo society has completely revolved from the society it was at the beginning of the novel. What used to be a civilization that thrived on traditional religion, worship, and customs has now completely revolved to reflect European culture. Clearly, the once living frog is now boiled, merely a skeleton of its former self. In not recognizing the cunning nature of the white man, the Igbo people lost the traditional culture that they had enjoyed for so long, a loss that was brought about by their own failure to recognize the corruption of the white man.

Although Tortoise came to the birds with the promise of being a "changed man," he is nothing more than a devious trickster who seeks to satisfy his selfish interests (58). The white man, while initially peaceful, brought the downfall of an entire culture, with the claim that he sought to improve the lives of such savages. However, the Igbo people do not see him for what he really is until it is too late. Although the tortoise's shell has been broken, he cannot be ultimately defeated, for he is a survivor, beginning as a peaceful stranger, but ending as nothing more than a cunning destroyer.

Works Cited

Abanime, E.P. “The image of the White Man in African Francophone Literature: The Case of the German in Pre-World War I Cameroun.” *Africa: Rivista trimestrarle de studi e documentazione dell’Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente*, vol. 40, no. 2, June 1985, pp. 303-13.

Achebe, Chinua. Personal interview. September 1964.

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2009.

Amos, Samuel, and Bruce Onobrakpeya. “Tortoise in Legend.” *African Arts*, vol. 4, no. 1, Autumn 1970, pp. 26-35.

Hoffman, Herbert. “Zeno’s Tortoise.” *Antike Kunst*, vol. 47, 2004, pp. 5-9.

Njoku, J. Akuma-Kalu. “‘There’s got to be a Tortoise in it’: Lore as the Conceptual Focus of Igbo Culture.” *The Southern Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 4, Summer 2009, pp. 159-172.

Ojaide, Tanure. “African Literature and Its Context: Teaching Teachers of Chinua Achebe’s ‘Things Fall Apart.’” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3/4, Fall-Winter 1997, pp. 169-77.

Oraegbunam, Ikenga K.E. “Crime and Punishment in Igbo Customary Law: The Challenge of Nigerian Criminal Jurisprudence.” Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies, vol. 7, 2010, pp. 1-31.

Pant, Anupum. “The Old Tale of a Boiling Frog.” Awesci – Science Everyday, 2014. 13 Mar. 2017.

“The Philosophy of Colonialism: Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce.” *Violence in Twentieth Century Africa*. Word Press. 06 Mar. 2017.