

Competition and Systems of Exchange

While *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* are both set in 19th century, or possibly very early 20th century, Africa, European involvement in Africa is the central focus of these two stories. Within this scenario we can see a multifaceted system of interaction between Africa's indigenous population and the Europeans who have made the journey to acquire the wealth that Africa contains. Before we start examining the systems of exchange between Africans and Europeans, it is helpful to consider what was going in Europe that would lead to European expeditions into Africa. As noted above, both of these stories are set in the 19th or early 20th century. Europe was in the midst of philosophical, economic, and territorial change at this time. Europeans were grappling with philosophies that emerged from the Age of Enlightenment, capitalist economic forces were spreading across the continent, empires of traditional European powers were in flux, and former colonies were moving toward becoming world powers themselves. When considered individually these factors don't seem to be significant enough to drive Europeans into neighboring continents, but we can see how the collective impact of these changes swirling throughout Europe may have caused a sense of unrest that would drive competing European forces into other lands. With a basic understanding of what may have been driving European involvement in Africa, we can start to take a closer look at these systems of exchange between Europeans and Africans. Specifically, we can examine why European and African exchanges persisted in spite of the incredible disparity in the backgrounds, customs, and technologies of these groups. The emergence and persistence of these systems of exchange can be boiled down to the idea and influence of the other as outlined in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. *New Keywords* defines the other as "what eludes our consciousness and knowing and what resides outside the sphere of 'our' culture and community" (Robins 249). This definition implies that the other is something distant

or wholly unknown, but Robins also states that “we can find the other where ever we are” (250). This second statement can be interpreted to mean that the other is not only the foreign and unknown other, but also the local and somewhat known other that can be found relatively close to ourselves. By taking the more local view of the other into account, we can see how competition with one’s other, either local or foreign, encourages and sustains exchange between groups.

The other is typically discussed when we are concerned with a completely foreign entity that is the least like us and most easily separated from ourselves. However, it can be argued that everyone has more than one other and each represents varying degrees of mystery. The idea of a local other, as noted previously, is something that can be seen in both European and African communities in *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*. Due to the perspective of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, we are not only presented with the foreign other represented by Africans, but also the more familiar, yet not wholly known, other represented by non-English Europeans. Conrad makes note of several instances that show a distance between the nations, or tribes, of Europe. The first is when Marlow sees a map of Africa that has been divided into colored sections with each representing a different foreign concern that had control over territory in Africa (Conrad 10). Conrad writes that the “map is marked with all the colours of a rainbow” and proceeds to mention how European countries are represented by these colors, but the zone controlled by his homeland, Britain, is where “real work is done” (10). Similarly in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe conveys a sense of the other that exists between tribes within Africa. Achebe describes Umuofia as being “feared by all its neighbors” because of its power “in war and in magic” (9). This goes to show that the tribes of Africa didn’t function as one large unit, but rather a hierarchy of different groups. Achebe also uses an exchange between Obierika and Okonkwo to explain how the clansmen of Umuofia classify customs of neighboring tribes as “very bad” because they do not adhere to the same customs as Umuofia (45). It could be said that these scenes do not demonstrate the existence of the other within Africa or Europe because the parties know about aspects of other tribes and nations. However, as

mentioned previously, the concept of the other doesn't hinge on the unknown, but rather the idea that the other is simply different, exists somewhere else, or is "backward and irrational, in comparison with" oneself (Robins 250). We can see how both stories demonstrate a lower level conflict between tribes, both African and European, and it's possible to see how these situations contribute to the exchanges between these two larger groups.

The most readily visible and directly influential exchanges between the Europeans and African tribal societies are those involving physical items. From an Amerocentric or Eurocentric viewpoint, the trade of physical goods seems rather lopsided because the Europeans in these stories trade relatively common and inexpensive goods in exchange for rather valuable resources. This may be seen as the Europeans taking advantage of the natives, which is a completely reasonable assessment, but the transactions are not as lopsided as they may initially appear. These exchanges can't be looked at in binary or absolute terms. Each group was looking for a way to use the foreign other to gain a material advantage over their local and traditional enemies. While these new cultures represented an unknown quantity, they also represented an immediate path to defeating traditional competitors who were dominating or challenging the dominance of one's own community. The case of the Europeans exchanging "a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire" to the Africans for "a precious trickle of ivory" seems to show Europeans relatively little to receive significantly more valuable goods in return (Conrad 18). This seems unfair to the African tribes, but when we consider that ivory was relatively worthless to the Africans, due to its abundance and lack of utilitarian value, this exchange doesn't seem completely unbalanced. Individual nations of Europe were receiving material wealth that could be used to establish their economic dominance in Europe and African tribes were receiving cultural or technological wealth that could similarly be used to improve their station in relation to other African tribes. In addition to material exchange, we also see mutually beneficial exchanges between Africans and Europeans that didn't involve the exchange of anything physical. Most of these

situations where we see the exchange of the intangible are found in *Things Fall Apart* and the church's influence on the tribes of Africa. A primary example of this is the exchange between the church and the Africans who found themselves on the fringes of tribal life. The church effectively created a new tribal group that not only accepted regular members from African tribes, but also accepted previously powerless "outcasts" (Achebe 90) and other tribal misfits. In this exchange we see how Europeans provided a sense of belonging as well as protection and power through the newly established European-style government and church (Achebe 89). Achebe also writes how these church members were imbued with a new sense of self-assurance and confidence as a result of belonging to this community (92). In exchange for this new community, the Europeans received new members to spread European religion, education, and culture throughout Africa. While these exchanges were mutually beneficial in the short term, traditional African culture and society ultimately suffered.

The aforementioned types of exchanges between Africans and Europeans became a source of new ideas and technology that irrevocably altered the course of native African culture. It is not as if African tribes existed in perfect harmony before Europeans arrived, but there was an established order that was quickly thrown into chaos by exchanges with Europeans. Since the weaker or smaller African communities were looking for ways to find parity with stronger groups, it is likely that they were the least resistant to the ideas and goods brought by Europe. Thanks to exchanges with Europeans these weaker groups started to prosper and challenged the authority of previously dominant tribes virtually overnight. A strong tribe may choose to resist European influence by abstaining from any trade involving Europe or products of Europe, but they would risk being defeated by the other. In order to survive encounters with the known and unknown other, exchange becomes imperative. If we look at Okonkwo's attack on the court messenger and his subsequent suicide (Achebe 115-117), we can see how the refusal or inability to engage in exchange results in the inability to effectively compete with the other. In order to

remain competitive and avoid annihilation or complete subjugation one must engage in exchange with the other regardless of how distasteful it may be.

Works Cited

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